

## ON OEDIPUS REX

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ERNEST Ansermet remarked some years ago on the good fortune of Stravinsky in having had his works become known before they were commented on. *Oedipus Rex*, together with the rest of Stravinsky's later music, has not shared this good fortune. The comparatively small number of his works, the rapid evolution of his style and his own increasingly enhanced reputation have all contributed to a wide-spread curiosity in which comment has often preceded thorough acquaintance or even in some cases the actual performance of his works. It is not surprising therefore that each new work is hailed as an entirely new departure, the starting point for new catchwords and generalizations by admirers and detractors alike. Such generalizations no doubt often contain some truth, but they must be understood with caution and accuracy if they are not to mislead. Above all they must be considered as no more than indications of a rather general character.

This was the case with the well known "Return to Bach" which was seen in the *Octuor* and the *Concerto for Piano*, and is equally true of the "Return to Handel" which *Oedipus Rex* is said to exemplify. *Oedipus* preserves in a general way the formal lines of the oratorio, of which it also reëmbodies some of the solemnity and stateliness of spirit. But it is the oratorio of Handel, impersonal and almost ritualistic in character, rather than the more dramatic Passion music of Bach, that has served as a general model for Stravinsky—a model to be studied and understood, but to be readapted rather than imitated in any but the broadest fashion.

The result is the "opera-oratorio," a form which while preserving the general lines of the dramatic action, makes possible the most complete freedom of musical development. The whole work is divided into two acts, each of which contains three main

sections separated by the successive appearances of a "speaker" whose ostensible function is to elucidate the drama in order that the hearer may concentrate attention upon the essential drama rather than upon the text. This drama unfolds itself in a series of musical movements, each fully developed, but bearing its definite musical relation to the formal plan of the whole. Keys, metres, tempi are balanced and contrasted with the utmost nicety; in the first act the alternation of chorus and solo passages produces an effect similar in kind to that of the older concerto form, where orchestral masses were brought into contrast with the solo instruments. The whole is in other words as closely knit, as organic a unit as a large instrumental work. The somewhat loose oratorio form is thus merely a point of departure; the division into arias, choruses and concerted numbers is preserved in some general fashion, but the total result is something essentially different in character and effect.

The "speaker" as we have already hinted not only elucidates the action of the drama; he performs the important function of helping to clarify the general musical lines by his regular appearance between the main sections. This was not clear at the première in Paris, owing to the very unsatisfactory nature of the performance as a whole. In Boston and New York however, the effectiveness of the contrast between speaking voice and music became evident, and added to the solemn and dignified impression of the whole work.

The music of *Oedipus* is built on a strictly harmonic basis; in this respect it stands in striking contrast to the other recent works of Stravinsky, which are primarily contrapuntal in character. This is moreover its second and final point of contact with Handel—here too with the spirit and method but in no sense the actual musical personality of Handel. Polyphony exists, and to be sure, is almost constant; but it is always subordinate, rather serving to accentuate the harmonic or rhythmic context than existing in its own right.

Arthur Lourié has acutely pointed out that the harmonic structure of *Oedipus* is *tonic* rather than *tonal* in the ordinary sense of the word. As in nearly all of Stravinsky's works, the shifting harmonies move around a clearly established harmonic

axis. In *Oedipus* the harmonic axis is nearly always a tonic triad. Whole sections may be found which are thus constructed on a single fundamental tonic harmony. To give but one instance: the musical pages which embody the crucial moment of the drama are based on a persistently reiterated D minor harmony. The effect of such a style is one of great deliberation and stateliness of movement. Tonality, as expressed in the harmonies of the perfect cadence, is to be found only occasionally in isolated phrases. It is in no sense a part of the structure of the whole.

Modulations generally effected through the shifting of the harmonic poles, are fairly frequent and often most striking in their boldness and freedom. The following is one of the finest examples from the choruses of the opening scene:

The image displays two systems of handwritten musical notation. The first system is for the Chorus and Orchestra. The Chorus part is in a soprano clef with a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat) and a 4/4 time signature. The lyrics are "ser - va nos" and "Quid fa - ki - en - dum". The Orchestra part is in a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) with the same key signature and time signature. The second system is also for the Chorus and Orchestra. The Chorus part continues with the lyrics "Quid fa ki en - dum, Oe - di - pro - pter ut li - beremur?". The Orchestra part includes the instruction "diminuendo". Both systems feature complex harmonic structures with frequent modulations and are marked with various musical notations including triplets, dynamics, and articulation marks.

This tonal freedom is characteristic of all of Stravinsky's more recent music; only in *Oedipus* one is conscious of greater simplicity as well as greater flexibility in the whole tonal scheme.

The orchestral style is characterized technically by the nearly complete equality of the three main instrumental groups. One is tempted to add to these a fourth consisting of piano, tympani and harp, which have important roles to fill, generally in combination. The scoring is at the same time simple and daring. It is as bare, as free from prettiness or mere brilliance as the music itself. Often two or three instrumental voices will carry the entire weight, as with the pages accompanying Oedipus' first appearance, where clarinets two octaves apart play a rhythmic and harmonic figure above a single bassoon; or the opening of Tiresias' long air, accompanied by first and second violins in unison from two to three octaves above a flowing figure in the bassoon, or like the accompaniment for two bassoons of the Shepherd's song. All of these passages are of the utmost simplicity, yet their effect is extraordinarily rich and full. In many of the tutti passages the instruments are strongly individualized. The music which accompanies the duet of Oedipus and Jocasta, for instance, achieves its extraordinary crystalline effect largely through the individual exploitation of single timbres—the trumpet, the clarinet, the piccolo. The score is full of masterly and subtle detail: the horn, an octave higher than the tenors of the chorus, adding a brilliance which almost suggests the presence of sopranos; a single pizzicato chord accenting a phrase of the trumpets; a horn sustaining the upper notes of a strumming accompaniment. Every instrument is exploited to the full extent of its characteristic possibilities; even the contrabassoon, two octaves below the voice, accompanies the first words of the messenger with an effect which is both completely novel and apposite.

The rhythmic element is, superficially at least, far less striking in *Oedipus* than in either *Le sacre du printemps* or *Les noces*. It is, however, not less important in the construction of the whole. A constant metrical unit is preserved with only the slightest variations from strict regularity in accordance with the necessities of expressive contrast. The transitions from one

tempo to another are always carefully and delicately wrought. The above quotation furnishes an excellent example, though Stravinsky's mode of procedure is quite familiar by this time. Rhythmic freedom in the sense of constantly shifting accent is rare and confined wholly to the scenes of the Messenger and Shepherd, which form an interesting though perhaps quite unconscious parallel with the general form of Greek drama in the introduction of complex and agitated rhythms at the moment when the tragic suspense is at its height. Otherwise the rhythmic effect is concentrated in certain persistent orchestral figures, such as the constant and regular pulsating of tympani, harp, piano and pizzicati beneath the choruses of the first act; in certain rhythmic effects arising directly out of the Latin text; and in a very different sense in certain pages of a quasi-declamatory nature, such as the long passage beginning with the words "Sphynga solvi" in the Latin text. Here one may speak of a kind of rhythmic modeling which is of extraordinary and subtle beauty.

The use of Latin as the language of the text has aroused an astonishment for which it is difficult to account. The text of a vocal work is of the utmost importance to the total effect, as any one can testify who has attentively listened to the performance of vocal music in other than its original language. In planning a vocal work in which the music should retain its complete supremacy it was natural that Stravinsky should choose a language which combines extreme vocal effectiveness with freedom from associations which would offer any distraction from the music. Latin as a "dead language" is in a sense a passive medium which can be used with respect to its timbre alone to a far greater extent than would be possible with French, Italian, Russian, or German, each of which has certain definite local connotations that could not be ignored.

The musical language of *Oedipus* is at first baffling through its apparent mixture of styles. The musician, according to the degree of his culture, may pick out "reminiscences" on every page, and is disconcerted not so much by the fact that they exist as by their apparent inconsistency. A dozen centuries, a dozen localities will seem to him to be clamoring for recognition.

Then gradually on closer acquaintance this impression disappears almost completely. The truth is that the elements involved are of the most general nature, belonging to no time or place in particular, but rather to the common fund of European musical culture. Stravinsky has reabsorbed them into a style which is his own, working in some such manner as the composers of the eighteenth century, who likewise wrote, not each in a separate, individual language, but in an idiom which he inherited and developed, according to his own talent and the unconscious dictates of his sensibility.

It is thus a mistake to think of Stravinsky's later music as in any sense "archaistic." If *Oedipus* tempts one on first acquaintance to various analogies with the music of the past, it is because of a lingering tendency, contrary to the whole spirit of Stravinsky's art, to seek impressions in music which are evocative rather than direct. The power of *Oedipus* never depends on effects of association. In each case the analogy holds good only up to a certain point, beyond which we find ourselves in the presence of a style whose individuality is so pervasive and compelling as to thoroughly escape analysis.

Like the other recent works of Stravinsky, indeed to a certain extent like all his works, *Oedipus* is the direct result of a certain esthetic faith, a faith which regards works of art as objects existing in and for themselves apart from the limitations of purely personal emotions. An art which is impersonal, objective, is certainly not to be judged by the standards generally current today.

One even suspects that many of the older composers are accepted now only because current standards of esthetic value are not applied to them. The reader of Mozart's letters, for instance, can hardly fail to be struck by this difference in attitude. His art, one is tempted to think, was for him in part at least, a commodity which was very much in demand, and which he could supply in large quantities with a maximum of assured quality. There is no trace of exhibitionism, of preoccupation with self-expression, individual exaltation, or any of the other attitudes which characterized the literature and the music of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The emphasis

was entirely on the work, not on the composer. His personality, in so far as it appears at all in his music, shows as a vitalizing but unconscious and inevitable factor. What he sought unceasingly was perfection of form and style—clarity and solidity and equilibrium.

It is a similar esthetic that underlies Stravinsky's later music. If personality consists in the exaltation of everything that is particular, eccentric, "personal" in the narrowest sense, or in the discovery and exploitation for their own sake of novel effects, *Oedipus* is certainly the least personal of works. But a quite different conception is possible. In seeking objective musical realities, concerning himself solely with concrete problems of form and style, his sensibility, his musical instinct is still the court of last appeal. Instead of affirming his own peculiarities he brings a complete personality—its general as well as its particular elements—into his work. It is this completeness which *Oedipus* achieves, and this quality above all which makes it similar in kind to the art which is generally called "classic."

