

Stravinsky Lite (Even "The Rite")

in his faculty for seeing what is actually in the score, and certainly not in a determination to find there what he would like to find." The last of his Harvard lectures of 1939, published under the title "Poetics of Music," was a snooty sermon on the distinction between execution—selfless submission to "an explicit will that contains nothing beyond what it specifically commands"—and interpretation, which lies "at the root of all the errors, all the sins, all the misunderstandings that interpose themselves between the musical work and the listener."

The chief command involved musical clock time, namely tempo, precisely because, being quantitative, it was most easily objectified. So as to "determine for the future the relationships of the tempi and the nuances in accordance with my wishes," Stravinsky sought means of casting his wishes in aural stone. Of all composers, he was the first to recognize the documentary value of recordings.

At first he made laborious transcriptions for mechanical pianos that amounted to virtual recompositions. (A couple have been released on records, most recently *The Rite of Spring*, on IMP Masters 25.) After electrical recording was introduced in the 1920s, he made conventional records as pianist and conductor, but did his best to turn himself into a walking pianola. The advent of the LP in the late 40s meant remaking them (though now as conductor only), and the arrival of stereo a decade later meant remaking them yet again, this time with an eye toward creating a complete documentation of his oeuvre. This final legacy, supplemented where necessary by earlier recordings, has now been released on twenty-two CDs by Sony.

The irony is that as the wholesale documentation of a lifetime of wishes and commands neared achievement, Stravinsky lost the impulse that had set the project in motion. The totalitarian control mania of the 20s and 30s (so typical of artists—and others—in the confusing decades after the Great War), and the happy positivism that saw eternal fixity in numbers and machines, gave way to fatalistic resignation as Stravinsky became the Oldest-and-Wisest of composers. On the eve of his eightieth birthday, with almost five years of recording still ahead, a more humane Stravinsky finally admitted that nothing in this life was stable.

"If the speeds of everything in the world and in ourselves have changed," he wrote, "our tempo feelings cannot remain unaffected." He gave up the dictator's dream, realizing that the composer's is only one voice—a good strong voice, but only one—in the chorus: "The metronome marks one wrote forty years ago were contemporary forty years ago. Time is not alone in affecting tempo—circumstances do too, and every performance is a different equation of them."

Competing "Compleats"

Sony Classical's CD reissue of the CBS Stravinsky Edition (SX22K 46290; 22 CDs) differs from the original 1982 centennial release in several details. Some are of documentary interest. These include substituting Stravinsky's own recordings as pianist for the those of others.

The first volume in Robert Craft's planned Musicmasters recording of the complete Stravinsky (01612 67078; two CDs) includes an early warhorse, *The Rite of Spring*, and Stravinsky's last major composition, *Requiem Canticles*, in which Mr. Craft competes against his own prior recording, executed in Stravinsky's presence. There are three major Neoclassical scores, *Oedipus Rex*, the *Symphony of Psalms*, and the *Symphony in Three Movements*, and three ragtime pieces, *Fantaisie for a New Theater* for two trumpets, a *Fantaisie* for Three Trumpets originally intended as the opening of *Agon*, and the *Pas de Deux* somewhat inexplicably excerpted from *Apollo*. The orchestra, where there is one, is the Orchestra of St. Luke's.

As a theorist of musical performance, Igor Stravinsky gave early voice to ideas that achieved widespread currency only decades later with the advent of the "Early Music" movement and its peculiar etiquette.

In his autobiography he asserted that "music should be transmitted and not interpreted," and that "an executant's talent lies precisely

Again he was prescient. The world of "historical performance" is currently in the throes of a humanizing counterrevolution. It is beginning to show signs of relativism and a mature recognition that tradition—that messy engine of change—is what maintains works of performing art in living repertory. But where does that leave Stravinsky's recorded legacy? If he is just one "interpreter" among many, how does he stack up against the competition?

The question is especially timely, now that Robert Craft, the composer's former interlocutor, ghost-writer, musical assistant, and executor, has unexpectedly declared himself a rival. A new two-CD MusicMasters set represents the hefty down payment on a promised complete Stravinsky that will document everything, all the way down to alternative versions and arrangements. It is meant expressly to supersede the composer's records, which Mr. Craft writes off as "largely unsatisfactory," owing to the aged composer's limitations as a conductor, the harried conditions under which he had to work, and the newness of much of the music, resulting in precisely the kind of uncertainty of style the composer feared most from his "interpreters."

Mr. Craft is understandably ambivalent about his former closeness to Stravinsky. On one hand, it is his chief credential, and he does not hesitate to trade on it, quoting the composer's awe, from 1959, that his then official deputy was the best conductor of his works. The endorsement was understood at the time to be an aspect of their business association, their quasi-familial relationship and Stravinsky's professed distrust of performers. (Mr. Craft himself once allowed that Stravinsky "would tolerate no interpreter he could not control—hence . . . in conducting, his preference for a mere craftsman over a Bernstein.")

Yet having by now passed Stravinsky's age at the time of their first meeting, the erstwhile junior partner feels entitled to recognition as an authority on a par with his former employer. "I do not claim that my performances represent his wishes," the notes surprisingly assert. "Rather, and at best, they represent my present feelings and ideas about the music." Can we overlook the contradiction? Do Mr. Craft's present feelings and ideas truly represent an advance over Stravinsky's? Perched on his mentor's shoulders, does he now see further?

Regrettably, he does not. His performances are a step forward only insofar as they represent the measurable progress of the generalizing, sterilizing trend that until recently characterized all truly modern performance. Faithful to the old objectivity, Mr. Craft is still inclined to value the generic over the specific, the type over the detail. Insight, being personal, is sacrificed to know-how.

What gives these otherwise dull renditions an interesting twist is that peculiar resonance with "Early Music," now widely recognized as

the exemplary modern way of performing all classical music. Roger Norrington's Beethoven, as Alice might have said, is moderner than Toscanini's, which was moderner than Furtwängler's, which was moderner than Nikisch's. Which is to say: it is fleetier, higher, drier, brittle, more uniform in every way. And it is therefore less individually characterized, less particularly memorable, less consequential—which is precisely the way it wants to be, and the way the passive, distracted contemporary audience evidently needs it to be. In this sense the newly Crafted Stravinsky is close kin to the Norringtonian Beethoven.

On the simplest level the trend may be measured by the clock. Virtually across the board, Mr. Craft's tempos are faster than Stravinsky's (which, by the last go-round, were themselves often faster than notated). One might imagine that increased speed would heighten excitement and produce exhilaration—and sometimes, as in the finale of the *Symphony in Three Movements*, it does. (Stravinsky's recording of that work was one of his least successful anyway, a thing of shreds and patches and dreadful splices, despite some strong details.)

Yet the opposite is far more often true, because the acceleration usually entails a loss of stress, or—even worse—because it frustrates the rapt stillness that was one of Stravinsky's greatest gifts. Two celebrated instances of trance music in the pieces under review—the "Ritual Action" in *The Rite of Spring* (in which a spell is cast on the hypnotized "adolescent" to compel her fatal dance) and the transcendent coda to the *Symphony of Psalms* (where we are the ones hypnotized)—are ruined by Mr. Craft's kinetic tempos, between 20 and 30 percent faster than those indicated in the score.

Also pushed outlandishly is the famously brusque "Augurs of Spring" ostinato in "The Rite," where Mr. Craft is far more speedy—and correspondingly unbrusque—than any of the performances Stravinsky reviewed in 1964 and 1970, including one (Zubin Mehta's) he then pronounced "vitiatingly fast."

But how remote the esthetic of "The Rite" has become. Stravinsky's neoprimitivist ballet was written against a background of furious debate between proponents of European culture and advocates of primeval Slav immediacy. Debussy, for one, resisted it. To Stravinsky's face he praised "The Rite" as "a beautiful nightmare," but behind the composer's back he mocked it as "primitive music with all modern conveniences."

Little did he know! By now, its demon thoroughly exorcised, Stravinsky's masterpiece has become the very touchstone of assembly-line efficiency and well-schooled orchestral precision. It receives readings, even from student or semiprofessional ensembles—like Benjamin Zander's Boston Philharmonic, on the same IMP Masters CD as

the piano roll — that are more accurate than Debussy (for Stravinsky) could ever have imagined at the time of the stormy premiere. But of course it threatens no one.

Mr. Craft's rendition of the culminating "Danse sacrée" is a triumph of know-how. Far faster than Stravinsky specified, it is probably faster than any orchestra could have managed the piece during Stravinsky's performing days, and faster than any on record except Mr. Zander's John Henry-ish effort to outpace the piano roll.

But was Stravinsky's holy dance meant to be dispatched with Nijinskian élan? Or should it represent a crushing, lethal strain the athletic young Orchestra of St. Luke's is obviously not feeling? And if the players don't feel it, will we? These strictures are not prompted by the mere authority of the composer's notation on his performances, to say nothing of his presumed opinion. They arise from the evident loss of contact (not Mr. Craft's alone) with the music's imagic sources and its expressive potential.

Sometimes it seems we may never get over Stravinsky's absurd half-century-old battle cry that music is "powerless to express anything at all." The joyless hand of the formalist still lurks behind Mr. Craft's ideal of extraordinary execution, exposing yet another link between routine modern and routine "historical" performance style.

The congruence is particularly intriguing here, since Mr. Craft conducts an ensemble known for its Early Music affinities (it is Mr. Norrington's orchestra, after all), and echoes of "historical" playing often surface unexpectedly in the sounds it makes. The exaggerated parsing of the string phrases in the Andante from the *Symphony in Three Movements* is just the sort of thing we get in Mozart these days; and the vibratoless string halo around Jocasta's recitative at the beginning of act 2 in *Oedipus Rex* might have come straight out of a period-instrument *St. Matthew Passion*.

Not that these touches are inappropriate, indeed, in a bizarre way they bring Stravinsky's "Neoclassicism" full circle. One would like to know, though, whether Mr. Craft called for them, or whether they arose serendipitously from the band.

What is most inappropriate and unfortunate is the flattening of the drama in *Oedipus*, a powerful "opera-oratorio," despite an excellent vocal cast and chorus, headed by John Humphrey (best known, it happens, for impersonating Bach's evangelists). Mr. Craft's tempos, conspiring with — at times producing — a lamentable absence of instrumental detail, rob the music of its force, if not its volume. One simply does not hear the individual pitches in the kettledrum tattoo accompanying the protagonist's fatal realization of his crime. One simply does not hear the searing reprise of the messenger's

trumpet fanfares accompanying his third attempt to describe Jocasta's suicide.

These shortcomings could be the fault of the microphone placement (as is, one trusts, the horrible imbalance at the beginning of the *Symphony of Psalms*, where one of the most distinctive chords Stravinsky ever wrote is reduced to the thwap of the bass drum). Yet there are other indications that Mr. Craft is uneasy with the work's high — yes, down-right stilted — rhetorical style.

Those coy pseudo-explanatory interpolations by "Le Speaker" are a notorious irritant (though anyone who has heard Jean Cocteau himself summon the attention of the "Spectateurrrrr" in Stravinsky's old monaural recording has surely never forgotten it). The solution, however, is not to amplify them in the interests of an unwanted colloquial "clarity" and assign them to a listener-friendly, slightly slurring, overdubbed but underrehearsed movie star, in this case Paul Newman. If, as Mr. Craft says, the postintermission reprise of the chorus in praise of Jocasta can be dispensed with in a recording, then so can the whole Speaker's role, especially if one is unconcerned to adjust its single musically notated moment — "the assassin of the *king-is-a-king!*" — to the tempo of the orchestra.

Mr. Craft appears more concerned with the proper pronunciation of the classical Latin text ("Oydipus!") than with projecting the full intensity of its meaning, though he is ready to discuss that meaning in copious irrelevant detail in his notes. True enough, Stravinsky often declared himself, as a composer, more interested in "syllables" than in "words" — but as a performer he did not slight them. *Oedipus Rex* was very well served by the composer's high-flown — yes, down-right stilted — recording (complete with the frostiest Speaker you'll ever love to hate, John Westbrook), now back in circulation on Sony.

For what Stravinsky never did as a performer was undercharacterize, and that is why his recordings remain indispensable and often thrilling, whatever their status as documents. At particularly doctrinaire periods of his life he could be awe-inspiringly graceless and unyielding, as in the despic reading of the *Concerto for Two Solo Pianos* he recorded with his son Soulima just before World War 2, now reissued for the first time. That inexpressive pose was as vivid a characterization as anyone's maudlin caterwauling, and, anything but bland, it transfixes.

Mr. Craft is bland. The blandness he radiates has become as emblematic of classical performance in our time as Stravinsky's haircut had been in its very different day. It is therefore an authentic cultural expression and the truest, most painful symptom of regression from Stravinsky. Now that we have had Beethoven *Lite* from

Christopher Hogwood and Brahms *Lite* from John Eliot Gardiner, and even Wagner *lie* from Mr. Norrington, it was inevitable that someone would bring us Stravinsky *lite*, even a *lite* "Rite." It is just too ironic that that person should have been one who used to speak in Stravinsky's own voice.

POSTSCRIPT, 1994

The *Times* would not let me review Benjamin Zander's *Rite* alongside Robert Craft's, since one of its staff reviewers had already given it a wild welcome. Exactly reproducing the claims "historical" performers have made for Early Music repertoires, Mr. Zander maintained that by submitting to the authority of Stravinsky's piano roll performance in the matter of tempo, he had produced a definitive orchestral realization of the score. (He even ventured to call his performance of the "*Danse sacrée*" "the truth," though the scare quotes betrayed residual discomfort with the claim.) And just like the other historical performers whose claims have been evaluated in this book, Mr. Zander submitted selectively. Stravinsky's authority (or, to put it another way, the doctrine of *Werktreue*) was invoked exactly insofar as it served the performer's needs.

Mr. Zander's agenda, like that of Robert Craft and many other latter-day performers of the early modernist repertory, was mainly one of increasing speed. Where Stravinsky's tempo on the piano roll was faster than the customary tempo or the one prescribed in the score, as was most conspicuously the case in the "*Danse sacrée*," that tempo was touted as "the truth." But where the piano roll tempo agreed with the published or traditional tempo (as in the "*Danse de la Terre*"), Mr. Zander still went faster if he could. Where the piano roll was significantly slower than the published or traditional tempo (and from Mr. Zander's description of it you would not guess that there were such places!), it was simply ignored.

A remarkable case in point is the "*You du Rapt*," where the score carries the metronome setting dotted-quarter = 132, where the piano roll varies between 109 and 116, and where Mr. Zander is out in front of all competitors at 152. (All competitors, that is, except Stravinsky himself, in his 1960 stereo recording. Mr. Zander might again wish to argue for his tempo on the strength of Stravinsky's authority, but the authority would then simply be the fastest tempo Stravinsky ever set over the course of his career, and again it would seem that authority was being sought to validate the conductor's speeds *ex post facto*.) At

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the "*Glorification de l'Élie*," the piano roll speed (two eighths = 123) is much slower than the score's prescription (144). Stravinsky, in 1929, conducted the piece at the piano roll tempo; in 1960 he was a little faster, at 132. Mr. Zander, at a steady 152, is the fastest ever recorded except for Pierre Monteux, who in his 1929 recording sets an initial 154 but failed to hold it. (The orchestra kept slipping back to around 134 after each return of the opening theme.) At the beginning of the Introduction to part 2, where the piano roll is slower than anyone's performance, Mr. Zander matches the old Monteux recording, in which the tempo is slower than any that Stravinsky either set down on paper or produced as conductor.

There are actually a couple of unadvertised instances where Mr. Zander's tempo is slower than the field. In the preface to the "*Rondes printanières*" (fig. 48), the score sets the quarter note at 108, the piano roll at 102, and Mr. Zander at 84. (Stravinsky's own recordings are consistently faster than what the score prescribes.) In the little "*Kiss of the Earth*" ("*Le Sage*") at fig. 42, the score puts the quarter note at 42, the piano roll has 46, and Mr. Zander takes it at 38, a very significant deviation when the tempo is so slow.

As to the "*Danse sacrée*" itself, on which Mr. Zander staked his main claim of fidelity, it turns out that his tempo is far faster than that of the piano roll (eighth = 172 vs. 147, with a spurt to 154 at the end). Pierre Monteux had equaled the piano roll tempo as early as 1929, and (as implied in essay 20), Robert Craft, though nowhere near as fast as Mr. Zander, also exceeded it.

What is the upshot of all these facts and figures? Only that Mr. Zander's exciting performance is his performance, not Stravinsky's, that it represents the "modernist" trend for this music, and that his claim of fidelity, not to say "truth," is as specious a claim of privilege as anyone else's. Like everyone else, he respects authority (the composer's "intention") only insofar as he agrees with it. And, as always, that only makes his performance the more authentic and respectable, not less. Performers can leave the quest for truth to scholars. What they need, and what Mr. Zander clearly has, is certainty.

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