Russians on Russian music, 1880–1917

An anthology

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(e) V. G. Karatïgin: *The Rite of Spring. Speech*, 16 February 1914. Karatïgin, pp. 122–9

For Karatïgin, see Chapter 4 (e). Stravinsky's score was heard in St Petersburg for the first time on 12 February 1914.

Motors, cinematographs, telephones, aeroplanes and radium represent a succession of discoveries and improvements which are increasingly out of the ordinary and follow one another increasingly quickly in all spheres of life, science and culture in general.

I am far from being in sympathy with the 'futurists' who think that the latest achievements of technology are the sole subject worthy of the most modern art. But can there be any doubt that motors and aeroplanes are bound to introduce – have actually already introduced – certain modifications in the whole psyche of modern man, or that the general restlessness and tension of the entire cultural atmosphere which surrounds us must correlate with the headlong speed of technical progress in our day? Can there be any surprise that even those strings of our soul most distant from any technology and least directly affected by motors and aeroplanes – namely, those which have charge of the secrets of artistic creativity and perception – are all in the last resort bound to resonate in some way in sympathy with this cultural atmosphere's characteristics? This influence, of course, is indirect, and its effects can be extremely varied. But, by virtue of the mutual interconnection of all the spheres of our psychological organism, such an influence must exist, and does exist. It lies in a certain speeding-up and sharpening of all our experiences, in a certain 'impressionization' of the whole structure of our soul. When transformed into creative images this psychological impressionism puts on different faces and appears in varied metamorphoses and convolutions; it is sometimes even accompanied by tendencies, however strange this might seem, which are directly opposed to impressionism – by a gravitation towards classical clarity and elegance or a striving for cultivated simplicity. In these cases, obviously, the law of psychological contrasts comes into effect. The artist reflects in his art his soul crushed and disconnected by nervy impressionism, yet at the same time feels a tiredness from irritating tensions; he seeks an antidote to them in a deliberate return to simplicity.

How do these considerations bear on Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*, with which Mr Koussevitzky has just acquainted us? The most immediate one, a direct one. Of all the arts, music is the one most free of influences from the external world. Of all the arts, music became associated with impressionism latest of all. But, once it became associated with it, music had to complete the full cycle of impressionist development. And this cycle, it would seem, is now close to being completed. The first to hint at the impressionist possibilities

of the art were Musorgsky, Borodin and Rimsky-Korsakov. Their hints were vague and hardly appreciable. But they had inevitably to be developed into a distinct and definite system of regarding sound at the time when, as the artistic atmosphere of our time developed, suitable resonators became available to enhance the embryonic impressionist sounds first revealed in the work of the New Russian School.

Debussy's talent proved to be in harmony with the impressionist elements in the musical work of our *kuchkisti*. A pure impressionism arose, 'a musical stenography', striving to capture artistic experiences on the wing, at the very moment of their conception, without waiting for them to become fully crystallized. As a consequence of the pursuit of an instantaneous photographing of artistic experiences in all their vital immediacy, there arose a special style of impressionist composition using separate, seemingly uncoordinated, aural brush-strokes, the connection between which had to be guessed by the listener, and was not provided by the composer. The traditional 'resolutions' of dissonances disappeared. The strangest and oddest combinations of sounds, previously conceivable only as 'passing' notes or harmonies or as 'suspensions' unfailingly demanding to move on to a consonance, began to be used freely as self-sufficient chords. What appeared to be 'abridgements' in artistic psychology arose in the logic which underlay the chord progressions, and filling in those cuts with missing links of musical logic was left to the listener. How was it to be done? Musical 'logic' is a relative thing. This filling-in is therefore also relative, realizable within the rather wide limits within which our imaginative capacity for musical logic fluctuates. Hence, the element of vagueness, or, more accurately, the psychological dual or even multiple meaning of many combinations and successions of sounds characteristic of impressionism. In this multiple meaning lies one of the special fascinations inherent in impressionism. Ravel has developed further the principles of impressionist texture. Roger-Ducasse[7] has rendered impressionism more complicated by a partial reaction in the direction of classicism (I spoke earlier about the meaning of such a reaction). An entire galaxy of second-rank French composers have attached themselves to the impressionist trend, which is the predominant one at present among all the modernist currents in French music. Could it possibly come about that Russia, where an embryonic impressionism first revealed itself, remained indifferent to the enormous harmonic achievements of Debussy, Ravel and Roger-Ducasse? That would indeed be incredible. Our Russian composers could not fail to be tempted by the luxuriant flowers breaking into bloom in

[7] This French near-contemporary of Ravel, who lived from 1873 to 1954, made more of a mark in his own day than he has left on musical history.

France from buds which first set on a tree of art grown in our Russian soil. Russian music could not fail to be carried away by an artistic trend which answered the spirit of the time and had been engendered initially within the bowels of Russian music itself. Our practitioners of the art of music could not fail to sense new beauty in impressionist quests and exploits. Russian art was bound to have its say loudly in the sphere of impressionist music, and it did. Stravinsky emerged, and (along with the German innovator Schoenberg) he stole up little by little to the extreme outer limits of refinement of sound and to a nerviness which was almost convulsive. Will it not be through their names, the names of Stravinsky and Schoenberg, that the circle of impressionist development will be completed for the whole of European music? Are not the paths for its further refining reserved for impressionism? I do not know. But I think that if the final frontiers of what is possible in musical impressionism have not yet been reached, then their attainment is in any case not far off. And I know already – not so much know as feel – that *The Rite of Spring*, whatever one's attitude towards it, is an event of exceptional historical significance in the life of Russian art and that the score Stravinsky has created is one of the most distinctive and brilliant results of contemporary impressionist attitudes to sound and impressionist psychology of creation.

The subject of *The Rite of Spring* may be outlined in a few words. Something along the lines of a 'ritual murder' among the ancient Slavs – that is the central motive of the plot. A young girl chosen by fate through the drawing of lots must be offered as a sacrifice to Spring. The Spring of doomed virginal youth must fructify and sanctify with itself the earth as it awakens to spring life. Around this mythological idea of a 'Great Sacrifice' are grouped various kinds of vernal divinations, round dances, 'The Kiss of the Earth' [the four bars preceding figure 72], appeals to forebears, secret girls' games – a sequence of scenes which transport our imagination into the grey distance of the ages with their ritual actions of enigmatic erotic/pantheist meaning, their religious and cosmic symbols, and the archaic 'syncretism' of the legendary Slav Ur-culture. What interesting material for musical illustration! What scope for the imagination of an impressionist! – for that is how Stravinsky quite definitely announced himself as early as *Petrushka*, that superb specimen of an artistic and musical popular print illustration (*lubok*).[8] I spoke above about the possibility of combining within impressionism extreme piquancy and refinement with an inclination to the primitive. This antinomy in art was also outlined earlier in *Petrushka*. In *The Rite of Spring* there is utterly free scope for the composer's imagination in this respect. For

[8] For *lubok*, see Chapter 2, n. 24.

here, if a composer wishes to create in sound something adequate to the conception in idea and myth of these musical and choreographic scenes, he has first and foremost to reflect in his score all the coarseness, inertia, primitiveness and spontaneity of the way of life and spiritual order without which our fantasy cannot conceive the life of prehistoric Slavdom. How can one express primitiveness and spontaneity in music otherwise than by combining harsh, self-sufficient dissonances with primitive constructions formed of bare unisons, fourths and fifths?

On the other hand, is it possible to display a new musical beauty, aided by these devices, without dealing with dissonant progressions in a way which uses that refined elaboration whose principles were shown with the utmost conviction by pure impressionism?

Extreme refinement combined with deliberate musical simplification, the influences of Musorgsky and Rimsky-Korsakov combined with a noticeable subordination to the French impressionists – those are the fundamentals which Stravinsky has transformed, by means of the creative working of his outstanding and bold individual talent, into one of the most unusual scores in the universal repertory. The brutal, biting, block-like music of *The Rite* is not music only. It strives to enter the spirit of a 'syncretic' epoch corresponding to the subject. It wants to merge with nature as it surrounded primitive man, with the soul of the Slav in the early dawn of his conscious existence. It wants to cry out through the voices of animals and birds, to quiver in the faint rustling of age-old forests, and to screech in the awkward reed-pipe melodies of ancient shepherds. Such are Stravinsky's tasks, and, for the sake of executing them successfully, he has been unstinting in inventing the most fantastic harmonies and the strangest rhythms as well as in detonating the harshest explosions of artistic temperament. And the melodic side of Stravinsky's talent is by no means as insignificant as is usually thought. Surely the first reed-pipe theme with which *The Rite* opens is charming. Surely the theme of the 'Dance of the Dandies', or the massive, weighty theme of the 'Oldest-and-Wisest' who kisses mother-earth, or the motive of the girls' secret games – surely these are distinctive. True – the majority of Stravinsky's themes call to mind Musorgsky or Rimsky-Korsakov, but this resemblance could scarcely have been avoided. The themes of Musorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov and Stravinsky are not so much similar to one another as much as they resemble melodic phrases in the spirit of Russian song, as much as they are related to one another through their common kinship with Russian song.

As a result of the happy combination of bold melodic writing, quaint and always distinctive harmony and the composer's volcanic temperament, we have in *The Rite of Spring* a series of episodes of unusual originality, vividness

and beauty. It is impossible to listen to the procession of the 'Oldest-and-Wisest' with indifference. In the bass are dull blows which seem to be in triple metre, although the procession's real metre is that of a march – quadruple metre. In the middle of the texture chromatically rising diminished sevenths growl. Still higher, in the very centre of the orchestral sonority, the ponderous theme of the supreme priest is set forth by the brass. And at the very top is something akin to the pealing of bells. The 'Kiss of the Earth' is marked by a Skryabinesque chord. There then follows the frenzied 'Dancing-Out of the Earth'. This entire Act I finale blends into a polychrome, headlong picture in sound where your heart is in your mouth as you listen to it. Another marvellous episode is the introduction to Scene 2, when over a D minor triad pedal Stravinsky carries on a slow figuration made from chords of A-flat minor, E-flat minor and other tonalities at the furthest remove from the principal one (in the pedal).

It is perhaps relevant to say a few words here about those harmonic combinations selected from the whole arsenal of impressionist devices of which Stravinsky makes greatest use. The complexity of Stravinsky's harmonies is to a certain extent *illusory*. Most often he combines a number of simple chords simultaneously which, however, belong to different keys. Such 'polytonal' combinations (they are common in Strauss too) sometimes give an impression of exceptional skill, but even a not very developed ear can soon detect their true composition, after which the given harmony is perceived not so much as an organic one but as a mixed one. So be it. Let a rather fraudulent character be typical of such harmonies. Do they inspire in consequence any doubt as to their high artistic quality? Not in the slightest. Does not illusion play an important role in art? Never mind Debussy – does one not encounter hints of illusionist possibilities in Rimsky-Korsakov – in the bitonal harmonies of *The Golden Cockerel*? Do not these psychological multiple meanings (I spoke more generally about it above) with which the musician will accept polytonal chords, experiencing them at one and the same time as complicatedly *recherché* and as the sum of simple harmonic components – do not these contain the new, original aesthetic values advanced by our time? One must give Stravinsky his due: in the realm of polytonal chords he displays astounding resourcefulness and logic. It is not just any keys he mixes, but always such as, for one reason or another, turn out to be to the listener's consciousness, as far as possible, most sturdily mutually coupled. Thus, for example, the pedal background in 'Spring Divinations' is formed of a combination of triads each a semitone lower than the next. The result is something strange, but close to an ordinary suspension of a diminished octave, an old device well known to everyone. In the 'Game of the Two Cities' Stravinsky carries out the following exercise: he takes a

splendid Russian theme and presents it in *diatonic* thirds (with the correct alternations of major and minor thirds) in a definite key, then the upper voice of these thirds is found doubled systematically at the *major* sixth above, and the lower one at the *minor* sixth below (the later rearrangement of parts is not a matter of principle). The result is a most curious alternating out-of-tuneness. Now the first and third parts slide about at the seventh, at the same time as the even-numbered parts give a pure octave, then these latter are out of tune while the odd-numbered ones sound at the octave. There are in essence three keys here, linked, however, by the abundance of pure octaves. Or else that is how Stravinsky still connects various keys. Putting it in terms of the piano, he gives two figurative patterns, one on the white keys and the other on the black ones in the same register and as far as possible in a metre incommensurate with the first pattern. It is obvious that as far as the ear is concerned, given the rapid movement of both patterns, a multitude of brief chromatic appoggiaturas arise in this instance, and the sum of the two diatonic figurations seems to acquire a chromatic appearance. One senses the two patterns separately, and also the 'pseudochromatic' whole.

I should like to say a little more about the development of contemporary chords made up of seconds formed from appoggiaturas, in a way similar to the emergence of appoggiaturas themselves from suspensions, about the gradual historical evolution of the unresolved suspensions used by Stravinsky from their old, very simple forms – but I am afraid of wearying readers' attention with details which are too specialist. I shall confine myself to adducing two principles which lie at the root of present-day impressionism when examined from the point of view of the purely musical evolution of attitudes to sound. The first principle is to recognize chords defined by increasingly complicated acoustic treatment as being consonant in character. This principle of harmonies formed 'of the higher overtones' has been implemented partly by the French and partly by Skryabin. The second principle is giving ever-increasing independence to passing harmonic moments. This principle is not alien to the French impressionists either. Stravinsky bases himself predominantly on it. Polytonal and pseudochromatic combinations may be cited as frequent instances of the second principle without particularly stretching the interpretation of it.

Whatever general conclusions can be drawn from all that has been said? What is the general artistic value of *The Rite of Spring*? It seems to me that its historical, symptomatic significance nonetheless exceeds its artistic significance. I have already mentioned the best episodes, those which act irresistibly on the listener's imagination. But even there, certain unpleasant features are striking – the uniformity of the devices, the absence of appropriate development of the ideas, the excessive tendentiousness in devising

harmonies each more terrifying and toxic than the one before. The main thing is the uniformity. A pedal is a good thing, but how vexatious it can be when pedals stretch out one after another in an endless line. How many uniform repeating rhythms there are in *The Rite*! It seems that however many tricks of metre Stravinsky can throw up, he does not achieve genuine variety. The final dance of the doomed victim is frankly some sort of rhythmic paradox, and for all that, it lacks rhythmic life, and it seems as if it could successfully have been put into duple or triple metre, with syncopation, of course.

Worse than that, for all Stravinsky's harmonic and colouristic inventiveness, for all his truly significant achievements in the field of polytonality and pseudo-chromaticism, for all this music's energy at full tilt, it is nonetheless superficial. Depth, breadth, inner power, epic pathos, mystic colour – everything one would have wished to see in *The Rite* in addition to the great deal which it has to offer – all that is not provided. How did this happen? How did it come about that the most important and necessary elements of creativity are not to be found in *The Rite*? Are a certain exterior quality and superficiality organically inherent in Stravinsky's talent? One would like to think that in subsequent works Stravinsky will disprove such thoughts, prompted, by the way, not by *The Rite* alone but to a degree by both *Petrushka* and *The Firebird*. But even if Stravinsky offers no refutation of this idea, his *Rite of Spring* will remain in our history of the arts as an exceptionally impressive monument, albeit in many respects imperfect, to the impressionist phase in Russian music.

(f) N. Myaskovsky: Sergey Prokofiev: Op. 4. *Vospominaniya* ('Reminiscences'); *Poriv* ('Elan'); *Otchayaniye* ('Despair'); *Navazhdeniye* ('Suggestion diabolique'). Price: Nos. 1, 2 and 3 – 50 kopecks each; No. 4 – 65 kopecks. Op. 11 Toccata. Price 1 rouble; for piano. Published by P. Jurgenson. *Music*, 12 October 1913, no. 151, pp. 667–8. Myaskovsky 2 (1964), pp. 139–43

These early pieces are based on compositions dating from 1908. The reworking was carried out between 1910 and 1912.

Despite his youth, Sergey Prokofiev is already a composer with a fully formed and, moreover, highly striking and original identity. This identity is severe and even somewhat hard, but it is not the cold and unchanging hardness of stone but rather the constantly vital, scorching, elastically strong power of a whirlwind. This feature of spontaneous tension is perhaps the most characteristic one, the one which stares you in the face in Prokofiev's art, and