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Igor Stravinsky: The Poetics and Politics of Music²⁴⁰

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Stravinsky, 1915

The most famous sentence in Igor Stravinsky's autobiography reads: "Music is by its very nature powerless to express anything at all."²⁴¹ When it appeared, this sentence surprised his audience. After all, Stravinsky had composed some of the most expressive music of the twentieth century, from the lyrical *Petrovichka* to the dramatic *Le sacre du printemps* (The Rite of Spring) to the elegaic *Symphony of Psalms*.²⁴² But ever the polemicist, Stravinsky was in actuality blasting those whom he regarded as his aesthetic opponents, such as the followers of Richard Wagner; such "impurists" were always marshaling music in the service of extramusical ends, from national solidarity to religious freedom. Seeking to repair a perceived imbalance, Stravinsky portrayed the musician as a craftsman whose materials of pitch and rhythm in themselves harbor no more expression than the carpenter's beams or the jeweler's stone.

Keywords: Stravinsky; *Le sacre du printemps*; The Rite of Spring; Poetics; Politics; Music.

²⁴⁰ The first version of this paper was published in Howard Gardner's *Creating Minds: An Anatomy of Creativity Seen Through the Lives of Freud, Einstein, Picasso, Stravinsky, Eliot, Graham, and Gandhi* (Basic Books 1993). The text is published with kind permission of the Holder of the copyright.

²⁴¹ Stravinsky, "Music is by its very nature . . ." is quoted in Druskin 1983: 70.

²⁴² Hereafter, pieces are referred to by the name most commonly used in performance.

THE POLITICAL FACE OF CREATION

Stravinsky may have been correct that, in the absence of an externally imposed “program,” music is simply music. He spoke of the “poetics” of music, which in its literal sense refers to the making (*poiesis*) of music. Unintentionally, however, Stravinsky vividly illustrated a different point through his own life: the extent to which the making of music is *not* possible without the externally triggered factor of politics. All creative individuals—and especially all musicians—must deal with a set of associates who not only help the creators realize their vision but also eventually, with a wider public, determine the fate of the creators’ works.

In comparison with the artistic and scientific pursuits we have surveyed so far, the making of music emerges as an intensely public activity. If merely scored and available for perusal, music has little effect. An ensemble of individuals (including performers, publishers, publicity agents, and ticket sellers) and a collection of materials (including instruments, a concert hall, billboards, and programs) are required if a musical idea is to achieve public expression. And when, as in Stravinsky’s case, one elects to mount huge spectacles like a ballet or an opera, the number of individuals involved quickly reaches the hundreds.

When his friend and collaborator Robert Craft began to sift through Stravinsky’s correspondence, spanning nearly seventy years, he was astonished by what he found. It seemed that as much of Stravinsky’s considerable energies had been directed toward the management of his musical life as toward actual composing and performing. Moreover, Stravinsky had thrown himself into this political arena with enormous gusto and determination. Craft comments:

*Whether or not Stravinsky’s letters²⁴³ to bankers, brokers, lawyers, and estate agents provide sufficient documentation to diagnose a ‘split personality,’ the concentration, logic, and concern with minutiae that he devoted to business affairs are awesome, at any rate in a great musician. . . . Stravinsky’s mind seems to divide almost equally into musical genius and moneylender. . . . After finishing *Le sacre du printemps* on a November morning in 1912, he apparently spent the afternoon writing letters about investment properties.*

In introducing three extensive volumes of published letters, Craft remarks almost apologetically:

²⁴³ Craft, “Whether or not Stravinsky’s letters . . .” is from Craft 1984: 261.

The correspondence does not include²⁴⁴ any of the extensive exchanges between Stravinsky and his banks in Russia from 1912 until the Revolution. It also omits the example of the numerous letters in which Stravinsky asks for advances from publishers, impresarios, patrons, and performance organizations—documents that contrast strikingly with the letters from people asking him to pay overdue bills. . . . This chapter does not examine any of Stravinsky's dozen or so ill-advised lawsuits.

With respect to his embroilment in personal and professional politics, Stravinsky represents an extreme, both within our sample of creative individuals and within the population of musical composers. (The analogy is perhaps best drawn with Picasso's increasingly entangled love life; quite possibly, both men derived pleasure from these conflict-laden affairs.) One need not engage in (typically futile) lawsuits to become a great physicist or an immortal composer. And yet, by throwing the political aspects of creation into sharp relief, Stravinsky reveals the extent to which an artist must work with the field that regulates his chosen domain. Only the rarest of individuals is fortunate enough to be embraced by the field without external prodding; only a few adult artists are blessed with another individual who is willing to run constant interference on their behalf, and, at least until the recent past, the need to justify publicly one's own creative output placed an even greater burden on women. Whether they do so well or poorly, eagerly or reluctantly, nearly all creative individuals must devote significant energies to the management of their careers. Such political activity by no means guarantees success; but in its absence, aspiring creative individuals risk permanent oblivion.

A RUSSIAN CHILDHOOD

Nearly all remembered childhoods are redolent of a gentler, simpler past; this seems particularly true for children reared in pre-Soviet Russia. From the writings of individuals like Vladimir Nabakov or Boris Pasternak, one receives the impression of cities in czarist Russia filled with delightful castles and scrumptious treasures, elegant hotels and clubs, countrysides dotted with snow-covered hills and splendid dachas, and a constant convivial atmosphere involving large, nurturant families, faithful servants, doting grandparents, and embracing nannies. In his nostalgia for the Russia of his youth, Stravinsky resembled others of the prewar generation, but his specific memories proved far less idyllic than those of his literary peers.²⁴⁵

The third of four sons of landed gentry on both sides, Stravinsky was born in Oranienbaum, Russia, in 1882. He spent the winters of his youth in St. Peters-

²⁴⁴ Craft, "The correspondence does not include . . ." is from Craft 1984: 276.

²⁴⁵ For more about Stravinsky's childhood memories, see Stravinsky 1962: 3–4.

burg, a city he especially prized; and he summered with the family in the country, at various estates owned by members of his extended family. The Stravinsky family's principal home was an intellectual center in St. Petersburg, frequented by individuals like the novelist Fyodor Dostoyevsky. Stravinsky's father was a well-regarded opera bass and a gifted actor at the Imperial Opera House. Young Igor heard much music at home and also attended concerts and operas where, in one of the most memorable experiences of his youth, the nine-year-old boy spied Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky shortly before the great composer died.

Stravinsky seems always to have been interested in music, and some of his most vivid and faithful initial memories involve sound. He recalled a peasant who could not speak but who had a fascinating habit of clicking his tongue very noisily. The peasant would then sing a song of two sounds (the only ones he could pronounce) with great speed and dexterity. He accompanied these sounds by pressing the palm of his right hand under his left armpit and then made a series of noises that sounded (euphemistically) like resounding kisses. Stravinsky attempted to recreate this music at home. As a young child, Stravinsky also imitated the unison singing of women from the neighboring village as they wended their way home from work.

It is risky to overinterpret such childhood crystallizing experiences. After all, both the families of creative individuals and the individuals themselves are likely to search for early markers and, if necessary, to embroider memories until those prove "worthy" harbingers of the adult talent. Yet, it does seem reasonable to assume that individuals differ in the kinds of childhood experiences that attract them and that prove memorable, and in this spirit, we may think of Stravinsky's early aural experiences as analogous to Einstein's fascination with the compass (see chapter 4) or to Eliot's vivid visual and tactile sensations (see chapter 7). Stravinsky was also able to remember accurately the visual components of these scenes, a kind of embroidery that would have been unnecessary if one were merely trying to make the case that the "golden ear" had been present since early childhood. Ultimately, Stravinsky was also distinguished from other composers by his mastery of the visual components of dramatic performances.

Though immersed in music, Stravinsky was not a musical prodigy. Indeed, as a child, he seems to have been more interested in painting and in theater than in music per se. He began piano lessons at the relatively late age of nine and advanced quickly. He read opera scores in his father's library and attended concerts with keen interest. From early on in his musical education, he was interested in improvisation and persisted in creating his own melodies and

variations, even though his family and teachers criticized these as a waste of time.²⁴⁶

Stravinsky grew up in an atmosphere conducive to his musical and intellectual development; but unlike other White Russians of the period, he seems not to have had a happy childhood. His father, a lawyer and civil servant as well as an artist, was strict and cold. Young Igor had only dutiful feelings toward his mother, though he loved his German governess, Bertha, and was deeply shaken by her death in 1917. Among his siblings he liked only his older brother, Gury, who died on the Rumanian front during the First World War. Stravinsky remembers being quite lonely as a child: "I never came across anyone who had any real attraction for me,"²⁴⁷ he recalled in his autobiography. In a manner reminiscent of Einstein, he did find some support from his uncle Alexandre Ielachich, a fervent music lover as well as a liberal intellectual, and from an older friend Ivan Pokrovsky, who introduced him to French composers.

By his own testimony, Stravinsky was not a good student and usually performed at or below the average level for his class. Unlike Picasso, however, who appears to have had genuine learning problems, Stravinsky was simply uninterested in formal schooling²⁴⁸ and preferred throughout his life to educate himself. Ignoring his son's antischolastic inclinations, Stravinsky's father insisted that Igor follow in his footsteps and receive legal training. Stravinsky did not like law school at all, and this alienation only exacerbated his tense relation with his father and his general disaffection with his current situation.

MUSIC AT THE CENTER

By the time of his entry to St. Petersburg University, Stravinsky had decided that music was his life's calling. Much of his education continued to be self-initiated. He disliked the study of harmony but liked counterpoint and was particularly excited by the opportunity to set and solve his own problems. He began to listen to new music; and like other promising young artists of the time, he soon found himself in a circle of intellectual and artistic peers, with a particular interest in the forms of contemporary expression in Russia and in Western Europe.

The most important event in Stravinsky's musical training was his 1902 meeting of Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov, the dean of Russian composers. While responding unenthusiastically to Stravinsky's youthful compositions, Rimsky-

²⁴⁶ For more on Stravinsky's early interest in improvisation, see Boucourechliev: 1987: 29.

²⁴⁷ Stravinsky, "I never came across . . ." is from Stravinsky 1962: 8.

²⁴⁸ For more on Stravinsky's lack of interest in formal schooling, see White and Noble 1980: 240.

Korsakov gave him shrewd advice about which studies he should undertake; moreover, and to young Igor's great surprise, Rimsky-Korsakov generously offered to supervise his composing.

For the next six years, until Rimsky-Korsakov's death in 1908, Stravinsky was the senior composer's pupil and, increasingly, his friend, confidant, and ersatz son. Much of the instruction was technical. Rimsky-Korsakov guided Stravinsky in orchestration, teaching him how to compose for each instrument; they would each orchestrate the same passages and then compare their versions. Stravinsky was an apt pupil, whose rapid advances pleased his mentor; and, perhaps for the first time in his life, Stravinsky found himself in a milieu that fully engaged him. The early crystallization in the musical domain was now transmuted into a lifelong course.

Stravinsky and Rimsky-Korsakov held similar philosophies about education, both favoring a strict disciplinary regime. As Stravinsky was to state later: "No matter what the subject may be, there is only one course for the beginner: He must at first accept a discipline from without, but only as the means of obtaining freedom for, and strengthening himself in, his personal methods of expression."²⁴⁹ And yet, their musical preferences were quite different. In many ways Stravinsky was more attracted to the music of Rimsky-Korsakov's Russian rivals such as Tchaikovsky than to his teacher's own programmatic music. For his part, Rimsky-Korsakov was suspicious of Stravinsky's interest in ancient Russian forms, his intoxication with current French music, and his curiosity about emerging hybrids of the Russian and European musical traditions. Displaying pride laced with ambivalence, he declared: "Igor Stravinsky may be my pupil but he will never be my or anyone else's follower, because his gift for music is uniquely great and original."²⁵⁰

At this time the domain of music in Russia was in a state of flux, reminiscent in some ways of the "multiple options" discernible in the domain of physics in Germany or of painting in France. Exerting considerable influence was a group of five composers who had banded together around 1875 to promote a national school of Russian music. Included in their ranks, in addition to Rimsky-Korsakov, were Alexander Borodin, Cesar Cui, Mili Balakirev, and Modest Mussorgsky. These composers fashioned themselves to some extent in opposition to Tchaikovsky and to Mikhail Glinka, who were seen as more influenced by Western European music, and to Aleksandr Glazunov, who favored an academic style that was faithful to the classical orchestral forms. Of course, Stravinsky also drew on the works and traditions of many European composers of the past.

²⁴⁹ Stravinsky, "No matter what the subject may be . . ." is quoted in White 1947: 17.

²⁵⁰ Rimsky-Korsakov, "Igor Stravinsky may be my pupil . . ." is quoted in Craft 1982, frontispiece.

According to critics, Stravinsky's early work was unremarkable. Like workers in all creative fields, he was mastering the languages of his predecessors. Stravinsky drew on his contemporaries in a most catholic way. His initial compositions can be variously compared to those of Rimsky-Korsakov, Tchaikovsky, and other Russian composers in whose work he became interested and whom he often consciously imitated. There are intimations of Ludwig van Beethoven, Richard Wagner, Richard Strauss, and other favorite Germanic composers. Eager to listen to new music, Stravinsky cofounded a Society of Contemporary Music in 1906; much of the tantalizing (but dangerous) new French music of Claude Debussy, Maurice Ravel, and others was performed there. While Stravinsky remained the eager pupil throughout most of the decade, his progress during that time was notable. Indeed, the critic Jeremy Noble claims that "the distance Stravinsky had already travelled in the four or five years since the sonata [of 1903 and 1904] is remarkable."²⁵¹

EARLY TRIUMPHS AND A FATEFUL ENCOUNTER

The first public performances of Stravinsky's works occurred in St. Petersburg in 1907 when his sonata was performed; his first symphony was performed in 1908. The composer was in his mid-twenties, not a youthful time for first performances. The pieces were not particularly well received by the audience or by Rimsky-Korsakov. More positive reactions greeted two brief pieces for large orchestra—the *Scherzo fantastique* and *Fireworks*—performed shortly thereafter. These pieces were explosive, brilliant, dynamic, and programmatic; the orchestration of simple motifs with rich harmonies was under firm control throughout. Perhaps more importantly, these brief compositions began to reveal Stravinsky's own artistic voice.

In attendance at a 1909 concert where the *Fireworks* was probably performed²⁵² was a young Russian lawyer-turned-impresario named Serge Diaghilev. Following an abortive career as a composer (Rimsky-Korsakov had discouraged him from pursuing this calling), Diaghilev had founded a publication called *Mir Iskusstva* (World of Art), which served as a rallying point for young artists, much as *Arte Joven* had done for Picasso and his Barcelona colleagues a few years earlier (see chapter 5) and as *Blast* was to accomplish for T. S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Wyndham Lewis in London a few years later (see chapter 7). The journal, which (again, like most of its counterparts) lasted but five years, helped situate contemporary avant-garde Russian art strategically between the academicians, on the one hand, and the political revolutionaries, on the other. It embraced art for art's sake, with a judicious blend of authentic

²⁵¹ Noble, "the distance Stravinsky . . ." is quoted in White and Noble 1980: 243.

²⁵² No definitive documentation seems to have been found.

Russian and contemporary European influences, and it gathered into Diaghilev's orbit the most talented young artists and writers of the time.

Diaghilev was a most remarkable individual. He was a grand and flamboyant seigneur, part gambler, part intellectual manqué, part artist manqué, part schemer, part dreamer. He loved intrigue, and for a charismatic homosexual living in the midst of a group of temperamental young artists and performers, such intrigue was never in short supply. He had an uncanny ability to pick out new talent and a virtually unerring sense of what was likely to shock (yet fascinate) an audience: Sexuality and ecstasy, violence and death were his chosen themes. And while he sought the modern, he never lost sight of his audience and the box office.

Diaghilev knew himself. As a young man in his early twenties, he had written to his stepmother:

I am firstly a great charlatan though con brio; secondly, a great charmeur; thirdly, I have any amount of cheek; fourthly, I am a man with a great quantity of logic, but with very few principles; fifthly, I think I have no real gifts. All the same, I think I have just found my true vocation—being a Maecenas.²⁵³ I have all that is necessary save the money—ma is ça viendra [but that will come].²⁵⁴

Stravinsky wrote of him: “He had a wonderful flair, a marvelous faculty for seizing at a glance the novelty and freshness of an idea, surrendering himself to it without pausing to reason it out.”²⁵⁵ Fated not to be a great creative artist himself, Diaghilev takes his place within a tiny cohort of catalytic nurturers of talent in the twentieth century, among them the photographer Alfred Stieglitz, the teacher of composition Nadia Boulanger, the editor Maxwell Perkins, and the theater director Max Reinhardt—individuals who fostered the artistic history of the twentieth century.

Having conquered St. Petersburg through his influential publication, well-received performances, and powerful stable of talents, Diaghilev set his sights on Europe, and particularly, on Paris. First he organized an exhibit of Russian art at the Grand Palais in 1906, then five concerts at the Opéra the following year, then in 1908 a *Boris Gudonov*, which was a sensation.

In 1909, Diaghilev undertook perhaps his most daring step, as he launched the Ballets Russes dance company. Ballet had a mixed reputation as an art form, with many intellectuals considering it an ancient and somewhat passé activity. But Diaghilev felt that there were many great ballets and that the form

²⁵³ Gaius Cilnius Maecenas was a Roman patron of letters.

²⁵⁴ Diaghilev, “I am firstly . . .” is quoted in Eksteins 1989: 21.

²⁵⁵ Stravinsky on Diaghilev, “He had a wonderful flair . . .” is quoted in Boucourechliev 1987: 39.

retained tremendous potential, especially given his Russian troupe's special gifts. With performances of the Chopin-inspired *Les sylphides*, Borodin's *Po-lovtisna* dances, and other spectacles, Diaghilev's Ballets Russes took Paris by storm.

By 1909, Diaghilev had already assembled a wonderful group of dancers (including Vaslav Nijinsky), choreographers (Mikhail Fokine), and designers (Leon Bakst and Alexander Benois), but he lacked one thing: a composer who could work steadily with his troupe. Hearing the Stravinsky composition, he knew that he had found his man. As one who trusted his impulses completely, Diaghilev had no hesitation in asking Stravinsky point-blank to orchestrate the A-flat-major nocturne and the *valse brillante* of *Les sylphides*. He had also been toying with the idea of mounting a ballet around the story of *The Firebird*, and he soon commissioned Stravinsky, now in his late twenties, to prepare the score for that dramatic saga.

The meeting with Diaghilev and the invitation to join the Ballets Russes company changed Stravinsky's life overnight. From a pupil of the recently deceased Rimsky-Korsakov, a youthful composer with some talent but neither institutional affiliation nor guiding mission, Stravinsky became a valued member of what was possibly the most innovative performing artistic group in the world. Just as Stravinsky had taken immediately to the instructional discipline of the paternalistic Rimsky-Korsakov, he was attracted equally to the ensemble of quirky talent gathered around the indomitable Diaghilev.

Now, instead of working mostly alone, Stravinsky had almost daily intercourse with the ensemble—a new and heady experience for someone who had craved the companionship of individuals with whom he felt comfortable. Stravinsky turned out to be a willing pupil, one who learned quickly and reacted vividly to everything. He was sufficiently flexible, curious, and versatile to be able to work with the set designers, dancers, choreographers, and even those responsible for the business end of the enterprise. Benois²⁵⁶ remarked how unusual Stravinsky was among musicians by virtue of his deep interest in theater, architecture, and the visual arts. From Diaghilev young Igor learned two equally crucial lessons for ensemble work: how to meet a deadline and how to compromise on, or mediate amongst, deeply held but differing artistic visions.

²⁵⁶ Benois's remarks about the young Stravinsky are quoted in White 1947: 25.

THE BALLET MASTERED: THE FIREBIRD AND PETROUCHKA

These disparate lessons came together when Stravinsky began work on the score to the ballet *The Firebird* in the winter of 1909 and the spring of 1910. As he later recalled: “I worked hard and this meant being in continual contact with Diaghilev and his collaborators. Fokine worked on the choreography of each number as I sent them to him. I was always at the company’s rehearsal and that day used to finish with Diaghilev, Nijinsky [who was not in fact dancing in this ballet] and me sitting down to a large dinner washed down with a good claret.”²⁵⁷

The Firebird showcased Stravinsky’s emerging gifts superbly. The story, in many ways a typical fairy tale, features the evil magical ogre king Katschei, the hero prince Ivan Tsaverich, the lovely princess Tsarevna, and the glittering “good fairy” Firebird. The fantastic creature is first imprisoned, then released, and finally helps Ivan save his love from the ogre.

This dramatic saga gave wide rein to Stravinsky’s theatrical imagination. Seizing on devices to which Rimsky-Korsakov had introduced him, he found a specific register for each character realm—for example, using chromaticism to refer to the supernatural, a diatonic style for human characters, and Oriental strains to evoke legendary Russia. Stravinsky also had the opportunity to express in musical terms the characteristic physical gestures and movements of each of the protagonists. Moreover, as the composition featured nineteen different scenes, he was able to mobilize his various orchestration techniques to full advantage. Though debts to French and Russian forbears were quite audible, the mastery of melody, harmonic progressions, and rhythmic movement marked the composer as one who had come into his own; he proved capable of creating vivid musical themes as well as clearly delineated sections and fragments that clashed energetically with one another. Not a few Hollywood films have been able to exploit devices that were handled to perfection in this, Stravinsky’s first major work.

Diaghilev had confidence that Stravinsky would enter a new sphere as a result of his masterful work on *The Firebird*. The impresario declared on the eve of the first performance: “Take a good look at him. He is a man on the threshold of fame.”²⁵⁸ And indeed, the reception to *The Firebird*, with Claude Debussy and other notables in the audience, was sufficiently enthusiastic to catapult Stravinsky to celebrity status almost immediately thereafter. As the biographical entry in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music* notes:

²⁵⁷ Stravinsky: “I worked hard . . .” is from Stravinsky 1936: 42.

²⁵⁸ Diaghilev, “Take a good look at him . . .” is quoted in Boucourechliev 1987: 31; see also White 1947: 27.

*The success of *The Firebird* altered the course of Stravinsky's life. At that time Paris was the international centre of the world of art, the Ballets Russes one of its prime sensations; and Stravinsky's the most important original score in the ballet's repertory. This meant that overnight he became known as the most gifted of the younger generation of Russian composers, and during the next few years his music became better known and appreciated in western Europe than in his native Russia.*²⁵⁹

None of the other six creators I am describing enjoyed a more meteoric rise. The success of *The Firebird* also gave a cosmopolitan thrust to Diaghilev's company and fused the fates of Stravinsky and Diaghilev for the next two decades.

Stravinsky was ambivalent about the success of *The Firebird*. It remained for the rest of his life the piece for which he was most famous and the piece that was most often performed and parodied (though generally not under copyright, which infuriated this instinctively litigious person). Perhaps underestimating its originality and its influence on his subsequent work, Stravinsky came to regard *The Firebird* as conventional in terms of conception and orchestration—a throwback to nineteenth-century narrative with its showstopping set pieces and its expressive excesses. Unhappy with some of the choreography, he seems to have been relieved when the suite began to be performed as part of an orchestral concert. As he commented sardonically: “It is more vigorous than most of the composed folk music of the period but it is also not very original. These are all good conditions for a success.”²⁶⁰ But at the time, Stravinsky did not wallow in pride or in ruefulness; like other highly creative artists, he was too busy working on his next pieces.

The Innovations of Petrouchka

Visiting Stravinsky in the summer of 1910, Diaghilev found that the composer was working on an orchestral piece, “a picture of a puppet, suddenly endowed with life, exasperating the patience of the orchestra with diabolical cascades of arpeggios. The orchestra in turn retaliates with menacing trumpet blasts. The outcome is a terrible noise which reaches its climax and ends in the sorrowful and querulous collapse of the poor puppet.”²⁶¹ Fascinated, Diaghilev convinced Stravinsky to convert the piece into the ballet score *Petrouchka*. Stravinsky worked on the score during the fall and winter; it was performed

²⁵⁹ “The success of *The Firebird*” is from White and Noble 1980: 244.

²⁶⁰ Stravinsky, “It is more vigorous . . .” is quoted in Van den Toorn 1983: 2.

²⁶¹ “a picture of a puppet . . .” is from White and Noble 1980: 244; see also Druskin 1983: 40.

at the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris, in June 1911, and garnered an enthusiastic response.²⁶²

The Firebird showed that Stravinsky could synthesize the lessons from his masters and fashion a piece that excited the field of his era. *Petrouchka* was a far more audacious work. The setting was both ancient and modern—a mix of traditional folk songs and popular urban songs against the background of a holiday festival. The mood shifts from the lyrical and the picaresque to the tragic, and unlike in *The Firebird*, the tragedy of the lonely puppet is genuine rather than formulaic.

The compositional techniques are innovative: Harmony alternates with polyphony, polytonality, and a touch of chromaticism; the predominant diatonic language is contrasted with a more dissonant idiom. Featured is the jarring Petrouchka chord in which a C-major triad (all white keys) and an F-sharp-major triad (all black keys) are superimposed. Stravinsky is able to create tiny episodes, some of them barely a phrase, that often sound quite discordant at first hearing, yet fit comfortably with one another; these recur in analogous contexts and combine to produce a larger, highly expressive, and satisfyingly integrated whole. There are also interesting characterizations: For instance, the poignant Petrouchka is portrayed through the seemingly contrasting vehicle of the carnival's wild abandon.

Probably the greatest innovations occurred in the rhythmic sphere. In the face of a seemingly inexhaustible invention of new meters, with binary and ternary rhythms superimposed, the overall sense is nonetheless of a completely integrated, almost mechanically precise score. Throughout, rhythm serves as the primordial organizing element, with a driving regularity punctuated by episodes of calculated asymmetry and syncopation. Perhaps not surprisingly, the composing of such an original score did not come easily to Stravinsky; in fact, he tried for a month to compose the poignant finale, seeking on the piano the last bars of the tableaux.

Far more so than *The Firebird*, *Petrouchka* has the feeling of a collage—a collection of individual pictures artfully integrated into a convincing larger tapestry. Unlike *The Firebird*, which follows the expected narrative sequence, *Petrouchka* is an effort to convey through suggestion the mood or feeling of the puppet and its world. Given that this work was created at precisely the same time as Picasso and Braque were experimenting with visual collages (see chapter 5), and Eliot was interspersing “overheard” conversational fragments in his poems (see chapter 7), one is tempted to envisage some artistic zeitgeist at work.

²⁶² A description of the score of *Petrouchka* is in Tansman 1949: 170.

Once again, Stravinsky worked closely with the members of the Diaghilev troupe, with Benois serving in this instance as joint author of the libretto. But in contrast to the customary procedure, the musical score was composed first, and it therefore controlled the shape of the dance. While this approach was entirely to Stravinsky's liking, it alienated Fokine, who eventually left the ballet corps. Stravinsky also participated far more actively in the actual staging. As the biographer André Boucourechliev comments: "It is impossible to exaggerate the importance of the active role played by the composer in the stage presentation of the work, which finally confirmed his professional status as a man of the theater."²⁶³ As Stravinsky gained in knowledge and confidence, he also found himself engaged in strenuous disputes about characterization, choreography, and instrumentation.²⁶⁴ Ultimately, he and Benois were also to fight bitterly about control of the rights to the piece.

Like *The Firebird*, *Petrouchka*, ably conducted by Pierre Monteux, staged by Benois, and choreographed by Fokine, was a triumph. No doubt a considerable proportion of the great success of the premiere was due to Nijinsky's brilliant performance as the puppet. Stravinsky always paid tribute to his marvelous inventiveness: "As Petrouchka he was the most exciting human being I have ever seen on stage."²⁶⁵ The positive reaction was also important for Stravinsky himself: "The success of Petrouchka was good for me, in that it gave me the absolute conviction of my ear just as I was about to begin *Le sacre du printemps*."²⁶⁶

A Telling Failure

Given Stravinsky's incredible productivity from 1910 to 1913, with three unchallengeable masterpieces completed during that brief interval, it is tempting to envision the young composer on an unprecedented roll, strutting from one success to another. Instead, Stravinsky actually devoted considerable energy during this period to *The King of the Stars*, a short cantata for male chorus and large orchestra, set to a text by the poet Konstantin Balmont. Stravinsky had great hopes for this composition, which he dedicated to Debussy, but the piece simply did not work. Indeed, due to the complexity of the choral writing and to other difficulties, the piece was not performed until 1939 and has rarely been heard publicly since then.

²⁶³ Boucourechliev, "It is impossible to exaggerate . . ." is from Boucourechliev 1987: 52.

²⁶⁴ For more on the dispute about characterization, see White 1947: 36.

²⁶⁵ Stravinsky, "As Petrouchka he was . . ." is quoted in Van den Toorn 1983: 98.

²⁶⁶ Stravinsky, "The success of Petrouchka . . ." is quoted in Van den Toorn 1983: 98.

Acknowledgment of a singular failure, against this background of unprecedented triumphs, is important. It reminds us that even the most creative innovators can proceed down a false path and that they differ from others in the way they recover, rather than in their intrinsic infallibility. Indeed, as noted earlier, the student of creativity Dean Keith Simonton has collected evidence suggesting that the greatest creators simply produce more works, which includes more inferior as well as more superior works.²⁶⁷ One ought to think of *The King of the Stars* as a kind of failed *Les demoiselles d'Avignon*, a discarded early draft of *The Waste Land*, or Freud's "Project for a Scientific Psychology"—the creator's sincere, but still fumbling, search for a publicly accessible symbol system to capture an emerging, but still inarticulate, personal artistic vision. While unsuccessful by the usual public criteria, these particular searches may have harbored considerable significance for the creator himself: They helped him discover what he did, and did not, wish to achieve in his work and how best to pursue those goals in future works.

LE SACRE DU PRINTEMPS: COMPOSING SOUND FOR A NEW CENTURY

In the spring of 1910, while finishing the score for *The Firebird*, Stravinsky had a dream: "There arose a picture of a sacred pagan ritual: The wise elders are seated in a circle and are observing the dance before death of the girl whom they are offering as a sacrifice to the god of Spring in order to gain his benevolence. This became the subject of *The Rite of Spring*."²⁶⁸ It is possible that the dream itself was inspired by a poem by a Russian modernist, Sergei Gorodetsky. Over the next three years, and particularly in the period following the completion of *Petrouchka*, Stravinsky worked on the score to this tableau. As is well known, the premiere of *Le sacre du printemps* was a major artistic scandal; but within a few years, the piece came to be considered a seminal work and, no less, a turning point in modern musical composition.²⁶⁹

Writing about music or ballet is more difficult for me than writing about literature or poetry, but I shall try to re-create the composition of, and reactions to *Le sacre*. The events surrounding the actual composition constitute a complicated tale. Shortly after Stravinsky told Diaghilev about his vision, he was given a formal commission. Stravinsky realized that he would benefit from collaboration with someone knowledgeable about Russian pagan rituals, so he began to work intensively with Nicholas Roerich, a painter, archaeologist, and

²⁶⁷ For Simonton on the number of good and bad works produced by creative individuals, see Simonton 1988.

²⁶⁸ Stravinsky, "There arose a picture . . ." is from Stravinsky 1989: vii.

²⁶⁹ For more on the sources used for the early drafts of *Le sacre*, see Stravinsky 1969; and Van den Toorn 1987.

ethnographer. Though the most concentrated scoring was not to occur until two years later, Roerich declared as early as 1910 that “the new ballet presents a number of scenes from the celebration of a holy night among primitive slavs. The action begins during a summer night and finishes before actual sunrise, as the sun’s first rays appear. The choreography consists of ritual dances, and the work will be the first attempt to reproduce life among a primitive people without using any definite dramatic story.”²⁷⁰ Fokine was already committed to other projects, and so the choreography fell to Nijinsky; because Ballet Russes members were already involved in developing two new spectacles (the notable *Daphnis and Chloe* of Maurice Ravel and Debussy’s *L’Après-midi d’un faune*), there was no prospect of a performance of *Le sacre* until 1913.²⁷¹

The composition of *Le sacre du printemps* did not proceed nearly as swiftly or smoothly as that of earlier works. The longer gestation period probably occurred because of the novelty and incredible complexity of the task Stravinsky had set for himself. In *The Firebird* he was working on a well-known form of narrative, using familiar musical techniques (if in a highly polished way), and collaborating intimately with the whole Diaghilev team. In *Petrouchka* he was using the relatively familiar story of a harlequin in a circus setting, and he had the good fortune of a principal dancer whose genius perfectly matched the part. But in *Le sacre* nearly all of the components were new—the theme, the folk material, Roerich as the collaborator, Nijinsky as the choreographer, and perhaps above all, an increasingly radical musical idiom that the composer was formulating for himself.

Drafts for the score of *Le sacre* exist, but in my view, there is less to them than meets the eye. Not exhaustive in any sense, they are particularly lacking in materials from the first period of composition: Stravinsky’s “sketchbook” is more a logbook, or a record of critical points, in the evolution of the score. Still, some facts seem reasonably well established. The tides and scenarios were worked out with Roerich in the summer of 1911. Sketches for the parts “The Augurs of Spring,” “Spring Rounds,” and “Ritual of Rival Tribes” were prepared at about that time. Folk melodies—heard and remembered ones—were important ingredients in several of the sections. Stravinsky also conceived the chord whose rhythmic articulation has since become the signature of the work—the highly dissonant *sacre* chord, a combination of E-flat major with added minor seventh, and F-flat major. As he recalled, Stravinsky was unable to explain or justify the construction of the chord, but his ear “accep-

²⁷⁰ Roerich, “The new ballet . . .” is quoted in Van den Toorn 1987: 34. Roerich, “The action begins . . .” is quoted in Druskin 1983: 64.

²⁷¹ For more on there being no prospect of a performance for *Le sacre*, see Van den Toorn 1987: 34.

ted it with joy.”²⁷² Interestingly, the opening sections depicting the awakening of nature, which lay the groundwork for the *sacre* chord, apparently were sketched later, and possibly even after the entire first part (of two) had been completed.

In both the initial vision and the early sketches, Stravinsky had in mind what the overall piece should sound like. (Here, the original vision resembles the early notions of *Guernica* and *The Waste Land*—very schematic but on the mark in terms of emotional tone and organizational structure.) “I had imagined the spectacular part of the performance as a series of rhythmic mass movements of the greatest simplicity which would have an instantaneous effect on the audience, with no superficial details or complications. The only solo was to be the sacrificial dance at the end of the piece.”²⁷³

Stravinsky generally composed a piece straight through, and, with some significant exceptions, *Le sacre* seems to have been drafted in much the same form as it is now heard; though the introduction may well have been penned at a relatively late stage (see figure 6.1). But, again, the composing involved problems: For example, there are no less than seven separate notations for the Khoborovod melody that frames the “Spring Rounds,” and the slow chromatic sections in the opening movements of the second part clearly caused significant struggles. In the sketchbook, the pianistic parts appear in almost final form, while those without such a clear pianolike quality are most extensively worked through. Since Stravinsky always composed on the piano, it is scarcely surprising that the non-pianistic portions would have caused him the most problems.²⁷⁴

One significant alteration occurred in the ordering of pieces. The “Abduction,” which now comes close to the beginning, right after “The Augurs of Spring,” had originally been scored to occur near the end of the first part, after “The Sage.” Pierre van den Toorn, who has carried out the most thorough investigation of the composition of *Le sacre*, believes that this reordering was instituted to prevent the first part from being anticlimactic.²⁷⁵

The sketches reveal another peculiar quality. While the work’s greatest innovation is now considered to be in its rhythmic configuration, the most painstaking efforts seem devoted to orchestration rather than to the rhythm. Whether this is because Stravinsky had already conceived the rhythmic details or because he did not generally deal with them in his written sketches cannot be determined.

²⁷² Stravinsky, “accepted it with joy . . .” is quoted in Van den Toorn 1983: 139.

²⁷³ Stravinsky, “I had imagined . . .” is from Stravinsky 1962: 28.

²⁷⁴ For more on the problems associated with the composing of *Le sacre*, see Van den Toorn 1987: 34.

²⁷⁵ For more on the reordering of scenes of *Le sacre*, see Van den Toorn 1983: 31.

FIGURE 6.1.

Interim page, *The Rite of Spring*, various sketches for “Savage Dance,” “The Ancestors,” and “Sacrificial Dance.”

© André Meyer/Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

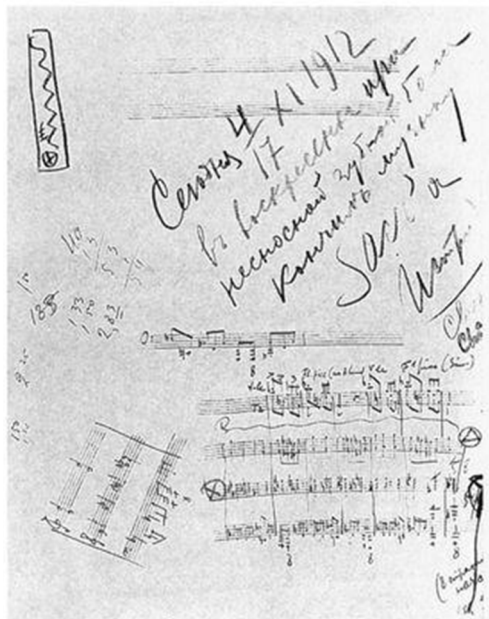


Without question, the composition of *Le sacre* was a long, complex, and arduous process that took its toll on Stravinsky. In one celebrated annotation on the final page of the sketchbook he declared: “Today, November 17 1912, Sunday, with an unbearable toothache I finished the music of the Sacre. I. Stravinsky, Clarens, Chatelard Hotel”²⁷⁶ (see figure 6.2). To compound matters, the rehearsal process did not go smoothly. Stravinsky fired the German pianist and began to play the piano part himself at rehearsals. Then, for unknown reasons, he stopped attending rehearsals regularly and left them in the hands of the capable conductor Monteux (though he made changes requested by Monteux until close to the time of the first performance). There was time for only a very few stage rehearsals at the new Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris, where the piece was scheduled to debut at the end of May 1913.

²⁷⁶ Stravinsky, “Today, November 17 1912 . . .” is quoted in Van den Toorn 1987: 24.

FIGURE 6.2.

Final page, *The Rite of Spring*, signed, I. Stravinsky, and dated, November 1912.
© André Meyer/Artephot-Ziolo, agence photographique, Paris.



Still, despite the meager rehearsal time for so intricate and innovative a piece, there were few intimations of the tremendously hostile reaction at the premiere. Stravinsky had played the piece in four-hand version with Debussy in the spring of 1913. Debussy had been awestruck, “as though by a hurricane from the remote past, which had seized our lives by the roots,”²⁷⁷ as an observer, Louis Laloy, had recalled. The dress rehearsal on May 29 had been attended by Debussy, Ravel, and the Paris press, none of whom appears to have had the slightest intimation of the turbulent reaction that would occur the next day.

LE SACRE DU PRINTEMPS: THE PERFORMANCE AND THE AFTERMATH

No other significant piece of classical music performed in modern times has been greeted with so overtly hostile a reaction as *Le sacre*. The audience at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées was agitated from the opening bars. When the curtain rose to reveal dancers jumping up and down, hissing and howling followed. The din continued throughout the performance and included whistling, stamping of feet, honking of automobile horns, and shouting of insults. Apparently, the audience unrest reached such a pitch that it was not possible

²⁷⁷ Laloy, “as though by a hurricane . . .” is quoted in Boucourechliev 1987: 64.

to hear the music: Choreographer Nijinsky had to stand in the wings and shout numerals to the dancers.

The extremity of the reactions is conveyed by oft-quoted eyewitness accounts. The artist Valentine Gross Hugo said: "It was as if the theater had been struck by an earthquake. It seemed to stagger in the uproar. Screams, insults, hoots, prolonged whistles drowned out the music, and then slaps and even boos."²⁷⁸ The author and photographer Carl van Vechten wrote: "Cat-calls and hisses succeeded the playing of the first bars and then ensued a battery of screams, countered by a foil of applause. . . . Some forty of the protestants were forced out of the theater but that did not quell the disturbance. The lights in the auditorium were fully turned out but the noise continued and I remember . . . the disjointed ravings of a mob of angry men and women."²⁷⁹

Most of the initial written reviews were equally condemnatory. Opening season critics commented:

Surely such stuff should be played on primeval instruments—or, better, not played at all.

The music is ingenious since if the composer be more than two years of age, he must have suppressed all he knew in order to devise it.

A crowd of savages, with knowledge or instinct enough to let them make the instruments speak, might have produced such noises.

*Practically it has no relation to music at all as most of us understand the word.*²⁸⁰

Ernest Newman, the dean of British critics, announced in the *Sunday Times* that "the work is dead," "the bluff is failed"; and he termed the event "the most farcical imposture in music of our time."²⁸¹

Why such a negative and hostile reaction to a work that had been appreciated in rehearsal and keenly anticipated by many of the Parisian cognoscenti? While the theme of a virgin who danced herself to death to propitiate the god of spring was provocative, it was certainly no more so than the bloodily erotic story recounted in Strauss's *Salomé*. The ballet was lengthy, but not significantly more so than other of Stravinsky's works and those of Tchaikovsky, Ravel, and other contemporary artists. Despite an air of surface chaos, the composition was highly structured and organized, in both its instrumentation and its rhythm.

²⁷⁸ Hugo, "It was as if the theater . . ." is quoted in Riding 1990: 17.

²⁷⁹ Van Vechten, "Cat-calls and hisses . . ." is quoted in Eksteins 1989: 13.

²⁸⁰ For more on the early criticisms, see Lesure 1980; and White 1947: 44.

²⁸¹ Newman, "the work is dead" and other comments, see Lesure 1980: 75.

One clue to the reaction may come from the undoubted technical skill of the composer and the widely acknowledged sophistication of the Ballet Russes. Audience members in Paris had been accustomed to attending the ballet and being provoked (as in Debussy's *L'Après-midi d'un faune*), but to remaining largely in command of the theatrical experience. Where other pieces had appeared outrageous, their authors had taken an ironic stance or had otherwise winked at the audience. *Le sacre*, however, seems to have fallen outside of the audience's customary categorical scheme, and the ensuing anomie was distinctly unsettling. All of the talent gathered on the stage of the theater seemed marshaled in an effort to shock, provoke, and challenge, and the audience simply decided not to collaborate in the effort. In particular, the early critics seem to have felt that they were being asked to accept too much, and they used their journalistic platforms to vent their anger.

Rather than there being any simple or single factor that caused the anger and alienation, I believe that the *combination* of factors engendered hostility. To begin with, the overt theme of a primitive sacrifice—a volitional self-annihilation—lacked any touch of pathos or moderation; it was unrelievedly amoral. The dissonant *sacre* chord was not played a few times: It was repeated for thirty-five solid bars and for a total of some 280 times in one section alone. Two- and three-note fragments were also reiterated many times in a monotonous and ceaseless alteration. There were not just frequent changes in rhythm: In some sections, nearly every bar differed from the previous one, with rhythms shifting abruptly from 9/8 to 5/8, 3/8, 2/4, 7/4, 3/4, 7/4, 3/8, 2/4, 7/8, and so on. The music was not just loud: It proceeded at unrelieved fortissimo for long percussive passages until suddenly stopping. Promising melodic passages appeared with tantalizing brevity, only to be dropped with unanticipated decisiveness. Stravinsky had thrived on juxtapositions since *The Firebird*; but now dissonant chords, irregular rhythms, exotic scales, and modified accent patterns virtually rained down on the listener. The method of melodic development—a process of breaking down, rearranging, and permuting simple four-note motifs based on Russian folks songs—shocked ears nurtured on nineteenth-century symphonic forms.²⁸² The superimposition of simple diatonic thematic material and discordantly complex harmonic texture within a relatively plotless structure was also difficult to assimilate.²⁸³ Virtually every musical and balletic expectation had been violated most provocatively. What had been barely audible in *The Firebird* and tantalizing in *Petrouchka* transgressed the threshold of tolerability in *Le sacre*.

²⁸² On the method of melodic development in *Le sacre* as a shock to ears nurtured on nineteenth-century symphonic forms, see Tansman 1949: 39.

²⁸³ On the superimposition of thematic material, see White 1947: 41.

To add to this musical shock value, Nijinsky's choreography made little sense to the audiences of the time. Having dancers jump up and down or walk for no apparent purpose seemed just another flouting of convention: Symmetrical body movements were abandoned to shuffles, jerks, and stamps; instead of presenting pirouettes, arabesques, or pas de deux, the dancers simply mimed the jarring sounds and irregular rhythms.²⁸⁴

Of all the commentators on the first *Le sacre*, the composer Ravel, one of Stravinsky's friends, may have had the deepest insight. Ravel declared that the piece's novelty lay not in the orchestration but in the musical entity itself.²⁸⁵ The orchestra had to be seen as a single multiregistered instrument seeking a single effect. Stravinsky himself was later to deny that the piece was revolutionary: "What I was trying to convey was the surge of spring, the magnificent upsurge of nature reborn,"²⁸⁶ he declared. But it is the overall work that one must either accept or reject.

Apparently, the work alienated so many initial auditors for many of the same reasons it ultimately became accepted and even taken for granted. Of course, it is the field, rather than the work that changed. The rhythmic experiments came to be heard as exciting in themselves and as peculiarly appropriate to the first intimations of spring, the tensions among the boisterous young boys, the mysterious and severe sages, and the hapless virgin. The brief introduction and sudden abandonment of so many motifs in an ever-increasing cacophony conveyed the scattered contributions of nature to the primitive rite, even as it forecast the drive toward an inevitable destructive climax. The very introduction and dropping of sections called on the listener to carry out a creative, integrating function.²⁸⁷ In addition, the studied repetition of certain notes and phrases provided another kind of anchoring point for the listener. The playing of archaic folk themes by a full orchestra conveyed Stravinsky's sense of distance from the events being portrayed: It was as if a primitive rite were being performed with a full awareness of contemporary urban life, as happens with Eliot's *The Waste Land*. Debussy's comment on *Le sacre* is apt: "An extraordinary, ferocious thing. You might say it's primitive music with every modern convenience."²⁸⁸

Paraphrasing Debussy, one might say that in composing *Le sacre*, Stravinsky used every gesture and trick he knew in order to communicate an original

²⁸⁴ On Nijinsky's choreography, see Eksteins 1989, pp. 50–51. For a revisionist view, see Riding 1990.

²⁸⁵ For Ravel on *Le sacre* as a novel entity, see Stravinsky 1970.

²⁸⁶ Stravinsky, "What I was trying to convey . . ." is quoted in Vlad 1967: 29.

²⁸⁷ On the listener being called on to carry out a creative, integrating function, see Boucourechliev 1987: 73.

²⁸⁸ Debussy, "An extraordinary, ferocious thing . . ." is quoted in Eksteins 1989: 51.

idea. The issue was less whether one liked the combination than whether one accepted it. Not surprisingly, older, more conventional, more traditional listeners were offended, if not insulted. Those who were younger, who enjoyed the spectacle, who shared the composer's impatience with the romanticism of the late nineteenth century and who sought to expand what was possible for the eye and the ear were invigorated. The very disconnections, disjunctions, repetitions, and abandonments that had so strained the early listeners became the essence of the work for a younger audience, which had its listening habits nurtured by repeated performances of *Le sacre*. The same lines of division determined the initial reactions to works like Joyce's *Ulysses*; Eliot's *The Waste Land*; or Picasso's *Portrait of Gertrude Stein*, *Les demoiselles d'Avignon*, and the early cubist works. And, as was the case with these works, initial distaste or noncomprehension gave way rather rapidly to a recognition—indeed to an insistence—that one was dealing with a novel work of power and, perhaps, a masterpiece. As the biographer Alexandre Tansman comments: "It is difficult to tell what is more admirable in *The Rite*—the boldness of the innovation or the total absence of the hesitation in its realization, combined as it is with the absolute certainty of an uncompromising convention that stops at nothing."²⁸⁹

And what of Stravinsky's own reactions? Without doubt, Stravinsky was disappointed and dejected by the initial lack of comprehension of his efforts. The design and execution were clear in his own mind; he was satisfied with Monteux's conducting, though, with the passage of time, he became increasingly critical of Nijinsky's choreography. As with his earlier ballets, Stravinsky was pleased that *Le sacre* could so readily and effectively be presented by an orchestra alone. Whether he received a certain satisfaction from the scandal it caused is not clear; Diaghilev obviously derived some pleasure, and in later life Stravinsky became only too aware of the dividends of controversy.²⁹⁰

Stravinsky continued to revise the work, more so than with any other of his works, and he did so mostly to clarify the design and harmony.²⁹¹ He also revised his rationale for the work, downplaying narrative and imagistic elements and stressing the purely musical aspects. Also, the issuing of later, more definitive versions allowed Stravinsky to control the performances of the piece and to receive new royalties. The work was later rechoreographed, and Stravinsky was much more satisfied with Léonide Massine's version, which was performed in New York and Philadelphia in April 1930, with Martha Graham dancing the role of the Chosen One.²⁹²

²⁸⁹ Tansman, "It is difficult to tell . . ." is from Tansman 1949: 17.

²⁹⁰ On Diaghilev's delight in the scandal surrounding *Le sacre*, see Horgan 1989: 20.

²⁹¹ For more on revisions of *Le sacre*, see Craft 1982: 398.

²⁹² For details on the version performed by Graham in New York in 1930, see Graham 1991, pp. 127–133.

FROM POETICS TO POLITICS

On the eve of the performance of *Le sacre du printemps*, Stravinsky gave an interview to a journal called *Montjoie!* in which he described what he wished to express in his new composition. To a contemporary reader the description seems straightforward. Each of the approximately one dozen sections is sketched in terms of its purpose and orchestration. The composer concludes with words of gratitude to Nijinsky, the choreographer, and to Roerich, the scenarist.²⁹³

Nonetheless, Stravinsky was infuriated by the publication of the interview, claiming to have been misrepresented. He seems to have been particularly incensed by the orotund opening, in which he declared: “In the *Prelude* before the curtain rises, I have confided to my orchestra the great fear which weighs on every sensitive soul confronted with the potentialities, the ‘being in one’s self which may increase and develop infinitely.’”²⁹⁴ To make matters worse, a Russian journal, *Muzyka*, published a translation of the interview, prompting Stravinsky to retort that the interview had been given “practically on the run,” that the Russian translation was even less accurate than the French, and that the style of the piece was misleading. He declared to the editor of *Muzyka*: “It is highly inaccurate, full to overflowing with incorrect information, especially in the part concerning the subject of my work.”²⁹⁵ But a version of the article revised by Stravinsky contains mostly grammatical changes. Finally, fully fifty-seven years after the original publication in *Montjoie!* Stravinsky declared in a communication to the *Nation* that the interview had been “concocted by a French journalist” and that he had disavowed it many times.²⁹⁶

Stravinsky’s concern about the way he is thought to have conceptualized his most famous work is not in itself surprising. What is anomalous are two further considerations. First, when given the opportunity to make corrections, Stravinsky made very few, and indeed in subsequent verbal accounts of *Le sacre*, he echoed many of the same remarks he apparently was rejecting in the *Montjoie!* account. Second, there is the oddity of a composer, whose music certainly could be expected to speak (or sing) for itself, caring so much about a chance interview published early in the century in an obscure French review.

²⁹³ For more on the *Montjoie!* incident, see Van den Toorn 1987: 5.

²⁹⁴ “In the *Prelude* . . .” is quoted in Van den Toorn 1987: 5.

²⁹⁵ Stravinsky, “It is highly inaccurate . . .” is quoted in Craft 1982: 55.

²⁹⁶ On Stravinsky’s many disavowals of the *Montjoie!* article, see Van den Toorn 1987, pp. 5–6.

A Legalistic Bent at Play

But as already noted, a concern with political minutiae seems to have characterized Stravinsky almost from the first. Like his father, Stravinsky had legal training. We may surmise that a legalistic (if not litigious) atmosphere pervaded the Stravinsky house and, perhaps, the intellectual and artistic circles in which his family traveled. Of course, Diaghilev was also trained as a lawyer, and Stravinsky had observed his mentor engaged in many negotiations throughout their twenty-year association; in some of them, Stravinsky and Diaghilev found themselves on the same side, but increasingly over the years, Stravinsky found himself at odds with his artistic mentor.

One source of information about the “political Stravinsky” can be found in his voluminous written legacy. Here, the Stravinsky-Diaghilev relationship does not come off very well. In addition to being terse, their telegrams to one another are devoid of any human touch and, with increasing frequency over the years, contain veiled or not-so-veiled threats. In letters, Stravinsky can be even more biting. For example, he writes to his friend conductor, Ernest Ansermet, about Diaghilev in 1919:

*His “moral integrity” about which he speaks incessantly is not worth much. . . . I was really ill when I learned of all this, not so much from his taking refuge in these “legal rights” as from his alluding to them, especially at a time when a friend finds himself in a difficult situation. A strange way to express friendship . . . I henceforth renounce all moneys that he might decide to send me without acknowledgement of my rights, moneys that I consider gifts and refuse to accept. And he should not complain about my behaving in this manner for he provoked it.*²⁹⁷

Stravinsky then enumerates his understandings of every property in dispute between Diaghilev and himself, in the process stipulating precise dates, lengths of commitments, and rights of ownership and performance as they apply in different parts of the world.

Some years later Stravinsky finds himself on equally tense terms with Ansermet. He writes: “Two words in response to your strange note of the 15th, *mon cher*. I am sorry but I cannot allow you to make any cuts in *Jeu de cartes*. The absurd one that you propose *cripples* my little March. . . . I repeat: either you play *Jeu de cartes* as it is, or you do not play it at all. You do not seem to have understood that my letter of October 14 was categorical on this point.”²⁹⁸ Similarly barbed sets of exchanges take place with Monteux²⁹⁹, who had given

²⁹⁷ Stravinsky, “His ‘moral integrity’ . . .” is quoted in Craft 1982: 134.

²⁹⁸ Stravinsky, “Two words in response . . .” is quoted in Craft 1982: 226.

²⁹⁹ For more on the exchanges with Monteux, see Craft 1982: 210; and Craft 1984, pp. 66–67.

such exemplary performances of Stravinsky's early works, and with the conductor Serge Koussevitzky, whom Stravinsky labels as "the enemy."

Such charged relations extend even to the Swiss writer C. F. Ramuz, who idolized Stravinsky, and with whom the composer enjoyed a Braque-like artistic intimacy for some years, during which their families also became quite close. Their correspondence includes any number of tense communications about the ownership of different facets of works they coauthored. Throughout, Stravinsky seems determined to wreak out every advantage, no matter how small. He browbeats Ramuz: "I hold firmly to my argument, dear Ramuz, and it would deeply sadden me to learn that you were the one who composed that unfortunate page (of credits), knowingly, and with an ulterior motive."³⁰⁰ I am reminded of the quip that "the haggling is so bitter because the stakes are so small."

Toward nonartists Stravinsky can be even more peremptory and brutal. His correspondence is filled with litigious threats and unrelenting cajolings directed at the phalanx of agents, brokers, bankers, publishers, and publicity agents with whom he had to deal during his lengthy career. Much of the argument between Stravinsky and his collaborators was over tiny sums of money. Some of the concerns were no doubt genuine: Stravinsky had had to abandon his personal property when the Bolsheviks took over Russia at the end of the First World War; and in the 1920s, he had been financially responsible not only for his four children but also for an ever-expanding extended family of émigrés. Yet, even after Stravinsky's family had decreased in size and he had personally become quite wealthy, the penny-pinching and the litigating continued unabated. The ungenerous aspects of his personality come through all too regularly in correspondence with his children and with his hapless first wife.³⁰¹

Not that Stravinsky was incapable of wielding words in more flattering ways. When he wanted composers, performers, or agents to do his bidding, Stravinsky could turn on the charm. For example, Stravinsky induced the patron of the arts Werner Reinhart³⁰² to pay him for performances that did not take place and even to make Stravinsky's negotiating victories look like concessions. And when he wanted someone to help him achieve a wish—for example, to travel to America during the First World War, to gain entrance into the French Academy,³⁰³ or to pledge to keep the story of a collaboration a

³⁰⁰ Stravinsky: "I hold firmly to my argument . . ." is quoted in Craft 1985: 55.

³⁰¹ On Stravinsky's letters to his family, see Craft 1992, chaps. 8 and 9.

³⁰² On Stravinsky's relation to Reinhart, see Craft 1985: 139.

³⁰³ On Stravinsky's wish to enter the French Academy, see Craft 1982: 5.

secret—he could be unabashedly ingratiating.³⁰⁴ His egocentrism and focus on his own needs and desires were great, but not so great as to blind him to the “voice” he had to adopt to increase the likelihood of getting his way. For him, as for the famed war strategist Karl Marie von Clausewitz, threats and suits were just negotiations being carried on by other means. While other creative masters did not avoid legal hassles, Stravinsky appeared to revel in legal wrangling and to continue with it as long as he was alive.³⁰⁵

To be sure, such inclinations to some extent reflect accidents of personality and upbringing. Certainly, an artist does not have to be as compulsive or embattled as Stravinsky, nor do most creative individuals live in the legal atmosphere that Stravinsky imbibed as a child. However, any artist involved in large-scale performances *does* have to enter the political arena, either directly, as Stravinsky did, or through the use of various representatives, agents, and patrons, which he also did in his later life.

Stravinsky’s early career experiences mirror those of many other artists who do not have the option of hiring a representative and do not have a sponsor. To all intents and purposes, then, artists who wish to work with others must either fight for their own rights and beliefs or surrender those to people with greater power or more persuasive arguments. The most notable creators almost always are perfectionists, who have worked out every detail of their conception painstakingly and are unwilling to make further changes unless they can be convinced that such alterations are justified. Few intrepid creators are likely to cede any rights to others; and even if they are consciously tempted to do so, their unconscious sense of fidelity to an original conceptualization may prevent them from following through.

Work on a More Intimate Scale

Having composed three major works in a short span of time, and having participated actively in the roller-coaster-like atmosphere of mounting these productions, it is not surprising that Stravinsky did not attempt another large ballet for a period of time. Given his physical and mental exhaustion, the advent of the Great War, his settling in Switzerland, and the difficulty of initiating any large-scale cooperative performing enterprises at this time, it became virtually inevitable that Stravinsky would elect to work on a smaller scale.

Even before the war, Stravinsky had been attracted to Japanese art. As he put it: “The impression which [Japanese lyrics] made on me was exactly like that made by Japanese paintings and engravings. The graphic solution of problems

³⁰⁴ On Stravinsky as unabashedly ingratiating, see Craft 1982: 94; and White 1947: 61.

³⁰⁵ On how Stravinsky reveled in negotiating, see Libman 1972.

of perspective and space shown by their art incited me to find something analogous in music.”³⁰⁶ And so Stravinsky composed a set of miniatures, including several based on Russian folk songs, and set a number to music. His collaboration with Ramuz came to center on works that were both solid and small-scale, especially *Histoire du soldat*, which could be read, played, and danced by a small troupe of performers and a performing ensemble of limited size. Other works of the time, such as *Renard*, *Cat’s Cradle*, and *Four Russian Songs*, were all of a much more confined, though not less original, scale than *Petrovichka* or *Le sacre*. It may have been at this time that Stravinsky arrived at his explicit philosophy of composition: that the setting of rigorous constraints on himself functioned as a liberating experience.

LES NOCES: A DIFFERENT KIND OF MASTERPIECE

As early as 1912, Stravinsky conceived of a choral work on the theme of a Russian peasant wedding.³⁰⁷ While his initial conception was to present an actual wedding spectacle, Stravinsky soon realized that he really wanted to present “wedding material through direct quotations of popular—i.e., non-literary—verse.” As he explained it later, *Les noces* consisted of a suite of wedding episodes through which waft clichés and quotations of the sort overheard in *Ulysses*. Rather than a connecting thread of discourse, there is instead the creation of an atmosphere. And rather than individual personalities, there are roles that impersonate different types of character.

Actual composition of this masterpiece began in 1914. When Stravinsky played an early version for Diaghilev in 1915, the impresario was so touched that he wept; it was to become his favorite Stravinsky composition and the one dedicated to him.³⁰⁸ *Les noces* is said to have been Stravinsky’s favorite composition as well. The music was composed in short-score form by 1917, but a complete score was completed only in 1923, just before the premiere.³⁰⁹

None of Stravinsky’s works underwent so much rescoring—“so many instrumental metamorphoses,”³¹⁰ as he put it. The initial version was scored for a large orchestra.³¹¹ Next Stravinsky divided the various instrumental groups into separate ensembles on stage; for instance, the strings were contrasted

³⁰⁶ Stravinsky, “The impression which [Japanese lyrics] . . .” is quoted in Druskin 1983: 126.

³⁰⁷ For more on the theme of a Russian peasant wedding, see Van den Toorn 1983: 155.

³⁰⁸ On *Les noces* as Stravinsky’s favorite piece, see Libman 1972: 227.

³⁰⁹ For a description of *Les noces*, see Van den Toorn 1983: 155. For more on the exposition and development of *Les noces*, see Van den Toorn 1983, pp. 130–134.

³¹⁰ Stravinsky, “so many instrumental metamorphoses . . .” is quoted in Van den Toorn 1983: 156.

³¹¹ On the evolution of the composition of *Les noces*, see Vlad 1967: 70.

with the brass. In other versions Stravinsky contrasted the winds with the percussions, or combined pianolas (a kind of player piano) with bands of brass instruments. Later the brass were replaced by a harmonium and the strings by a pianola and two Gypsy cymbals. Finally, in 1921, Stravinsky arrived at a satisfying solution: "I suddenly realized that an orchestra of four pianos would fulfill all my conditions."³¹² He complemented the pianos with a collection of percussion instruments.

Despite the lengthy compositional period with its variety of contemplated orchestrations, *Les noces* emerges as a unified piece. It consists of three tableaux and four movements. Musical and literary references illustrate several components of the traditional wedding ceremony (referred to as matchmaking, separation of the couple, at the bride's house, at the bridegroom's house, the bride's departure, lament, parental blessing, sacrifice, ritual meal, funeral, the wedding bed, the burial of virginity, and so on).³¹³

The composition is typically intricate. Stravinsky carefully studied the phonetics of Russian folks songs and made sure that he captured the precise accents and stammering in the accompaniment. He also conferred a witty touch by means of syncopated rhythms and choral voices. The rhythm, which dominates the composition, is largely obsessive, synchronous pulsation; there is a fundamental motif of a fourth divided into a minor third and a major second. The melodies are largely folk songs, and the timbre features a contrast between percussion, on the one hand, and the continuity of the singing voice, on the other. With the instrumentation restricted to percussion instruments, the piece features simple combinations of piano, xylophone, and triangle.

Les noces can be instructively contrasted with *Le sacre*. It has been described as a kind of civilized, "cultural" answer to the explosive "pagan" ritual of *Le sacre*. Absent are the harsh violence, abrupt shifts, or ear-blasting passages of *Le sacre*; the piece is austere, concise, concentrated, and intellectually controlled while still spirited and humane. The recurring "vertical" chromaticism of *Le sacre* is replaced by music that is largely diatonic. Instead of an extravagant spectacle, there is a formal tableau; instead of a splendid orchestra, there is a compact and rigorously functional ensemble of players, with voices as important accompaniments. Both compositions do create their own form, with thematic material shifting in the face of a pulsating rhythmic drive; but the thematic material in *Les noces* is far more closely related and integrated with the rhythm. As in *Le sacre*, the music's direction comes from coupling, rotation, and metric transformation of a small number of melodic scraps.³¹⁴

³¹² Stravinsky, "I suddenly realized . . ." is quoted in Vlad 1967: 70.

³¹³ Components of the traditional wedding ceremony are described in Vlad 1967: 69; and White 1947: 71.

³¹⁴ On *Les noces* coming from a small number of melodic scraps, see White 1947: 73.

Like *Ulysses* or *The Waste Land*, both completed at almost the same historical moment, the text is a montage of related, but deliberately unorganized, popular sayings; the consciousness of the audience member must provide the integration, which occurs at the level of intuition rather than formal analysis.

The extensive experimentation that Stravinsky went through in creating *Les noces* gives insight into his approach to composition. Stravinsky generally had a clear conception of the shape of the piece that he was creating; and with the help of the piano, he was able early on to identify its basic themes and rhythms. Not an inspired melodist, he relied as much on the scraps of the classical and folk musical cultures as on his own experience with the optimal instruments and ensembles in fulfilling his musical ideas and in determining how to juxtapose various fragments and sections to achieve the musical and expressive effects that he sought.

Stravinsky was engaged in a complex endeavor in which he had to balance literary themes, dramatic personalities, and dominant moods against the available instrumental and musical resources. We might say that the primary symbol system in which he worked was tonal music, but that the music had to be reworked constantly in light of linguistic, personal, visual-scenic, bodily-kinesthetic, and metrical considerations. Various drafts represent his changing efforts to mediate among these elements.

In my view *Le sacre* and *Les noces* are the two most important compositions by Stravinsky, comparable to *Ulysses* and *Finnegan's Wake* by Joyce, *Les demoiselles d'Avignon* and *Guernica* by Picasso, and, if one can cross the art-science chasm, to the two theories of relativity formulated by Einstein. We see at work what I have dubbed the ten-year rule, with significant innovations or reorientations occurring at approximate decade-long intervals after an initial decade in which the skills of one's trade have been mastered. In Stravinsky's case, the situation is complicated by the fact that the two compositions were begun at almost the same time, with *Les noces* having an extraordinarily lengthy gestation period. The reactions to *Les noces* were initially mixed, but its genius was gradually recognized; nowadays many find it a more satisfying work than the grander, but less elegantly shaped, *Le sacre*.³¹⁵

Trying to label the stylistic provenance of these pieces serves little purpose. Yet in both cases, one observes Stravinsky struggling to reconcile the different influences upon, and pressures within, himself. The three great works of the immediate prewar period constitute Stravinsky's distancing himself from the Russian balletic tradition, as both the themes and the instrumentational means become increasingly more radical: One can speculate that Rimsky-Korsakov would have been proud of *The Firebird*, ambivalent about *Petro-*

³¹⁵ For more about the reactions to *Les noces*, see Tansman 1949, pp. 186–187; and White 1947, pp. 75–76.

uchka, and personally offended by *Le sacre du printemps*. The latter piece belongs properly to, and helped to constitute, the Parisian avant-garde; it is remote from Russian national or Russian-European music.

In contrast, *Les noces* may be thought of as a kind of return to, and confirmation of, Stravinsky's Russian origins. The piece denotes an actual pivotal life event—the peasant wedding. Both the language and the music draw widely and deeply on folk materials, in a manner that reminds one of Béla Bartók; accordingly, the piece appears remote from current Western European concerns. The piece represents a further development in an increasingly personal idiom of a master in his prime.

A FRESH RELATION TO THE MUSIC OF THE PAST

With *Les noces*, Stravinsky climactically spanned the Russian past and the modern era. In some ways, the effort to mediate between the two strands within him never ceased, he remained simultaneously Russian and modern throughout his career.

But from well before the completion of *Les noces*, Stravinsky had embarked on a new enterprise—a rediscovery of the classical music of the past and its re-creation through the embracing of a neoclassical style. As a neoclassicist, he paid homage to both the melodic sensibility and the forms favored by composers from the classical era. As had always been the case, Stravinsky was his own best teacher, and so he now pored over work from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries with the same discipline he had displayed two decades before in tackling modern masters. As Boucourechliev comments: “He was determined to make the whole of history his own, to use it for whatever attracted or inspired him at that moment, whatever the occasion or circumstance, and to use it to create a new work by Stravinsky.”³¹⁶

While walking through the Place de la Concorde after the end of the Great War, Diaghilev suggested to Stravinsky that he study some music written by the eighteenth-century composer Giovanni Pergolesi. Stravinsky liked the music and decided to create a Pergolesi-inspired piece based on the figure of Pulcinella. Diaghilev arranged for Picasso, whom Stravinsky had met a few years earlier, to create the decor for the piece. Thus, the two indispensable creators of modern art became close collaborators for the only time in their lives. According to Stravinsky, “Picasso accepted the commission to design the decor of Pulcinella for the same reason that I agreed to arrange the music—for the fun of it.”³¹⁷ Stravinsky added: “[Picasso] worked miracles and I find it

³¹⁶ Boucourechliev, “He was determined to make . . .” is from Boucourechliev 1987: 18.

³¹⁷ Stravinsky, “Picasso accepted the commission . . .” is quoted in Druskin 1983: 88.

difficult to decide what was more enhancing—the coloring, the design, or the amazing inventiveness of this remarkable man.”³¹⁸

The composition of *Pulcinella* occurred at a critical juncture for Stravinsky. In 1920 he moved from Switzerland, a neutral no-man’s land, to France, thus casting his lot with the West and identifying more explicitly than before with the Western classical tradition. Stravinsky was aware of this pivotal moment: “*Pulcinella* was my discovery of the past, the epiphany through which the whole of my late work became possible. It was a backward look of course—the first of many love affairs in that direction—but it was a look in the mirror too.”³¹⁹

The parallels with Picasso have often been remarked on. The two men were born a year apart, both of them somewhat outside the orbit of mainstream Western European culture. Both gravitated to and made their first major splashes in Paris in the early 1900s, with Picasso more precocious than Stravinsky. Their most determinedly avant-garde works were produced in the years just before the Great War, with Picasso working alongside Braque, and Stravinsky immersed in the world of the Ballets Russes. During the war both tread water to a certain extent, with Picasso also meeting his first wife, who, interestingly enough, turned out to be a member of the Ballets Russes. Then, around the end of the war, both men embraced a middle-class life in Paris and moved into a neoclassical phase of creation, during which each was quite cognizant of what the other was doing. This postwar period also engendered an ingratiating playfulness in their work, as well as a preoccupation with more intimate compositional forms.

An interest in the work of the past is certainly an understandable step for a master, and particularly for one steeped in his particular art form and conscious of its origins and his own niche in its evolution. Such a historical bent may also be a normal reaction to an early career, in which one has quite explicitly rejected the canons of the past and one’s own roots. What one absorbed intuitively as a young student can now be revisited in a more conscious and detached way; and because one has already made a decisive break with the past, it is no longer perceived as a crushing weight. Frequently one goes back to more remote times, as Stravinsky noted: “It is in the nature of things that epochs which immediately precede us are temporarily further away from us than others which are more remote in time.”³²⁰

I submit that for Stravinsky and Picasso the opportunity to engage in a stimulating and sustaining dialectic with the past was one of the prime reasons each

³¹⁸ Stravinsky, “[Picasso] worked miracles . . .” is from Stravinsky 1962: 81.

³¹⁹ Stravinsky, “*Pulcinella* was my discovery . . .” is quoted in Boucourechliev 1987: 141.

³²⁰ Stravinsky, “It is in the nature of things . . .” is from Stravinsky 1962: 75.

could contribute creatively for so long. Reworking and learning from the past, they discovered further dimensions of their own voices. In this way they exploited an option not available to scientists or mathematicians. Had they lacked this playground of the past, they might have had little choice but to become yet more individualistic and radical, a tack that might have proved troublesome and counterproductive.

While Stravinsky's early work had been frankly and productively collaborative, his work in the 1920s and 1930s was more individual. Stravinsky did not stop collaborating, but he was more likely to initiate works and to do so with one or two other select collaborators of equal status, rather than as part of an established ensemble like the Ballets Russes.

In addition to several fruitful collaborations with Ramuz and the one with Picasso, Stravinsky also worked on *Oedipus Rex* with the French poet Jean Cocteau, and on *Perséphone*, with the French novelist and dramatist André Gide. He considered a collaboration with Berthold Brecht but found himself unable to work in revolutionary political theater. He began his longest, most fruitful, and most important association with the Russian-born dancer and choreographer George Balanchine; such rapport and mutual respect existed between the men over a forty-year period that there seems to have been little of the tension that characterized Stravinsky's other collaborations. I suggest that, of all Stravinsky's collaborators, Balanchine was closest to being his equal in terms of background, talent, and aspirations. Their tastes and their views of the relation between dance and music were cut from the same cloth, and both men were products of the same social and artistic tradition, with Balanchine exactly one generation younger than his father-figure and mentor, Stravinsky.³²¹

Throughout this period Stravinsky deliberately strove to relate contemporary and earlier works. Like Eliot in *The Waste Land*, he pointedly used materials from other eras. As far as he was concerned, it was not necessary for an audience to appreciate a quotation directly; sensing at an unconscious level the use of themes with some substantial history and allusiveness sufficed. (This idea was quite similar to what Eliot termed the "objective correlative," as discussed in chapter 7.) Like his English counterpart, Stravinsky also spurned work that wallowed in individual self-consciousness; he wanted to confirm and sustain a tradition, not create an idiosyncratic style. He saw all of European music as a single, indissoluble whole to which one could contribute. As he once expressed it: "Did not Eliot and I set out to refit old ships? And refitting old ships is the real task of the artist. He can say again, in his way, only what has already been said."³²²

³²¹ For more on Stravinsky's relation to Balanchine, see Druskin 1983: 62.

³²² Stravinsky, "Did not Eliot and I . . ." is quoted in Druskin 1983: 79.

As Stravinsky became more established, he found himself in a position to dictate the terms for each of these works; ever the perfectionist, it was very important for him to maintain control over as many facets as possible. Increasingly, he stipulated the most stringent criteria for performance of his pieces, often insisting on conducting or playing his own works. Like a dictatorial military leader, he allowed conductors and interpreters virtually no leeway. He composed piano music for himself and commissioned violin music for a young Russian violinist, Samuel Dushkin, who willingly and wholly bent to the master's whims. The Stravinsky of the 1920s and 1930s became a small industry, all focused around his own career.

THE MATURE THINKER AND PERSON

While working out his relation to the musical past, Stravinsky was also defining other aspects of his mature personality. In 1926, while attending the seven-hundredth anniversary of the Celebration of Saint Anthony in Padua, Stravinsky underwent a profound religious experience. Shortly thereafter, Stravinsky rejoined the same church he had abandoned in his youth. By a curious coincidence, Stravinsky's return to the Russian Catholic fold occurred almost simultaneously with Eliot's conversion to the Anglo-Catholic faith (see chapter 7). One cannot help wondering whether, in addition to the men's need for membership in a traditional church at a time of personal and worldwide turmoil, the respective conversions of these two exiles represented an atonement for past "sins" of aesthetic iconoclasm. It may also have been part of a bargain they struck with God, in an effort to sustain their creative powers. Even if his motives may have been mixed, Stravinsky experienced very powerful religious feelings, which remained with him throughout his life, affecting his daily activities. He declared: "I regard my talent as God-given and I pray to him daily for the strength to use it. When I discovered that I had been made custodian of this gift, in my earliest childhood, I pledged myself to God to be worthy of it. . . . First ideas are very important—they come from God."³²³ And as he once told Robert Craft, in order to compose religious works he had to "not only believe in the symbolic sense, but in the person of the Devil and the miracle of the Church."³²⁴

For most of the rest of the world, irrespective of the personal demons with which he was wrestling, Stravinsky represented the quintessential cosmopolitan artist: well connected, well groomed, and living the good life in Europe; married, but with an attractive and artistic mistress named Vera de Basset (whom he married in 1940 following the death of his invalid first wife); sailing and later jetting all over the world to promote his own music and to confer his

³²³ Stravinsky, "I regard my talent . . ." is quoted in Boucourechliev 1987: 158.

³²⁴ Stravinsky, "not only believe in the symbolic sense . . ." is quoted in Boucourechliev 1987: 158.

blessing—or to pronounce his curse—on others' music. As he grew older, Stravinsky contributed actively to this legend by his pungent writings and by his participation in various efforts to dramatize his intriguing persona. He was unquestionably a witty, charming, articulate, and literate individual, whose companionship delighted those charmed few admitted to—and retained in—his circle. Indeed, though I would clearly have been eager to know all of the individuals chronicled in this book, I believe I would have most enjoyed eavesdropping at the Stravinsky dining table.

But Stravinsky preferred to view himself as a workman in a long tradition:

I was born out of due time in the sense that by temperament and talent I should have been more suited for the life of a small Bach, living in anonymity and composing regularly for an established service and for God. I did weather the world I was born to, weather it well you might say, and I have survived—though not uncorrupted—the histericism of publishers, musical festivals, recording companies, and publicity—including my own.³²⁵

Clearly, the flamboyant, controversial, public Stravinsky was balanced by a cerebral, hardworking, private craftsman. He saw himself as embodying an Apollonian principle of order and balance, with only occasional forays into the turbulent Dionysian realm.

Stravinsky worked at least ten hours a day for many years. Beginning by playing a Bach fugue on the piano, he would compose for four to five hours in the morning and then, after lunch, orchestrate and transcribe for the rest of the day. His approach was very orderly; as his biographer Mikhail Druskin notes: “Stravinsky’s work table resembled that of a surgeon rather than that of a composer. The neatness and precision of his scores recalled those of a map, with every syllable, every note, and every rest perfectly drawn.”³²⁶ He had available all conceivable writing implements and scoring paraphernalia he might need, and he used these like the most highly skilled craftsman.

Stravinsky introspectively described his own composing activity: “For me as a creative musician, composition is a daily function that I feel compelled to discharge. I compose because I am made for that and cannot do otherwise. . . . I am far from saying that there is no such thing as inspiration. . . . Work brings inspiration if inspiration is not discernible in the beginning.”³²⁷ (I am reminded of Freud’s similar plaint: “When inspiration does not come to me, I go half way to meet it.”³²⁸) Stravinsky remarked on the opportunistic aspects of com-

³²⁵ Stravinsky, “I was born out of . . .” is quoted in Druskin 1983: 4.

³²⁶ Druskin, “Stravinsky’s work table . . .” is from Druskin 1983: 11.

³²⁷ Stravinsky, “For me as a creative musician . . .” is from Stravinsky 1962: 174.

³²⁸ Freud, “When inspiration does not come to me . . .” is quoted in Jones 1961: 225.

posing: "I stumble upon something unexpected. This unexpected element strikes me. I make a note of it. At the proper time, I put it to profitable use."³²⁹

In describing the composing of *Petrouchka*, Stravinsky paid tribute to the role of his own bodily intelligence: "What fascinated me most of all in the work was that the different rhythmic episodes were dictated by the fingers themselves. . . . Fingers are not to be despised; they are great inspirers and in contact with a musical instrument, often give birth to unconscious ideas which might otherwise never come to life."³³⁰ Noting his tendencies to obsessiveness,³³¹ he commented: "I would go on eternally revising my music were I not too busy composing more of it."³³² And he added: "They think I write like Verdi! Such nonsense! They don't listen right. These people always want to nail me down. But I won't let them! On the next occasion I do something quite different; and that bewilders them."³³³ These words echo those of Picasso, Graham, and other introspective creators.

Always a reader and an intellectual, in a way that Picasso never was, Stravinsky hewed out a coherent musical philosophy during his middle years. While he did not enjoy literary composing per se, he was articulate. Working with gifted ghostwriters like Pierre Suvchinsky, and Alexis Manuel Lévy (who wrote under the pen name of Roland-Manuel), he voiced this philosophy in two seminal works: his autobiography of 1936 (*Chronique de ma vie*) and his Charles Eliot Norton Lectures at Harvard, delivered in 1939 and 1940 and published in 1942 as *The Poetics of Music*.

In these writings Stravinsky develops his positive views of music, while also seizing the occasion to castigate his opponents. Stravinsky's annoyance at the pretentiousness of Wagner's music, through which that composer sought to combine all art forms and to elevate his works to the status of a religion, motivated Stravinsky to assert, memorably, that music in itself is powerless to express anything. He wanted to replace unending melody with discrete order, syncretic and synthetic forms with self-contained ones, and emotional self-expression with strictly musical statements.

Suppressing whatever revolutionary impulses may have existed in his own person and animated his earlier music, ignoring the rich emotional associations of his early masterpieces, Stravinsky stressed the importance of conventions and traditions, and the utility of self-imposed constraints. He loathed disorder, randomness, arbitrariness, the Circean lure of chaos. Music was akin

³²⁹ Stravinsky, "I stumble upon something . . ." is from Stravinsky 1970: 55.

³³⁰ Stravinsky, "What fascinated me . . ." is quoted in Vlad 1967: 14.

³³¹ For more on Stravinsky's tendency toward obsessiveness, see Tansman 1949: 9.

³³² Stravinsky, "I would go on eternally . . ." is quoted in Stravinsky and Craft 1962: 197.

³³³ Stravinsky, "They think I write like Verdi . . ." is quoted in White 1947: 126.

to mathematical thinking and relationships, and one could discern powerful, inexorable laws at work. In the paradox-packed closing lines of *The Poetics of Music*, Stravinsky declared: “My freedom will be so much the greater and more meaningful, the more narrowly I limit my field of action and the more I surround myself with obstacles. Whatever diminishes constraints, diminishes strength. The more constraints one imposes, the more one frees one’s self of the chains that shackle the spirit.”³³⁴

Stravinsky’s philosophical statements about music and composing have taken on a considerable importance, analogous in spirit, if not equal in potency, to those put forth around the same time by Eliot with respect to literature. In fashioning coherent (and surprisingly congruent) philosophies, these men differ from Picasso, whose intellectual aspirations were less well honed. Eliot and Stravinsky also shared a conservative political orientation, one tinged with anti-Semitism and a sympathy for fascism; in one letter to his German manager, Stravinsky declared: “I loathe all communism, Marxism, the execrable Soviet monster, and also all liberalism, democratism, atheism, etc. I detest them to such a degree and so unreservedly.”³³⁵ Stravinsky’s political conservatism did not blind him to the value of radical musical innovations. The same person who praised tradition and constraints had once declared: “I am the first to recognize that daring is the motive force of the finest and greatest artist. I approve of daring; I set no limits to it.”³³⁶

However, the two artists differed in important ways. Stravinsky was not concerned about political matters, except to the extent that they impinged on his own artistic labors or pertained to the fate of his beloved Russia. And while much of Eliot’s poetry now seems to be directly autobiographical, chronicling the agonies of his personal life, Stravinsky’s music appears to have evolved intrinsically. Perhaps in the deepest sense, this lack of association between musical and extramusical events confirms Stravinsky’s conviction that music cannot express anything by itself.

FINAL MASTERY

In 1947, after the Second World War, Stravinsky was leading the life of the expatriate in southern California. Already in his mid-sixties, he had transcended his initial revolutionary period and had worked through an entire neoclassical agenda. Both the Russian and the European worlds had fallen apart. His parents, his first wife, and one of his children were dead; his other children were grown; and it would have been easy either to retire or to succumb

³³⁴ Stravinsky, “My freedom will be . . .” is from Stravinsky 1970: 87.

³³⁵ Stravinsky, “I loathe all communism . . .” is quoted in Craft 1984: 236.

³³⁶ Stravinsky, “I am the first . . .” is from Stravinsky 1970: 15.

to the allure of Hollywood. Indeed, a number of attempts were made to get him to compose for the popular American screen and theater. Stravinsky's attitude about those opportunities is captured wonderfully in the story of his encounter with the well-known American impresario Billy Rose.³³⁷ Rose had heard *Scenes de ballet* by Stravinsky and liked it, but he felt it could be improved by an arranger. Rose wired:

your music great success stop could be sensational success if you would authorise robert russell bennett retouch orchestration

Stravinsky immediately wired back the deflating response:

satisfied with great success

In later life, Stravinsky spoke about two crises he had had to deal with: the loss of Russia and his native language, after 1920; and the need to adjust after the Second World War to a new form of music, the austere serial style that Schönberg had developed in the early 1900s and that was being widely adopted in elite musical circles. In each case, he was able to make an adjustment and thereby to prolong his musical life.

Stravinsky was fortunate enough to create a third career, one that enabled him to compose with originality until the last years of his life. The energy and inspiration came from him, of course, but these were reinforced by pivotal contacts with two younger artists. In 1947, on a visit to the Chicago Art Institute, he had been greatly impressed by William Hogarth's engravings that depicted *A Rake's Progress*. He talked with his friend Aldous Huxley, the writer, about his plan to compose an opera based on this theme; soon thereafter Huxley introduced him to the young British poet W. H. Auden, who had also immigrated to America.

At Stravinsky's invitation, Auden joined the renowned musician in creating a full-length opera, *The Rake's Progress*. The two men worked for three years on the piece, spending approximately a year on each of three acts. From all evidence their collaboration delighted both men, who enjoyed obsessing over the details of versification as well as gossiping about the present and historical great figures of Europe and the United States. The opera was performed to considerable critical acclaim in Europe and in the United States in the early 1950s. Often considered the culmination of Stravinsky's neoclassical period, *The Rake's Progress* demonstrated that he was able to execute a major work in the English language and to reach new audiences without compromising his artistic integrity.

³³⁷ For more on Stravinsky's encounter with Rose, see Craft 1982: 211.

At about the same time that he met Auden, Stravinsky also made initial contact with the gifted young American conductor Robert Craft. Craft was intrigued by the compositional innovations associated with the Viennese school of twelve-tone, or serial, music, which Schönberg had instituted several decades earlier. Stravinsky was of course aware of these experiments; and earlier in his career, he had listened with sympathy to some of Schönberg's work, calling *Pierrot Lunaire* "this brilliant instrumental masterpiece."³³⁸ He had declared in his 1940 lectures: "Whatever opinion one may have of Arnold Schoenberg's music, it is impossible for a self-respecting mind equipped with genuine musical culture not to feel that the composer of *Pierrot Lunaire* is fully aware of what he is doing and that he is not trying to deceive anyone."³³⁹

Nonetheless, Stravinsky had kept his distance from the serialists for several reasons, ranging from his personal antipathy to Schönberg, to his dislike of a pri-ori compositional schemes, to the understandable uneasiness induced by a major competitor, one who was arrogant about his work, sarcastic about the ballet, and dismissive of Stravinsky's own efforts. (Schönberg had declared: "I have made a discovery that will assure the preponderance of German music for a hundred years."³⁴⁰) Two somewhat paranoid personalities inevitably clashed. The gulf between the composers, while understandable, was unfortunate, particularly since they lived near one another in Los Angeles and shared many of the same interests and acquaintances.

Craft was not to be undone by these Old World tribal feuds. He gently pressured Stravinsky to listen to the music of the Schönberg circle, and Stravinsky found it far more stimulating than he had anticipated. He was particularly attracted to the work of Schönberg's younger associate Anton Webern, whose pointillistic, intervalic approach proved more congenial to his ear than Schönberg's grander and more harmonically oriented style. When Schönberg died in 1951 (roughly coincident with the conclusion of the *Rake* project), Stravinsky felt licensed to begin his own experimentation with serial techniques.

Even as the contact with Diaghilev had inspired Stravinsky in his twenties, and the revisiting of the classical repertoire had invigorated Stravinsky in midlife, the exposure to serial (twelve-tone) music fueled Stravinsky's compositional powers in late life. At a life stage when most creators have ceased to work altogether (like Eliot) or are susceptible to repeating themselves (as Picasso sometimes did), Stravinsky embarked on a set of compositions that, while never widely popular, are considered by some critics to be as important and innovative as his earlier works. In compositions like *Canticum sacrum* (1956),

³³⁸ Stravinsky, "this brilliant instrumental masterpiece . . ." is quoted in Vlad 1967: 39.

³³⁹ Stravinsky, "Whatever opinion one may have . . ." is from Stravinsky 1970: 17.

³⁴⁰ Schönberg, "I have made a discovery . . ." is quoted in Boucourechliev 1987: 210.

Agon (1957), *Threni* (1958), and *Movements for Piano and Orchestra* (1958–1959), Stravinsky created works in the language of serial music that retained his personal voice and reflected his lifelong aesthetic vision. Rather than being archetypical serial music, these works combined the tonal and the serial. Melodic invention and emotional immediacy were perhaps less evident than in earlier music; but his thematic and contrapuntal skills continued to develop, and the minted Stravinskian tonality, rhythmic organization, and sharp juxtapositions remained.³⁴¹

We may think of this synthesis as what might have happened if Picasso had crossed the Rubicon into purely abstract art while adhering to key compositional principles that had animated his earlier periods, or, more metaphorically, if Einstein had succeeded in fusing the relativistic and quantum-mechanical approaches. To be sure, Stravinsky's work in the serial mode proved less accessible (and less frequently performed) than some of the earlier works. Stravinsky appeared to accept this with resignation tinged with a defiance; he stated in his autobiography: "The general public no longer gives my music the enthusiastic reception of early days. . . . Their attitude certainly cannot make me deviate from my path."³⁴²

Stravinsky's strength began to ebb in his eighties, and he suffered a series of debilitating illnesses, which gradually reduced his composing and performing activities. Still, he remained a vivid presence in the international artistic scene through a curious activity—the issuing of a long series of books and articles he and Craft penned. Craft is a gifted writer, a knowledgeable musician, and a sharp observer of the contemporary artistic scene; and in the twenty-odd years during which he lived with the Stravinsky family, virtually becoming one of its members, he came to know the mind of the master extremely well. He continued to invigorate his mentor by introducing Stravinsky to new music and encouraging him to listen again to some of the Germanic music he had earlier castigated.

What began with a series of questions and answers executed at Stravinsky's seventy-fifth birthday in 1957 culminated in writings where, as *The New Grove Dictionary of Music* entry indicates, "the two authors were beginning to sink their individual identities in a new character which was distinguished by some of the salient characteristics of both."³⁴³ Controversy has arisen about the extent to which Craft placed words in Stravinsky's mouth (just as the same question could be raised about earlier collaborators, Suvchinsky, in his *Autobiography*, and Claude Roland-Manuel, in his *Poetics*). But we clearly know far

³⁴¹ For more on Stravinsky's brand of serial music, see Tansman 1949: 58; and White and Noble 1980.

³⁴² Stravinsky, "The general public . . ." is from Stravinsky 1962: 26.

³⁴³ "the two authors . . ." is quoted in White and Noble 1980: 258; see also Libman 1972.

more about Stravinsky's views and sensibilities than we could ever have known, were it not for Craft's tireless conversing and chronicling of this oddly evocative friendship. It is as if Boswell and Johnson, or Goethe and Eckermann, had collaborated on a set of writings over fifteen years, or as if Françoise Gilot had remained on good terms with Picasso and thereby served as a continuing catalyst for the expression of his views. As Stravinsky once put it: "It is not a question of simple ghostwriting but of somebody who is to a large extent creating me."³⁴⁴

We have seen that, earlier in his life, Stravinsky received needed cognitive and affective support from Diaghilev and Roerich, as well as from the members of his tight-knit ensemble. In the absence of such support, Stravinsky might well have been unable to break away from the Rimsky-Korsakov mode of *Fireworks* and *The Firebird* and develop the more innovative languages of *Le sacre* and *Les noces*. During his middle years, Stravinsky enjoyed the support of a wide circle of friends and followers; but, like Picasso, he seems to have conducted his neoclassical experimentation in conversation with his redoubtable predecessors as much as with his illustrious contemporaries. In old age, however, Stravinsky may have felt the need for someone of greater vitality who could again play a nurturing role, this time providing parentlike guidance as well as intellectual sustenance. It is perhaps because Craft met the ensemble of needs so perfectly that Stravinsky sustained his creativity in old age more fully than did our other creators and that he remained active among the living musical creators of his era. I see Craft as the last, and in many ways the most influential, of the series of collaborators who provided cognitive and affective support to the master throughout his long life.

Like Picasso, Stravinsky lived through much of the twentieth century and helped place his distinctive mark on it. He was able to absorb an enormous set of influences and yet retain his own highly distinctive voice—or set of voices. He may have lacked Picasso's indefatigable energy and protean facility, but he surpassed Picasso in the coherence of his work, the consistency of his personal philosophy, and the ability to articulate his vision in words as well as in his chosen artistic medium.

Having elected to compose music, and to do so largely in formats that required the participation of many other individuals, Stravinsky was consigned to collaboration in a way less necessary for an individual working in a relatively solitary pursuit like painting or poetry. From Diaghilev he received a primordial model of how to collaborate; and he internalized much of the most positive, as well as many of the least attractive features, of that dominating personality. During the height of his career, Stravinsky as a collaborator could be

³⁴⁴ Stravinsky, "It is not a question of simple ghost-writing . . ." is quoted in Boucourechliev 1987: 251.

quite unpleasant, and as noted, Craft himself was shocked by the inflammatory paper trail left by Stravinsky during the early decades of the twentieth century.

In later life, Stravinsky appears to have become increasingly at peace with himself and with those around him. While remaining a stickler for details and a perennial skinflint, he seems to have been able to enjoy life, with access to the friends, the travels, and the publicity he needed, as well as the privacy he prized. Drawing on his understanding of the theater, he became a dramatic personality of his time. He was fortunate that he was able to continue composing until close to the end of his life, and to do so in an idiom that made sense to him and took advantage of the century's progress in his domain. He had the shrewdness to initiate collaborations with younger men like Auden and Craft that kept him in touch and engaged with the environment of the day. In this respect he was much more fortunate than Picasso, whose quest to remain young was more fervent but less well guided, secured chiefly through a never-ending search for young lovers and done with scant effort to remain in contact with the most innovative and fertile artistic streams. More so than our other creators, Stravinsky seems to have been able to preserve what was important from childhood while enjoying as well some of the fruits of later life.

I must mention one discordant note. Stravinsky's relations with his three surviving children were bumpy and, toward the end of his life, increasingly disrupted by legal entanglements over the ownership of rights. The children had never fully accepted Vera de Basset, Stravinsky's long-time mistress and second wife, and by the end of his life, his wife did not want to have anything to do with them; even their attendance at his funeral and at various memorial services became an issue. As with several of our other creators, a connection to the wider world seems to have been purchased at the cost of smooth and loving family relationships.

The waning of one's powers provides no pleasure for anyone, and this is perhaps an especially bitter experience for the creative titans of a century. But Stravinsky dealt with aging as well as any other master of our era, continuing to compose, being personally happy with his wife and his "adopted" son, Craft, and able to relinquish some of the most combative aspects of a creative life carried on amidst other creative individuals. As a final gesture of peace, he was buried, at his wish, in his beloved Venice, near to Diaghilev, with whom he had quarreled a half century earlier, but with whose founding and catalytic genius he wished to be reconciled in the end.

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