

DLA Thesis

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Stravinsky and The Violin - Three Approaches

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1. Background to the Research

Questions concerning the compositions of Igor Stravinsky, especially ones I put to myself while performing his *Italian Suite* for violin and piano, motivated this piece of research. On account of the fact that western musical culture stretches over several centuries, one of the most important today is how we should accommodate interpretation to the stylistic features and expectations of a given/specific period. The repertoire of a modern classical violinist includes works whose date of composition stretches from the 17th century to our own age; furthermore, over that interval of time most of the major composers require a performance approach tailored specifically to their own music. In Stravinsky's case, owing to the overlapping of stylistic quotations and allusions, the decoding of the score, problems of expression and meaning, the choice of tempo and special instrumental effects (with string instruments, for example, the different tone colours, the manner of playing, the use of vibrato), historical faithfulness becomes an especially complicated issue. Advances made in recent decades within the field of Bartók interpretation (which the importance that contemporary concert life places on rendering a composer's own articular idiom and means of expression) has also stimulated my own research. The dissertation sets out to answer the following set of questions: Can we in fact talk about

idioms in the case of Stravinsky? If we in fact can, what constitutes them, and what role do they play in the study, practice and performance of one of his compositions?

2. Sources

The main sources that I used in my research were documents related to Stravinsky's life and compositional work: firstly, books, essays, articles and letters (the Paul Sacher Stiftung in Basel kindly provided me with access to unpublished ones); secondly, the composer's own recordings, the number of which continues to grow; thirdly, the examination/perusal/close study of scores, which has also involved a comparison of the authorised and published version with the existing manuscripts. As far as secondary sources are concerned, the oeuvre of Richard Taruskin is especially important. Not only did Taruskin write what is regarded as the classic work on Stravinsky, namely, his monumental two-volume study, *Stravinsky and the Russian Traditions*, but also published a considerable number of shorter more specialised essays focussing either on Stravinsky himself or on theoretical-philosophical principles regarding the performance of his works, or both these aspects together. Sometimes the work of Maureen A. Carr and Charles M. Joseph – the first concentrating upon philosophical issues, the second on matters of performance helped my

examinations. Eric Walter White's study, *Stravinsky – the Composer and his Works*, remains - even today - an indispensable starting-point for any research that investigates the reception of Stravinsky's compositions. With respect to the violin, the recollections found in Samuel Dushkin's memoir, *Working with Stravinsky*, are of great significance. I have included a full translation of this work at the appendix of this dissertation.

I sometimes refer to the writings and recorded statements of Robert Craft, since he is a musician who studied Stravinsky's compositions with the composer himself and subsequently recorded them. Arguably no one else worked so closely with Stravinsky.

The writings of Theodor W. Adorno helped me to place Stravinsky within a wider social and cultural context, even if I did not necessarily agree with Adorno's conclusions.

3. Method

As my subtitle shows, this dissertation takes three approaches. Its first part is strictly historical. It discusses such questions as how the composer gained his knowledge of the violin; the presence or absence of this instrument at various stages of Stravinsky's compositional career; the stylistic roots of particular solos or parts written for the instrument; his views or prejudices on the violin and

violinists; the conception Stravinsky had of the various roles the instrument might take on in a composition; or even how the capabilities of the violin (or string instruments, in general) influences the musical form. I do not embark upon a musical analysis that takes into account Stravinsky's use of scalar patterns, his system of modality, or choice of form, with the exception of the relatively few instances where such matters have directly to do with the violin. In this first part, I also give an overview of Stravinsky's copious compositional output, so as to identify the tendencies that come to the fore in his writing for violin at different periods of his career. I also wanted to show how the instrumental resources he draws upon change across the decades, and also the stylistic features and peculiarities that can be identified in his treatment of the violin, whether that be in solo or chamber compositions or in the string parts of orchestral/ensemble works. I also take note of the lack of prominence he gives to the violin or the string section in certain periods.

In the second part, I approach Stravinsky's compositions for violin from a performance perspective. I attempt to model questions which at first sight might appear rather to be a theoretical problem, but which nevertheless bears upon how a performer either could or should interpret a particular passage or work. Such an investigation is

inrealizable for a performer if one does not have access to manuscript versions or to a detailed analysis of a particular work. I focus particularly upon comparing and contrasting the published scores with Stravinsky's remarks about interpretation and also his recordings. I take particular care to note the real, or alleged, or suspected inconsistencies. In this process, I often found it helpful to take into refer to similar issues that have arisen in other artistic or academic disciplines. Although this part sometimes places performance practice in a wider context, aligning it with issues that arise in fields such as philosophy and literary criticism, it never shifts its attention away from Stravinsky's relationship with the violin.

In the third part, I investigate look more closely at Stravinsky's *Italian Suite*, focussing more upon its earlier version: *Suite on Themes, Fragments and Pieces of Giambattista Pergolesi*. Having looked at more general features in my first two parts, I now concentrate specifically on one composition, so as to show more closely Stravinsky's handling of the violin. I pursue this more concrete investigation in terms of the approaches that I have presented in the previous two parts. I also give prominence to the philological perusal of the scores, in order to clarify the origin of sections that are difficult to decipher, the fingering, performance markings, dynamics, and the actual notes themselves. In this endeavour, the manuscript

sources and the draft versions completed by Stravinsky at various stages of the work's composition helped me a great deal. The difficulty that the *Italian Suite* above all poses is how its performers should treat the work's mixture of styles and its stylistic allusions, for which a knowledge of the early-classical works which Stravinsky recomposed is indispensable.

4. Results of the Research

The first part of my dissertation, besides offering help in mapping the performance tradition that informs how the violin was used in different historical periods, also offers a point of reference for the cultural and auditory expectations that serve as a background to how Stravinsky handled the instrument to convey his musical conceptions. In the early period, this involved cavalcades of colour and effect, which were very soon overtaken by the influences of folk and gypsy music, and even of klezmer music. Later, in the second half of the 1920s, Stravinsky breaks with this folk influence and renews his commitment to the melody-centred western European tradition, above all by means of string instruments. Placing ever greater emphasis on counterpoint, in the last decades Stravinsky however foregrounds string instruments far less than he did earlier. This is very much a consequence of the far more abstract character of the later

compositions, where instrumental ability and colour played a secondary role. This historical part reveals the individuals who influenced Stravinsky's image of violinists and virtuosi, and how this collaboration influenced his compositional process of particular works. In several compositions, the violin has an important symbolic role, especially in those composed for the theatre, where the violin pulls a music that inclines to abstraction down to a more earthly domain, which Stravinsky contrasts with the more coolly objective sound-world of the winds. For Stravinsky, the violin communicates this-worldly intimacy and uncomplicated emotional associations, both inextricably bound up with the violinist who, as a soloist or as a person who both belongs to and represents a community, vividly expresses common images from day-to-day life.

In the second part, I examine Stravinsky's views on performance practice, primarily on the basis of his public pronouncements. After clarifying important terminology, I first discuss the issue of faithfulness to the composer or the work or the score, and then look at his own recordings and the performance tradition. Here, what both inspired and provoked my research was the relationship between theory and practice. The chapters of this part show the extent to which Stravinsky kept to his own stipulations concerning strictness of tempo, articulation and instructions. I point

out where pronouncements, scores and recordings are consistent with one another, and also where they diverge (perhaps inconsistently). In the latter case, textual problems demonstrate what kind of inconsistencies could appear in the score.

In the third part, which is devoted to the *Italian Suite*, I concentrate on the process by which Stravinsky transcribe the original compositions. This approach reveals, that the work has seven distinct compositional phases that extend from the original early-classical pieces through to their rewriting as a chamber work. It also highlights the oddities that the textual problems within this process. I also raise issues concerning the contribution of violinists to the transcription and presentation of the work, an aspect which resolves certain issues. The structural analysis of the composition shows the relationship between the suite's titles and the text of the original ballet, which, because it is not well known, I give in full in the appendix. The third part also addresses interpretative issues, among which are how a contemporary performer, playing in the wake of the historical performance movement, might relate to a work that contains both classical and early modern elements. Finally, in the final chapter I examine the form interpretative projections of irony take in respect to *Pulcinella*, i.e. the original ballet, as well as how valid these might be.

5. Related activity

Concerts:

13th May 2015. Stravinsky Recital

Stravinsky: L'histoire du soldat (Trio-version)

Péter Szűcs (clarinet), Zoltán Fejérváry (piano)

Stravinsky: Italian Suite for violin and piano

Stravinsky: Duo concertant

Zoltán Fejérváry (piano)

Stravinsky: Double Canon

Stravinsky: Three Pieces for String Quartet

Péter Surján (2nd violin), Péter Tornyai (viola), Tamás Zétényi
(violoncello)

Stravinsky: Three Easy Pieces for Piano Four Hands (secondo)

Zoltán Fejérváry (piano)

Central European University Budapest

23rd November, 2016. Génie oblige (Recital)

Stravinsky: Elegy for Solo Violin

Small Hall of the Liszt Academy

24th October, 2017. Quartet recital

Stravinsky: Three Pieces for String Quartet

Éva Osztrosits (violin), András Kurgyis (viola), János
Fejérváry (violincello)

Marble Hall of the Hungarian Radio

14th February, 2018. Final Concert of Péter Eötvös's Masterclass

Stravinsky: L'histoire du soldat

Csaba Klenyán (clarinet), Attila Jankó (bassoon), Marcell
Dénes-Worowski (double bass), Tamás Schlanger
(percussion), Tamás Pálfalvi (trumpet), Róbert Káip
(trombone), Pál Mácsai (narrator), Toby Thatcher, Su-Han
Yang, Shoji Haraguchi, Roman Baltag, Kens Lui, Carlo
Emilio Tortarolo (conductors)

Budapest Music Center

24th August, 2018. augusztus 24. Arcus Temporum

Stravinsky: L'histoire du soldat

Csaba Klenyán (clarinet), Attila Jankó (bassoon), Marcell Dénes-Worowski (double bass), Tamás Schlanger (percussion), Tamás Pálfalvi (trumpet), Róbert Káip (trombone), Pál Mácsai (narrator), Zoltán Rácz (conductor)

Pannonhalma, Benedictine Library

6th November, 2019. Quartet recital

Stravinsky: Three Pieces for String Quartet

Éva Osztrosits (violin), András Kurgyis (viola), Barnabás Baranyai (violoncello)

Vienna, Collegium Hungaricum

Other:

Hungarian translation of Stravinsky's *Poétique musicale*