



**Russian Piano Masterpieces: Stravinsky
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Stravinsky the Pianist

Stravinsky may not have written many piano works, but the piano is nevertheless central to his compositional methods, which did much to shape 20th-century music. Stravinsky was well aware of this:

“The piano is the centre of my life and the fulcrum of all my musical discoveries. Each note that I write is tried on it, and every relationship of notes is taken apart and heard on it again and again.”

Stravinsky in 1962

Some of the important features of Stravinsky’s piano style, and aspects of his overall style, can be traced back to his childhood and his earliest piano teachers:

“Mlle Kashperova’s only idiosyncrasy as a teacher was in forbidding me all use of pedals; I had to sustain with my fingers, like an organist – an omen, perhaps, as I have never been a pedal composer.”

Stravinsky

Stravinsky was not a virtuoso pianist at the level of Rachmaninoff and Prokofiev, but he had attained a high standard by 1908 to premiere his Four Studies, op. 7, which include some ferocious difficulties.

This premiere was an isolated event, and his transformation into pianist in the public eye came much later, in the 1920s. Prokofiev, at the time, was creating a sensation in the Paris music world by performing his own modernist piano concertos, inspiring Stravinsky to write a piano concerto of his own, and to perform it himself. This commanded a much higher fee than the composition credit alone, which helped convince Stravinsky to put in many hours of practice over the winter of 1923-4, including finger exercises and several lessons from the famous pianist and teacher Isidor Philipp. In the rivalry between the two composers, Prokofiev’s concerto playing had finally moved him out from Stravinsky’s shadow, and now he was about to lose this one area of pre-eminence. In these circumstances, he entered the Pleyel piano shop one day, only to find Stravinsky rehearsing his Concerto with Jean Wiéner:

“We were in time to hear only the concluding bars, which came over very well, dramatically effective even in the technically bravura passages where Stravinsky rose to the occasion, throwing himself with abandon into the octaves. He proudly showed us his biceps. Where can he have got those from?”

Prokofiev’s Diary, 3 May 1924

Stravinsky wrote piano music not only for himself, but for members of his family. There are parodies of Czerny’s five-finger exercises for beginners, a set of easy duet pieces designed for the capabilities

of his young children, and later a Concerto for two pianos (without orchestra) which he performed with his son, Sviatoslav-Soulima Stravinsky, who was by this stage a professional pianist.

Petrushka: “The Konzertstück” – The Ballet – Three Movements

Stravinsky’s glittering international career was shaped by the Diaghilev *Ballets Russes*. His second Diaghilev ballet, *Petrushka* (1911), was his real musical breakthrough, when he confronted the musical world with an array of hitherto unexplored ideas, delighting some, and outraging others.

Interestingly, Stravinsky had been developing these ideas before they found their place in the ballet score. His original conception pitted a pianist against the orchestra, in kind of concerto where conflict predominated. There were two clear pieces in the making, which Stravinsky presented to Diaghilev, who wanted them for the new ballet. They evolved into the music for the *Danse russe* and *Petrushka’s Cell*.

“Yesterday I heard the music of the Russian Dance and of Petrushka’s shrieks, which he has just composed. It is a work of such genius that one cannot contemplate anything beyond it.”
Serge Diaghilev to Alexander Benois (librettist and designer of *Petrushka*)

The scenario of the ballet extrapolated from musical ideas that were already present in the two piano sketches. The Russian Dance alternates between two chords, in the manner of a rudimentary song accompaniment on the concertina: the dominant chord is on the “push”, and the tonic on the “pull”. Stravinsky might well have borrowed the idea from a simple piece for children by Tchaikovsky, which likewise alternates between tonic and dominant (and even ends on the dominant, as if his imagined concertina player has no concern for the basics of musical grammar). For the ballet, Stravinsky turned the whole orchestra into a giant concertina, and used this as the musical backdrop for the ballet’s representation a Shrovetide fair.

The idea of violent confrontation between piano and orchestra is developed in the role of *Petrushka*, who is entirely at odds with the world around him (the piano becomes “his” instrument). Even *Petrushka’s* musical motif (his shrieks) was clearly born on the piano keyboard: the hands overlap, one hand, below, playing the white keys, the other, above, playing the black keys, and the result is jarringly dissonant.

Stravinsky wrote his Three Movements from *Petrushka* in 1921, ten years after the ballet, for the pianist Arthur Rubinstein, whom he admired and tried to interest in modern repertoire. The Movements are not just a return to the original pianistic conception, but also strive to imitate many of the ballet’s orchestral textures. The movements, then, are not a standard arrangement of an orchestral score, but they do, in their own way, preserve the multi-layered and polyrhythmic complexity of the ballet score, which broke new ground in pianistic complexity and virtuosity.

The Rite of Spring

Stravinsky’s next ballet, *The Rite of Spring* (1913), does not include a piano in the orchestration (unlike *Petrushka*), but even so, it was composed on the piano from beginning to end, and pianistic thinking pervades the score. Stravinsky had a four-hand piano version published at the same time as the orchestral score, and this was used for rehearsals of the dancers. But even during the orchestral rehearsals Stravinsky would sometimes refer back to the piano score, on one occasion, for example, asking the basses and percussion to imagine themselves as “the left hand” in the texture. There are indeed various piano-like “vamping” patterns in the score that suggest exactly that. In the *Augurs of Spring* there are endless repetitions of an outrageously dissonant and brutal chord, but even this is a cousin of the *Petrushka* motive, since this chord can be split into two

component chords (from different keys), and each of these lies comfortably under the hand at the keyboard.

Debussy and Prokofiev both played the piano duet *Rite* with Stravinsky on different occasions, and the experience left an indelible mark on them. Debussy sight-read his complex Secondo part without a hitch (Stravinsky was duly impressed) but once they had reached the end “there was no question of embracing, nor even of compliments. We were silent, overwhelmed by this hurricane that had come from the depths of the ages and torn up our life by the roots” (the description comes from Louis Laloy who was present at the occasion). Although he familiarised himself with the score when he attended rehearsals of the *Rite*, Debussy never reconciled with the music, and he described Stravinsky as “a spoilt child who thumbs his nose at music”.

Prokofiev, when his turn came two years later, was much more susceptible to the allure of the music:

“Then, in the presence of the Futurists, we played the piano-duet version of The Rite of Spring. At this point I had heard the work only once at Koussevitzky’s concert, and had a less than clear understanding of it. Now, sitting down to play it with the composer in front of a large gathering, I was extremely nervous as I knew that it was incredibly difficult. Stravinsky, normally small and bloodless as he was, became engorged with blood while playing, sweated, sang or rather croaked, and laid down such a strong, good rhythm that we played Le Sacre to stunning effect. To my total and unexpected amazement I saw that Le Sacre is a magnificent work, with its incredible colours, its clarity and mastery.”

Prokofiev, Diary, March 1915

The Wrong Notes

When Debussy was talking about Stravinsky “thumbing his nose at music”, he was not merely complaining, but picked out an important element of Stravinsky’s modernism: many of his compositional devices cultivate “wrongness” of various kinds, which could easily provoke laughter if heard briefly (but Stravinsky pursues them at length, lending the devices a certain earnestness). In *Petrushka*, for example, he imitated a barrel organ that had a broken pin, resulting in “missing” notes. “What a lot of tomfoolery there is in this music”, Scriabin said.

There is one example of Stravinsky’s musical “tomfoolery” where we actually have documentary evidence of the composer’s train of thought. In 1915, he wrote a short light piece for Diaghilev, a Polka for piano duet.

“I wrote the Polka first as a caricature of Diaghilev... The idea of the four-hand duet was a caricature also, because Diaghilev was very fond of four-hand playing. The simplicities of one of the parts were designed not to embarrass the small range of Diaghilev’s technique. I played the Polka to Diaghilev and [Alfredo] Casella in a hotel room in Milan in 1915, and I remember how amazed both men were that the composer of Le Sacre du printemps should have produced such a piece of popcorn. For Casella, however, a new path had been indicated, and he was not slow to follow it; so-called neoclassicism of a sort was born in that moment.”

Stravinsky, *Dialogues*

The trick of that piece is that the lower-part is written as if for a beginner, and sits in a different key from the melody in the upper part, as if a dutiful small child was playing the accompaniment for an older and naughtier child (Stravinsky was probably taking a dig at Diaghilev’s respectable but modest piano skills). The trivial, generic polka melody is deformed – Russian critics used the label “grotesque” for all such distortions of the familiar. Stravinsky invented this grotesque style, which became a mainstay of French or German composers in the 1920s, not to mention Prokofiev and Shostakovich. Casella was not alone in seeing great potential in this musical trifle.

Stravinsky's cultivated wrongness resonated with the other arts, as the critic Vyacheslav Karatygin described lucidly when discussing the *Rite*:

*"You have all seen futurist paintings... you have read futurist verses... And you have of course noticed that **displacement** is the characteristic feature of futurist art. Either the two eyes in a portrait have skittered to different corners of the painting, or else the letters in a word have been rearranged, mixed up..."*

"What Stravinsky is doing in the Rite is founded mainly on displacement. Tonalties are displaced...they...have begun to pile up on top of one another.... and intervals are displaced. Octaves have suddenly slipped down into sevenths.... And rhythms are displaced. Everything has been shifted and shuffled..."

Vasily Karatygin (1914)

Neoclassicism and Non-Expression

In the *Rite*, any initial amusement was soon stifled by the relentlessness of the music (and the stage spectacle) – it was beyond a joke. The folk-like melodies which were harmonized dissonantly were not witty playfulness, but designed to invoke a prehistoric barbarism. But Stravinsky returned to his urbane irony when he directed his attention to the more civilized musical materials, like 18th-century courtly music, or in more recent popular genres, as in the Polka. The principle of displacement remains the same, but the material seems to be borrowed, or just "stolen", as if the composer wants to display his contempt for the Romantic aesthetic of originality, in the manner of the ready-mades in the visual arts of the time, from newspaper cuttings in Picasso's cubism to all manner of everyday objects in Dada.

Prokofiev, who was particularly resistant to the idea of a composer using material that was blandly generic, and for this reason, he describes Stravinsky's neoclassical Sonata (1924) in unflattering terms:

"Stravinsky has delivered himself of a dreadful piano sonata, which he himself performs not without a certain chic. But the music itself sounds like Bach with smallpox."

Prokofiev's letter to Myaskovsky

Prokofiev's "pockmarked Bach" refers to this phenomenon of displacement, of "wrong notes" that disfigure Bachian (or Mozartean) models. The types and genres of music which Stravinsky takes as his models can usually be identified, although they rarely point to a single piece and different idioms are often freely mixed and matched. The sonata's first movement is a kind of gigue, a fast Baroque dance that divided the beats into three and was often relentless. The second movement is a highly ornamented Baroque instrumental aria. In the finale, Stravinsky mentioned that Bach's two-part inventions were in his mind at the time, and the similar two-part E-minor fugue in Book I of Bach's "48" sounds particularly close, even sharing the same key.

Occasionally in the 1920s and 30s, Stravinsky combined his neoclassicism with the popular music of the time, in the manner of Les Six, as in the Piano Concerto (1924) and the Capriccio (1929), but for the most part, he cultivated a more earnest image, shedding the comedic associations of his "wrong notes". He strove to drain his idioms of all expression, even though they might be traced back to topics, such as lamentation, or to various dance genres.

"My latest works do not contain any external artistic components ... 'Symphonies of Wind Instruments', the 'Octet for Wind Instruments', 'The Concerto for the Piano and Winds' and the 'Sonata for the Piano' ... all these from beginning to end are absolute music. It is dry, cold

and clear like extra dry champagne. It does not give a sense of sweetness, it does not relax like other forms of this drink, instead it burns ... The times have passed when I tried to enrich music. Today I would like to construct it."

This became sedimented as his leading aesthetic principle. He insisted that music could embody no human emotions, nor could it carry any associations with the world outside itself. He, at least, was prepared to write music without labouring under any such illusions. His best-known formulation of the aesthetic is:

*"I consider that **music** is, by its very nature, essentially powerless to **express anything at all**, whether a feeling, an attitude of mind, or psychological mood, a phenomenon of nature, etc."*

Stravinsky, Autobiography

His expertise as a composer, of course, does not give him expertise as an aesthete, but at any rate, we can regard this statement as a musical manifesto, with some bullying rhetoric tacked on. There were obvious consequences for performers: there could be no "espressivo" playing, and the performer had no right to "interpret" the score. Stravinsky, indeed, played a major role in consigning the "romantic" performing tradition to the dustbin of history. Out was interpretation and rubato (the modification of tempo beyond printed instructions in the score), and in came a new metronomical and mechanistic performance aesthetic.

"It is taken for granted that I place before the performer written music wherein the composer's will is explicit."

Stravinsky, Poetics of Music

The Pianola and Ragtime

Stravinsky's dislike of "interpretation" led to his fascination with the pianola (mechanical piano), and he was also attracted by the prospect of composing with no concern for the limitations of the pianist's two hands. In 1917, Stravinsky wrote an "Étude" for pianola, and even thought he might replace most of the orchestra with pianolas in his forthcoming ballet, *Les Noces* (The Wedding). In the end, he was disappointed that the pianola mechanism allowed humans to control the tempo, opening up the possibility of rubato again. He also discovered that it was not at all easy to combine pianolas with other instruments, and decided to score *Les Noces* for four pianos and percussion, all operated by human performers.

In the late 1910s, there was a change in the pianola market: rolls for pieces in ragtime and other popular styles were now being sold in large numbers, and pianola manufacturers reflected the shift in advertising their products. Stravinsky's interest in ragtime slightly predated this trend, and he first heard music in this genre from phonographic records in 1914. Ragtime pianists, such as Scott Joplin, began publishing their compositions in the mid-1890s, spreading knowledge of their music across the US, and then Europe. Stravinsky was delighted with the style, and spent hours improvising his own rag music at the piano. Ragtime surfaced first in the semi-staged tale *L'histoire du soldat*, then in the ensemble piece Ragtime for 11 instruments, and only after these did Stravinsky return to the style's primary instrument, in his Piano Rag Music. Although the ragtime references are unmistakable, the piece is no closer to its ragtime models than the Sonata is to Bach. The standard left-hand patterns were too regular for Stravinsky, who prefers to disorientate the listener with ever-changing until eventually even this is too constraining, and the score continues without barlines.

"I was inspired by the same ideas, and my aim was the same, as in Ragtime, but in this case I stressed the percussion possibilities of the piano. What fascinated me most of all in the work

was that the different rhythmic episodes were dictated by the fingers themselves. My own fingers seemed to enjoy it so much that I began to practise the piece; not that I wanted to play it in public... but simply for my personal satisfaction. Fingers are not to be despised: they are great inspirers, and, in contact with a musical instrument, often give birth to subconscious ideas which might otherwise never come to life.”

Stravinsky, Chronicle

Stravinsky sent the piece to Arthur Rubinstein (this was prior to the *Petrushka* arrangements), but the gift was not well received:

“On my return to New York, at the desk of the Biltmore, a small, carefully packed item which had arrived from Europe awaited me. My heart was beating as I opened it carefully. I knew what it was: the composition Stravinsky had promised me. The title of it was Piano Rag Music, dedicated to Arthur Rubinstein, It was a meticulously and beautifully written autographed manuscript. He had even drawn some flowers around my name. With awe I put this precious sheet on the desk of my piano and began to read it. It took me four or five readings to understand the meaning of this music. It bore out Stravinsky’s indication that it was going to be “the first real piano piece”. In his sense, it was just that; but to me it sounded like an exercise for percussion and had nothing to do with any rag music, or with any other music in my sense. I must admit I was bitterly, bitterly disappointed. Good musicians to whom I showed it shared my opinion.”

Arthur Rubinstein

Rubinstein was not at all perturbed by the choice of ragtime, but rather by the astonishing hooliganism that Stravinsky imposes on his ragtime models, and it is hardly surprising that Rubinstein found it rebarbative.

Some Conclusions

Despite repeated rejections from performers, critics and audiences, Stravinsky probably became the most influential composer of the 20th century. He introduced a wide range of modernist aesthetics and compositional principles: irony, unemotional coolness, displacement and block-type construction, machine-like motion, and a mixing of high and low idioms from the present and the past. These contributions have fertilised not only concert music but also jazz and rock, and once the avant-garde was on the wane, they flowed into minimalism and into various postmodernist currents. The piano was, as he said, the “fulcrum” for these discoveries. At the same time, Stravinsky aligned the piano with modernism (aided by Bartók and Prokofiev), emphasising its mechanical nature and percussive qualities. His pianistic style reflected his fascination with many other instruments (the concertina, cimbalom, and pianola), but also utilised basic and even humble pianistic elements (like five-finger exercises, close-position chords and left-hand vamping). Under his hands, the piano was transformed from the glamorous vehicle of the Romantic virtuoso into a jack-of-all-trades and a laboratory for new ideas.

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Sources and Further Reading

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Questions, Answers & Comments

1. Why do you think Stravinsky's piano music isn't so widely known? We are all so familiar with the great ballet scores....

There could be many potential answers. One is that the virtuoso circuit is driven primarily by virtuosic music, so it's only *Petrushka* that qualifies for that, but not the neoclassical works, which are not show pieces. Another is the magic of Diaghilev that did give the ballets an excellent start and continues to drive their popularity. When you think of it, Stravinsky wrote a huge amount of music that is not being played.

2. My fave piece is *The Rite* but it doesn't get played on piano?

The piano duet version does get played – basically any piano duet in existence would have it in their repertoire.

3. Would Professor Walker be able to talk about the piano music in Stravinsky's late serial period, e.g. 'Movements' for Piano and Orchestra?

Well that's the only one, isn't it? It is on Peter's CD, but I don't know many people who sincerely like it. The only thing I can say off the top of my head is that people have tried to hear Stravinskianisms in it and in principle it is possible but far from straightforward.

4. When he moved onto 'Les Noces' he stripped back the orchestration, the xylophone part stays with me... Was this partly due to the criticism he received on 'The Rite', particularly thinking of the use of the bassoon in that upper part of the register in the opening?

I think most of all it happened due to WWI, the enforced break on cultural activities led to the idea of huge orchestral scores being impractical, and Stravinsky started experimenting with smaller forces chosen specially for every particular piece. And many other composers started doing the same, it became a new fashion.

5. Why do you think jazz musicians like Stravinsky so much? Excellent lecture, thank you.

Thank you! I think it is because of how he plays with rhythm, shifting patterns across the barline, re-stressing them, it's something that jazz musicians do all the time and they and their audiences are very adept at hearing these shifts and appreciating them. And at some point jazz in general must have been influenced by Stravinsky, I think that probably happened in the 1960s.

6. How different would the music world be if Stravinsky did not compose such masterpieces?

Oh I think hugely different, because his influence is so immense on so many different trends including postmodern polystylism and minimalism. Perhaps Schoenberg would have had even more influence if not for the counter-effect of Stravinsky, although I think someone would have wanted to provide an anti-Schoenbergian approach anyway.

7. How did the authorities of the time consider Stravinsky? Did Lunarcharsky have an opinion - or Gogol?

If you mean the authorities in the Soviet Union (where of course he never lived), they were largely hostile because he was an émigré. In 1925 Lunacharsky wanted to invite him back but Stravinsky did not respond to the letter, so after the 1920s his music wasn't played much in Soviet Russia until the 1960s (when he made his only return visit). I am sure you don't mean Gogol (who was dead), but I can't guess who you mean!