

Carl van Vechten, "A New Principle in Music," from *Music and Bad Manners* (NT: Alfred Knopf, 1916), 217–25.

ALTHOUGH Igor Stravinsky plainly proclaimed himself a genius in *The Firebird* (1909-10), it was in *Petrouchkka* (1910-11) that he began the experiment which established a new principle in music. In these "scenes burlesques" he discovered the advantages of a new use of the modern orchestra, completely upsetting the old academic ideas about "balance of tone," and proving to his own satisfaction the value of "pure tone," in the same sense that the painter speaks of pure colour. And in this work he broke away from the standards not only of Richard Strauss, the Wagner follower, but also of such innovators as Modeste Moussorgsky and Claude Debussy.

Strauss, following Wagner's theory of the leitmotiv, rounded out the form of the tone-poem, carried the principle of representation in music a few steps farther than his master, gave new colours to old instruments, and broadened the scope of the modern orchestra so that it might include new ones (in one of his symphonies Gustav Mahler was content with 150 men!). Moussorgsky (although his work preceded that of Strauss, the general knowledge of it is modern),

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working along entirely different lines, strove for truthful utterance and achieved a mode of expression which usually seems inevitable. Debussy endowed music with novel tints derived from the extensive, and almost exclusive, use of what is called the whole-tone scale, and instead of forcing his orchestra to make more noise he constantly repressed it (in all of *Pelléas et Mélisande* there is but one climax of sound and in *l'Après-midi d'un Faune* and his other orchestral works he is equally continent in the use of dynamics).

Igor Strawinsky has not been deaf to the blandishments of these composers. He has used the leitmotiv (sparingly) in both *The Firebird* and *Petrouchkka*. He abandoned it in *The Sacrifice to the Spring* (1913) and in *The Nightingale* (1914). His powers of representation are as great as those of Strauss; it is only necessary to recall the music of the bird in *The Firebird*, his orchestral piece, *Fireworks*, which received warm praise from a manufacturer of pyrotechnics, and the street organ music in *Petrouchkka*. Later he conceived the mission of music to be something different. "La musique est trop bete," he said once ironically, "pour exprimer autre chose que la musique." In such an extraordinary work as *The Nightingale* we find him making little or no at-

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tempt at representation. The bird does not sing like the little brown warbler; instead Strawinsky has endeavoured to write music which would give the feeling of the bird's song and the effect it made on the people in his lyric drama to the auditors in the stalls of the opera house. As for Strauss's use of orchestral colour the German is the merest tyro when compared to the Russian. There is some use of the whole-tone scale in *The Firebird*, and elsewhere in Strawinsky, but it is not a predominant use of it. In this "conte dansé" he also suggests the *Pelléas et Mélisande* of Debussy in his continent use of sound and the mystery and esotericism of his effect. Strawinsky is more of an expert than Moussorgsky; he handles his medium more freely (has any one ever handled it better?) but he still preaches the older Russian doctrine of truth of expression, a doctrine which implies the curt dismissal of all idea of padding. But all these composers and their contemporaries, and the composers who came before them, have one quality in common; they all use the orchestra of their time, or a bigger one. Strauss, to be sure, introduces a number of new instruments, but he still

utilizes a vast number of violins and violas massed against the other instruments, diminishing in number according to the volume of

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sound each makes. He divides his strings continually, of course; they do not all play alike as the violins, say, in *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, but they often all play at once.

Stravinsky experimented at first with the full orchestra and he even utilized it in such late works as *Petrouchka* and *The Nightingale*. However, in his search for "pure tone" he used it in a new way. In *Petrouchka*, for example, infrequently you will hear more than one of each instrument at a time and frequently two, or at most three, instruments playing simultaneously will be sufficient to give his idea form. The entire second scene of this mimed drama, is written for solo piano, occasionally combined with a single other instrument. At other times in the action the bassoon or the cornet, even the triangle has the stage. And when he wishes to achieve his most complete effects he is careful not to use more than seven or eight instruments, and only one of each.

He experimented still further with this principle in his Japanese songs, for voice and small orchestra (1912). The words are by Akahito, Mazatsumi, and Tsaraiuki. I have not heard these songs with orchestral accompaniment (the piano transcription was made by the composer himself) but I may take the judgment of those

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who have. I am told that they are of an indescribable beauty, and instinct with a new colour, a colour particularly adapted to the oriental naivete of the lyrics. The orchestra, to accompany a soprano, consists of two flutes (one a little flute), two clarinets (the second a bass clarinet), piano (an instrument which Stravinsky almost invariably includes in his orchestration), two violins, viola and 'cello. This form of chamber music, of course, is not rare. Chausson's violin concerto, with chamber orchestra, and Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* instantly come to mind, but Stravinsky did not stop with chamber music. He applied his new principle to the larger forms.

In his newest work, *The Village Weddings*, which I believe Serge de Diaghilew hopes to produce, his principle has found its ultimate expression, I am told by his friend, Ernest Ansermet, conductor of the Russian Ballet in America and to whom Stravinsky dedicated his three pieces for string quartet. The last note is dry on the score of this work, and it is therefore quite possible to talk about it although no part of it has yet been performed publicly. According to Mr. Ansermet there is required an orchestra of forty-five men, each a virtuoso, *no two of whom play the same instrument* (to be sure there are two violins but

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one invariably plays pizzicato, the other invariably bows). There are novelties in the band but all the conventional instruments are there including, you may be sure, a piano and an infinite variety of woodwinds, which always play significant roles in Stravinsky's orchestration. And Mr. Ansermet says that in this work Stravinsky has achieved effects such as have only been dreamed of by composers hitherto . . . I can well believe him.

He has made another innovation, following, in this case, an idea of Diaghilew's. When that impresario determined on a production of Rimsky-Korsakow's opera, *The Golden Cocks*, during the summer of 1914 he conceived a performance with two casts, one choregraphic and the other vocal. Thus Mme. Dobrovolska sang the coloratura role of the Queen of Shemakhan while Mme.

Karsavina danced the part most brilliantly on her toes; M. Petrov sang the role of King Dodon, which was enacted by Adolf Bolm, etc. In order to accomplish this feat Mr. Diaghilew was obliged to make the singers a part of the decoration. Nathalie Gontcharova, who has been called in to assist in the production of *The Village Weddings*, devised as part of her stage setting two tiers of seats, one on either side of the stage, extending

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into the flies after the fashion of similar benches used at the performance of an oratorio. The singers (principals and chorus together) clad in magenta gowns and caps, all precisely similar, sat on these seats during the performance and, after a few seconds, they became quite automatically a part of the decoration. The action took place in the centre of the stage and the dancers not only mimed their roles but also opened and closed their mouths as if they were singing. The effect was thoroughly diverting and more than one serious person was heard to declare that the future of opera had been solved, although Mine. Rimsky-Korsakow, as she had on a similar occasion when the Russian Ballet had produced Fokine's version of *Scheherazade*, protested.

Rimsky-Korsakow wrote his opera to be sung in the ordinary fashion, and, in so far as this matters, it was perhaps a desecration to perform it in any other manner. However, quite beyond the fact that very large audiences were hugely delighted with *The Golden Cockerel* in its new form, these performances served to fire Stravinsky with the inspiration for his new work. He intends *The Village Weddings* to be given precisely in this manner. It is an opera, the roles of which are to be sung by artists who sit still while the figures

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of the ballet will enact them. The words, I am told, are entirely derived from Russian folk stories and ballads, pieced together by the composer himself, and the action is to be like that of a marionette show in which the characters are worked by strings from above. It may also be stated on the same authority that the music, while embracing new tone colours and dramatic effects, is as tuneful as any yet set on paper by this extraordinary young man; the songs have a true folk flavour. The whole, it is probable, will make as enchanting a stage entertainment as any which this composer has yet contrived.

It is not only folk-tunes but popular songs as well that fascinate Igor Stravinsky. Ernest Ansermet collected literally hundreds of examples of American ragtime songs and dances to take back to the composer, and he pointed out to me how Stravinsky had used similar specimens in the past. For example, the barrel organ solo in the first scene of *Petrouchka* is a popular French song of several seasons ago. *La Jambé de Bois* (a song now forbidden in Paris); the final wedding music in *The Firebird* is an adagio version of a popular Russian song, with indecent words. He sees beauty in these popular tunes, too much beauty to be allowed to go to waste. In

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the same spirit he has taken the melodies of two Lanner waltzes for the dance between the Ballerina and the Moor in the third scene of *Petrouchka*. It would not surprise me at all to discover *Hello Frisco* bobbing up in one of his future works. After all turn about is fair play; the popular composers have dug gold mines out of the classics. Consistent, certainly, is Stravinsky's delight in clowns and music halls the burlesque and the eccentric. He has written a ballet for four clowns, and Ansermet showed me one day an arrangement for four hands of three pieces, for small orchestra, in *style music hall*, dated 1914. We gave what we smilingly referred to as the "first American audition" on the grand

pianoforte in his hotel room. I played the base, not a matter of any particular difficulty in the first number, a polka, because the first bar was repeated to the end. This polka, I found very amusing and we played it over several times. The valse, which followed, reminded me of the Lanner number in *Petrouchka*. The suite closed with a march, dedicated to Alfred Casella. . . . The pieces would delight any audience, from that of the Palace Theatre, to that of the concerts of the Symphony Society of New York.

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