

THE ENIGMA OF STRAVINSKY

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OF ALL living composers, none has provoked so many studies, commentaries and discussions as Igor Stravinsky. Special books, and articles in reviews and newspapers about his work form a constantly growing library. The eminent place occupied in contemporary art by the composer might partly explain this flowering of criticism. But he is not the only one up on the heights, and yet, nearly always, Stravinsky is the center of our discussions on music. Writers who have already devoted more or less important studies to him, return to their subject, take up their theories again in order to modify them, demonstrating that they feel the incompleteness of their grasp and that some aspect of his art escapes them. I speak from experience. Despite all previous explanations, we realize as time goes on that the problem continues to present itself under new aspects. There is, therefore, a Stravinsky "enigma;" in his art we find something disturbing, even irritating.

This is due, I believe, to a certain incompatibility between Stravinsky's music and that of all other composers. The author of *Les Noces* is a path-breaker not through novelty in his methods of procedure, but because music for him is something different from what we have known before. No matter what the difference between the works of Debussy and Schönberg, for example, they both conform to our idea of music, while the work of Stravinsky evades this classification and stands apart, compelling us drastically to modify our very conception of music. What then is the enigma that the art of Stravinsky sets before us?

There is another artist whose product creates the same sort of disturbance, presents the same baffling character: Picasso. I believe that Picasso can help us understand Stravinsky and vice

versa. Picasso's position among painters is similar to Stravinsky's among musicians. In their respective fields both have the same virtuosity, which permits them, it seems, to do what and as they want. The painter's evolution is just as disconcerting, just as capricious as the musician's. Like Stravinsky's compositions the canvases of Picasso have provoked a tremendous critical literature, fiery enthusiasm and violent attack, which may be explained perfectly by the fact that they have compelled us to revise our ideas of painting.

In short, the musician and the painter, while attracting us, shock us, and for reasons which seem to me to be identical. Their art is *art raised to the second degree*. But that requires explanation.

André Lhote said recently with justice (in *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, August 1932) that Picasso did not paint "after Nature," but "after the art of painting;" he took his methods and inspiration from works of art, which he rearranges, simplifying, complicating, or deforming them . . . and that is what I call art raised to the second degree.

The painter, the sculptor, as a rule, start with reality and transmute it; Picasso works on something that has already been transmuted, on pictorial forms which he reorganizes. Stravinsky operates similarly in his field, he creates with something that has already been created; his starting points are musical works; his genius takes in hand form elements which are not really his, in order to arrange them after his own fashion. Of course, the very word "art" presupposes artifice; all art is more or less conscious arrangement. But this artificial aspect is doubly presented in the music of Stravinsky, since his raw material is something already constructed, something artificial. If music usually expresses the reaction of the composer to reality, and is a sort of answer to the demands of life, then one might say that Stravinsky's art is his reaction to music, a reflection on music, and it is precisely this reflection which indirectly expresses his attitude to reality. Just as Picasso's universe is made up of plastic forms, Stravinsky's universe is composed of musical forms and compositions. This explains the non-human nature of Stravinsky's art and its rarefied atmosphere; for since Stravinsky's in-

ventive faculties work with material already organized, and his art is constructed of things which are already art, his work retains not an atom of sentiment, of real emotion. Because of this double transposition, this double filtration, all psychic elements are banished. Here we meet a system of music whose existence is only esthetic, and which thus belongs to a world strictly apart, having no contact with reality. Compared to a ballet like *Le Baiser de la Fée*, for example, the compositions of other musicians, classic as well as romantic, seem charged with personal elements and steeped in reality. And that is understandable, for any musical work, cleverly constructed or consciously put together as it may be, contains a part of the "gift," of the inspiration, as we usually say, of the composer, that is, elements which he finds in himself, which rise up in him spontaneously and may be considered a manifestation of his deepest individuality. That is why, whether the composer wills it or no, every work is in a certain sense a confession and permits us to see the real personality of the creator. But with Stravinsky, this "gift," this spontaneous effusion which gives music a certain psychologic value, has always been unimportant, and it is reduced to a minimum in his latest works; they are completely "made," composed. But since the work of elaboration must deal with some material, some substance, Stravinsky finds his substance in the treasures of our musical culture. Is not this, then, the answer to the enigma, the explanation of the special character of Stravinsky's music—art grafted on art?

Of course, we know that, like Picasso, Stravinsky neither copies nor stylizes. There can, indeed, be no suspicion of "alexandrianism." Neither the painter nor the musician is a rhetorician or a compiler, but they are genuine creators, powerful personalities whose creative faculties seem to react only to art. The question is, however, whether their work, so clearly indicative of the tendencies, the ideas and the taste of the present era, is not the symptom of a certain hypertrophy of our esthetic culture, a dangerous hypertrophy which is also revealed in many other ways.

This specific quality in Stravinsky, which I have tried to isolate, enables us better to understand his evolution. But first,

is it possible to apply this word "evolution," which suggests the idea of a continued progress, to that series of metamorphoses through which Stravinsky, a real Proteus of music, has passed? In general when we consider a work by a great artist, we can divine, more or less, how it has developed from its predecessors, and how it engenders those which will follow. The various works of Stravinsky (excepting the last) are considered by many to have nothing in common, to be determined solely by the *sic volo, sic jubeo* of the composer. But I believe that this is true on the surface only. In spite of everything, Stravinsky's output has a certain unity, though it is not conditioned by the use of the same technic or the same musical language, for in the course of his career the composer has changed these many times. He always has had a definite goal, something concrete to accomplish, and has achieved it by methods specially selected for this effect, to be later replaced by other means exactly adapted to the new problem which he was meeting, this latter depending in turn on the means the composer had at his disposal. Thus there is always an exact correlation between the goal and the means, which explains Stravinsky's successes. He has always done what he wanted to, because he wanted to do only what he could, what his possibilities enabled him to realize at the given moment. To each of the stages of his life as a musician correspond certain works perfectly achieved in their genus, but this genus, as well as the technic adapted to it, is abandoned finally, never to be resumed by him. The metamorphoses in this production are, in short, the expression of a unique tendency, which he has pursued practically without a halt after the inevitable gropings of his debut.

In the art of Stravinsky the art of music has become aware of itself for the first time, so to speak, and has set itself up as its own objective. The series of dissimilar works marks the stages of a progressive mastery of the culture of music, by an ever more perfect theoretical knowledge of its principles, by a practice more and more liberal in its procedure. The personality of the composer asserts itself and expands precisely as his domain increases, and in the extent to which he takes possession of its riches.

There is nothing revolutionary in the art of Stravinsky, after all is said and done. He makes innovations, but inside the frame set up by his predecessors. At the time of the *Sacre* he tried to extend that frame but since then has remained faithful to it, contenting himself with working in depth, so to speak. The fact that Stravinsky has succeeded in renewing European music, all the while obeying its principles, is a demonstration not only of the power of his genius, but also of the vitality of Occidental musical culture, its riches, its immense possibilities, which centuries of production have been unable to exhaust. If we accept this point of view, Stravinsky becomes an essentially traditionalist spirit. A Schönberg, a Debussy, are outlaws, rebels; we can trace their parentage, see the influences which have acted on them, and how at a certain moment, they break with the past and range themselves against their predecessors. Compared to them Stravinsky looks like a reactionary. It was natural to be mistaken at his debut; today, however, it is clear that if Stravinsky at first brutally upset the classical principles, it was for the purpose of extracting their new possibilities, of utilizing them in a new fashion. Comparing him in this connection with Picasso, it appears that the foundation of his art is even narrower than the painter's. With an avid and tireless curiosity, Picasso seized on Negro, Japanese, Mexican, medieval forms; his imagination looted Asia, Africa, America, Oceania. Stravinsky remained a pure Occidental. He let himself be tempted once by some Negro rhythms (*Ragtime*, *Rag-Music*) but immediately after came back to the fold, that is, to Europe. The exoticism which has seduced so many contemporary composers has always been completely foreign to him; he is and has always been a Russian and a European. If, in spite of this, his art has always appeared disturbing compared with that of certain of his emulators, it is only, I repeat, because this art has undergone a double decantation, which has deprived it of all its human elements. It is the very essence of music, a sort of "ninety per cent alcohol."

Though a pupil of Rimsky-Korsakov, Stravinsky did not follow the path of the St. Petersburg conservatory. None the less his first works are tinged with the academism which has always

reigned in that institution, and this point is quite in character, for the academic is also art grafted on art, though by the means of formulæ. The academician, be he poet, musician or painter, reduces the inventions and the discoveries of the great masters to a handful of recipes, and thus arrives at an art which is abstract, neuter and eclectic. But precisely such is Stravinsky's *Symphony in E flat*, where the lyric and pathetic formulæ inherited from Tschaikovsky serve as the material of one of those great musical structures for which Glazounov (following Brahms) set the type in Russia. Though tinged by modernism, this eclecticism is still apparent in the cantata *Le Faune et la Bergère*. Then comes *L'Oiseau de Feu* which opens the series of specifically national works constructed on popular themes, whether directly borrowed from folklore or based on models furnished by this same folklore. But while *L'Oiseau de Feu* is still grounded in the picturesque and descriptive manner of Rimsky-Korsakov—of a very refined Rimsky-Korsakov it is true, who already knew Debussy and Scriabin (*Le Poème de l'Extase*)—, the four Russian ballets, *Petrushka* and *Renard*, *Le Sacre* and *Noces*, are the works of a creator in full possession of his tools, entirely free of his masters.

These four ballets seem to me to form a separate group in Stravinsky's output, because of the richness and meatiness of their musical material; here for the first and last time Stravinsky found himself in contact with reality, in other words, he worked with something relatively unorganized. But two points must be made in this connection: The material which he utilized consisted of popular songs and dances; it is therefore with art after all, crude and simple though it may be, that the musician was concerned. And furthermore—this is most important—his attitude towards this material is strictly esthetic. In his Russian works, Stravinsky is not national like Manuel de Falla, Bela Bartok or Moussorgsky; for them the popular melody is a natural means of expression, it embodies their thought, their emotion, and is in effect their direct speech. Stravinsky approaches this folk music objectively, it is only a stimulating agent for him, it is one of several subjects to which his genius for form can apply itself, exactly as the Negro idols or the Jap-

anese prints serve Picasso. How impossible it is to conceive of Manuel de Falla drawing from Italian sources or of Bela Bartok seeking inspiration in Polish songs. If they did, they would only betray their own nature and produce pastiches. But *Pulcinella* is not a pastiche; it is proof irrefutable of the absolute liberty, even the supreme indifference of Stravinsky toward the material which he organizes and shapes after his own fashion. In the fifteen years since *Petrushka* he has given us *Mavra*, *Oedipe*, *Apollon*, *Le Baiser de la Fée*, the *Symphonie des Psaumes*, the *Sonate*, the *Concerto*, the *Capriccio* for piano and the *Concerto* for violin, in which works, with the touch of a master and the ease of genius, he makes use of J. S. and P. E. Bach, Handel, Lully, Beethoven of the first style, Glinka and the Russian dilettantes, Rossini, Meyerbeer, Liszt, and the gypsy violin style, remaining faithful to himself in spite of everything and maintaining originality by the complete revision of the diverse elements and by their synthesis.

The war and the revolution which separated him from his country have not had, it appears, any influence on his development, and nothing could be more false than to consider him uprooted. When he wrote *L'Oiseau de Feu*, *Petrushka* and *Renard*, he handled the Russian popular songs in a Western manner, and forced them to conform to the principles elaborated by European musical thought; principles to which they were entirely strangers; but on the other hand, the Russian who is Stravinsky is clearly revealed in the flexibility and ease of his successive transformations, in the extraordinary faculty, which he alone possesses among musicians, of understanding, becoming part of and dominating all ages, all the various aspects of European music culture, not as a dilettante but as a creator. Is not this an expression of the tendency to "universalism" that Dostoevsky proclaimed (in his discussion of Pushkin) as one of the characteristic traits of the Russian spirit?

It must not be forgotten, however, that Stravinsky, above all and always, remains a pure artist, a technician. In the course of his excursions into the past his sole concern is with art. When Glinka wrote his *Jota Aragonesa*, he actually felt himself part of the soul of Spain, while the composer of *Pulcinella*, of

Apollon and *Mavra* remains detached, never incarnating himself; all his transformations unfold on the esthetic plane and his human personality does not find itself involved. It is this which accounts for the perfection, the harmonious beauty and the solidity of his music but also sets its limits. Of course his work is not yet finished; Stravinsky today is at the height of his powers, and I would not presume to play the prophet so far as he is concerned. But it is beyond question that a reaction is developing against Stravinskyism and that a banner is being raised for the "heart." Against the music which makes all other music appear "human, all too human" to speak the language of Nietzsche, another art has opposed itself which clearly proclaims the rights of the human, protests against technic to the limit, against formalism, affirms the primacy of inspiration, and tends to reestablish contact with reality, to find personal truth again. This reaction is inevitable, and, for the future of music, it is to be hoped that it will be as far-reaching and vigorous as possible. As a matter of fact, the work of Stravinsky, like that of all great creators, cannot be surpassed; one cannot develop it further without opposing it; the only one who will profit from the lesson of Stravinsky is the man who will go in exactly the opposite direction.