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ESSAYS: IGOR STRAVINSKY \*\*\*

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Minor punctuation inconsistencies have been silently corrected. A [list](#) of other corrections made can be found at the end of the book.

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# MINIATURE ESSAYS:: IGOR STRAVINSKY

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IGOR STRAVINSKY

# IGOR STRAVINSKY



Igor Stravinsky was born at Oranienbaum, near St. Petersburg, on June 5th (18th), 1882. His father, an operatic singer, who won great favour with the public of the Russian capital at the Maryinsky Theatre, soon discovered remarkable musical gifts in the boy, which he did not neglect to develop, although he wished him to grow up to a legal career. In accordance with this plan, Igor Stravinsky, on having reached adolescence, entered the University of St. Petersburg and devoted himself to the study of jurisprudence, not without periodical and almost irresistible impulsions to abandon it for music. He had thus reached the age of twenty-two, when a meeting with Rimsky-Korsakov, who saw and appreciated the young man's astonishing talent, proved the decisive event of his life. Rimsky-Korsakov declared himself willing to accept him as a pupil.

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The direct outcome of Rimsky-Korsakov's tuition was, first of all, a Symphony, begun in 1905 and finished in 1907. This was succeeded by "Faun and Shepherdess," a song-cycle with orchestra, and two orchestral works, "Fireworks" and "Scherzo fantastique." The latter was the means of bringing about a meeting that was destined to direct Stravinsky's activities into a new channel: he made the acquaintance of Serge Diaghilev, who was struck by the vitality and colour of the work he had heard, and who induced him to set to music one of the ballets he proposed to produce. This was the "Firebird" (1910), which was followed in due course by "Petrushka" (1911) and "Le Sacre du Printemps" (1913). Next came an opera, begun some years earlier, "The Nightingale," finished in 1914, the second and third acts of which were later converted into the symphonic poem, "The Song of the Nightingale" (1917). Stravinsky left Russia at an early stage of his career and has since lived alternately in Paris and on the shores of the Lake of Geneva.

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It is almost impossible to-day to consider the work of Igor Stravinsky with the detachment that is the first requisite of a judicious appreciation, and to avoid taking part in the violent controversy to which it has given rise, a controversy that is in itself a testimony to its vitality, for Stravinsky's music is so characteristic an expression of the artistic tendencies of our time that even those who most dislike it cannot pass it by in silence. It is perhaps hardly paradoxical to assert that fundamentally all the critics agree as to its significance, and that they differ merely in the point of view from which they regard it.

There have been few composers whose development has been as rapid and as far-reaching as that of Stravinsky, and this is probably the chief reason why his later works so completely baffle anyone who is not intimately acquainted with those that precede them. For it cannot be too strongly emphasized that, disjointed as Stravinsky's output may appear to the superficial observer, it reveals a gradual and very logical transformation, in the course of which each work falls into its place and contributes something to an evolution—so often mistaken for revolution—which is only more difficult to follow than that of most other composers because it is so much more rapid. Stravinsky has covered, within a decade, a stretch of ground which most others would have taken fifty years to traverse, if indeed they would have traversed it at all. Small wonder that he leaves many of those who endeavour to follow him in a state of breathless vexation by the wayside.

The development began immediately after the Symphony, Stravinsky's first work, and the only example of his availing himself of a classical form for the expression of his ideas, which were even then sufficiently original to force upon him the realization of the necessity of creating new and more elastic moulds. The next works, in fact, "Faun and Shepherdess," "Fireworks" and "Scherzo fantastique," already give an impression of far greater spontaneity and, despite the still apparent outside influences, especially Rimsky-Korsakov's, of greater individuality. Rimsky-Korsakov's sway over his pupil was, even at this early stage, confined to a certain picturesqueness that soon became too obvious for Stravinsky, and to the example of the master's glowing orchestration, an inheritance destined to bear compound interest in the pupil's hands. In the "Firebird" this influence is seen for the last time and in a greatly diminished degree, being now restricted to the characteristic national treatment of the thematic material. It may be remarked in passing that the national element is a secondary matter in Stravinsky's music, and that his personal expression always predominates; he is above all a *musician*, and

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only incidentally a *Russian* musician, just as Poushkin was first and foremost a poet, who only by the accident of his birth happened to express himself in the Russian language. Yet the national idiom in Stravinsky is second only to his universally human expression, or we should never have had such a work as "Petrushka." In this ballet, still regarded as his masterpiece by those who are unable to follow him beyond it, he certainly reached full maturity and completely revealed his personality. To consider the music of "Petrushka," as the casual listener might be tempted to do, as merely descriptive, is to mistake its purpose entirely. With Stravinsky, as we may already see in the "Firebird," where it is narrative rather than illustrative, music is never subservient to anything else, even when it is allied to literary, histrionic or choreographic conceptions. It is a separate organism and always remains absolute music that makes its appeal to the senses rather than to the intellect. It is not explicative, but parallel, it is a stimulant that calls forth other ideas; hence the possibility of giving "Le Sacre du Printemps" two entirely different choreographic settings. The tendency to provide pure music to a scenario with which it is analogous in feeling, but from which it remains nevertheless independent, reaches its culmination in "L'Histoire du Soldat" and in "Renard." That the music of the former, for instance, is capable of being enjoyed separately, as music pure and simple, has been proved by more than one concert performance, and will be experienced by those who play at home the composer's own Trio arrangement (for piano, violin and clarinet), or the piano transcription of some of the principal numbers.

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A very remarkable feature of "L'Histoire du Soldat" is the manner in which Stravinsky explores the possibilities of various forms of popular music—not the folk-song, but the music of the fair, the ballroom, or the music-hall—which he converts into art-forms that are lifted out of their original functions. The Waltz, the Tango, the Rag, become in his hands much the same musical assets that the Allemande, the Courante, the Sarabande, became in the hands of the old masters. Other examples of this conversion of vulgar forms of music may be found in the "Piano Rag Music," in the "Ragtime" for small orchestra or piano, in the two sets of easy pieces for piano duet, and in the diminutive piano pieces for children, "Les Cinq Doigts."

It is difficult to imagine that the principle of absolute music can be realized where it is a question of the setting of words; yet Stravinsky has succeeded in upholding his ideal even in such works as the "Berceuses du Chat," the "Pribaoutki," the "Four Chants Russes" and the "Three Histoires pour Enfants." This explains at once the otherwise perhaps inexplicable choice of words that have no literary significance. To set a great poet's words to music has become for Stravinsky an absurdity, because to him the verses themselves are already a completely and independently satisfying equivalent of musical emotion. His aim is not to write music that performs the functions of applied art, and he is therefore on the look-out for texts that are too insignificant or naïve in themselves, such as the little popular Russian verses he has chosen. They made their appeal to him because of their sonorous and rhythmic, not because of any literary quality; they are potential, foreseeing all sorts of possibilities which they leave to the composer to realize. Stravinsky is sociable and direct; he writes simply for the enjoyment of player and hearer alike.

The one quality of Stravinsky's art that no critic has ventured to dispute is his consummate mastery of every instrumental resource. His combinations of tone-colour always hold surprises in store for us, which curiously enough do not seem to wear off even after repeated hearing. One of the secrets of the extraordinary resonance that astonishes the hearer is the fact that Stravinsky writes for each instrument individually as if he were himself a virtuoso on it; he always gives it exactly the kind of music to play that suits its particular character. He does not transfer the same phrase from one instrument to another unless he is sure that it is congenial to both, and he generally prefers to give each one something entirely different to do, something that invariably goes to the very root of its idiosyncrasy. This tendency results in a subtle blending of different rays of colour and degrees of light and shade, in a kind of dynamic (as distinct from harmonic) chord formation. In the later works, this manner of individualizing each instrument has become still more interesting because Stravinsky has more closely adapted his medium to his purpose. He distributes his chords among instruments of very different character instead of aiming at unity of colour, and he thus helps us to hear each of the simultaneously sounding notes as a separate value. "L'Histoire du Soldat" and the "Ragtime" give an impression of extraordinary plasticity;

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we have here a parallel to the three-dimensional art of the sculptor rather than to the deceptive perspective of the painter's canvas. But Stravinsky can at will abandon the three dimensions and give us a perfectly satisfying study in mere contour, such as we get in the three pieces for solo clarinet.

An entirely new conception is the ballet-divertissement, "Les Noces," where in addition to an orchestra from which string instruments are excluded, there are four solo voices and a chorus supporting the whole fabric of sound, sometimes alternately and sometimes in combination, without a single interruption throughout the whole work. The music of the *Noces*, like all the later works by Stravinsky, is directly and exclusively written to satisfy the auditive faculty of the hearer and it is thus a new affirmation of the reaction against the subjective expression in music that has so many adepts among the greatest composers of the nineteenth and the opening of the present century. If he can be compared to any older masters, he certainly has far more affinity with Haydn and Mozart than with any nineteenth century composer, and it is less surprising than those who are but superficially acquainted with his work might be inclined to think, that he should have found a very congenial task in composing on the basis of some pieces by Pergolesi the ballet of "Pulcinella," a task of which he acquitted himself with a delicacy and a reverence that none but a kindred spirit could have achieved.

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Igor Strawinsky est né à Oranienbaum, près de St. Petersbourg, 5 (18) Juin, 1882. Son père, un chanteur d'opéra qui jouissait d'une grande faveur auprès du public de la capitale assidu au Théâtre Marie, découvrit bientôt les remarquables dons musicaux de l'enfant et ne négligea point de les développer, bien qu'il souhaitât le voir poursuivre l'étude du droit. Conformément à cette intention, Igor Strawinsky entra par la suite à l'Université de St. Petersbourg et se consacra à l'étude de la jurisprudence, non sans de vives et presque irrésistibles tentations de l'abandonner pour la musique. Il avait ainsi atteint l'âge de vingt-deux ans quand une rencontre avec Rimsky-Korsakow, qui vit et apprécia l'étonnant talent du jeune homme, fut l'événement qui décida de sa vie. Il se déclara prêt à le prendre pour élève.

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La conséquence directe de l'enseignement de Rimsky fut, tout d'abord, une *Symphonie* commencée en 1905 et achevée en 1907; et qui fut suivie par *Faune et Bergère*, suite de mélodies avec orchestre, et par deux œuvres pour orchestre *Feu d'artifice* et *Scherzo fantastique*. Cette dernière œuvre fut l'occasion d'une rencontre qui allait engager l'activité de Strawinsky dans une nouvelle voie; il fit alors la rencontre de Serge de Diaghileff qui fut frappé de la couleur et de la vie de l'œuvre qu'il venait d'entendre et qui décida le compositeur à mettre en musique un des ballets qu'il se proposait de monter. Ce fut *l'Oiseau de feu* (1910), suivi peu après par *Petrouchka* (1911) et *le Sacre du Printemps* (1913). Puis vint un opéra, commencé plusieurs années auparavant, *le Rossignol*, achevé en 1914 et dont le deuxième et troisième acte furent ensuite convertis en poème symphonique: *le Chant du Rossignol* (1917). Strawinsky avait quitté la Russie au début de sa carrière et a vécu depuis lors alternativement à Paris et sur les bords du lac de Genève.

Il est presque impossible aujourd'hui de considérer l'oeuvre d'Igor Strawinsky avec le détachement qui est la condition d'une appréciation judicieuse, et d'éviter de prendre part dans la violente controverse à laquelle elle a donné naissance, controverse qui est par elle-même le témoignage de la vitalité de cette oeuvre: car la musique de Strawinsky est une expression si caractéristique des tendances artistiques de notre temps que même ceux qui la détestent le plus ne peuvent la passer sous silence. Il est peut-être à peine paradoxal d'affirmer que tous les

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critiques sont essentiellement d'accord sur sa signification et qu'ils ne diffèrent que par le point de vue d'où ils la considèrent.

Peu de compositeurs ont connu un développement aussi rapide et aussi considérable que Strawinsky, et c'est probablement pourquoi ses dernières oeuvres déconcertent si complètement ceux qui ne sont pas familiarisés avec des oeuvres précédentes. On ne peut en effet trop insister sur le fait que si décousue que puisse paraître l'oeuvre de Strawinsky aux yeux d'un observateur superficiel, il révèle une évolution graduelle et parfaitement logique au cours de laquelle chaque oeuvre prend sa place et contribue à dessiner la courbe d'une évolution, (trop souvent considérée comme révolution) qu'il est seulement plus difficile de suivre que celle des autres compositeurs parce qu'elle est plus rapide. Strawinsky a parcouru en dix ans un chemin que la plupart des autres auraient mis cinquante ans à franchir, si même ils l'avaient franchi. Comment s'étonner alors qu'il laisse haletants sur le bord de la route bon nombre de ceux qui s'efforcent de le suivre?

Ce développement commence aussitôt après la *Symphonie*, première oeuvre de Strawinsky, et seul exemple d'utilisation d'une forme classique qu'il ait donné pour exprimer ses idées, idées qui étaient dès alors assez originales pour l'amener à se créer des moules nouveaux et plus souples. Les oeuvres suivantes; *Faune et Bergère*, *Feu d'artifice* et le *Scherzo fantastique*, donnent déjà la sensation d'une spontanéité beaucoup plus vive, et en dépit de visibles influences (spécialement celle de Rimsky) d'une plus grande individualité. L'empreinte de Rimsky sur son élève était, même à cette époque des débuts, limitée à un certain pittoresque qui devint bientôt trop *facile* pour Strawinsky et à l'exemple de la brillante orchestration du maître, héritage qui devait porter des intérêts composés entre les mains de l'élève. Cette influence se montre pour la dernière fois et grandement atténuée dans l'*Oiseau de Feu* et se réduit à l'emploi caractéristiquement national du matériel thématique. On peut remarquer en passant que l'élément national est une question secondaire dans la musique de Strawinsky, et que l'expression personnelle prédomine toujours; il est par dessus tout un *musicien*, et seulement occasionnellement un musicien *russe*, exactement comme Pouchkine était, d'abord et avant tout, un poète qui dut au seul hasard de la naissance de s'exprimer en russe. Mais chez Strawinsky l'idiome national ne passe qu'immédiatement après l'expression universellement humaine, sans quoi nous n'aurions jamais eu *Petrouchka*. Dans ce ballet, que considèrent encore comme son chef d'oeuvre ceux qui ne peuvent le suivre plus loin, il a certainement atteint sa pleine maturité et révèle complètement sa personnalité. Considérer la musique de *Petrouchka* comme uniquement descriptive, ainsi que l'auditeur occasionnel peut être tenté de le faire, c'est s'abuser entièrement. Chez Strawinsky, ainsi qu'on l'a déjà vu dans l'*Oiseau de Feu*, où elle est plutôt un récit qu'une illustration, la musique n'est jamais subordonnée à quoique ce soit d'autre, même lorsqu'elle se trouve alliée à des conceptions littéraires, théâtrales ou chorégraphiques. C'est un organisme séparé et qui demeure toujours de la musique absolu s'adressant aux sens bien plus qu'à l'intellect. Elle n'est pas explicative, mais parallèle, c'est un stimulant qui éveille d'autres idées; de là la possibilité de donner du *Sacre du Printemps* deux expressions chorégraphiques entièrement différentes. La tendance à attacher, à un scénario, de la musique pure qui, si analogue qu'elle puisse être par le sentiment, en demeure cependant indépendante, se montre au plus haut point dans l'*Histoire du Soldat* et dans *Renard*. Que la musique de la première, par exemple, puisse être goûtée séparément, comme de la musique pure et simple, on en a eu la preuve par plus d'une exécution au concert, et on peut l'avoir aussi en jouant chez soi l'arrangement en Trio (piano, violon et clarinette) ou la suite pour piano que l'auteur a faite de quelques uns des principaux morceaux.

Un caractère très remarquable de l'*Histoire du Soldat* est la manière dont Strawinsky utilise les ressources des diverses formes de la musique populaire,—non pas la chanson populaire, mais la musique des foires, des salles de bal, ou du "music-hall,"—qu'il convertit en formes d'art éloignées de leur fonction originelle. La *Valse*, le *Tango*, le *Rag* deviennent entre ses mains des éléments musicaux analogues à ce que l'*Allemande*, la *Courante* ou la *Sarabande* sont devenues entre les mains des Maîtres anciens. D'autres exemples de cette transformation des formes vulgaires de la musique se voient dans le *Piano-Rag-music*, dans le *Ragtime* pour petit orchestre et piano, dans les deux séries de pièces faciles à quatre mains, et dans les toutes petites pièces de piano pour enfants, *les Cinq Doigts*.

Il est difficile d'imaginer que le principe de la musique absolue puisse être réalisé lorsqu'il est question de paroles mises en musique; pourtant Strawinsky a réussi à rester fidèle à son idéal, même dans des œuvres telles que *Berceuses du chat*, les *Pribaoutki*, les *Quatre Chants russes* et les *Trois Histoires pour enfants*. Cela explique de suite le choix, peut-être inexplicable autrement, de paroles qui n'ont aucune signification littéraire. Mettre en musique les paroles d'un grand poète est devenue pour Strawinsky une absurdité, parce qu'à son avis les vers eux-mêmes sont déjà un équivalent satisfaisant, complètement et en soi, de l'émotion musicale. Son but n'est pas d'écrire de la musique qui remplisse le rôle de l'art appliqué, aussi est-il toujours en quête de textes tout à fait insignifiants ou naïfs par eux-mêmes, tels que les petits vers populaires russes qu'il a choisis. Ils le satisfont par leur qualité sonore et rythmique et non pas par leur qualité littéraire: ils contiennent en eux toutes sortes de ressources qu'il appartient au compositeur de faire surgir. Strawinsky est sociable et direct; il écrit simplement pour la satisfaction de l'exécutant et de l'auditeur à la fois.

Une qualité de l'art de Strawinsky qu'aucun critique ne s'est aventuré à discuter est sa maîtrise consommée de toutes les ressources instrumentales. Ses combinaisons de timbres ont toujours pour nous des surprises en réserve, qui assez étrangement, ne semblent pas s'user après des auditions répétées. L'un des secrets de l'extraordinaire résonance qui étonne l'auditeur est le fait que Strawinsky écrit pour chaque instrument individuellement comme s'il était lui-même un virtuose; il lui donne toujours à jouer exactement la sorte de musique qui convient à son caractère particulier. Il ne transporte pas la même phrase d'un instrument à l'autre, à moins d'être sûr qu'elle peut convenir aux deux, et il préfère généralement donner à chacun d'eux quelque chose d'entièrement différent, quelque chose qui aille invariablement jusqu'aux profondeurs mêmes de son caractère particulier. Il en résulte un mélange subtil de rayons de couleurs différentes et de nuances de lumière et d'ombre, une sorte de formation dynamique des accords (distincte de la formation harmonique). Dans ses dernières oeuvres, cette façon d'individualiser chaque instrument est devenue encore plus intéressante parce que Strawinsky a étroitement adapté le moyen au but. Il distribue ses accords parmi des instruments de caractère différent au lieu d'avoir en vue l'unité de couleur, et il nous laisse ainsi entendre chacune des notes résonnantes comme une valeur séparée. *L'Histoire du Soldat* et le *Ragtime* donnent une impression d'extraordinaire plasticité: on a ici un parallèle à l'art à trois dimensions du sculpteur, plutôt qu'à l'illusoire perspective de la toile du peintre. Mais Strawinsky peut aussi abandonner les trois dimensions et nous donner une étude de simple contour, parfaitement satisfaisante, telle qu'on la trouve dans les *Trois pièces pour clarinette seule*.

Une conception tout-à-fait neuve est le ballet-divertissement: *Les Noces* où en plus d'un orchestre d'où la masse habituelle des cordes est exclue, l'on trouve quatre voix et un chœur qui supportent toute la sonorité, quelquefois alternativement, quelquefois combinés avec elle, sans une simple interruption durant tout le cours de l'œuvre. La musique des *Noces*, comme du reste toutes les dernières œuvres de Strawinsky, s'adressant directement et uniquement à l'ouïe de l'auditeur, est une nouvelle affirmation de cette réaction contre l'expression subjective en musique dont on trouve tant d'adeptes parmi les plus grands musiciens du 19<sup>e</sup> et du commencement de notre siècle. S'il fallait le comparer à quelque maître d'autrefois, on lui trouverait assurément plus d'affinité avec Haydn et Mozart qu'avec ceux-là, et il est moins surprenant que ceux qui ne connaissent que superficiellement son œuvre pourraient le croire, de voir qu'il a trouvé une tâche qui lui convenait parfaitement lorsqu'il a composé sur des morceaux de musique de Pergolèse le ballet *Pulcinella*, tâche dont il s'est acquitté avec une délicatesse et un respect que seul pouvait posséder un esprit de la même famille.



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**Corrections**

The first line indicates the original text, the second the corrected text:

La première ligne indique le texte original, la deuxième le texte corrigé:

p. [7](#):  
satisfying study in mere contour  
satisfying study in mere contour

p. [9](#):  
la capitale assidu au Théâtre Marie  
la capitale assidu au Théâtre Marie

bien qu'il souhaitât le voir  
bien qu'il souhaitât le voir

p. [10](#):  
assez originales pour l'amener  
assez originales pour l'amener

p. [11](#):  
à des conceptions littéraires, théâtrales  
à des conceptions littéraires, théâtrales

p. [13](#):  
phrase d'un instrument à l'autre  
phrase d'un instrument à l'autre

une sorte de formation dynamique  
une sorte de formation dynamique

s'adressant directemant  
s'adressant directement

en musique dout ou trouve  
en musique dont on trouve

les plus grands musiciens  
les plus grands musiciens

p. [17](#):  
Conservatoire de Musique de Geneve.  
Conservatoire de Musique de Genève.

### **Erratum**

p. [6](#): "Four Chants Russes" and the "Three Histoires pour Enfants." should be "Quatre Chants Russes" and the "Trois Histoires pour Enfants."

\*\*\* END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK MINIATURE ESSAYS:  
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