The exterior of *Ode to a Grand Staircase*, created by Julie Chen and Barbara Tetenbaum in 2001, is a simple red box with a magnetic closing mechanism, and it bears the title on an orange rectangle in the center over a light green concentric circle motif. Once the lid is lifted and the book is removed, the complexity of its design can be seen. (Fig. 1) The book unfolds into eight parts, one for each line of the Erik Satie poem it contains. It expands outward, taking up more space as it opens, but parts of the creation remain hidden under each flap, so that the whole book cannot be seen without further exploration. Though my initial impression of the book was one of wonder, I became fully taken with it upon returning and combing through its parts, gathering its meaning through a slow reveal. The experience of *Ode to a Grand Staircase* is essentially tactile and based in discovery. The best way to experience the book is by sitting down with it for an extended period of time, exploring its folds, reading its hidden texts, and perhaps listening to the compositions of Erik Satie.

Erik Satie, whose music and poetry inspired the book, is most famous for his compositions *Gymnopaedies* and *Gnossiennes*. *Gymnopaedies* is marked by slow tempos and emotional crescendos and decrescendos. *Gnossiennes* is faster but with an uneven tempo that lags and speeds up again. *Marche du Grand Escalier* (March of the Grand Staircase) is fast-paced with quick staccato notes, setting it apart from his other works, but still maintaining
the sense of improvisation that all his works possess, as Satie’s compositions have an air of unpredictability. *Marche du Grand Escalier* was written for child-size hands, which explains the whimsical nature of this book – both text and design.

The main text within *Ode to a Grand Staircase* is a poem written by Erik Satie which accompanied the composition *Marche du Grand Escalier*. The poem reads:

> it is a large staircase, very large
> it has more than a thousand steps, all of ivory
> it is very beautiful
> nobody dares use it for fear of damaging it
> the king himself has never used it
> to leave his room he jumps from the window
> also he often says:
> I love this staircase so much I am going to have it stuffed
> is the king not right?

The text is evenly placed throughout the book, some of it meant to be seen at the first encounter like the poem above, and some of it meant to be found upon further investigation—such as the text underneath the folds which reveals phrases such as “hold back,” “grow bigger,” “seriously,” “but without tears,” and “cultivate renunciation.” None of the shapes decorating the book are anthropomorphic, and therefore do not relate to the king, but the image of the staircase is repeated in the cutouts and folds of the book. Even the accordion-like side which holds the pages together unfolds to echo the staircase.

The poem addresses beauty and experience, which reflects on the way the book is meant to be seen. If it were treated like the staircase in the poem, the hidden words within it would never be seen. The staircase in the poem represents a piano, as is made clear by by phrases such as “all of ivory.” Though pianos are outwardly beautiful, they can only be fully appreciated when they are being played, and the keys of a piano only look like a staircase when they are being
used. The phrases that are hidden in the book, like “hold back” and “grow bigger,” echo
directions a composer would give on a piece of sheet music, telling the pianist how the piece is
meant to be played. Further, the book reflects a deep connection to music in the repetitions of
numbers such as two, four, and eight. *Marche du Grand Escalier* has a time signature of 2/4,
meaning there are two beats in a measure, and a whole note is four beats. The book has eight
parts each divided into four sections, the two main leaves bearing the text of the poem and the
two outer flaps with the hidden texts.

*Ode to a Grand Staircase* resonates with me not only because of its complexity and its
slow reveal, but also for its relationship to music. As a pianist and a former choral singer, the
parenthetical phrases hiding in the folds of the book helped me to feel the emotion of the poem,
connect to the book, and appreciate the work of Erik Satie. In listening to his works
*Gymnopædies* and *Gnossiennes*, I am reminded of my love of piano and contemporary piano
composition, which I was introduced to in high school choir, but had not re-explored since
coming to college. Upon discovering this book, my interest was renewed. The book itself puts a
visual pattern to the feeling the music evokes, with squiggly lines that remind me of sound
waves, dots of varying sizes that look like notes in sheet music, and various amoeba shapes,
which connect to my mental image of sound. The grid pattern throughout reminds me of an
instruction manual for constructing some kind of invention, which is essentially what sheet
music is – an instruction manual for creating a certain sound and feeling.

The magic of *Ode to a Grand Staircase* lies in the combination of music, poetry, and art
and the way it creates a sense of wonder, as if lifting the lid of the plain red box were lifting the
cover of a treasure chest. Though it appears as a simple-looking book, it unfolds and expands,
revealing itself while also creating more mystery. As I opened each fold of the book, I found myself hoping to find another hidden word, pattern, or shape which would illuminate its meaning further, and every time I went back to it looking for another revelation, I found something. Whether I found another hidden phrase in the folds or a repeating pattern in the pages, upon each return, I felt more connected to *Ode to a Grand Staircase* and wished I could take it home with me.
Fig. 1. *Ode to a Grand Staircase*, created by Julie Chen and Barbara Tetenbaum (2001), Special Collections, Wellesley College