

## STRAVINSKY'S TWO-PIANO WORKS

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THE news that Igor Stravinsky has again written a major work for two pianos will be cause for rejoicing among the devotees of this increasingly popular musical medium. The new piece is the *Sonata for Two Pianos*. According to the dates on the photostat copy of the score the *Sonata* was begun in 1943 and completed in 1944.\* That one of the masters of our time has written two works for this formerly neglected combination of twin instruments within less than ten years is significant testimony to the newly won importance of the medium as a means of original musical expression.

The *Concerto per due pianoforti soli* of 1935 has now made its way to the musical centers of several continents. The new *Sonata* received its first performance by permission of the composer as the feature of a special concert given by Mlle. Nadia Boulanger at Indiana University on August 8 of the past summer. It was my privilege to assist Mlle. Boulanger in presenting the work. Previously the *Sonata* had been played at the Dominican Sisters in Madison, Wisconsin, in a private performance by Nadia Boulanger and Richard Johnson.

The differences of style and treatment in these two compositions are as marked as the differences between the earlier *Piano Concerto* (1924) and the *Capriccio* (1929) both for solo piano and orchestra. It is again clear that Stravinsky is not interested in solving the same problem twice. Again the choice of exact titles is further evidence of the care he brings to each task. The *Concerto per due pianoforti soli* fulfills the implications of its title in its brilliance, complexity, breadth of formal design, and highly contrasted sonorities. The *Sonata for Two Pianos* is a work of small dimensions, of great simplicity and clarity, remarkably concise and economical even for late Stravinsky. Both works bear the imprint of their creator unmistakably on every page, but the *Concerto* has stylistic relationships with the dazzling and luxuriant concertante style of the late baroque period, whereas the *Sonata* recalls the calm, poised, unpretentious and intimate instrumental style of the Viennese classical epoch. The use of a concertante style is indeed no novelty in Stravinsky's instru-

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mental music of the past twenty years, but the intimacy, gracefulness and utter simplicity found in the new *Sonata* are less familiar aspects of his nature and bring to mind the *Symphony in C* of 1940 as about the only previous extended manifestation of these tendencies in the composer's absolute music.

The three movements of the *Sonata*: I, Moderato; II, Theme with Variations; III, Allegretto, require something less than ten minutes for performance. This is somewhat under half the performance time called for by the four movements of the *Concerto*: I, Con moto; II, Notturmo; III, Quattro variazioni; IV, Preludio e Fuga. One basic difference to be observed in the general structural conception of the two works is that thematic relationships exist between the various movements of the *Concerto*, while in the *Sonata* each movement is concerned only with its own thematic material. One can only guess as to whether or not this marks a structural departure on the composer's part, recalling that the *Symphony in C* does employ the cyclical technic. Both works have middle movements in variation form, in each case with four variations. Because of the cyclical scheme adopted in the *Concerto* the conventional statement of a theme before the series of variations begins is abandoned, and portions of the subject of the last movement Fuga appear throughout the four variations and Preludio in preparation for the first statement of the full subject in the Fuga itself. This magnificent fugal structure concluding the *Concerto* has a miniature counterpart in Variation III of the *Sonata* which is a gay and meticulously worked out fughetta.

The opening Moderato movement of the *Sonata* is one of the two recent examples of Stravinsky's use of the sonata-allegro form, the other being the Allegro of the *Symphony in C*.\*



In less than one hundred bars the composer presents an exposition, which is marked for repetition, a brief development and a recapitulation closing with a coda. The only departure from the well-known conventions of this classical formal design is that the recapitulation begins in the

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dominant key C major, and presents all of the first theme group in this key before proceeding to transitional passage and second theme in the tonic.

In the *Sonata* the second movement begins with a *Largo* statement of the majestic, diatonic Theme.



The five measure melody is stated three times in a soprano register while lower voices gradually join it, one of them forming a regular canon in inversion. As in most variation movements by Stravinsky the melodic material, rather than the rhythmic or harmonic patterns, forms the principal thread of unity relating the variations to the theme. After building up to the fugal tension of Variation III in a gradual manner through the earlier variations Stravinsky returns to an abridged and transformed version of the *Largo* opening of the movement for Variation IV. This final cantabile statement, the melody in a baritone range with chords above it, makes one think of some ancient religious melody intoned by a singer. The concluding *Allegretto* is cast along simple ABA lines, with an abbreviated return of the opening and a surprise shift in key center from G to C at the very end. It is the most vigorous and witty of the three movements. In the opening and closing sections there is more antiphony between the two instruments than in other portions of the work; much of this give and take is brusque and forceful.

There are no structural complexities in the *Sonata* to recall the formal intricacies of the first two movements of the *Concerto* with their elaborate development and reworking of short motives in a concerto grosso style.

Tonal centers and keys are clear and solidly defined in both works. The basic key scheme for the *Concerto* is E minor in the first movement, G major in the Notturmo, B  $\flat$  in the third movement, and D minor for most of the *Preludio e Fuga* until the final nine measure Largo passage when a shift is made to conclude the work in E major. In the *Sonata* the first movement is in F major, the second is divided about equally between G major and D major, and the Allegretto is in G minor and G major until its close in C.

### III

The possibilities for polyphonic writing inherent in the two-piano medium may be one of its chief attractions for Stravinsky, as other composers have been drawn to the string quartet with its uniform coloristic but varied textural possibilities. The polyphonic qualities of motion and independent life in many voices are found in both the black page style of the *Concerto* and the white page style of the *Sonata*. As may be observed from the first of the above illustrations, the direct, straight-forward opening of the *Sonata* presents four voices in a non-imitative texture, each voice clearly articulated by precise phrase markings, the ensemble of lines beautifully balanced and suggestive of a passage for strings. Even in homophonic passages such as the opening of the Notturmo, Stravinsky achieves an interesting texture by employing different touch effects simultaneously.

The opening of the last movement of the *Sonata* is another example of the vitality he gives the music by using a texture largely devoid of imitation but alive with polyphonic activity. The statement of the theme in the second movement of the *Sonata* is so unforgettable not only because of the beauty of the simple melody, but because of the effect of continuous enrichment and gradual unfolding achieved by the repetition of the melody above canonic imitation in the lower voices. In the fugal movements of both works one naturally expects to find polyphonic writing of rigor and complexity. The closing movement of the *Concerto* is one of Stravinsky's most convincing demonstrations of sustained polyphonic creative power, to be compared with the second movement of his *Symphonie de Psaumes* in grandeur. In this tremendous Fuga the only

doubling of voices is found in the short transition leading into the concluding division of the movement based on the inverted subject. At this point the basses of both pianos play descending scales in unison, as if Stravinsky wished to lessen the demands for intense concentration from both performers and audience before proceeding into new complexities.

Of the various possible distributions of melodic lines to the four hands of the two players it is interesting to note that while Stravinsky displays ingenuity and originality in solving these problems, a tendency exists for the right hand part of the first pianist to act as soprano, or top orchestral voice, and for the left hand of the second pianist to serve as bass. The disposition of the inner voices varies considerably. As a result of the first piano's tendency to assume a soprano function it also tends to be the most florid and highly ornamented part. The second piano acts as accompanist in the opening variations of each work.

Direct antiphonal exchange between the two pianos – that stock device of the conventional two-piano arranger – is less frequently encountered in either work than one might expect. However Stravinsky is fond of dividing themes both between the hands of one performer and between one piano and the other. One method of indicating such divisions is the use of heavy lines showing the progress of the theme. In Variation III of the *Concerto* this type of exchange reaches a peak where in one bar three of these lines cross. Another method of indicating thematic divisions is to have the notes from the first pianist's left hand staff spill over to the second pianist's right hand staff, or vice versa, without breaking the melodic lines. The second entry of the subject in the Fuga gives the first part of the theme to the left hand of the first piano, the remainder of the entry is given to the right hand of the second piano with the exception of one eighth note which is assigned again to the first piano by notation bridging the two staves. These devices are merely an eye hazard, and work effectively from both a pianistic and musical viewpoint.

The general sonorities of the two works are as different as everything else about the compositions. In the *Concerto* harsh, biting, astringent sonorities dominate. Brilliance and power are achieved by extended chord positions often containing major sevenths, by passages in parallel fourths, by drum-like insistence on repeated note patterns at rapid tempi, by polychordal harmonic structures, and by rhythmic activity giving little release from constant, driving motion. In the *Sonata* the emphasis is upon lyricism and songfulness. The dry, brittle sound is replaced by a

sound nearer to strings or voices, and one recalls *Apollon* and portions of *Perséphone* along with the *Symphony in C*. Broken chains of parallel thirds and sixths appear, chords never seem massive or harsh, rhythmic schemes are relaxed and varied. In some magical way passages of quite different character in both works suggest wind sonorities, but the *Sonata* never implies brass or heavy percussion. Novel trill and tremolando effects, so richly explored in the *Concerto*, are at a minimum in the *Sonata*. Sudden dynamic changes are common to both works as the frequently encountered *subito piano* marking indicates. Both pedals are called for sparingly.

Deep thanks to Igor Stravinsky for enriching a literature which goes back to the Elizabethan Giles Farnaby's *For Two Virginals* but which is so slight in volume that important works can almost be counted on the fingers of both hands. The new *Sonata* should be widely acclaimed and known because of its sincerity, seriousness, simplicity and general accessibility. It is the work of a master creator tremendously experienced and wise in the ways of his art.