

Stravinsky's Ear for Instruments

Chris Dromey

Do you remember the first time you heard the music of Igor Stravinsky? Or modernist music more generally? My teenage introduction to both was *Ragtime* (1917-18), our music teacher helping us join the dots between its particular strand of twentieth-century classical music and Scott Joplin's evergreen rag 'The Entertainer' (1902), which the pianists among us would struggle to play.¹ Looking back, the muffled giggling which *Ragtime* provoked was due as much to the jolting introduction of its faint and weird-sounding cimbalom as to the relentless discontinuities that shape its phrasing, melody and timbre. To hear Stravinsky repeatedly is to understand how these innovations relate to one another, but the shock of having to quickly process his music for the first time was real and literally physical. Here were strange folk- and jazz-inspired sounds, far removed from the Classical and Romantic orchestras that had framed our expectations of so-called classical music until that point. *Ragtime's* sound was, and remains, quite alien.

Adolescent memories such as these are valuable to recall because they help us grasp and rekindle certain truths about early modernist music and its contexts. For example, that listeners who persist with such music can quickly become attuned to new thresholds of consonance and dissonance or perceive continuities and discontinuities in a different way, qualities that are central to comprehending and therefore enjoying the music itself. Or, that the described scene of sniggering schoolchildren is a microcosm of the public's general bewilderment about classical music's twentieth-century course.

¹ Another youthful exposure to Stravinsky's music was via *Fantasia* (1940), of course. Surely every young Stravinskian's ear has been turned by the way Walt Disney employed *The Rite of Spring* to accompany its most epic scenes, in the process helping Stravinsky's most famous work seep into public consciousness *as a soundtrack*, without foregrounding its composer.

At the same time, such instinctive responses to Stravinsky, or to early-modernist music more broadly, are surely not too far removed from what drove many of their harshest critics, chief among them the century's most influential music theorist, Heinrich Schenker, who dismissed 'Stravinsky's way of writing [as] altogether bad, inartistic and unmusical.'² This is not to brand the brilliant Schenker childish, of course, but rather to understand that instinct can fetter the wide-eyed novice and distinguished music theorist alike, whether it is rooted in a lack of experience, habit, fear, or ideology – or, most likely perhaps, a mix of all of these. Put another way, while music such as *Ragtime* assumes a very different character when heard for a sixth or seventh time, several important deductions follow by remembering its initial impression or by addressing its wider context. The piece *is* fun, being the antithesis of 'dry' or 'cerebral', terms which have, on occasion, clouded appreciation of Stravinsky's music.³

Also, *Ragtime* is hardly representative of Stravinsky's creative output at the time. Unusually, it was composed not at the piano (as was his custom) but at the cimbalom, an instrument for which Stravinsky would write no further music because of the difficulty of finding good players. Nevertheless, there are local similarities with parts of *The Soldier's Tale* (1918), another work for mixed ensemble, and more obviously with *Piano-Rag-Music* (1919) for solo piano.⁴ Besides, the anomalous nature of *Ragtime* is itself valuable. Consider its unprecedented ensemble - flute, clarinet, horn, cornet, trombone, two violins, viola, double bass, cimbalom, and percussion - upon which the piece's distinctive discontinuities depend. 'The whole ensemble', the composer explained, 'is grouped around the bordello-piano sonority of [the cimbalom].'⁵

Epitomised by Stravinsky, the phenomenon of early twentieth-century composers writing for unorthodox, unexpected or plain eccentric combinations of instruments created a headache for musicologists who later sought to make sense of modernist genres. Where, for example, to draw the line between *chamber* music, a designation with its own special musical and historical connotations, and the less

² Heinrich Schenker, *The Masterwork in Music: A Yearbook: Volume 2* [*Das Meisterwerk in der Musik*, 1926], ed. William Drabkin, trans. Ian Bent et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.18.

³ For example: 'It is the early Stravinsky that I like. Most of what he has done since *Le Sacre* seems to me dry, cerebral perhaps.' John Ireland, quoted in interview (c.1963) with Murray Schafer, in *The John Ireland Companion*, ed. Lewis Foreman (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2011), p.60.

⁴ 'I continued to play the cimbalom every day in my Pleyel Studio in Paris between the wars, though I wrote no more music for it because of the difficulty of finding good players.' *Dial.*, p.54.

⁵ *Ibid.*

specific *ensemble* music? Which new instrumental line-ups accrued individual significance or influence? And how did long-cherished ‘received’ genres, such as the string quartet or wind quintet, fare in this generically crowded place? To scrutinise Stravinsky’s works for small- and medium-sized ensemble is to help address these questions. As we shall see, *Ragtime*’s eleven-piece ensemble is not the only clue that Stravinsky’s decisions about mixed timbres and textures, and their resultant linearities, are inseparable. Talk of such compositional qualities returns us to Schenker, by whose self-defined analytical principles of linear progression and cohesion Stravinsky was said to have ‘failed’. With the benefit of hindsight, a more neutral reading would be to record that, however they are valued, Stravinsky’s innovations still call for audiences and scholars to find and practise new ways of approaching the music: not only embracing timbre and texture, but also registering the consequences for genre, musical appreciation (that is, how we historicise Stravinsky and his composer peers), and, by extension, musical modernism at large.

To locate another prime example, one that manages to encapsulate each of these contexts, we only need to rewind a few years. In Stravinsky’s vast catalogue another type of mixed ensemble stands out because of its debt to Arnold Schoenberg, in particular the much-imitated scoring of his expressionist melodrama *Pierrot lunaire*, op. 21 (1912) and its inspiration of Stravinsky’s *Three Japanese Lyrics* (1912–13) for soprano, two flutes (one doubling piccolo), two clarinets (one doubling bass clarinet), piano, and string quartet.⁶ The circumstances behind this connection are striking. While speculation about the relationship between Stravinsky and Schoenberg has filled many pages, history records just one occasion when they met in person. The encounter took place in December 1912 when two musical tours auspiciously converged on Berlin, as the Ballets Russes brought Stravinsky’s *Petrushka* (1910–11) to German audiences and *Pierrot lunaire* returned to the city where it had been premiered two months earlier. Stravinsky left an idiosyncratic account of the latter event, largely ignoring Albertine Zehme’s conspicuous (and contentious) *Sprechstimme*: ‘[She] accompanied her epiglottal sounds with a small amount of pantomime (...) I was concentrating too closely on the copy of a score Schoenberg had given me to notice anything else (...) I

⁶ *Pierrot lunaire* is scored for *Sprechstimme* (the so-called speaking voice) and a shape-shifting accompaniment of flute doubling piccolo, clarinet doubling bass clarinet, piano, violin doubling viola, and cello.

wanted Frau Zehme to be quiet... so that I could hear the *music*'.⁷ Instead, he elected to praise the 'instrumental substance' and 'whole contrapuntal and polyphonic structure of [*Pierrot*'s] brilliant *instrumental* masterpiece'.⁸ Scholars have since pored over the *Three Japanese Lyrics* to detect Schoenberg's influence; certainly, the music Stravinsky completed *before* hearing *Pierrot* ('Akahito', albeit for voice and piano at that stage) is more octatonic, tonally centred, and passive than the other two *Lyrics* ('Mazatsumi' and 'Tsaraiuki'), which were composed later.

The longer-term impact is equally significant: Richard Taruskin contends that Stravinsky exhibited a post-*Pierrot* 'inclination toward spare linearity'.⁹ More straightforward is our knowledge that Stravinsky also regaled Maurice Ravel with an account of Schoenberg's piece during their joint residence by Lake Geneva, inspiring the Frenchman to write *Trois poèmes de Stéphane Mallarmé* (1913) for the same instrumentation as the *Three Japanese Lyrics*. This musical lineage would continue without Stravinsky until he arranged his *Two Poems of Konstantin Bal'mont* (1911) for the same medium in 1954. In any case, a credible argument can be made for *The Soldier's Tale* being the closer cousin to *Pierrot lunaire*. Whereas the *Japanese Lyrics* augmented Schoenberg's line-up, Stravinsky conceived *The Soldier's Tale* as a touring theatre piece and partnered its narrator, dancer, and actors with another unique ensemble (clarinet, bassoon, cornet, trombone, violin, double bass, and percussion), probably influenced by klezmer bands native to Ustilug, where Stravinsky spent most summers until 1914.¹⁰ Alongside a wide-ranging part for percussion - so important to Stravinsky that he apparently bought his own set of percussion instruments in Lausanne in order to learn to play them - the ploy of pairing treble and bass winds, brass, and strings makes *The Soldier's Tale* more orchestrally representative than most small mixed ensembles, including *Pierrot lunaire*.¹¹ No other work by Stravinsky employs a *solistische Instrumentation* aesthetic in quite this manner, maximising dramatic contrast from such minimal means.

Pribaoutki (1914) comes close, comprising four Russian songs for voice and an octet of flute, oboe (doubling cor anglais), clarinet, bassoon, violin, viola, cello, and

⁷ *Conv.*, p.69 (original emphasis).

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.76, emphasis added.

⁹ Richard Taruskin, *Stravinsky and the Russian Traditions: A Biography of the Works through Mavra*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1996), vol. 1, p.834.

¹⁰ *Ibid*, vol.2, pp.1305-6.

¹¹ *The Soldier's Tale*, indeed, is a better fit for the *kleines Kammerorchester* header under which *Pierrot lunaire* had been speciously advertised in Berlin.

double bass, a version that was premiered, notably, during a 1919 concert presented by Schoenberg's Verein für musikalische Privataufführungen (Society for Private Musical Performances) in Vienna. *Renard* (1915–16) also has special significance dramatically, separating its miming dancers from the musicians, and musically by closely resembling a 'one-of-each-instrument' sinfonietta.¹² It is no coincidence that the idea to miniaturise the orchestra in this way flourished during a time of shoestring economics that shrank the market for large-scale works. But the effect also chimed with, and doubtless accelerated, an ideal that sought to 'release' itself into line and counterpoint beyond the confines of, say, the harmonically orientated string quartet or the voice/piano duo. Each of these early twentieth-century contexts was highly relevant to Stravinsky, given his 'stratified' style,¹³ his disinclination to compose for conventional chamber forces, and, conversely, the importance to his oeuvre of further works for medium-sized ensembles. These included: *Trois petites chansons* (1906/13, arranged in 1929-30 for paired flutes, oboes, clarinets, and bassoons, and string quartet), *Eight Instrumental Miniatures for 15 Players* (1920-21), arranged and expanded in 1962 for paired flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons, violins, violas, cellos, and a single horn for concerts in Los Angeles, Toronto, and Mexico), and the Concerto in E-flat, 'Dumbarton Oaks' (1937), for another fifteen-piece ensemble (flute, clarinet, bassoon, two horns, and a string decet), though it is a work whose balance and neoclassical deployment confirm its chamber orchestra billing.

To examine Stravinsky's later music for ensembles is to confront another of the potent myths that have coloured the composer's legacy: that he was uncomfortable writing for the violin. The rumour is fuelled by the genre-subverting *Violin Concerto* (1931) and prominent string-less pieces such as *Symphonies of Wind Instruments* (1920, rev. 1947) and an entertaining *Octet* (1922-23) for flute, clarinet, paired bassoons, trumpets, and trombones - a line-up Stravinsky claimed was suggested to him in a dream. The truth, typically, is more nuanced. The absence of strings was certainly no barrier to Stravinsky's compositional technique, as the contrapuntal transparency of the

¹² Specifically: flute, oboe, clarinet (doubling piccolo, cor anglais, and piccolo clarinet respectively), bassoon, two horns, trumpet, percussion, cymbalom - used on this occasion to mimic the archaic gusle (*guzla*), whose 'preciously tiny' sound Stravinsky praised - and a string quintet featuring a double bass.

¹³ Edward T. Cone, analysing Stravinsky's music, argued for a stratified view of form in which various layered units were synthesised or superimposed. His theory's less reductive and unitary approach to hierarchy was an influence on subsequent methods that, contrary to Schenker, either celebrated discontinuity and conflict at the musical surface or sought to introduce systems of analysis with much greater specificity. See Edward T. Cone, 'Stravinsky: The Progress of a Method', *Perspectives of New Music*, 1/1 (Autumn, 1962), 18–26.

Octet's snappish, colourful attacks attest. The composer made his own position clear: 'For many years I had taken no pleasure in the blend of strings struck in the piano with strings set in vibration by the bow.'¹⁴ The remarks describe an 'acoustic problem' Stravinsky would set about solving in *Duo concertant* for violin and piano (1931-32), premiered by Samuel Dushkin, with whom Stravinsky would extend and rearrange (in 1933) his arrangement (1923) of *Pastorale* (originally composed in 1907) for an unusual woodwind quartet of oboe, cor anglais, clarinet, and bassoon, with a solo violin replacing the original soprano.

Very rarely did Stravinsky compose for conventional chamber-music groupings, such as the string quartet. His iconoclastic debut in this hallowed genre was the brief *Three Pieces for String Quartet* (1914, rev. 1918), which originally went by the title of *Grotesques*. They were later transformed into three-quarters of the orchestral *Quatre études* (1928). Their performance by the Flonzaley Quartet led Stravinsky, at leader Alfred Pochon's suggestion, to write a single-movement *Concertino for String Quartet* (1920), better known today in its later, enlarged guise. Stravinsky's only other work for the medium is the late *Double Canon for String Quartet* (1959), beautifully written in his late, serial idiom; it lasts barely more than a minute. If one includes alongside this already curious collection of music the ballet *Apollo* (1927-28), accompanied by string orchestra and atypically lyrical, then the reality of Stravinsky's so-called love-hate attitude to strings is clear: his approach simply evolved. Indeed, just as the *Pastorale* and *The Soldier's Tale* exist in multiple versions, Stravinsky's rearrangement of two of his works for string quartet was versatile, commercially savvy (if oeuvre-muddling), and aesthetically significant. The difference in the cases of the *Three Pieces for String Quartet* and the *Concertino* is that Stravinsky used mixed timbres to realise the pieces' ideas more convincingly, while also, in the process, undermining or eroding chamber distinctions themselves.

Other works in the catalogue clearly exhibit Stravinsky's efforts to prolong certain chamber categories and conventions. Separated by half a century, *Berceuses du chat* (1915-16) and *Elegy for J.F.K.* (1964) both employ voice and three clarinets, a distinctive medium for which Darius Milhaud (*Cocktail*, 1920), Luigi Dallapiccola (*Goethe Lieder*, 1953), and others also wrote, and which British ensemble The Matrix

¹⁴ Igor Stravinsky, 'Some Ideas about my *Octuor*', in Eric Walter White, *Stravinsky: The Composer and His Works* (London: Faber, 1966), p.372.

(founded c.1970) would augment with piano and/or percussion, further extending this intriguing lineage. Similarly, the *Septet* (1952-53) - one of Stravinsky's first works to accommodate series- and array-derived materials - employs the same clarinet, bassoon, horn, piano, violin, viola, and cello combination of Schoenberg's *Suite*, op. 29 (1925-26). Although he would develop his serial idiom in a very different manner to Schoenberg, the basic compatibility between Stravinsky's approach and Schoenberg-derived serialism should not, in principle, be a surprise - even if it was in practice. To compose, for Stravinsky, was to '[combine] lines into a polyphonic whole',¹⁵ hence the *Septet*'s passacaglia, fugues, and instrumental subgroups (the 'Gigue', for example, makes the piano a lynchpin between the string and wind trios, just as op. 29 does), which Stravinsky's modest, mixed forces accentuate. We also know that its catalyst was a 1952 series of Schoenberg concerts given in Los Angeles and conducted by Robert Craft, who would later describe Stravinsky's unease upon learning that his recent music held no interest for younger European composers.

The *Elegy for J.F.K.* (1964) is one of several late compositions Stravinsky wrote to honour public figures, and which gave a late-career boon to his music for ensembles. The aforesaid *Double Canon*, in memory of the French artist Raoul Dufy, is another example. A third is the contemporaneous *Epitaphium* (1959), a serial miniature tribute to Max Egon zu Fürstenberg (patron of the Donaueschingen Festival) scored for flute, clarinet, and harp - a trio subset of the mixed quintet that accompanies Anton Webern's *Fünf Geistliche Lieder*, op. 15 (1917-22), alongside which the *Epitaphium* was premiered. (Stravinsky thrice wrote for similar, if much rarer, trios in the 1950s, accompanying *Four Russian Songs* (1916-18, arr. 1953-54) with flute, harp, and guitar, and *Three Songs from William Shakespeare* (1953) with flute, clarinet, and viola.) A third, and most celebrated, example is *In memoriam Dylan Thomas* (1954), a setting of 'Do not go gentle into that good night' for tenor voice, framed by dirge canons for strings and four trombones.¹⁶

Throughout Stravinsky's career, then, the invention of instrumental ensembles was key to his musical thinking. It is similarly clear that the status of music written for more conventionally grouped chamber forces changed during this era - a backdrop to

¹⁵ Joseph N. Straus, *Stravinsky's Late Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p.54.

¹⁶ Distinctive timbral ideas are fundamental even to later, grander pieces in this Stravinskian subgenre, for example the twelve-part inventions that characterise several of the orchestral *Variations* (1963-64, subtitled 'Aldous Huxley in memoriam'), or the eccentric ensemble of harp, piano, timpani, tam-tams, viola, and double bass that plumbs the registral depths in *Introitus* (1965, memorialising T.S. Eliot).

which Stravinsky's creative neglect of them played its part. Given this, it is reasonable to ask why his music for small- and medium-sized ensembles is not better known today. The answer is manifold. This part of Stravinsky's oeuvre, while voluminous and estimable in its own right, is overshadowed by ballets and other large-scale works whose thematic links or quickly-acrued headlines gave them a much greater heritage and prominence. If critics, musicologists, and the listening public have not fetishized Stravinsky's smaller-scale pieces in quite the same way, then one must concede that the 'orderliness' of his stage ritual or Greek triptychs make those works much easier to classify and, by extension, to access and appreciate.

Equally, it is true that one of the defining virtues of Stravinsky's music for ensembles is precisely its resistance to being pigeon-holed, even though this often places a limit on the number of performances it enjoys. Stravinsky's shrewdness, both creative and financial, is well documented, but the logistics of programming unique pieces such as these remain unenviable. This real-world problem belongs to a context bigger still: that *because* the rise of more colourful, heterogeneous types of ensembles proved inexorable, a modern medium could be attractive but seldom fixed.¹⁷ The solution to this paradoxical situation has been found by countless modern music groups configuring themselves as sinfoniettas, but elastically dividing into smaller ensembles as performances require. Fittingly, Stravinsky's versatile accomplishments correspond with, and continue to sustain, their *raison d'être*.

Author's Recommendation

Concertino for Twelve Instruments (1920, arr. 1952)

What greater encapsulation of Stravinsky's individual approach to chamber/ensemble music could there be than a sonically chaotic piece that first took the form of a string quartet but is better known today as the *Concertino for Twelve Instruments* (1920, arr. 1952)! From the original only a violin and a cello survive, the later arrangement conflating the winds of the *Octet* and the second (1933) version of the *Pastorale*.

¹⁷ Even the innumerable emulations of Schoenberg's *Pierrot* ensemble fall into subcategories that hardly ever match the taxonomy of *Pierrot lunaire*.

Concertino's brittle, cellular fabric and its abundance of musical ideas belong to the heyday of early modernism, yet there are shades of minimalism and instrumental theatre within its free 'sonata-allegro' (the composer's label) and parade of colours. *Concertino* is also notable for escaping the wrath of German philosopher Theodor W. Adorno, whose backhanded compliment was that it 'preserves the aggressive fragmentation of infantilism without deforming a model in any obvious way'.¹⁸

Recommendations for Further Reading and Research

- Heinrich Schenker, *The Masterwork in Music: A Yearbook: Volume 2* [*Das Meisterwerk in der Musik*, 1926], ed. William Drabkin, trans. Ian Bent et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).
- Edward T. Cone, 'Stravinsky: The Progress of a Method', *Perspectives of New Music*, 1/1 (Autumn, 1962), pp.18–26.
- Joseph N. Straus, *Stravinsky's Late Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).
- John. H. Baron, *Chamber Music: A Research and Information Guide* (3rd edn; Abingdon, Routledge, 2010).
- CD: *Igor Stravinsky, Chamber Works & Rarities* (European Soloists Ensemble, Vladimir Ashkenazy, et al. (Decca, cat. 4738102, 2003).
- Film documentary: Andy Wilson (dir.), *Riot at the Rite* (BBC, 2005), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JcZ7lfdhVQw>.
- Film: Bill Roberts et al., *Fantasia* (Walt Disney Productions, 1940).

¹⁸ Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, trans. Anne G. Mitchell and Wesley V. Blomster (London: Seabury Press, 1973), p.206.