

Poetics of Music  
in the Form of  
Six Lessons

Bilingual Edition

Igor Stravinsky

Preface by  
George Seferis

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# POETICS OF MUSIC

*in the Form of Six Lessons*

Igor Stravinsky

*English translation by  
Arthur Knodel and Ingolf Dahl*

Preface by George Seferis

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Drawing of Stravinsky by Picasso, 1920.

# POETICS OF MUSIC

The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures for 1939-1940

## PREFACE TO A NEW EDITION OF THE POETICS OF MUSIC

George Seferis

**I**F I could freely choose where I should like to have been in the academic year 1939–40, my choice would be a place in the youthful audience of Igor Stravinsky at Harvard College. Perhaps I have inherited something from the tradition of the old medieval guilds. It is in that spirit — of an artisan of a bygone age — that I understand Stravinsky when, praising “Bach’s incomparable instrumental writing,” he notes that one can smell the resin of his violins and taste the reeds of his oboes.<sup>1</sup> And in this same spirit I venture to say that the precepts of renowned masters may carry as much weight as their creations.

Since his time at Harvard important pages have been added to the corpus of texts dealing with the life and works of the great composer. I have in mind his “Conversations” with Robert Craft, who is performing for Stravinsky the service that the young Eckermann did for Goethe. Even so, I must at once insist that just as the Harvard *Lessons* did not supersede such books as the *Chroniques de ma vie* (Paris 1935), so the *Lessons* are complemented, not outmoded, by the thoughts on music and the recollections that have since been given to us.

These six lectures were delivered in French under the title *Poétique musicale sous forme de six leçons* and belong to the distinguished series of Charles Eliot Norton Lectures on Poetry at Harvard University. The original text has long been out of print and unobtainable. And only now, in the present edition,

1. Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Conversations with Igor Stravinsky* (Doubleday: New York, 1959), p. 31.

does it at last appear with the English translation on facing pages. This is a real advantage, since in the thought of a Stravinsky even the least nuance is significant.

Stravinsky tells us how grateful he was, French not being his native language,<sup>2</sup> that he could check the draft of his text with his friend Paul Valéry. It is a charming picture, this collaboration of two devotees of precision. Equally charming, and instructive, is this other detail that the musician gives us: "Even now, a half-century since I left the Russian-speaking world, I still think in Russian, and speak other languages in translation."<sup>3</sup> It is difficult, I think, for Babel to fit into a soul that is striving for unity.<sup>4</sup>

Stravinsky at Harvard makes me think of Paul Valéry. When I was a student in Paris, around 1922, Valéry meant a great deal to me. And later on, when people my seniors who had known him spoke to me about him I was always moved: they all loved him. I shall never forget one autumn evening in the tiny office of T. S. Eliot at Faber and Faber's the voice of the poet of the *Quartets* ending our conversation about Valéry: "He was so intelligent that he had no ambition at all."

And now, as I pen this simple tribute to a musician of our time whom all my life I have regarded with devotion, I recall the phrase in one of Valéry's letters: ". . . en matière musicale les mots du métier ne me disent rien que de vague ou d'intimidant." I share this feeling and I was very hesitant to agree to write even these few words. And my hesitation was reinforced by Stravinsky's own observation: "How misleading are all literary descriptions of musical form."<sup>5</sup> Indeed yes, and it is not

2. Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Memoirs and Commentaries* (Faber and Faber: London, 1960), p. 74.

3. Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Expositions and Development* (Faber and Faber: London, 1962), p. 18.

4. Igor Stravinsky, *Poetics of Music* (Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass., 1970), p. 43.

5. *Conversations with Igor Stravinsky*, p. 17.

a question simply of music. Generally, I think, it is misleading to transfer a given artistic expression from the medium which gave birth to it to some other which will, inevitably, be alien. I give an example.

We are all familiar with the episode related in Book II of the *Aeneid*, the episode in which the serpents strangle Laocoön and his sons. It would, I fear, be difficult to maintain that either El Greco's painting of the scene (which we admire in the National Gallery in Washington) or the famous Rhodian statue conveys exactly, without misleading, the expression of Virgil's verses. And one could say the same of Stéphane Mallarmé's *Après-midi d'un faune* and Debussy's superb musical setting of the poem. Each art has its own medium, that material which the artist's creative manipulation suddenly and unexpectedly makes more sensitive—molds it into a form different from the way we see it in everyday life. This is a clarification that I feel obliged to make and at the same time it implies a distinction between the use of words as the medium of poetry and the use of words for didactic or explanatory purposes. It is this latter use that one marvels at in Stravinsky, both in his Harvard lectures and in the choice pages with which from time to time he favors us.

Nevertheless, for Stravinsky's most profound expression (and I use the word in an absolute sense) it is not in the realm of words that we must search but in the realm of sound. There he has transfused his whole self, there he has made his mark as a great master of music, a figure comparable in stature to that other pillar of our age, Pablo Picasso. Their works, the expression of these two men, have set their seal on our time, but if one is to find the catharsis, the deliverance, that they offer us it is to the works themselves that we must go, not to intermediary words, the countless words that have been written about them.

I once observed, perhaps in a carefree moment of exaggeration, that even if the language we speak were reduced to a single



word the good poet would still be readily distinguished from the poet of lesser talent. Thus I found food for thought in the passage that Stravinsky at the end of the *Lessons* ascribes to the Arcopagite: "The greater the dignity of the angels in the celestial hierarchy," says the Saint, "the fewer words they use; so that the most elevated of all pronounces only a single syllable."<sup>6</sup>

A word, a syllable, a single sound. The goal that one strives for but never attains. Yet the road traveled, the long blind way that we easily lose and only with great toil find again, this is what touches us to the quick in the life of the creative artist.

I am grateful to these few lines because they have given me the occasion this past month to hear again — in recordings — a large part of Stravinsky's work and to read his *Conversations*. In one of these, an interview that reached me just at the right time,<sup>7</sup> he speaks of the last quartets of Beethoven and says: "The quartets are a charter of human rights," and, again, "A high concept of freedom is embodied in the quartets." This view, I must confess, caused me some malaise. And then, suddenly, I thought of the basic significance that time has for music and for Stravinsky himself: witness the phrase where he speaks of the "natural respiration" of music, his affirmation that "pulsation is the reality of music."<sup>8</sup> At the same moment there flashed into my mind a quartet that has become part of my life and that I have listened to countless times, Opus 132, especially the third movement ("molto adagio") his "Hymn of Thanksgiving in the Lydian mode." Then at last I felt that I saw clearly what Stravinsky meant: music (as he taught us in the second *Lesson*) is the art of time; and also, I reflected, our human bodies are subject to time, this tortured humanity that continually yearns

6. *Poetics of Music*, p. 185.

7. Igor Stravinsky, "Where is thy sting?", *The New York Review of Books*, 12:4 (April 24, 1969); reprinted in Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Retrospectives and Conclusions* (Knopf: New York, 1969).  
12:4 (April 24, 1969).

8. *Memoirs and Commentaries*, p. 113.

to breathe freely in the radiance of health. Here Mallarmé's "l'ennui de fournir du bavardage" made me halt.

One note more. Out of the rich harvest of facts and gestures of Igor Stravinsky that Robert Craft offers us, one in particular sticks in my mind. Craft remarks: "I have noticed that you always sleep with a light on; do you remember the origin of this need?" Stravinsky replies: "I am able to sleep at night only when a ray of light enters my room from a closet or adjoining chamber . . . The light I still seek to be reminded of must have come . . . from the street lamp outside my window on the Krukov Canal . . . Whatever it was, however . . . this umbilical cord of illumination still enables me at seventy-eight, to re-enter the world of safety and enclosure I knew at seven or eight."<sup>9</sup>

I marvel to hear this from a man who declares bluntly: "I do not like to remember my childhood."<sup>10</sup>

Just the same, that dim but persistent light which first shone from a street lamp of old St. Petersburg and decade after decade, long after its original source must have been extinguished, continued—like the light of a burnt-out star—to illumine his sleep and to provide him the security of childhood.

Last year Stravinsky said: "But I know I have more music in me, nevertheless. And I must give; I cannot live a purely receiving life."<sup>11</sup> God grant him many years to come! And may that gleam from the nocturnal Krukov Canal still attend his fruitful dreams!

*Athens, May 1969*

9. *Expositions and Development*, p. 13.

10. *Memoirs and Conversations*, p. 24.

11. Igor Stravinsky, "Side Effects: An Interview," *The New York Review of Books*, 10:8 (March 14, 1968); reprinted in Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Retrospectives and Conclusions* (Knopf: New York, 1969).

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POETICS OF MUSIC  
POÉTIQUE MUSICALE

## PREMIÈRE LEÇON

### PRISE DE CONTACT

**J**E CONSIDÈRE comme un grand honneur d'occuper aujourd'hui la chaire de poétique Charles Eliot Norton, et il m'est agréable avant tout de remercier le Comité qui a bien voulu m'inviter à prendre la parole devant les étudiants de l'Université d'Harvard.

Je ne puis vous cacher ma joie de m'adresser pour la première fois à un auditoire qui veut prendre la peine d'écouter et d'apprendre avant de juger.

Je me suis produit jusqu'à présent devant ces collectivités humaines qui composent ce qu'on appelle le public, sur les estrades des concerts et dans les salles de théâtre; mais jamais, jusqu'à ce jour, je ne m'étais adressé à un studieux auditoire. En cette qualité qui vous rend certainement désireux d'acquérir des notions solides sur les matières qui vous sont proposées, vous ne serez pas surpris si je vous préviens que la matière dont je vais vous entretenir est sérieuse — plus sérieuse qu'on ne le pense généralement. Vous ne serez pas effrayé de sa densité, de son poids spécifique. Je ne songe pas à vous en accabler . . . , mais il est difficile de parler musique en s'attachant seulement à ses réalités substantielles: et je penserais la trahir en en faisant le sujet d'une dissertation à bâtons rompus, émaillée d'anecdotes et de digressions plaisantes.

Je n'oublierai pas que j'occupe une chaire de *poétique* et ce n'est un secret pour aucun de vous que poétique, au sens propre, veut dire étude de l'œuvre à faire. Le verbe *ποιεῖν* dont il provient, ne signifie pas autre chose que faire (to make). La poétique des philosophes de l'Antiquité ne comportait pas de

## FIRST LESSON

### GETTING ACQUAINTED

I CONSIDER it a great honor to occupy the Charles Eliot Norton chair of poetics today, and I take particular pleasure in thanking the Committee that has so kindly invited me to address the students of Harvard University.

I cannot conceal from you how happy I am to be speaking for the first time to an audience that is willing to take the trouble of listening and learning before judging.

Up to the present I have appeared on the concert platform and in theater halls before those agglomerations of people that make up what we call the public. But never until today have I addressed an audience of students. As students, undoubtedly eager to acquire solid information about matters that are presented to you, you will not be surprised if I warn you that the particular matter I am going to discuss with you is serious—more serious than is generally thought. I hope you will not be frightened by its density, by its specific gravity. I have no intention of overwhelming you . . . but it is difficult to talk about music if one considers only its material realities; and I should feel I were betraying music if I made it the subject of a dissertation hastily thrown together, sprinkled with anecdotes and amusing digressions.

I shall not forget that I occupy a chair of *poetics*. And it is no secret to any of you that the exact meaning of poetics is the study of work to be done. The verb *poiein* from which the word is derived means nothing else but *to do* or *make*. The poetics of the classical philosophers did not consist of lyrical dissertations about natural

dissertations lyriques sur le talent naturel et sur l'essence de la beauté. Le même mot *τεχνη* englobait pour eux les beaux-arts et les arts utiles, et s'appliquait à la science et à l'étude des règles certaines et déterminées du métier. C'est ainsi que la *poétique* d'Aristote suggère constamment les idées de travail personnel, d'agencement et de structure.

Je vais précisément vous parler de la poétique musicale, c'est-à-dire du *faire* dans l'ordre de la musique. C'est assez dire que nous ne prendrons pas la musique pour prétexte à d'aimables rêveries. Je sens trop, en ce qui me concerne, la responsabilité qui m'incombe, pour ne pas prendre ma tâche au sérieux.

Si donc j'estime à son prix l'avantage de parler devant vous, qui êtes ici pour étudier et pour prendre de moi ce que je suis peut-être capable de vous donner, vous aurez en revanche, je l'espère, l'avantage d'être vraiment les témoins d'une suite de confessions musicales.

Ce ne seront pas, rassurez-vous, des confessions à la manière de Jean-Jacques Rousseau, encore moins à la manière des modernes psychanalystes, lesquels, sous un appareil pseudo-scientifique, n'opèrent qu'une misérable profanation des valeurs authentiques de l'homme et de ses facultés psychologiques et créatrices.

Je voudrais situer mon système de confessions entre un cours *académique* (je retiens votre attention sur ce terme, car je pense y revenir au cours de mes leçons) et ce qu'on pourrait appeler une *apologie* de mes propres idées générales. J'emploie le mot *apologie*, non dans le sens courant, qui veut dire éloge, mais dans le sens d'une justification et d'une défense de mes idées et de mes vues personnelles. C'est dire qu'il s'agit au fond de confidences dogmatiques.

Je sais bien que les mots *dogme*, *dogmatique* ne manquent jamais, pour peu qu'on les applique à l'ordre esthétique, voire à l'ordre spirituel, de heurter — de choquer — certains esprits plus riches de sincérité que forts de certitudes. Je n'en insiste



talent and about the essence of beauty. For them the single word *techné* embraced both the fine arts and the useful arts and was applied to the knowledge and study of the certain and inevitable rules of the craft. That is why Aristotle's *Poetics* constantly suggests ideas regarding personal work, arrangement of materials, and structure. The poetics of music is exactly what I am going to talk to you about; that is to say, I shall talk about *making* in the field of music. Suffice it to say that we shall not use music as a pretext for pleasant fancies. For myself, I am too much aware of the responsibility incumbent upon me not to take my task seriously.

So if I greatly prize the advantage I have in speaking before you who are here to study and to get from me whatever I may be capable of giving, you, in return, will, I hope, enjoy the advantage of actually being witnesses of a series of musical confessions.

Do not be alarmed. They will not be confessions of the Jean Jacques Rousseau sort, and even less of the psychoanalytic sort which, under a pseudo-scientific guise, merely effect a sad profanation of man's real values and of his psychological and creative faculties.

I should like to place my plan of confessions midway between an *academic* course (and may I call your attention to this term, because I shall refer to it again in the course of my lessons) and what one might call an *apology* for my own general ideas. I use the word apology not in its current French sense, where it means eulogy, but in the sense of a justification and defense of my ideas and personal views. In fine, all this means that I shall be giving you dogmatic confidences.

I am fully aware that the words *dogma* and *dogmatic*, however sparingly one may apply them to aesthetic matters or even to spiritual matters, never fail to offend — even to shock — certain mentalities richer in sincerity than they are strong in certitudes. For that