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# AMIDS AT THE LOUVRE

*Music, Culture, and Collage from  
Stravinsky to the Postmodernists*



from Strav-

## GLENN WATKINS



# Pyramids at the — Louvre —

*Music, Culture, and Collage  
from Stravinsky to the  
Postmodernists*

Glenn Watkins

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Lighting one candle with  
another's flame  
At dusk in spring—the same  
yet not the same.

*Buson*

## — Contents —

Acknowledgments	ix
Preludes and Postulates	1
The Orient	
1. “And the Moon Descends over the Temple That Was”	13
2. Of Nightingales and Ukiyo-e	38
The Primitive	
3. Out of Africa and the Steppes	63
4. “Massacre” and Other Neologisms	84
5. The Creation of the World	112
6. Josephine and Jonny	134
7. The Cunard Line	164
8. Take the “A” Train	187
Clockwork	
9. The Valley of the Bells	215
10. Stravinsky and the Cubists	229

Masquerades

- |  |     |
|--|-----|
| 11. Obsessions with Pierrot                            | 277 |
| 12. Masks and Machines                                 | 310 |
| 13. <i>Oedipus</i> and <i>Agon</i> : “Husks of Style?” | 342 |

Cut and Paste

- |                                |     |
|--------------------------------|-----|
| 14. Exodus: 1939               | 377 |
| 15. Tristan’s Scissors         | 398 |
| 16. Pyramids at the Louvre     | 419 |
| 17. Envoi: The New Cartography | 443 |

Notes	477
-------	-----

Bibliography	525
--------------	-----

Index	555
-------	-----

## — Preludes and Postulates

Myths are the agents of stability, fictions the agents of change.

*Frank Kermode*

If, as suggested in some quarters today, we are not only in a period of Postmodernism but in one of Post-History, a certain urgency surrounds our need to understand the forces that contributed to the Modernist movement of the twentieth century as well as its announced successors. Asserting an essentially ahistorical posture, most Postmodern critics have maintained that in the arts the doctrines of influence and intentionality ought to be debated, disentangled or jettisoned, and if retained allowed to remarry as the facts allow or as the fancy prefers. The truth is to be measured only in the power of the idea thus formed, and as such subject to continuing modification.

Yet in the absence of history, nostalgia for signs of continuity persists: *imitation* and *emulation*, recognized more or less continually from the time of the ancients, have been reviewed and retagged *misreading*, and juxtaposition and contrast have resurfaced with new and powerful claims to contemporaneity under the rubric of collage. Collage: cut-and-paste, assemblage, re-contexting of images collected from both quotidian experience and our knowledge of the past. In the foreword to a recent study Kim Levin has spoken of collage as “the all-purpose twentieth-century device.” Noting the capacity of the technique to support a variety of artistic movements from the first decade to the present, Levin traces its vitality to a dexterity in accommodating a series of emerging avant-gardes while simultaneously aiding in the definition of what was new in each of them.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, from the early decades of the twentieth-century the very idea of Modernism has been likened to a curio cabinet, where unrelated objects are placed together and achieve cohesion through arrangement and proximity. But from the enigmatic federation of such a highly diverse complex of attitudes some have concluded that all hopes for communicating with a large public audience



were abandoned, that the autonomy of the arts was proclaimed, and that obscurity of intention was elevated to the status of a credo.

Despite the appeal of such sweeping judgments on an age, the reduction of so varied a round of evidence to so limited and potentially demeaning a verdict does very little honor either to the practice of history or to the richness of an era. Thus in trying to grasp the voices of Modernism, alternately judged as now past or currently thriving, as well as of Postmodernism, its paradoxical companion and non-successor, the practice of collage in music virtually refuses discussion in isolation, for many of its techniques as well as its philosophical underpinnings are observable in both literature and the fine arts. Eschewing loose analogy wherever possible, I have tried to conjure up the methods, the effects, and the contexts of artistic theory, social inference, and technological progress as they relate to the issue at hand; to demonstrate that rather than promoting a disoriented, incoherent jumble of contradictions, collage has exhibited a vigorous capacity to enlighten through juxtaposition, to forgo resolution, to sponsor pluralistic conclusions, and to promote understanding of an order that eludes all edicts.

From Cubism, Futurism, Dada, and Surrealism to the numerous aesthetic turnovers of the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s and 1990s, collage has sustained its vitality. Although the layman may readily recall the pasted snippets of newspaper or music in the art of Picasso and Braque, and be vaguely aware of the power of citation and allusion in the works of Joyce and Eliot, the central role of collage's guiding hand in music has been considered only incidentally and unsystematically. Yet in music's reshuffling of bits and scraps of memory, in the unsuspected confrontation and unusual alliance of materials, and in the manipulation of both time and space through a new set of coordinates, a sense of discovery was already being heralded from the first dozen years of the century in the music of such notables as Debussy, Ravel, and Stravinsky. The temptation to relate such developments to the emergence of Cubism in Paris between 1906 and 1914 is encouraged by the fact that its most famous practitioners were well known to the musicians.

Pierre Boulez has correctly pointed to Stravinsky's love for manipulating musical objects, a delight in taking things apart and putting them together again in a different fashion, thereby giving them "significance."<sup>2</sup> For Stravinsky the invocation of a known and one's expectations regarding it became the starting point of the creative process. In this gloss of pre-existent material, however, Stravinsky was obliged to

define his own voice with increasing precision. A personal style was thus coined not so much through the appropriation of ingredients from a particular historical or cultural model as through their fracture and purposeful reassemblage: criticism of received materials becomes the *modus operandi* for the creative act. "Why was it that the world of quotation and reference . . . exercised such a fascination on the most brilliant spirits of the day, and why does that same fascination persist today though the borrowed clothes are new and the masking ideology has lowered its claims?"<sup>3</sup> By asking this question in such a perplexed tone at the time of Stravinsky's death in 1971, Boulez highlighted the persistence of one of the most important issues of contemporary musical thought: the seductiveness of cultural outreach and the power of appropriation as a creative stimulus. In an age when the activities of the most distant provinces as well as the customs and habits of our neighbors are brought both sonically and visually into our living room daily, it need come as no surprise that many composers of our time have been moved to register a similar fascination both with the elusiveness of global fraternity and with the diversity and richness of local traditions. Once again the agency of collage seems to have been ready-made for such an inquiry.

It should be understood from the outset, however, that the term *collage* is used here as a metaphor; that citation typically refers less to thematic recall of familiar tunes than to the assemblage and rearrangement of a rich parade of cultural loans involving textures, timbres, temperaments, and generative procedures ranging from the banal to the esoteric; that juxtaposition characteristically italicizes complementary qualities in the seemingly contradictory; and as a consequence surfacing questions more often evoke polychromatic illumination rather than single-hued answers.

But beyond the identification and definition of collage as a technique, we will need to question at every turn the reasons for its rising tide of glamor. The opening chapters on Orientalism and Primitivism consider presumably discrete topics in the early definition of Modernism. Yet while Primitivism may appear to relate to the issue of the authority of the past (backward in time) and Orientalism to authorities of the present (geographically outward), both involve recognition of forces at some remove from the here-and-now implied in the modish stem of Modernism's name. The Western idea of the Orient in the early twentieth century was not only of a physically displaced Other



embued with qualities of the exotic but of one that quickly came to be fused with a search for the primitive, for an elusive “first times” containing the roots of expression. The ultimate paradox was finally proposed by the Surrealists in their attempt to distance the everyday. During the first two decades of the twentieth century, then, not only was there an attempt to congest ethnic diversity into a primal, global vision, but the authority of first times was collapsed to include the present.

Other fictive constructions that aided in this interpretive realignment centered on the temptation, voiced from the time of its premiere, to view *Le Sacre du printemps* as a kind of *musique nègre*, paralleling the taste for *art nègre* in the visual and literary domains. The perception of Africa as the quintessential locus for Primitivism in turn gave rise to further attempts at promoting fusions between European folk primitive and American popular expressions. For with Europe’s increasing awareness of Afro-American musical developments in ragtime and jazz, a richly prepared cultural theory of transference was forwarded in numerous quarters.

Just as the increasingly variegated rush of daily urban experience—coupled to neonationalist sentiments suddenly tempered by the suspicion that the Age of Colonialism was on the eve of extinction—accounted in part for the Cubist vogue for collage in the period 1909–1914, so the ultimate rage for ragtime and jazz can be ascribed to multiple causes. For the feverish embrace of this Afro-American musical expression was surely due not only to the visceral attraction of its rhythms and timbres but also to the weight of social inference which it carried both at home and abroad. Reflective of an energetic and rising young nation and its ethnic diversity, it was ultimately graced with an elevated cachet in America following Europe’s capitulation to its charm. Yet, prolonged confusion and debate over source repertoires and sponsorship, in jazz as well as in other forms, has frequently obscured the observation that it was the liaison of diverse circumstances and materials, typically fractured and juxtaposed in an unfamiliar mosaic, that constituted not so much the seeds of a predicament as the basis of a new power.

Simultaneously and paradoxically, whether in *Le Jazz* or *Le Sacre*, the search for Urtexts capable of transcending contemporary local traditions, of speaking of the very source of culture, gradually and collectively came to preoccupy most artists of the twentieth century who

were interested in resuscitating their art in a radical new way. Indeed, a search for the elusive and necessarily mythical roots of inspiration soon identified the center of a new quest. Whether in allusions to African sculpture, even if ascertainably of recent vintage, that prized conceptual rudimentariness over perceptual beauty; whether in the formal appropriation of a trenchant haiku or of a Chinese ideogram—both of which, more than mere geographical displacements, appeared to Westerners ignorant of Oriental languages as standing altogether outside of history; whether in the arrangement of folk tunes or other derivative materials shorn from anthologies as though they were prized discoveries from a field dig; or in the deconstructed guitars and clarinets, beverage and tobacco labels, as well as in the cropping of newsprint into chunks that resonated like recently discovered relics from a previous age; the ideal model for a new foundation was hypothesized. Following an avalanche of such reassemblages, the critic's interpretive game—the search for a contemporary meaning in the sum of these fragments—began.

The thought gradually surfaced that with the journey to the primordium might come visions of an artistic millennium, and there can be little doubt that this perception helps to account for the current interest in reviewing an earlier attraction to Primitivism by an age with its own millennial preoccupations. The notion of Primitivism as encompassing more than a concern for preindustrial or tribal societies, however, allows us to recognize that a significant part of the twentieth-century cultural explosion, which would ultimately require reconstitution through collage, involved an obsession not so much with primitive societies of a distant past as with the search for an energizing authority in two equally elusive models—one involving outreach to geographically distant shores densely impacted with legend, and another which sought to forward the mechanisms of modern society and everyday life as contemporary counterparts to ancient ritual.

Such polyfocal perspectives prospered under freshly colored banners of relativity in both science and art, where a new sense of time fostered illuminations available only through simultaneous projection. In this endeavor, the painters and the dramatists literally set the stage. The masks of the Greeks and of Japanese No drama were retrieved, and wedded to the traditions of the Italian *commedia dell'arte*, Russian *lubok*, French *image d'Épinal*, and other folk traditions, they aided in the 1920s not only in the fabrication of Neoclassicism, Constructivism, and a Theater of the Absurd but in the definition of a new mechanico-urban



age and, somewhat later, a review of their collective force for a second postwar era.

Then, in the 1930s, a new impetus to cultural collage came with the wholesale exodus of artists, intellectuals, and scientists from Europe to the United States and the simultaneous dispersal of newly formed civilian armies under varied auspices and from numerous countries to every corner of the globe, forcing in the process not only a review of attitudes held in the first half of the century but the contemplation of alternative courses of action for the future. After World War II, advance in the formats as well as the speed of communication soon made available such a smorgasbord of materials that it was natural, if not inevitable, that the sheer quantity of options seemed to dictate the final abandonment of any desirability, let alone possibility, of separation: high and low, black and white, homegrown and exotic flourished under the patronage of new dimensions of time and social structure, intimated in the early part of the century but now projected with exhilarating intensity and an accompanying philosophy. Loudly debated, the widespread celebration of cultural diversity and the construction and consideration of seemingly endless lists of binaries led at century's close not only to a reconsideration of the Western canon but to the denial of any appeal to historical resonance in the consideration of materials from such a swollen base. The new perspectives gradually and resolutely began to deny former restricted aesthetic approaches that tended to promote a sense of enduring formal values and at the same time often yielded to the temptation to turn every work of art into a sociopolitical document.<sup>4</sup>

In appraising the long arch of these developments, the historian characteristically recognizes the advantages of viewing various aesthetic movements according to a combination of formal and social dicta. Schoenberg is frequently described as a Viennese Jew, an intellectual, and an Expressionist; Stravinsky as an Italo-Russian Slav, intuitive in approach, and a Primitivist. Yet in the period 1909–1914, the essential qualities typically attributed to these two men can readily be reversed. Schoenberg's compositional process was much less structured, more involuntary, and more conditioned by Expressionist tenets of "inner necessity" than Stravinsky's, which, for all its Primitivist reliance upon a folk melos and rhythm, had already by 1912–1914 demonstrated an understanding of the mathematical formalizations of the Cubists and their usefulness for establishing control over a potential runaway organism. Even more interesting is the argument that there was something

of the Russian in the German point of view and vice versa, that the intellectual carried a substantial intuitive component, that the Expressionists shared many of the basic concerns of the so-called Primitivists, and that newly constituted formalisms could serve as agents for a range of metaphysical perceptions.

Recognizing that the pressure placed upon any artist to stand for an age is defensible only to the extent that individuals are understood to belong to larger circles, the historian rightly takes pause when faced with the daunting task of controlling multiple histories. At the same time, in broadcasting our arrival at a new, Postmodern era, he has also laid claim not only to a chronological distance sufficient to permit a measured perspective concerning the issues attendant to the birth of Modernism but to a contemporary vision capable of tracing lines of continuity from the inception to the end of an age now closed.

This concept of Postmodernism, however, has clouded our sense of a contemporary identity at least as much as it has clarified it. If the concept of an avant-garde has been interred and the idea of the masterpiece is suspect, it is not the first time in this century. Furthermore, current notions of multiculturalism increasingly demand recognition of a lineage that is traceable to the last fin de siècle; an early period's devotion to the simultaneous projection of competing authorities continues to thrive under the new banner of stylistic pluralism; and, as in the past, music continues the struggle to comprehend the range of its societal functions. Thus, the story that surfaces here announces neither the demise of Modernism nor its retrospective failure. Rather it tries to clarify the ways in which Modernism served as a natural conduit to and claimed continued residency in a Postmodern age. Indeed, the penultimate chapter, "Pyramids at the Louvre," stands as an interdisciplinary test case of this very proposition and, prior to an *envoi*, retrospectively seeks to justify the metaphor which serves as a title for the collection as a whole.

Neither an attempt to discredit Postmodernism as a term nor an assault upon its tumescent literature, the present volume merely joins the battle for its clarification. Though for a book with such high aims a round of disclaimers might well be expected, the first is nonetheless registered as an appeasement: namely, that I felt no obligation to recount the Postmodern debate *ab ovo* through a heady litany of its most prominent interlocutors, since to address their texts directly would force review of a terrain that has been excessively debated and broadly inter-



preted. Though their importance is openly acknowledged in the many references to sources that take note of their arguments, the fleeting allusions to such important figures as Jean-François Lyotard, Jürgen Habermas, and Frederic Jameson stand as a coded confession of my interest in but general sense of dismay at much of the circularity surrounding the concept of Postmodernism and the feeling that a detailed reconsideration of this vast literature ought not enter the body of the present discussion. By the same token, I willingly admit that before undertaking the present project I was more inclined to take issue with the deconstructionists' repudiation of the autonomy of the musical text. In the act of parsing the issue of collage for the twentieth century, however, I have at least begun to appreciate the reasoning behind their claim "that critics are no more parasites than the texts they interpret."<sup>5</sup> At the same time, if the Postmodern fraternity has appropriately been charged with the abandonment of metanarratives, the present volume eludes membership through the dispatch of a series of *petits récits* that pretend to enchain in the formation of a larger organism.

My indebtedness to other disciplines, however, is immense, and on occasion I have approached the primary sources outside of music history directly, as with Albert Gleizes and Cubist theory. But for the rest I have called upon important interpretations that surfaced in the studies and debates attendant to several pertinent and lively art exhibitions: the "Primitivism" and the "High/Low" shows at the Museum of Modern Art, for example, or the Los Angeles County Museum Diaghilev and Constructivist exhibitions.<sup>6</sup> Thus, while frequent reliance upon interpretations in art history and theater fostered a deductive approach, my concern for dealing directly with the central musical sources promoted a more inductive methodology. For the present at least, I have viewed this as the only prudent course in an interdisciplinary study where I stray so frequently from my central field of expertise.

Finally, I would like to add that the perceptions recorded here were intended less as a lively, frontal assault on a recent species of musicological reductionism given to pruning away contextual detail than as an affectionate attempt to return to the musicological discourse many of the approaches that have been somewhat aggressively strained out in recent years. Theories of criticism, however, tend to spawn a never-ending chain of more theory that frequently fails to test the basic assertions through concrete example. For all of the appeal of Jacques Derrida's denial that criticism can ever achieve scientific status and

Nietzsche's view that the historian's objectivity is essentially that of the artist, not the scientist—that history itself is “pure story, fabulation, myth conceived as the verbal equivalent of the spirit of music,” such a belief only facilitates what Hayden White has termed the “dissolution of the dream of a method by which history-in-general can be endowed with any sense at all.”<sup>7</sup> Consequently, a continuing search for the ingenious melodies of narrative history as cohorts to scientific accountability persists as the perpetually elusive goal.

Regardless of what objectives may be defined as proper to a responsible history of the future, the music historian has always been, and continues to be, seduced by his role as a story teller and at the same time tamed by a sense of obligation to the musical object which ought not become buried in a sea of theory—critical, aesthetic, or formalistic. As a purely practical and defensive act, then, the music historian is obliged to sidestep the invitation to confect a unified world theory, to color his story with only a touch of philosophy, and, like the artists about whom he writes, to construct a narrative that is seasoned as much by intuition and affection as by methodology. Contrarily, he knows that free-wheeling criticism quickly tends to polemic and the odor of a hot-house exercise. Some years ago, before the current brand of criticism had surfaced as a fashionable enterprise, before “discourse” and “text” had need of quotation marks, Virgil Thomson pronounced the following sobering judgment: “Musicology is all right, when useful. Analysis and professional judgments are cardinal to the act. But polemical esthetics, commonly referred to as ‘criticism,’ are for any purpose but salesmanship, so far as I am concerned, pure lotus-eating.”<sup>8</sup>

However we choose to write our story, the impossibility of structuring a definitive history or of arguing the truth beyond narrow parameters forces us to accept the fact that the ideological proportions of history and criticism are fated to twist and turn in a perpetual state of flux and to be endlessly reconstituted for every age. Thus, while claims to comprehensiveness invariably elude all cultural histories, I hope that readers who note grand omissions and shocking gaps in the present study will be moved to enlarge and complement from personal experience the observations recorded here, and to view this collection of essays as a coherent exercise in collage itself—one that only hints at a set of possibilities and settles for the fabrication and elaboration of a consistent fiction.

Finally, with a sensitivity to current definitions of fashion and propri-



ety, it is fair to warn that this book provides no comprehensive account of popular or folk music cultures, modern dance and theater, or the integration of musical and social agendas. Yet it is perhaps no paradox that all of these issues surface repeatedly and in no way superficially. Indeed, it is precisely their relevance to some of the icons of musical Modernism as well as Postmodernism that constitutes the present story. As a consequence, concern will be noted for the current *fin de siècle*'s claim to the discovery of multiculturalism. Such a perspective, which in any case cannot be forestalled, need not, in my mind, be rejected out of hand but may be regarded rather as the familiar and perennial wedding of radical contemporary theory with the best of a grand tradition—a tradition briefly jettisoned but now returned with a new pigment and a revitalized sense of utility. Thus, the aim here is not so much to discredit a contemporary report as to implore recognition of a rich chain of events from the turn of the last century. No doubt the introduction of such an appeal is in part reflective of the fact that slightly before the midpoint of the present centennial curve the author, owing to the caprices of war, learned an Oriental language before he studied a modern European one and lived in Tokyo before he ever traveled to Paris.

Marcel Proust purportedly once asked his housekeeper, "Do you ever read novels, Celeste?" "Occasionally, monsieur," she replied. "Why?" he continued. "They take me out of myself," she responded; to which Proust retorted, "They should take you into yourself."<sup>9</sup> The same may reasonably be claimed for the writing as well as the reading of history.