

Evoking the Past, Inspiring the Future

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From the time he wrote *The Firebird* (1909–10), Igor Stravinsky's music achieved feats of compositional magic by combining musical recollection with innovation in a way that left each recognisable, yet inseparable from the other.¹ Stravinsky's works looked to the past by evoking established musical repertoires and their conventions. In these same works, his frequently radical inventions created a groundbreaking musical present that motivated his own future and that of music more generally.

The music of Stravinsky's 'Russian' period, which included the composer's most well-known works, evokes the past in its incorporation of Russian folk song as both a musical resource and a stylistic inspiration. Numerous folk melodies appear, for example, in the first and fourth tableaux of *Petrushka* (1910–11), where they depict scenes from the traditional Shrovetide Fair.² Well-known examples include the melody that enters in fragments in the first tableau (R2), reaching its fullest rendition as an accompaniment to the tipsy merrymakers (original 1911 edition: R5; revised 1947 edition: R7), and the tunes heard during the 'Wet-nurses' Dance' (1911 version R90+4, R96; 1947 version R171, R180).³

Russian folk song repertoires are essential as well to *The Rite of Spring* (1911–13). As Richard Taruskin demonstrates, however, Stravinsky modified many of the folk tunes so extensively that their identities are

¹ This chapter describes the features of specific passages so that readers can locate them by ear. For readers who prefer to study the passages in a score, the chapter provides rehearsal and bar numbers, for example R2 and bars 13–14.

² Frederick W. Sternfeld, 'Some Russian Folk Songs in Stravinsky's *Petrushka*', in Charles Hamm (ed.), *Petrushka*, Norton Critical Scores (New York: W. W. Norton, 1967), pp. 203–15; Richard Taruskin, *Stravinsky and the Russian Traditions: A Biography of the Works through Mavra*, vol. 1 (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 695–717.

³ Taruskin, *Stravinsky and the Russian Traditions*, vol. 1, pp. 697–8, 709. (R90+4 refers to four bars after rehearsal number 90. When rehearsal numbers for the same location differ in the original and revised editions of *Petrushka*, numbers are provided for each.)

impossible to determine without recourse to his sketches, which document his transformations of the original sources.⁴ After having immersed himself so thoroughly in the Russian folk traditions that he had absorbed their style, Stravinsky created his own 'folk' melodies for *Les Noces* ('The Wedding', 1914–17, 1921–23), and its scenes of Russian peasant wedding rituals.⁵ Folk songs and performance traditions provide material for non-programmatic works of the period as well, including the first of the *Three Pieces for String Quartet* (1914).⁶

Stravinsky's music of this period is also indebted to the musical practices of the contemporaneous Russian compositional establishment, including those of his teacher, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov (1844–1908) and other composers in Rimsky-Korsakov's St Petersburg circle. Perhaps most recognised among these traditions is the characteristic use of the octatonic scale, an eight-note scale that alternates half and whole steps. An octatonic passage opens the second tableau of *Petrushka* (1911 ver.: R48; 1947 ver.: R93), where the pitches of the octatonic scale find expression both as melody (G–C–G–F-sharp–E–E-flat) and harmonies (E-flat 7/C major). Indeed, immediately following this section is the simultaneous arpeggiation of two major triads with roots a tritone apart (C and F-sharp), an octatonic configuration commonly dubbed the 'Petrushka chord' (1911 ed.: R49+1–2; 1947 ed.: R95+1–2).

Even as the Stravinsky honed his treatment of the past, he developed new compositional techniques. These begin to emerge tentatively in *The Firebird*, a work that follows strongly in the St Petersburg traditions, and more boldly still in *Petrushka*.⁷ It is with *The Rite of Spring*, however, that Stravinsky's innovations began to dominate and drove his compositional course in radically new directions. Although he probably didn't know it at the time, his music would draw on these Russian-period inventions for more than fifty years. Among these important compositional strategies are the five briefly described below with reference to *The Rite of Spring*:

- *Block form* comprises a succession of sharply juxtaposed, contrasting sections or 'blocks'. The musical material within each block typically consists of a distinctive melodic fragment – often evoking folk idioms – that repeats exactly or with variation. A specific block, typically distinguished as well by instrumentation and register, will return multiple

⁴ Taruskin, *Stravinsky and the Russian Traditions*, vol. 1, p. 894. ⁵ *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p. 1370.

⁶ *Ibid.*, vol. 2, pp. 1465–6.

⁷ Peter C. van den Toorn, 'Will Stravinsky Survive Postmodernism?', in *Music Theory Spectrum* 22, no. 1 (2000), pp. 108–13.

times, often altered. The 'Ritual of the Rival Tribes' (R57) begins by juxtaposing short blocks which grow longer as the movement progresses.

- Juxtaposition in the vertical dimension marks the *superimposition of layers*, typically involving between two and six contrasting strata. These layers are commonly distinguished by differences in instrumentation, register, pitch content and emphasis, rhythm and motive. Instances of this last (as a motive or brief melodic idea) often evoke folk music. The many differences among the strata cause them to clash with each other rather than to combine into a unified harmonic scheme. In the 'Dance of the Earth' (R72), as in many of Stravinsky's stratified textures, the conflicting layers accumulate gradually until together they reach a peak of overwhelming complexity and tension.
- *Irregular groupings* result when successive short segments (usually varied repetitions of the same musical idea) differ in length. Perhaps the most famous example of this technique occurs in 'The Augurs of Spring' (R13), which begins with repetitions of the same *forte* chord. Irregularly placed accents produce successive groups of quavers of the following lengths: 9, 2, 6, 3, 4, 5, 3.
- *Varied repetition* is a method for constructing melodies. The melody, such as that launching 'Mystic Circles of the Young Girls' (R91), begins with a brief, notable statement. This statement is followed immediately by its repetitions, some or all of which exhibit small variations. The succession of these repetitions creates irregular rhythmic groupings.
- The beginning of 'Mystic Circles' also demonstrates the *chromatic harmonisation of a diatonic melody*. Many of the melodies in *The Rite*, whether derived from folk songs or newly composed, are diatonic; that is, each melody's pitches belong to a single major or minor scale. The harmonies used to set these melodies, however, are pointedly chromatic; they contain pitches from outside the melody's source scale. The simple melody of 'Mystic Circles' draws its pitches from B major, while the accompanying chords introduce C-natural, D-natural, F-natural, G-natural and A-natural, all foreign to that scale. Furthermore, each chord creates harsh dissonance against its melody note. The result is an eerie passage that summons the ancient rituals that form the conceptual basis of *The Rite*.⁸

⁸ Lynne Rogers, 'Revisiting *The Rite* in Stravinsky's Later Serial Music', in Severine Neff, Maureen Carr, and Gretchen Horlacher (ed.), *The Rite of Spring at 100* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press 2017), pp. 382–7.

In the Russian works, these and other such innovative techniques generate and shape the materials culled from the past, which in turn influence the disposition of the innovations. Old and new fuse seamlessly in artworks that bear Stravinsky's unique voice.

Reference to the past is a hallmark of Stravinsky's neoclassical music. These works are filled with allusions to the forms, gestures, pitch structures and conventions of tonal Western music, primarily of the baroque and classical eras. It is precisely *how* Stravinsky's music alludes to the past without actually recreating it that is this repertory's most revolutionary aspect. Each allusion offers a strong enough hint of the past to prompt recognition while appearing in an environment that simultaneously defies essential tonal procedures, such as harmonic progression towards a goal. This deft balance of the familiar and unfamiliar is a remarkable innovation, yet rarely appreciated as such.

Equally essential to the neoclassical works are the compositional techniques first established in the Russian music. Block form, superimposed layers, irregular groupings and varied repetition are among the practices repurposed for and adapted to the needs of the new style. In essence, the neoclassical music was part of the future towards which Stravinsky's Russian-period procedures pointed. For example, the opening of *Symphony of Psalms* (1930) combines conventional chordal structures with block form. The first block contains a sharply articulated E minor triad in nearly the full orchestra, framed by short rests (bar 1). The second block, sounding initially in oboes and bassoons, rapidly arpeggiates dominant-seventh chords (bars 2–3). As the blocks alternate, the duration of the first block diminishes slightly while its triad remains intact. In contrast, the second block lengthens during its returns and alters its material.

A passage occurring slightly over halfway through the first movement of the Violin Concerto (1931) offers stepwise melodies with prominent diatonic segments in a texture of three superimposed layers (R₃₃₊₁ through R₃₅₊₄). As the solo violin plays two repetitive, mournful melodies in counterpoint in the middle of the texture, cellos and basses articulate dissonant, *pizzicato* sonorities below while clarinets and flutes swirl rapidly above. In addition to instrumentation, each layer has its own melodies, rhythmic pattern and texture. The solo violin also incorporates varied repetition extensively, resulting in irregular groupings in that layer.

A vibrant passage from the first movement of *Symphony in Three Movements* (1942–5) takes conventional harmonies and treats them as percussive objects within a long succession of varied repetitions of changing length. Shortly after the opening of the movement, the piano, which

had been temporarily silent, returns with *pizzicato* strings (R7+3). The piano, violins and violas immediately establish a pattern with three components: a higher dominant seventh chord jumping to a lower arrangement of the same chord; a varied repetition of the same gesture; and a new dominant-seventh chord played off the beat. This initial pattern, which lasts for four crotchet beats, is repeated continuously with and without variation (R8+2). The result is the following scheme of crotchet groupings: 4, 3, 4, 3, 5, 6, 3, 10, 4, and so on. All of this happens over a three-beat *ostinato* – an unchanging pattern – in a second layer comprising cellos and basses.

Innovations and allusions to the past are essential to Stravinsky's neo-classicism, their interaction being responsible for much that is expressive in that music. Allusions may have associations with specific aspects of older repertoires and thus import the original meanings associated with these aspects into Stravinsky's music. In *The Rake's Progress* (1947–51), for example, numerous gestures are immediately understood as cadences, even if closer inspection weakens their resemblance to classical-era closing formulas. Nonetheless, these gestures convey the function of closure during the opera. Allusions to the familiar may also trigger expectations of what will follow, as happens repeatedly in the poignant 'Aria II' of the Violin Concerto. Here, certain arrangements of pitches trigger anticipation of specific outcomes. When these expectations are left partially or completely unfulfilled – as is typical in this repertory – the music can convey tension, yearning, frustration and even humour.

Possibly because many listeners notice first in Stravinsky's neoclassical music what is most familiar – the frequent allusions to music of the past – these works have often been dismissed as old-fashioned.⁹ Such characterisations likely consider only general impressions of the musical surface and not the modern techniques that control it. For instance, upon first hearing, a neoclassical work may sound as if it is in a key, adhering to the same tonal principles as do Mozart's works. More attentive listening, however, reveals not only what is new in the music, but also the many essential features of tonality that Stravinsky's neoclassical music lacks. His piano solo *Serenade in A* (1925), for example, is not in the *key* of A in the conventional sense; rather, it conveys A as its 'home pitch' through other

⁹ Such attitudes are discussed in Joseph N. Straus, *Stravinsky's Late Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 2–3; Stephen Walsh, *Stravinsky: The Second Exile – France and America, 1934–1971* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006), pp. 271–2.

means. In these and other ways, Stravinsky's techniques harness the power of the past without surrendering to it, and thus offer avenues for future compositions. If in Stravinsky's neoclassical music the allusions to convention initially overshadow what is new, the opposite situation governs his serial music, composed during his last period of composition. In this repertory, it is the assertively new pitch language that first strikes the ear; however, upon repeated hearings the works' debts to the past emerge.

Serialism is a compositional method created by composer Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951). As established by Schoenberg, the basis of each serial composition is the series: a specific ordering of the twelve pitches of the octave, each appearing once. Standard operations generate additional forms of the series that are directly related to the original. Together, the original series and its transformations function as the source for pitch materials in serial works. Stravinsky adopted these principles of order and transformation, although, in his earliest serial works, sometimes used a series of other than twelve tones. For his later serial works beginning with *Movements* (1958–9), Stravinsky also embraced an approach to serialism pioneered by Ernst Krenek (1900–91).¹⁰ Using this method, a twelve-tone series divides into two hexachords, or sets, of six pitches apiece. Each hexachord is rotated so that each of its members in turn becomes the first pitch of a line. All five rotations are then transposed so that all begin on the first pitch of the original hexachord. The result is a *rotational array*, a square comprising the original hexachord and its five transposed rotations, thus measuring six pitches across by six pitches down. Stravinsky typically used the rows of the array as melodies.

By adopting the serial method of composition, Stravinsky joined an established musical community; however, his many innovations depart radically from the serialism of his contemporaries and of Schoenberg. Most famously, when composing with his rotational arrays, Stravinsky used their columns, which he called 'verticals', as harmonies. The verticals exhibit an intervallic structure different from that of the rows and thus boast an identity not found in classic serialism. A relatively unknown and radical practice that plays a significant part in Stravinsky's later serial works is his treatment of the array as a kind of gameboard. According to rules, presumably of his own invention, he would generate a series of moves among locations on an array and then use the pitches in those locations to form melodies and harmonies unavailable in the rows and verticals. Some of Stravinsky's serial experiments are found only in his unpublished

¹⁰ Straus, *Stravinsky's Late Music*, pp. 26–33.

sketches and drafts. They reveal, for example, new methods for creating a twelve-tone series and generating a rotational array. These findings suggest that Stravinsky, even close to the end of his career, never stopped experimenting.

Serial pitch organisation is inherently inhospitable to tonality. Yet, at the same time as Stravinsky's serial music became ever more radical, it also welcomed the past by incorporating allusions to tonal music in the guise of triads and seventh chords, fragments from major and minor scales, and familiar devices and gestures. That Stravinsky's serial music features tonal allusions without violating serial principles is indeed remarkable. Furthermore, the presence of these allusions suggests that one possible impetus for Stravinsky's unceasing invention may have been to devise serial techniques that would produce these sounds.

Stravinsky's serial music looks to the distant past, where these tonal materials originated, and to the technique of incorporating tonal allusions in Stravinsky's neoclassical music. However, whereas such allusions permeate the neoclassical music, they are hard-won, much less frequent and achieved in a far different manner in the serial music. In addition, the allusions contrast strongly with the prevailing serial pitch structures, and, as a result, may seem to jump out of the texture. Among many examples are the striking major triad that ends the first phrase (R: 'A') of *In Memoriam Dylan Thomas* (1954); the cadential gesture, reminiscent of Haydn, that closes the first section of the fourth movement of *Movements* (1958–9; bars 108–9); and the many diatonic segments, including echoes of the first three notes of the ascending minor scale that populate 'A Prayer', the lyrical third movement of *A Sermon, a Narrative and a Prayer* (1960–1; e.g. bars 216–19) and God's ponderous pronouncements in *The Flood* (1961–2; e.g. bars 85–90, 182–4 and 459).

Many of Stravinsky's other established compositional techniques reappear in the serial music, adapted for the needs of the pitch language. These include block form, as heard in 'The Building of the Ark' from *The Flood* and the 'Lacrimosa' and 'Postlude' from *Requiem Canticles* (1965–66). Examples of superimposed layers may be found in *The Flood* when, after he expels Adam and Eve from Eden, God sings against high, metallic chords in upper strings (bars 181–246), and in 'A Prayer' as the chorus sings above the low, slow-moving melody in bass, harp and piano (bars 231–4, 244–75). Even the chromatic harmonisation of diatonic melodies makes its return in the serial music, as in, for example, the *forte*, chorale-style passages that occur shortly after the

beginning of 'The Building of the Ark' from *The Flood* (bars 277–82) and at the very end of *Variations* (1963–4; bars 137–41).¹¹ Irregular groupings occur frequently, often signalled by changes in time signature. Strikingly reminiscent of the famous repeated chords, with their irregularly occurring accents, in *The Rite's* 'Augurs of Spring' are the systematically piled, repeated notes in strings that open *Requiem Canticles*.

Throughout Stravinsky's oeuvre his compositions fuse materials from, and references to, the musical past with powerful, often revolutionary, innovations. His musical inventions may have been created to satisfy the demands of a particular work; yet they also provided him with techniques that he would reuse and reconfigure in later – sometimes much later – works. Indeed, as his late sketches demonstrate, he continued to experiment even as his physical frailties left the prospects of these inventions in doubt. If Stravinsky's works and compositional methods motivated his own future, they also inspired his contemporaries and later composers. As Philip Glass (b. 1937) states in his 1998 tribute to Stravinsky: 'There is not a composer who lived during his time or is alive today who was not touched, and sometimes transformed, by his work.'¹² Musicologist Stephen Walsh agrees: 'For younger composers of almost every persuasion, his work has continued to offer inspiration and a source of method.'¹³ In sum, Stravinsky's music continues to provoke new ways to understand the musical past and to envision the musical future.

Author's Recommendation

The Flood (1961–2)

A major serial work composed near the end of Stravinsky's professional life, *The Flood* reconceives the musical past, including Stravinsky's own, and abounds with the new and unexpected. The work's imaginative music sets the biblical story of Noah with sensitivity and spectacle. Drama also

¹¹ Rogers, 'Revisiting *The Rite*', pp. 387–94.

¹² Philip Glass, 'The Classical Musician Igor Stravinsky', *Time*, June 8, 1998, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,988502-1,00.html> (accessed 15 April 2018).

¹³ Stephen Walsh, 'Stravinsky, Igor', in *Grove Music Online*, p. 38, www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000052818 (accessed 9 June 2018).

colours *The Flood's* own genesis. Stravinsky composed the work in response to a commission from the CBS television network. Unfortunately, the notoriously unsuccessful televised premiere in 1962 damaged the work's reputation, leading *The Flood* to be undeservedly neglected.¹⁴

¹⁴ Charles M. Joseph, "Television and *The Flood*: Anatomy of an "Inglorious Flop", in Charles M. Joseph, *Stravinsky Inside Out* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), pp. 132–61.