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IGOR STRAVINSKY

*His personality, works
and views*

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Mikhail Druskin

Translated by Martin Cooper

Igor Stravinsky

His life, works and views

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Preface by Theodore Strawinsky

Among the countless books that have appeared about Stravinsky this is unquestionably one that deserves to be known to the wider public who cannot read it in the original. Mikhail Druskin is a distinguished musicologist, whose study of Stravinsky first appeared in Leningrad in 1974, followed by a German translation two years later. A second 'corrected and completed' edition was published in Leningrad in 1979; a French translation of it is in preparation; and English and American readers will, I feel sure, welcome the opportunity of becoming acquainted with Druskin's book in the present translation.

At the time of Stravinsky's death in 1971 there already existed a mass of works devoted to his music, to his aesthetics, and to his personality as containing the key to his development as an artist.¹ Some of these studies had a certain importance when they appeared, but since their subject was a living personality and a body of work that was still growing and evolving, they were as it were open-ended. The advantage enjoyed by Druskin's book (and others written, or at least completed, after Stravinsky's death) lies in the fact that it has now become possible to view the subject as a whole; and in making use of this advantage Druskin has shown altogether extraordinary qualities of sensibility, tact and psychological penetration. Furthermore Druskin is not only a musicologist – that is his profession – but also a profound and subtle student of human nature. This has enabled him to study Stravinsky's personality not only through his music but also as a human being, and one who responded with absolute immediacy to every aspect of human existence. It is in fact this human being that Druskin seeks in the composer, each helping to explain the other. On the other hand he has never allowed the admiration, the affection, even veneration that he feels for Stravinsky's music to detract one iota from his critical sense. It is this circumstance, I believe, that gives his opinions their authoritative character.

Druskin's analyses of Stravinsky's works, individually and as a whole, are unfailingly lucid, illuminated as it were from within. He examines each of the specific characteristics of Stravinsky's genius and has a firm grasp of the roots from which that music grew and developed over the years. This development was various, Protean, like

that of his contemporary Picasso. Indeed, Picasso and Stravinsky are two personalities to whom among others – and doubtless more than to any others – our age owes its character. Nor is this parallel a fortuitous one, for Druskin also insists upon it. If we use the word 'Protean' of Stravinsky's evolution, it must be granted that logical minds will not fail to discover a number of apparent contradictions between its different phases. Were these in fact contradictions? They certainly acted as a stimulus first to the composer himself, who found himself repeatedly called upon to outdistance himself in order to find his new path, and then to students in search of the essence of his music. In Stravinsky's case his music meant his evolution. Then quite apart from such contradictions as these – and setting them in a still clearer light – there were the many paradoxical statements in which he delighted to express himself, whether verbally or in writing. These were given enormous publicity and disconcerted some even of his most fervent admirers, who found themselves suddenly confronted with a Stravinsky who was the opposite of the one they thought they knew. Here again Druskin is concerned to explain to his readers the actual truth embodied by the composer in his music and at the same time disguised in deliberate, often humorous paradoxes recalling those of G. K. Chesterton.

When it comes to the question of the Russian element in Stravinsky's music – something to which Druskin attaches major importance – his analysis goes to the true heart of the matter. Whereas the general public regards only Stravinsky's first period as 'Russian' (chiefly on account of the preponderance of Russian subjects) Druskin goes much further. He shows us the origins, the deep roots of Stravinsky's music, and tries to make us aware of the persistence of a Russian element in its very texture. In the early works this element was clear enough, but Druskin traces it right through the unhappily named 'neo-classical' works, where the track is not always easy to follow, and into the works of the last period, where it is often quite difficult. This was the period, after *The Rake's Progress*, when the 'Russian' composer who had become the chief figure in the neo-classical movement in twentieth-century music suddenly surprised the world by laying his art wide open to the serialism of the Second Viennese School, which he had always hitherto obstinately rejected. In fact Druskin demonstrates the persistent presence, against all appearances, of this Russian vein throughout the whole of Stravinsky's oeuvre.

Persistent though that element may have been, it was not the fundamental element of his aesthetics, which was – as Druskin shows

Preface by Theodore Stravinsky

– his universal eclecticism. It is this that explains all the sudden changes and apparent breaks in his evolution as a composer, the last of which brought him, in serialism, a whole new area to exploit as a craftsman. I am quite prepared to admit that the Russian element persisted in the music of this last period, and indeed Druskin gives clear instances from *Requiem Canticles*, the chief work of these last years. It is only fair to say, moreover, that Stravinsky's nostalgia for Russia, which Druskin represents as having sharply increased during his last years in America, was then, as always, counterbalanced by another trait which was absolutely fundamental to his character and which was expressed in the wise words of C. F. Ramuz, who wrote 'You never were, and never could be a foreigner anywhere, for nowhere did you lack affinities with things, with life, you were nowhere separated from Being – and that is the greatest gift of all.' That indeed is how he was, with all his complexities, the man who is the subject of this book, the man who was my father. We were always close, both emotionally and intellectually, and we engaged in endless discussions of artistic, religious and philosophical problems. I was therefore delighted to find that Druskin's study includes, beside a true portrait of Stravinsky and an extremely apt analysis of his music, many illuminating observations on the position occupied by that music in what may be called the 'cultural substance' of the twentieth century.

Author's preface to second Russian edition

This book was completed in 1973 and first published in Russian in 1974; a German translation appeared in 1976. Having left the author's hands, the book led an independent existence. It had been planned for a number of years, and from the middle of the sixties fragments had appeared as articles in the Soviet and foreign Press. In the present edition (1979) a number of points have been clarified and some further information added. Otherwise the contents remain unchanged. It may, however, be as well to emphasise several ideas which form the basis of the book.

Stravinsky was one of the Russian composers who have exercised an enormous influence on contemporary music. Many different aspects of twentieth-century music are reflected in his works, but throughout his long life he remained a Russian artist, closely bound up with the traditions of Russian culture. This is one of the central themes of the book. At the same time Stravinsky cannot be understood without reference to twentieth-century Western culture and its many glaring contradictions. Like Valéry, T. S. Eliot, Picasso and Thomas Mann, Stravinsky sought to assimilate and to reflect in his music the whole artistic experience of the European past. The manifestation of this universalism in his music is a second fundamental theme.

If Stravinsky never ceased to attract the attention of the musical world, it was not only as an enormously gifted composer but also as a highly organised intellectual personality – a personality in which there were a number of paradoxes and contradictions. In order to penetrate the essential character of these contradictions, the author has attempted to present a more complete picture of Stravinsky's unique individuality, and this may be regarded as the third main idea of the book. As Goethe says –

Wer den Dichter will verstehen
Muss in Dichters Lande gehen

– in order, that is, to penetrate the 'poet's world' we must study not only his works but how he himself understood them and what he thought about himself, his contemporaries and his predecessors. In order to realise this ideal the author has made use of many quotations from Stravinsky's own pronouncements. These quotations are often

embedded in the text, and their object is to direct the reader's attention to the personality of the composer and to the artistic and intellectual movements of his day. The quotations are interpreted critically and made the subject of discussion. In fact they serve as a natural reinforcement and corroboration of the author's theories.

It would of course be a mistake to equate Stravinsky's opinions with his musical legacy: his subjective interpretations of his own works may well differ from the estimates of objective critics. This is particularly true in the case of Stravinsky, whose artistic sympathies and antipathies were for many years – many decades, indeed – arbitrary and fluctuating. At the very height of his career he would on occasion make a parade of the wildest and most unexpected paradoxes. In this sense one could perhaps apply to him the witty observation of Somerset Maugham's:

The celebrated develop a technique to deal with the persons they come across. They show the world a mask, often an impressive one, but take care to conceal their real selves. They play the part that is expected of them and with practice learn to play it very well, but you are stupid if you think that this public performance of theirs corresponds with the man within.¹

The quotations from Stravinsky's own words have been taken from six books written or edited by him at different periods and with different collaborators, who have left a certain imprint of their own upon the contents:

Chroniques de ma vie (Paris 1935–6; English translation as *Chronicle of my Life*, London 1936). This is an autobiographical narrative dictated by Stravinsky to V. F. Nouvel, for many years a collaborator with Serge Diaghilev. It goes up to 1934, a time when Stravinsky was proposing to stand for the Académie Française – hence in all probability the elaborately polite and occasionally even *mondain* tone.

Poétique musicale, with the collaboration of Pierre Souvchinsky and Alexis Roland-Manuel (Paris 1952; English translation by Arthur Knodel and Ingolf Dahl as *Poetics of Music*, Harvard University Press 1942, 4th edition 1977). This was based on lectures given at Harvard University 1939–40.

Four volumes of conversations, published under the joint authorship of Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft:

Conversations with Stravinsky (London 1958)

Memories and Commentaries (London 1959)

Expositions and Developments (London 1959)

Dialogues and a Diary (London 1963)

Selections from these four books have been translated into Russian and published in a single volume as *Dialog* (Leningrad 1971).

The tone of the lectures which form the basis of *Poetics of Music* is sharp and polemical, and the subject-matter alternates swiftly between what is serious and important and what is superficial and anecdotal. This unevenness of quality is easily explained by the awkward position in which Stravinsky found himself during the first year of his residence in the United States. Quite apart from that, however, Stravinsky could hardly be expected to exhibit consistency or to provide systematic substantiation in the exposition of his ideas since, despite the undoubted sharpness of his intelligence and the penetrating character of his observations, he never had any inclination for aesthetic speculation. What was characteristic of him was an aphoristic way of talking, an explosive quality in the judgments that he would often appear to deliver impromptu, though they may well, in fact, have been premeditated. The charm of the conversations with Robert Craft lies in the fact that here Stravinsky appears at his ease and speaks freely, without restraint of any kind. Craft put the questions and directed the course of these 'interviews', and it must be admitted that it is not always easy to distinguish the voice of the man steering the conversation from that of the man answering the questions. However, for the most part Stravinsky's voice is clearly distinguishable.

The many references to *Chronicle* and the various books containing Stravinsky's conversations with Robert Craft are inset in the text and compared with the opinions and judgments of other major artists of the twentieth century, thus emphasising Stravinsky's many and various spiritual links with his contemporaries.

The present book consists of thirteen chapters including an introduction and an epilogue. The skeleton of the book is formed by three chapters ('The Russian element', 'World classics' and 'Torniamo all'antico . . .') in which the three stages of Stravinsky's artistic development – the Russian period, the neo-classical and the final period – are distinguished in the accepted manner. Interspersed with these chapters are eight others which concentrate on the theoretical aspects of the subject. The multiplicity of these angles of vision establishes a system of cross-reference between the different chapters of the book and gives rise to a kind of invertible counterpoint throughout the book.

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Preliminary portrait

In writing about Stravinsky's personality it would plainly be an advantage to have spent a considerable amount of time in his company, to have observed him closely, to have followed – and indeed to have shared – his intense and often unexpected spiritual development, to have seen him regularly on working days and on special occasions, at his work table, in all the preliminary preparations for a first performance and at those performances themselves. It is a handicap not to have taken part in his private conversations or to have attended the many official receptions with which he was concerned, not to know at first hand his reading habits or the books he read, his daily interests, what he accepted and what he rejected in the milieu in which he lived, in urban civilisation generally, in the monuments of the cultural past, in nature. How invaluable to have had personal experience of how he arranged his working day, or how his ideas originated and of the course of their realisation; and what a privilege it would have been to have experienced personally the spontaneous ebullitions of such a highly and variously gifted personality, to have seen that remarkable temperament in effective action!

There is, however, a further difficulty in writing about the phenomenon of Stravinsky's personality and it lies in the fact that this personality was neither simple nor unambiguous. Although he was an artist of high intellectual development and strong purpose, his very subjective and fluctuating attitudes to life, to people and to art revealed the complexity and mercurial nature of his character. He himself said that the sonorous complex (in music) springs from the tension arising from the pull of polarised forces, and we may visualise the inner essence of his personality as a highly individual complex of just such opposed forces.

This tension was partly reflected in his personal appearance. Although small in build, he had the disproportionately large hands of an artisan which found a further contradiction in the small, noticeably elongated head. His facial features were harsh and angular – something particularly emphasised in Picasso's sketches of him – and he himself once jokingly observed that 'my music consists

entirely of bones'. A skeleton, of course, has many angles and intersecting lines and, to continue Stravinsky's own metaphor, we might say that his strongly knit frame was the exterior expression of the complex and apparently ill-regulated intersection of these lines. But in action – and Stravinsky was very impulsive by nature – these angles became smoother and softer, a harmony was revealed in the geometrical disproportions and a fundamental unity became apparent.

His eyes were immediately arresting – deepset, piercing, narrowly and intensely observant, as though intent on penetrating to the very heart of a subject. His way of holding himself, his 'carriage', betrayed both a *mondain* elegance and the casual ease of the artist; and this combination again gave the vague suggestion of some inner contradiction. How indeed are we to explain this touch of the *mondain* in an artist gifted – in Pushkin's words – 'with a sharp and cool intelligence', 'a swift and piercing eye'?

Compare, for example, the early Paris days of Stravinsky's contemporary, Picasso, in the *bateau-lavoir* haunted by Derain, Dufy, Braque, Léger, Apollinaire, Max Jacob. He, and the others, knew what it was to be really poor, and the pictures that he painted at that time contain many down-and-outs. Reputation and material comfort came to Picasso in time, but he was never attracted by aristocratic society. Or take a musician who stood at the opposite extreme to Stravinsky – Arnold Schoenberg, his senior by eight years, who knew real poverty not only in his early days but later too. He had a difficult life during which he naturally met many people but, business dealings apart, all of these shared his intellectual or artistic interests, and with his firm convictions and his egocentric tendencies he admitted only a few friends on an intimate footing. Or take another contemporary of Stravinsky's, Bela Bartók, a man who spent the greater part of his time with musicians and was more attracted by long expeditions studying folk-lore than by smart parties. Hindemith and Honegger were of course considerably younger than Stravinsky and developed in a different age and another milieu.

Stravinsky frequented the frivolous, 'social' world more than any composer of his own, or indeed of the younger, generation. He came into contact with the artistic world in the house of his father, a well-known singer of the Maryinsky Theatre, who entertained not only his colleagues but Stassov, Mussorgsky and Dostoevsky. Even as a child he was imbued with the whole phantasmagoria of the theatre, the freedom and insouciance of backstage life. As a young man he was a member of the highest circles of the artistic intelligentsia in

Petersburg, and took part in the 'Evenings of Contemporary Music' in which he played a leading role with A. P. Nurok and V. F. Nouvel. Through them he came into contact with contributors to the magazine *Mir Iskusstva* ('The World of Art') and with the man who set his personal seal on that paper, Serge Pavlovich Diaghilev. It was under Diaghilev's decisive influence and patronage that the young Stravinsky's dazzling career as a composer was established. On his mother's side Stravinsky was distantly related to Diaghilev. 'I need hardly say what an important part these two societies ["Evenings of Contemporary Music" and the "World of Art" group] played in my artistic and intellectual development and how they forwarded the growth of my creative powers.'¹

It is not possible to sum up Diaghilev's personality in a single phrase. An aesthete of the greatest refinement, he possessed a faultless artistic taste, a keen flair for everything fresh or novel in the arts and a superb talent for organisation. During twenty years of intense activity up to his death in 1929 he triumphantly established Russian art in Western Europe, and the performances given by his 'Ballets Russes' stand out among the greatest events in the musical-theatrical history of the first decades of the twentieth century.

It was Diaghilev who revealed Stravinsky's genius to the world, and he took an enormous pride in his protégé, guarded him jealously and tried – unsuccessfully – to dominate him entirely as his own inalienable property. It was the clash of two wills, Diaghilev overbearing and intolerant of opposition and Stravinsky convinced of his own vocation; and the break between them described in *Conversations* was inevitable. This came later, however, and in the early years it was thanks to Diaghilev, though not without the assistance of another jealous patron, Debussy, that Stravinsky was quickly accepted by the aristocratic élite of Paris. He became a fashionable figure and was received in the smart salons of the day. There was Misia Sert, with her second husband Edwards, editor of *Le Matin*, and her brother Cipa Godebski, the friends of Ravel; and there was the Princesse Edmond de Polignac, who commissioned and performed new works by Fauré, Ravel, Satie, Falla and Poulenc as well as by Stravinsky. There was Gabrielle Chanel, of the great *couturier* house, one of Diaghilev's most generous supporters, the dancer Ida Rubinstein and the American arts-patron Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge, the last two of whom commissioned works by Stravinsky.

He developed close ties with many representatives of the other arts,

with philosophers, physicists and theologians, and he met a number of important political figures. He gave interviews in which, he was later to relate, 'my words, my ideas and even the facts themselves were distorted to the point of unrecognisability',² but he went on giving them nevertheless, amazing his interviewers with his gift for repartee, the sharpness of his intelligence and the paradoxical character of his judgments. Has any other twentieth-century composer been considered worthy of such attention?

Stravinsky did not cultivate success artificially. Fame came to him unexpectedly at the age of twenty-eight with the performance of *Firebird* in Paris (1910) and was greatly increased three years later after the notorious first performance of *The Rite of Spring*. His name remained famous even after the Second World War, though the works that he wrote in the 1950's and 1960's did not enjoy the success of those that he wrote before 1930. At the end of his career the ovations that he received were due perhaps less to his music than to his personality, as the embodiment of a fame enjoyed while still living – something consisting in the last resort, as Rilke observed bitterly, of 'the sum of the misunderstandings that arise around the name of a famous artist'. As an old man he found it oppressive. 'A plague on eminence!'³ he exclaimed on one occasion. And how tragic he sounds when he says

I was born out of due time in the sense that by temperament and talent I should have been more suited for the life of a small Bach, living in anonymity and composing regularly for an established service and for God. I did weather the world I was born to, weathered it well, you might say, and I have survived – though not uncorrupted – the hucksterism of publishers, music-festivals, recording companies and publicity – including my own.⁴

Behind the façade of *mondain* wit there lay concealed an intense intellectual life, and how these two extremes were combined in Stravinsky, how such totally opposed aspirations were compatible in a single character will always remain a mystery.

It may be said without fear of exaggeration that no contemporary expatriate composer could compare with Stravinsky in knowledge of the present-day world, whether it was in philosophy, religion, aesthetics, psychology, mathematics, or the history of art. Nor was he content to remain simply well informed, he wished to have a specialist's understanding of every subject, his own opinion on every problem and his own attitude to every point under discussion. Right into extreme old age he was an avid reader and always had a book in his hands. His library in Los Angeles contained something like 10,000

books, and in this indeed he resembled his father, who was also a passionate bibliophile. Reading answers a need for spiritual contact, and he was active and intense in both conversation and letter-writing. Until 1956, when his left leg was weakened by a stroke, he walked quickly and impatiently,⁵ and his reactions were equally quick, whether it was to the remarks of his partner in a conversation or to the ideas of a writer, which he immediately seized upon and adapted to his own.

Work, however, was his main concern and he was indefatigable, never allowing himself a breathing space and able, if necessary, to continue eighteen hours on end. Robert Craft, who played a large part in Stravinsky's life after 1948 and was eventually to become his *alter ego*, bears witness to the fact that in 1957, when the composer was seventy-five, he worked ten hours a day – composing for four to five hours before lunch and orchestrating or transcribing for five to six hours after that. After 1923, however, Stravinsky took part in many concerts and therefore gave only approximately six months of the year to composition. He worked steadily and regularly every day – in his own words, 'like a man working office hours'. That, to use a figurative comparison, is the explanation of Stravinsky's hands, the hands of a 'craftsman'. Describing the process of composition he emphasised one particular feature: 'I insist on the word "pleasure", though some might find it too light-weight. It was the feeling I experienced in the actual process of working and in foreseeing the joy that every inspiration and every discovery would give me.'⁶ Elsewhere he wrote that inspiration 'is found as a driving force in every human activity' but that 'this force is only brought into action by an effort, and that effort is work that brings inspiration'.⁷

Thus Stravinsky with his vocation as a 'sacrifice to Apollo' (to paraphrase Pushkin) and Stravinsky intent on being a figure in the public eye were one and the same person, an essentially contradictory individual. Although the whole tenor of his existence declared him to belong to 'this' world, he strove at the same time to rise not only above its frivolity, but above the conflicts of that other threatening age whose horizon was darkened by the storms of social revolution.

Why, then, do I insist on the contrasts in Stravinsky's personality? Picasso justly observed, 'It is not what an artist does that is important, but what he represents . . . It is Cézanne's disquiet that irresistibly attracts us, that we learn from; it is in Van Gogh's agonies that we find the true drama of humanity!' What is it indeed that attracts us in Stravinsky? Precisely this contrast of opposites between his spiritual and his emotional powers. I do not think that during the

course of his sixty years' service to music – and his was a passionate service – his personality underwent such significant changes as his style of composition. On the contrary, I should say that his personality was finally shaped by the age of thirty, and that by then both the 'barbarian' and the 'aesthete' existed in him, the one possessed of an elemental power and the other concerned with modernising the styles of different epochs (including folk-music), while the stern 'ascetic' rejected artistic embellishment of any kind. These three features appeared in succession as dominating the three main periods of Stravinsky's career as a composer. Naturally, within those periods there were works which formed an exception to this general rule. Thus the *Octet* and *Symphonies of Wind Instruments* are 'ascetic', although Stravinsky was still in his Russian period when he wrote them; and the stylisation characteristic of the 'World of Art' movement is to be found in *Firebird* and *The Nightingale*, while the turbulent 'Scythian' element so characteristic of *The Rite of Spring* recurs in the last movements of *Symphony of Psalms* and *Symphony in Three Movements*, and is even perceptible in the opening section of *Requiem Canticles*, the composer's last significant work.

A rich stratification of this kind, rooted fundamentally in the polarisation of his emotional powers, is one of the attractions of Stravinsky's music: a listener who finds the works of any one individual period unsympathetic may be enthralled by works belonging to another. Furthermore, differences of individual taste may well account for different reactions to works that are chronologically close to each other. The impressions made, for instance, by *Petrushka* (1911) and *The Rite of Spring* (1913) or by *Les Noces* (1923) and *Pulcinella* (1920) are not comparable in character; and it is possible to be fond of *Symphony of Psalms* (1930) while rejecting *The Fairy's Kiss* (1928). There is an analogous correlation between *The Rake's Progress* (1951) and the *Septet* (1952), *The Flood* (1962) and *Threni* (1958). Yet beneath all these differences of manner we are aware of a single personality, a unity in complexity and a specifically Stravinskian vital sensibility, the manifestation of which changes with each new work. There are very few references to this in existing studies of Stravinsky. The study of an artist's sensibility, or temperament as it used to be called, is generally masked by questions of his attitudes and opinions. Such questions are of course very important for the understanding of his artistic aims, but they are by no means the whole story. In what light does the artist actually see the world, and what are the colours that he chooses from his palette – gloomy or serene, dark or light? One man's existence (though no one knows why) is full of