

MODERN MUSIC

MINNA LEDERMAN, Editor

ON STRAVINSKY, EARLY AND LATE

ANDRÉ SCHAEFFNER

WRITING from Paris for America, I have a feeling of ease which would be lacking before a European audience. I know that what is the Orient to us is West to an American. The earth is round, yet some savages, or would-be savages, still do not know this, and with them are most critics and historians—at least those in France. There is no longer an absolute Orient or Occident, but the recent discoveries by archaeologists in the field of Byzantine, Persian, and Graeco-Buddhistic art have not reached the world of critics or, oddly enough, of musicographers. I believe this is one reason they are annoyed by the case of Stravinsky. As in many other situations, it is just a question of the old immigrant eyeing the new one with some animosity. Let us consider Stravinsky, for an instant only, as an oriental come among us Europeans or pseudo-occidentals. Why reproach him because his art is more or less occidental, when we ourselves, so closely related to ancient orientals, have merely occidentalized what we have received little by little from the Orient?

There is, moreover, no Stravinsky "case". This musician is no more oriental than others; therefore he does not belie himself by an occidental manner of expression. Neither is he a nomad like other artists who are enabled by a special flair to take their material wherever it is found even from sources which they use unconsciously. I am thinking now of Pablo Picasso, of some of his borrowings which are really extracted from thin air. Of course Stravinsky first wrote *Le Sacre du Printemps*, then *Les*

Noces, and finally *Oedipus Rex*; but which of these three works is most "oriental" either in spirit or in character? Not a bit of the "orientalism" freely attributed to Russian musicians, nothing of his "modernism," has been lost. It has all shifted its base, has been moved from Lithuania to Persia or Byzantium; one use of appoggiatura makes way for another, one form of synco-pation changes to a new kind of conflict between time and rhythm.

But the sum-total of orientalism, occidentalism, or modernism has remained exactly the same. Would Stravinsky have thought of writing *Le Sacre* if he had not already been familiar with the young French school of that time, or even with Schönberg? Is *Oedipus Rex* less oriental because its composer has never returned to Russia? One by one the works of this musician fall like meteorites. At the height where they originate what difference does it make whether the starting point is east or west of where we presume it to be fixed; actually it moves like everything else. I have reached a stage where I often ask myself whether Stravinsky, of all of us, is not the one who has evolved least. Criticism of Stravinsky has been as a rule too impatient, too superficial, it has shown little sagacity and it has constantly changed its position without knowing it.



Let us consider Stravinsky's latest composition, *Perséphone*. The common reproach has been that it represents a certain hoarding of his resources in invention and exploitation of effects. But was this any different in *Le Rossignol* (particularly in *Le Chant du Rossignol*)? The two works, apart from the difference in their styles, resemble each other strikingly. After twenty years must we accept one and reject the other?

In *Perséphone* a unique character otherwise motionless on the stage sings: it is Eumolpe. An aria of Eumolpe, placed at the very beginning of the work contains melodic and expressive elements out of which develop the nine measures which the same character sings at the beginning of the second part, the first aria of the third part, and, finally, the aria which concludes the work accompanied by the choral ensemble.

In *Le Rossignol* a certain air, given at first to the Fisherman, is also repeated again and again, each time as though to close

one side of the triptych; the Nightingale hardly varies his motives during the last tableau. Three Chinese marches, the second a repetition of the first, indicate a constant preference for the same clear, hammered rhythm, in itself rather monotonous. The Fisherman's song, the Nightingale's airs, the Chinese marches, through their sparse development, create a certain impression of immobility, even of barrenness, which is without doubt integral to the conception of the work. It is present in the same degree in *Perséphone*, where a lavish though transparent choral material seems to relieve the aridity, or rather the habitual severity of the music. And just as Boris de Schloezer, attacking *Perséphone*, finds that it bears the aspect of a splendidly bedecked corpse, so in *Le Rossignol* and in *Oedipus Rex* we can discover a fixed, hieratic, mummified quality which the action, dramatic and symphonic, tends to assume. In my book on Stravinsky I have emphasized this trait, so paradoxical in a musician whose richness of rhythmic invention is undeniable; a recurring tendency toward the static, toward sculptured immobility. It is apparent even in *Le Sacre du Printemps* and *Les Noces*.



I cannot help discerning in this aspect of Stravinsky a trace of the much-discussed orientalism, of the Byzantinism which goes far toward explaining the rigid, solemn, priestly, petrified, or gilded aspect of this musician's dramatic art. He has come to the theatre, it seems, to arrest its motion. I avoid all the facile though well-founded comparisons with the art of the ikons, with that of the two occidental Byzantines, Cimabue and El Greco. When Boris de Schloezer complains that the classicism of *Perséphone* is less Greek than Alexandrine, I reply that there is a long Greek period which is not represented for us by the art of Phidias. From Kafiristan to Alexandria, Pompeii and Venice, from the deep neolithic strata to the late days of the twelfth century, there was produced a unique, but varied art, which developed, matured, and had its principal center of radiation in the Balkan Peninsula, in Asia Minor, and the seas which bathe them. For those to whom such comparisons seem a trifle literary, let me refer to a strange figure taken from a Greek urn which is pre-

served in Berlin and reproduced in *La Danse Grecque Antique* by Séchan. It represents a chorus of women entirely enveloped in one large cloak, and who are thus evocative of the grouped and fixed character of certain stage-effects planned or accepted by Stravinsky (*Sacre*, *Rossignol*, *Noces*, *Oedipus Rex*, *Perséphone*).



Another phase of the same reproach is applied to *Perséphone*: the hoarding of resources involves several compositions at a time; that is to say, Stravinsky does not hesitate to repeat in *Perséphone* effects developed in his previous works. Shall we then forget the flagrant reminders of *Tristan* which generously pad out *Die Meistersinger* and *Parsifal*? But apart from obvious recourse to the style of *Apollon*—a very legitimate re-use, moreover, which produces an Elysian tenderness never attained before—the other reminiscences are no more than evidences of that psycho-esthetic process which assigns similar pen-strokes to the handwriting of the same creator. Can we not find traces of *L'Oiseau de Feu* in *Le Rossignol*, of *Pétrouchka* in *Le Sacre* and *Le Rossignol*, of *Renard* in *Les Noces* and the *Symphonies for Wind Instruments*, of *L'Histoire du Soldat* in *Pulcinella*, *Mavra*, and the *Octuor*, and finally of *Le Sacre*, the least effaceable of them all, even in the *Concertino* and *Oedipus Rex*?

All these repetitions—I pass over some of them—have not injured the ever new originality of each work by Stravinsky. It is thus that *Perséphone* has a sound which is its own,—dare I say a starry sound. For this music has something celestial about it, milky at times, but often sharply scintillant. Nobody but Stravinsky—particularly the composer of *Le Rossignol* and *Apollon Musagète*—could have expressed more serenely the melancholy lot of the whirling, infernal shades at the beginning of the second part.



The comparison of these three works, which I group because they give the same calm expression to a rather somber view of the world, now leads me to emphasize similarities and resemblances in Stravinsky's music which are more fecund than those

cited in a carping spirit; they throw a valuable light on the secrets of his technic.

To begin with, there is a resemblance between the finales of *Le Rossignol*, *Apollon*, and *Perséphone*. The atmosphere is even, moderate, sweet and solemn, in a certain apotheosized respect. The effect is the same; it is the technical means which are different, with, nevertheless, a few traits in common (if only of a very personal manner, short and spare, of crescendo or harmonic development). The beginning of *Perséphone* makes us think of that of the *Duo Concertante*; but the brusque, symmetrical opening of the *Capriccio* comes closer to that of *Oedipus Rex*. In the chorus of the third part: "We bring our offerings", the abrupt alternations of piano and forte sections (like the contrasts of soli and tutti in the old concerto) remind us that this procedure was customary with the composer of *Le Sacre*, *Le Rossignol* and *Les Noces*. The priestly, liturgical character which Stravinsky gives to the harmonic columns, themselves expanded, is found again, absolutely identical in form, in the closing of the *Pieces for String Quartet*, in the *Symphonies for Wind Instruments*, and in the air of Eumolpe at the beginning of the third part of *Perséphone*. We must also mention, although there is not space to develop the point, the singularly persistent taste of Stravinsky for the timbre of the flute (*Pétrouchka*, the *Octuor*, *Le Baiser de la Fée*, the *Symphony of Psalms*, etc.), the recourse to the reed timbre which has the voice of a child.