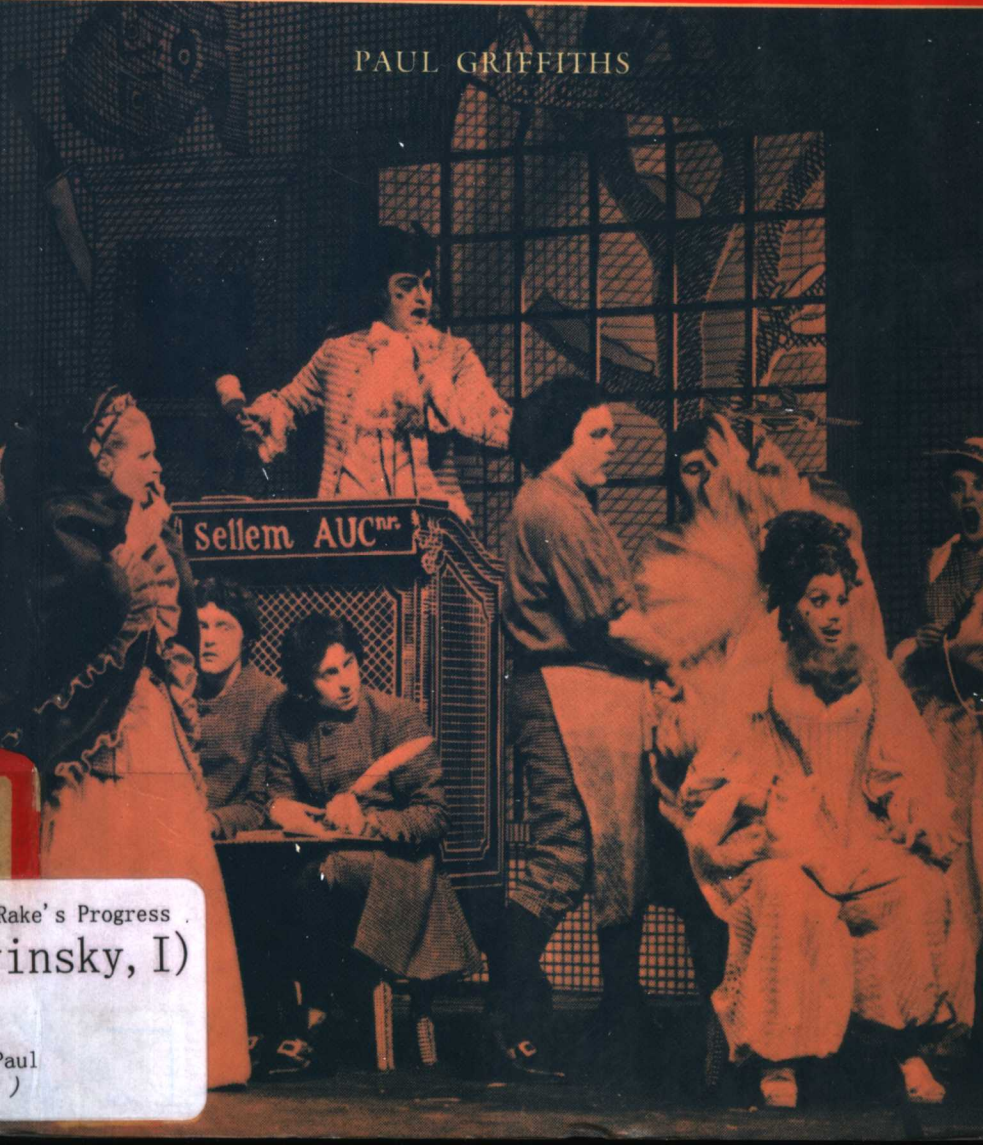
CAMBRIDGE OPERA HANDBOOKS

Igor Stravinsky

The Rake's Progress

PAUL GRIFFITHS



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with Igor Stravinsky, Robert Craft and Gabriel Josipovici

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General preface

This a series of studies of individual operas, written for the serious opera-goer or record-collector as well as the student or scholar. Each volume has three main concerns. The first is historical: to describe the genesis of the work, its sources or its relation to literary prototypes, the collaboration between librettist and composer, and the first performance and subsequent stage history. This history is itself a record of changing attitudes towards the work, and an index of general changes of taste. The second is analytical and is grounded in a very full synopsis which considers the opera as a structure of musical and dramatic effects. In most volumes there is also a musical analysis of a section of the score, showing how the music serves or makes the drama. The analysis, like the history, naturally raises questions of interpretation, and the third concern of each volume is to show how critical writing about an opera, like production and performance, can direct or distort appreciation of its structural elements. Some conflict of interpretation is an inevitable part of this account; editors of the handbooks reflect this – by citing classic statements, by commissioning new essays, by taking up their own critical position. A final section gives a select bibliography, a discography and guides to other sources.

In working out plans for these volumes, the Cambridge University Press was responding to an initial stimulus from staff of the English National Opera. Particular thanks are due to Mr Edmund Tracey and Mr Nicholas John for help, advice and suggestions.

Books published

Richard Wagner: *Parsifal* by Lucy Beckett
C. W. von Gluck: *Orfeo* by Patricia Howard
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Other volumes in preparation

Acknowledgements

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The essay by Gabriel Josipovici in Chapter 6 was first published in *Tempo*, 113 (June 1975) 2-13. It then appeared in Josipovici's *Lessons of Modernism* (London and Basingstoke, Macmillan, and Totowa, New Jersey, Rowman & Littlefield, 1977) and is reprinted here by permission of those publishers.

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1 Venice 1951: the Graveyard scene

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Sellem, auctioneer	*Tenor*
Keeper of the Madhouse	*Bass*

SATB chorus of whores, roaring boys, servants, citizens and madmen

Orchestra: two flutes (second doubling piccolo)
two oboes (second doubling cor anglais)
two B flat clarinets
two bassoons
two horns
two B flat trumpets
timpani
harpsichord (or piano)
strings

The action takes place in eighteenth-century England

I *The composer's view*

BY IGOR STRAVINSKY

I. A programme note

Rather than seek musical forms symbolically expressive of the dramatic content (as in the Daedalian examples of Alban Berg), I chose to cast *The Rake* in the mould of an eighteenth-century 'number' opera, one in which the dramatic progress depends on the succession of separate pieces – recitatives and arias, duets, trios, choruses, instrumental interludes. In the earlier scenes the mould is to some extent pre-Gluck in that it tends to crowd the story into the secco recitatives, reserving the arias for the reflective poetry, but then, as the opera warms up, the story is told, enacted, contained almost entirely in song – as distinguished from so-called speech-song, and Wagnerian continuous melody, which consists, in effect, of orchestral commentary enveloping continuous recitative.

Having chosen a period-piece subject, I decided – naturally, as it seemed to me – to assume the conventions of the period as well. *The Rake's Progress* is a conventional opera, therefore, but with the difference that these particular conventions were adjudged by all respectable (i.e. progressive) circles to be long since dead. My plan of revival did not include updating or modernising, however – which would have been self-contradictory, in any case – and it follows that I had no ambitions as a reformer, at least not in the line of a Gluck, a Wagner or a Berg. In fact, these great progressivists sought to abolish or transform the very clichés I had tried to re-establish, though my restitutions were by no means intended to supersede their now conventionalised reforms (i.e. the leitmotif systems of Wagner and Berg).

Can a composer re-use the past and at the same time move in a forward direction? Regardless of the answer (which is 'yes'), this academic question did not trouble me during the composition, nor will I argue it now, though the supposed backward step of *The Rake* has taken on a radically forward-looking complexion when I have compared it with some more recent progressive operas. Instead, I ask the listener to sus-

pend the question as I did while composing, and, difficult as the request may be, to try to discover the opera's own qualities. For a long time *The Rake* seemed to have been created for no other purpose than journalistic debates concerning: (a) the historical validity of the approach; and (b) the question of pastiche. If the opera contains imitations, however – especially of Mozart, as has been said – I will gladly allow the charge if I may thereby release people from the argument and bring them to the music.

The Rake's Progress is simple to perform musically, but difficult to realise on the stage. I contend, however, that the chief obstacles to a convincing visual conception are no more than the result of an incapacity to accept the work for what it is. True, Tom's machine-baked bread may be hard to swallow, but even *it* will go down, I think (with a lot of butter and more than a few grains of salt) if the stage director has not lost sight of the opera's 'moral fable' proposition by over-playing the realism of 'the Rakewell story'. As Dr Johnson said, 'Opera is an exotic and irrational art.'

It is easy to find faults of this sort in *The Rake*, to be sure, though, alas, it offers nothing quite so foolish as the concealed-identity scene in *Un ballo in maschera*, or the post-stabbing coloratura concert in *Rigoletto*, to name two far greater operas which, like my own, I love beyond the point where criticism can make a difference. Having perfect 20–20 hindsight, like most people, I am now able to see that Shadow is a preacher as well as a Devil; that the Epilogue is much too 'nifty' (as Americans say); that the ostinato accompaniment style could do with an occasional contrast of polyphony, the dramatic opportunity for which might have been found in an extra ensemble or two during which the minor characters might also have been given more development and connection. But though such things matter, they are not fatal. And in any case, I am not concerned with the future of my opera. I ask for it only a measure of present justice.

Paris, 16 August 1964

II. A tribute to a librettist

I chose Wystan Auden as librettist for my opera *The Rake's Progress* because of his special gift for versification; I have never been able to compose music to prose, even poetic prose. That he was a great poet others had assured me – I felt as much, but was too new to English to judge for myself – yet my first requisite was more modest and more

specific; after all, successful collaborations between musicians and poets in dramatic works have been rare, and in fact Dryden and Purcell, Hofmannsthal and Strauss, Boito and Verdi (Boito was, rather, a great adapter, but that is almost as valuable), are the only names that come to mind. What I required was a versifier with whom I could collaborate in writing songs, an unusual starting point for an opera, I hardly need to add, as most composers begin with a search for qualities of dramatic construction and dramatic sensation. I had no knowledge of Wystan's dramatic gifts or even whether he was sensible to operatic stagecraft. I simply gave all priority to verse, hoping that we could evolve the theatrical form together and that it would inspire Wystan to dramatic poetry.

I think he *was* inspired, and in any case he inspired me. At the business level of the collaboration he wrote 'words for music', and I wonder whether any poet since the Elizabethans has made a composer such a beautiful gift of them as the 'Lanterloo' dance in our opera. Wystan had a genius for operatic wording. His lines were always the right length for singing and his words the right ones to sustain musical emphasis. A musical speed was generally suggested by the character and succession of the words, but it was only a useful indication, never a limitation. Best of all for a composer, the rhythmic values of the verse could be altered in singing without destroying the verse. At least, Wystan has never complained. At a different level, as soon as we began to work together I discovered that we shared the same views not only about opera, but also on the nature of the Beautiful and the Good. Thus, our opera is indeed, and in the highest sense, a collaboration.

Wystan has lived in Austria too long now, and I wish you could convince him to come back. After all, we cannot afford to give our best poet to the Germans.

For a BBC television documentary on Auden. Hollywood, 5 November 1965.

2 *The makers and their work*

It is the pattern of opera that its composers should either be constantly involved with it, as Mozart, Wagner, Strauss and the Italians were, or else confine themselves to a single masterpiece, like *Fidelio* or *Pelléas et Mélisande*. Stravinsky, uniquely, did both. *The Rake's Progress* is his only full-length opera, but it was preceded and followed by a variety of other works combining, as opera combines, music with words and gesture. It is as if he had been avoiding opera until the composition of *The Rake's Progress*, just as he had avoided the sonata until the Piano Sonata of 1924 and the symphony until the Symphony in C of 1938–40. And, exactly as in those other cases, the avoidance continues even in the eventual capitulation: *The Rake's Progress* is an opera despite itself.

Stravinsky's first operatic work was also his first project for the stage, *Solovey* or *The Nightingale*, to a Russian libretto by Stepan Mitusov after the tale by Hans Christian Andersen. He began work on it in 1908, shortly before the death of his teacher Rimsky-Korsakov, whose fantasy operas, along with Debussy, were a notable influence on the piece. But in 1909 he stopped work to compose his first ballet score for Dyagilev, *The Firebird*, and henceforth music for dancing was to occupy much of his attention. Only after writing *Petrushka* and *The Rite of Spring* did he return to *The Nightingale* and complete it in 1913–14, producing a work which, though having three acts, lasts for only about three-quarters of an hour in all. Thus was established the 'one-acter' size of Stravinsky's later quasi-operatic works, including *Oedipus rex* and *Perséphone*. Thus was established too the approach of opera towards ballet that was to dominate his thinking, since he subsequently described the two later acts of *The Nightingale* (those composed after *The Rite*) as 'a kind of opera–pageant ballet',[1] and the original production by Dyagilev's company placed the emphasis firmly on dance and spectacle. Stravinsky himself decided that the soprano who sings the Nightingale must be placed in the orchestra pit and represented on stage by the

figure of a bird; Dyagilev also removed the singer who takes the part of the Fisherman and had this role mimed, following the precedent of his production of Rimsky's *The Golden Cockerel* in the same season, for which he had used a double cast of singers on either side of the stage and dancers executing the action.

The idea obviously appealed to Stravinsky. In a newspaper interview of 1913 he had maintained that: 'Music can be married to gesture or to words – not to both without bigamy.'[2] But his experience with *The Nightingale* had shown him how unions might be effected on separate planes, and this he pursued in his next works for the stage, *Svadebka* or *The Wedding* (1914–23) and *Bayka* or *Baize* (1915–16). Both are treatments of Russian folk material adapted by the composer himself. In both the action is danced while the singers, whose parts are not in any consistent direct relationship with the characters on stage, join the orchestra. And in both Stravinsky intended that the mismatch between music and drama should be manifest: he wanted the orchestras of singers and instrumentalists to be visible, to have their own visual identity, so undermining the illusion of opera that characters and music belong together in some imagined world.

The presentation of action and music as linked but distinct was taken further in *Histoire du soldat* (1918), where the play by Ramuz is managed by a narrator and enacted by two actors and a dancer, while an instrumental septet, also on stage, play a score which lies alongside and then comes to engulf the drama. His next ballet, *Pulcinella* (1919–20), again had singers in the pit for a few songs kept as relics of the 'Pergolesi' originals. Then, after this backward glance to Italian comic opera, Stravinsky turned to the operatic tradition of his own country and created in *Mavra* (1921–2) a short one-act opera in homage to Pushkin, Glinka and Tchaikovsky. They make a strange trinity. Glinka has commonly been seen as the ancestor of the Mighty Handful and their brand of Russian nationalism, but Stravinsky made it clear that he was thinking not of *Ruslan* but of the songs, and the way they adapt Italian bel canto to native substance, much as Pushkin and Tchaikovsky also looked westward. *Mavra* was a reaction against the Russianness of such works as *The Wedding*, which had celebrated their exoticism, and an assertion that the Russian artist must become heir to a wider heritage. It was the last work in which he set the Russian language, and the first in which he chose to revitalise old forms and styles.

But, characteristically, Stravinsky's neoclassicism in *Mavra* was not an acceptance of old conventions but a use of them to formalise and distance. If the speed and absurdity of the action were not enough to

prevent its being taken as a slice of life, then the presence of arias and ensembles would show up the work as a construction, especially when these operatic routines are accompanied not by a balanced orchestra but by a wind band that belongs only to the period of composition. Thus although *Mavra* was the first work since *The Nightingale* in which Stravinsky had tried to bring about the bigamous union of music, language and movement, he still maintained a division between the bel canto voices and the jazzy accompaniment.

In his next two operatic works he reverted to making such a division between substance and form quite unmistakable. The opera–oratorio *Oedipus rex* (1926–7) was to be presented with a minimum of action by masked figures on pedestals, singing in Latin while a narrator introduces and explains the story in the vernacular, so that the myth is displayed rather than dramatised. Similarly in *Perséphone* (1933–4) Stravinsky wanted a gap between action and narrative, here with the story mimed and danced while it is also being told by a chorus, a tenor soloist and a female speaker.

The ritual aspect of *Oedipus rex* and *Perséphone* takes on a particular significance if one recalls that these were among the very few of Stravinsky's works since *Mavra* to employ voices, and that nearly all the others were religious: the *Symphony of Psalms* (1930), the cantata *Babel* (1944), the Mass (1944–8) and the small a cappella pieces. (The only exceptions were little homages to Ramuz and to Nadia Boulanger.) When he came to compose *The Rake's Progress*, therefore, he had for more than a quarter of a century kept to the principle that singing could be permitted only in the cases of a chorus expressing sacred truth or of participants retelling a quasi-sacred myth at a remove. Such a history could be a preparation only for an opera in inverted commas, an opera aware of itself at every moment as *Mavra* had been.

That any new opera would have to be also a number opera, like *Mavra*, *Oedipus rex* and *Perséphone*, is to be assumed from Stravinsky's spoken pronouncements, especially those in his *Poetics of Music* (1939–40). Although, as Robert Craft has demonstrated, the text of these lectures was in fact written by Roland-Manuel,[3] Stravinsky's notes make it clear that he was in sympathy with the belabouring of Wagner, writing that: 'Defiance (of the classical Rules) demands things of music that are beyond its jurisdiction – the principle of illustration, imitation (leitmotiv).'[4] His draft also includes one statement central to the *Poetics*: 'Art is freer when it is more limited, more finished, canonical, dogmatic.'[5]

According to Stravinsky's own account, the possibility of *The Rake's*

Progress arose very much at the time of the *Poetics of Music*, since he had wanted to write an opera in English ever since his arrival in the United States, which was in 1939.[6] If so, it was a possibility that remained dormant for several years, since the pattern of his output during his early American years continued as it had been in France: the emphasis was on orchestral works, including the *Symphony in Three Movements* (1942–5), and ballet scores, ranging from the *Circus Polka* (1942) to *Orpheus* (1947). Then, while he was at work on *Orpheus*, he found the subject for his opera. On 2 May 1947 he visited a Hogarth exhibition at the Chicago Art Institute[7] and there saw the series of canvases entitled *The Rake's Progress*, painted in 1732–3 and normally housed in Sir John Soane's Museum in Lincoln's Inn Fields, London. Popular at the time in engravings, they depict a moral fable in eight stages:

1 'The Heir': Tom Rakewell comes into his inheritance on the death of his father and is visited by Sarah Young, a town girl he has seduced, together with her mother.
2 'The Levee': Tom is seen with various professors in the gentlemanly arts.
3 'The Orgy': he rollicks with whores in a low tavern.
4 'The Arrest': he is about to be apprehended for debt, but Sarah arrives with her savings to redeem him.
5 'The Marriage': he makes a marriage of convenience to an elderly and ill-favoured rich lady, while Sarah, carrying his child in her arms, is excluded from the ceremony.
6 'The Gaming House': he loses his second fortune.
7 'The Prison': he is committed to the Fleet for debt.
8 'The Madhouse': he is removed to an asylum, where the ever-faithful Sarah continues to visit him.

The paintings had been used as the basis for a ballet by the Vic-Wells company in 1935, with music by Gavin Gordon in a pastiche Handelian style and choreography by Ninette de Valois, and it would seem quite possible that Stravinsky knew of this. He may also have been aware of an updated film version, starring Rex Harrison, which had been made in 1945. In any event, he decided soon after seeing the pictures that within them lay the germ of a libretto, and so he set about finding a literary collaborator. If he had already decided on an opera in eighteenth-century dress, musical as well as scenic, then he might have been expected to look for an Italian poet, even if it is hard to think of anyone who could possibly have fulfilled his task. In fact he seems to have had no doubt that this would be his opera in English, and of course he had chosen an English subject; he therefore began by seeking the advice of his Californian friend and close neighbour Aldous Huxley.[8]

Huxley recommended W. H. Auden, whose claims might have been

2 Hogarth: 'The Orgy' from *The Rake's Progress* (1732–3)