

Erik Satie – 42 Vexations (Stephane Ginsburgh) [2009]

Written by bluesever

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1. *Vexations, for piano* 69:30 Stephane Ginsburgh – piano

Vexations is a strange piece, of uncertain provenance and meaning. It's a simple, four-part theme for piano, with an inscription implying (though never stating explicitly) that the theme is to be performed 840 times in succession. Other instructions relating to tempo and the use of the bass are oblique, and up to the individual interpreter. Satie never published, performed, or discussed it in his lifetime; it was only brought to public attention in 1949, when John Cage published a facsimile version. In September, 1963 Cage and 11 other pianists performed it in its full marathon form, and it's been played a number of other times, including a centennial performance featuring 21 pianists, each playing for an hour. This CD, on which the piece is performed by Stephane Ginsburg, offers only five-percent of the whole -- in order to get the full 840 out of it, you'll have to play the disc 20 times. But even one journey from beginning to end will have a powerful effect on the listener. The slow, mournful repetition of these off-kilter notes that move and resonate with each other in unexpected ways creates a kind of head-spinning feeling after a while, not unlike late-period extended works by Morton Feldman (the solo piano piece *For Bunita Marcus*, or the piano/violin duo *For John Cage*, in particular). Putting this disc on in the background -- Satie described some of his other work as "furniture music," designed to unobtrusively fill the space around a listener -- will be at first fascinating, then disquieting, and finally relaxing. Of course, on another level it's interesting just that it exists, given the technology of digital recording. Ginsburg could, after all, have played the piece once and the producer could have cut-and-pasted 41 more repetitions into place. But they didn't; they played it through. --- Phil Freeman, Rovi

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