# 6 Stravinsky's neoclassicism

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## Introduction: neoclassicism

In his homage to Stravinsky, Milan Kundera explains that Stravinsky's experience of forced emigration triggered a change in his musical style no less reactionary than irrevocable.[1] Also an émigré, Kundera sees emigration as a wound – the 'pain of estrangement: the process whereby what was intimate becomes foreign'. Stravinsky, like any émigré artist, suffered estrangement from the 'subconscious, memory, language – all the understructure of creativity' formed in youth. Leaving the place to which his imagination was bound caused a kind of ripping apart. Kundera believes that emigration erased Russia for Stravinsky. After that, his homeland became the historical landscape of music, and his compatriots were the composers that populate that history. Kundera describes the advent of Stravinsky's neoclassical style as a metaphorical recognition – and achievement – of a new home with the 'classics' of European music:

> He did all he could to feel at home there: he lingered in each room of
> that mansion, touched every corner, stroked every piece of the
> furniture;...[from] the music of...Pergolesi to [that of] Tchaikovsky,
> Bach, Perotin, Monteverdi...to the twelve-tone system...in which,
> eventually, after Schoenberg's death (1951), he recognized yet another
> room in his home.[2]

Where Kundera sees reverence in Stravinsky's appropriation of history, Stravinsky himself described it as more compulsive and aggressive – a 'rare form of kleptomania'.[3] Whatever attitude we ascribe to it, Stravinsky's appropriation of the past was a genuine artistic engagement, seeking to create modern works by reconstructing or accommodating past styles in a way that maintained his own integrity and identity in the history of music.

In the following discussion, I want to explore four principal strategies that Stravinsky employed in his neoclassical works to accommodate the past. The task is made difficult, first, by the number and variety of works Stravinsky composed during his neoclassical period (roughly from 1920 to 1951) and, second, by confusion about the term 'neoclassicism', in the context of early twentieth-century music and in Stravinsky's own work.

Consider, for example, the differences in scholarly accounts of the origins of neoclassicism. Some scholars attribute the ambiguities of the term to semantic change, nationalistic prejudices, and the polemical torsion inevitable among composers vying to create a niche for themselves in the overpopulated state of the repertoire. Others believe that neoclassicism evolved as a reactionary ploy triggered by the social and political convulsions of the Weimar Republic. Still others – taking a Freudian and formalistic stance – adapt Harold Bloom's 'anxiety of influence' to revise radically the term's usual meaning.[4]

No less confusing are scholarly accounts of what constitutes the 'essence' of Stravinsky's neoclassical style. Too often the confusion results from squabbling about first sightings – when and where Stravinsky first uses triads and major scales, tonal bass lines and dominant–tonic cadences, tonal centres or classical forms. Such sightings clearly have a role in a full description of Stravinsky's neoclassicism, but remain inconclusive if not interpreted in a broader context. The necessary context emerges, I argue, when one recognises that these technical devices almost always concern imitation in some sense of the word: imitation of classical rhythm, phrase structure, harmonic progressions, tonal centres and the like. Analyses of Stravinsky's neoclassical works have tended to isolate specific features, but to lack a theory of imitation that would help identify and categorise imitative resources and effects – that would, in other words, help us to give content to the term 'neoclassical'.[5]

Whenever any kind of secular canon-formation occurs – whenever any choice is made of authorities or models for new artistic creation – T. S. Eliot's question 'What is a classic?' becomes inescapable.[6] A classic is a past work that remains or becomes relevant and available as a model, or can be made so through various techniques of accommodation. Stravinsky's neoclassical pieces invoke earlier classics in a much broader sense than merely music in the style of Haydn or Mozart. What makes a classic in this broader sense is being *chosen* as a model for some sort of anachronistic engagement, some manner of imitative crossing of the distance that divides the new work from its model. This act of choosing is precisely what Kundera portrays by picturing Stravinsky wandering in the mansion of musical styles, choosing which objects to appropriate and which rooms to inhabit.

Perhaps we can agree at the outset that neoclassicism, in any of the arts, involves an impulse to revive or restore an earlier style that is separated from the present by some intervening period. The Renaissance created itself by breaking one historical continuity in order to repair another broken continuity. That is, the Renaissance created the Middle Ages by recognising that the Middle Ages had broken or fallen away from 'classical antiquity'.

Any neoclassicism does the same, rejecting a prevailing period style in the name of restoring an earlier, more authentic, still relevant – and therefore classic – style. That is precisely what happened when early twentieth-century French composers (joined later by Stravinsky) repudiated Romantic music because, in their view, it had abandoned the classical virtues to revel in Teutonic excess, obscurity and subjectivity. A neoclassical aesthetic thus reaches across a cultural and chronological gap and tries to recover or revive a past model. By doing so, it clears ground for modern artists by devaluing intervening styles.

To speak very broadly, there are two modes of returning to the classics, two routes giving access to models acknowledged as classical. The first is philological or antiquarian and the second – and for the history of the arts the more important – is translation or accommodation. Translation and accommodation both grapple with anachronism because they cannot avoid the incongruities that arise from linking different times or periods.[7] Reading our own concerns and needs into the classics, we recognise the classics advancing to meet us on the path we are following. There are several modes of accommodation – modes of accessing the past – but for Stravinsky the most important is what, for lack of a better term, I call 'metamorphic anachronism'. This specific mode of accommodation involves various kinds or strategies of imitation.

A brief digression may help to clarify what I mean by anachronism. As I use it, the term does not imply any kind of failure or mistake. Musical anachronism is rooted in the recognition that history affects period style and that period style affects composition. This is not controversial; we are all willing to assume that pieces are datable on internal evidence. But this recognition of historical change also suggests that pieces will become 'dated' in the negative sense, that is, that they will eventually sound 'out of date'. Music, like the other arts, can incorporate or exploit this capacity for datedness, but only by juxtaposing or contrasting at least two distinct styles. This contrast or clash of period styles or historical aesthetics is the simplest definition of anachronism.[8]

Anachronism can be used in art in a number of different ways, but the type of anachronism most relevant to a neoclassical aesthetic is one that 'confronts and uses the conflict of period styles self-consciously and creatively to dramatize the itinerary, the diachronic passage out of the remote past into the emergent present.'[9] This is the type I call 'metamorphic anachronism', borrowing from geology where metamorphic rocks fuse or compress the old into the new. In music, metamorphic anachronism deliberately dramatises a historical passage – bringing the present into a relationship with a specific past and making the distance between them meaningful.

When anachronism – that is, the conflict between period elements in a piece of music – is meaningful, then a phoenix springs from the ashes. When it is not, then only a corpse emerges, shrunken and mummified from the tomb, though perhaps ornamented with modern trinkets. The main question is not whether anachronism has been avoided, but whether it has been controlled. If not, then no itinerary between past and present is opened, no genuine renewal occurs, and the impulse to revive the past is abortive or trivial.[10]

One mode of controlled anachronism – parody – is usually distinct from a genuine neoclassical impulse, but is nonetheless relevant to several of Stravinsky's works that are sometimes mistakenly described as his earliest experiments in neoclassicism. Composed between 1917 and 1920, just as Stravinsky began to explore compositional techniques that later mark his neoclassical style, these pieces include 'Three dances' from *The Soldier's Tale* (Tango, Waltz, Ragtime), *Ragtime* for eleven instruments, and *Piano-Rag-Music*. While these pieces are Stravinsky's first to be based on contemporary popular dances and do feature more prominently the usual major and minor scales, they nonetheless seem better described as parodies or satires, for their effect derives from making that which has become too familiar appear unfamiliar – or at least barely recognisable. In these pieces, Stravinsky seeks not to revive a past tradition, but playfully to mock popular conventions.

Stravinsky's *Piano-Rag-Music* bears out this view, especially in its ending, which surely pokes fun at contemporary infatuation with jazz improvisation and rags (see Ex. 6.1). Building up to an extended climax of improvisatory flourishes, the piece suddenly subsides to an exhausted, motoric vamp that abruptly breaks off for no apparent reason, as if the performer abandons the piece for lack of inspiration or interest.[11] Particularly surprising is how Stravinsky uses irregularly spaced dotted lines in place of bar lines, for it throws into question the regular metrical patterns of the rag form. Poking fun at the fashion of combining improvisation with a metrically rigid form, Stravinsky concludes with a spent motivic fragment – as if asking a question that, as yet, has no answer. Such parodic or satiric imitation deliberately teases our expectations, replacing the familiar with an absurdly distorted reconstruction, and is ordinarily – though perhaps not categorically – incompatible with neoclassicism.

If anachronism is controlled and not parodic, if the impulse to revive is successful, how are we to describe the imitative process? I find it useful to identify four broad strategies of imitation that Stravinsky employs in his neoclassical works, each of which controls anachronism in a different manner while implicitly portraying one perspective on history.[12]

**Ex. 6.1** *Piano-Rag-Music* (1919 edition), ending