

IMPRESSIONS OF IGOR STRAWINSKY

By C. STANLEY WISE

A little man, with a face rather long and melancholy in appearance; who is usually to be seen garbed in grey, thus conveying a general impression of greyness if not of insignificance to anyone not sufficiently observant of the formation of his head;—such is Strawinsky, whom many critics consider to be the most powerful and representative of the Russian composers of our day. (Now that Scriabin is dead, it is indeed difficult to name anyone who could compete with him for that position.) It is to the very simplicity and directness of the man that we owe rather frequent misconception of his character and to a certain extent of his music. Here in this little Swiss town of Montreux where he passed many of his days since he emerged from the state of pupildom, and in whose peaceful precincts nearly all of his not very numerous published works of importance were written:—a holiday place redolent and by no means unmindful of the names of those artistic and literary celebrities of the past who made it their temporary residence, and also from time to time brimful and running over with the chronicled achievements of various would-be celebrities of the present day;—here Strawinsky went on his quiet way practically ignored and unknown.

Since the young composer's aim in settling here was to find quiet for his work as well as a good and invigorating climate, this somewhat amusing state of affairs must have suited him well, although, were he less single-minded, it would surely have caused his face to wrinkle into the gently-ironic smile that one learns to expect and loves to draw forth when in conversation with him.

I am not at all concerned with the question as to whether, as has been said, my friend's music is or is not typically "Russian," or if it is of the very essence of "Cosmopolitanism" or if it possesses "all the defects of the train-de-luxe Ritz-Carlton atmosphere in which he has passed so much of his time" but in so far as such criticism would imply that Strawinsky himself possesses the social habits or tastes of a Wagner, Weber, Mendelssohn, Rossini and Richard Strauss combined, that he is only in his true element when he finds himself in a well-fitting suit before a table

supplied by a good *chef*, and surrounded by social flatterers, it is so wide of the mark as to be absolutely farcical.

His very simplicity of mind and singleness of aim naturally cause him to feel quite at home wheresoever and in whatsoever company he may find himself. He can face an infuriated audience in Paris or a heavy social dinner in London with equal calm; nor is he moved to any abnormal extent when he has to appear on a platform before serried ranks of wild enthusiasts. Thus a critic such as Mr. Toye, who has probably never met the musician except amid the environment of gleaming shirt-fronts and twinkling glasses, may be excused for imagining the *hôtel-de-luxe* to provide the atmosphere most congenial to him, but I think that he cannot be pardoned for building artistic criticism upon such a foundation of ignorance.

Strawinsky's whole soul is wrapped up in his music, and apart from his work (which, by the way, he treats entirely practically, as did Bach, Mozart, Beethoven and others of the great composers, even Wagner himself to a considerable extent,) he is purely and singularly domestic in his tastes and habits. In this respect as in many others his character has always seemed to me to bear a considerable resemblance to that of the first composer above mentioned,—old John Sebastian Bach with his marvellous grasp of counterpoint and delight in setting himself to solve musical puzzles, his never-ceasing experiments in harmony, his domesticity and personal simplicity.

The latter quality it was that first attracted me to the man, for he had already begun to make some mark in the musical world when I became acquainted with him, and in the course of a fairly long life I have come across a good many "geniuses" whose attitude towards life and their surroundings was so unlike his. They have almost always talked largely and at great length about their "Art." And usually even more huge than the capital "A" in that word the big "I" has loomed in their speech!

As for Strawinsky, unless one is intelligently interested and enquires about his work, it is possible to pass hours with him and know nothing of what he is doing. While always eager to discuss music, having no false shame about his own achievement and being able to give reasons for the faith that is in him, he never obtrudes his own personality or boasts of his successes, and still less does he ever attempt to depreciate the work of others, whether he may be in thorough sympathy with their methods or not.

I have already alluded to his practical attitude towards musical composition. This is well brought out by the fact to

which Mr. Francis Toye in a recent article in the *Musical Quarterly* aptly drew attention:—that he alone among living composers writes generally with a view to performance by a definite body of artists. It should be noticed, however, that in his compositions he holds himself free to express just what he wishes to say,—or I would rather put it that he writes whatever he feels to be of the essence of his subject,—leaving to his interpreters the task of conveying his meaning to the hearers. I remarked especially that feature of his artistic production three years ago when he was busy with the composition of *Le Sacre du Printemps*.

Looking through the first sketch of the great solo dance in the second act, where the rhythm varies continually, the bars being marked $\frac{3}{4}$, $\frac{2}{4}$, $\frac{3}{4}$, $\frac{4}{4}$, $\frac{3}{4}$, $\frac{2}{4}$, and so on, in an order that at first strikes one as purely fortuitous, I was impressed by the great difficulties presented therein for dancer and conductor. I could not resist asking him, therefore, whether during its composition he had consulted Nijinsky or his *première danseuse*, with regard to its effective execution.

His reply was most decided and something to this effect:—“Surely not! A musician must write in accordance with his own ideas. It would be impossible for two persons to compose a work.” Some weeks later he hastened to tell me that he was “just back from the first rehearsals of the ‘*Sacre*,’” and he must say that “the dance that had been evolved was the most perfectly beautiful” that he had ever seen.

In fairness I ought to add that some who saw the ballet produced in Paris two or three months later compared that dance to Swedish gymnastics! I am not here concerned with criticism of the art either of Strawinsky or of members of the Russian Ballet, I but emphasize this point as it helps to illustrate the composer’s attitude toward his art.

Strawinsky lives very quietly in the villa that he has rented at Morges, usually spending a part of the summer in some Swiss mountain resort, and when the health of his family renders change of air judicious, he always accompanies them, difficult as he must sometimes find it to carry on steady work under the conditions prevalent, for instance, in a small mountain hotel. It is only lately that he has taken up his residence at Morges, near Lausaune; where, by the way, Paderewski has resided for many years. Before then he lived at Clarens.

The Russian composer’s amusements are few and simple. He is sound enough at heart to enjoy indulging in a certain

amount of winter sport in the season, and he even retains a thorough boy's love for sweetmeats.

Much in the way of description of Strawinsky's music would be a difficult task to undertake,—to criticise it an impossibility, at all events for a musician of an older generation. The idioms of music, even more than of other arts, change very quickly, and attempted criticism by able men and earnest students of the work of contemporary composers in former days has usually resulted in such appalling examples of lack of insight that I should prefer to leave modern compositions to be judged by results even if I felt myself competent to essay their appraisal.

His early symphony, played at Montreux in 1914 for the first time in public, affords but few instances of unusual harmonic combinations, although it was completed not so very many years ago; the true Strawinsky first appears in his popular ballet *L'Oiseau de Feu*. In this one already finds those subtle rhythms and original touches of orchestration that one now expects from the composer; also, and perhaps above all, that conciseness of utterance—that ruthless suppression of each redundant bar in which he goes even beyond any of his fellow countrymen.

In *Petrouchka*—perhaps his most beautiful work up to the present time—the harmonic combinations are more audacious, but the music, when it receives an orchestral rendering as perfect as it should, sounds in no way harsh, although its effects are remarkably strange to ears accustomed only to nineteenth century music.

The same cannot be said of *Le Sacre du Printemps*, his most incomprehensible work. Getting to know it fairly well during its time of composition I was not at all amazed to hear that upon its production in Paris in 1913 it roused the audience to positive fury.

More surprising was the fact that a year later, when played symphonically without ballet or scenery under M. Pierre Monteux's sympathetic direction, it was received in the same city with an enthusiasm at least equal to the aversion with which the music had previously been heard. The subject of this ballet seems to me distinctly too vast for musical illustration, or if not so, it is at all events beyond the easy comprehension of any audience, even of trained musicians. It deals, one may say, with the pulsing of the primeval world under the influence of spring, while at the same time a simple story of savage religious rites unfolds itself, and the wild weird music cannot be ignored by any hearer: it must excite either to deep enjoyment or to positive aversion.

The orchestration in this work is marvellous. I regret that it is impossible to give illustrations of it here. All present-day composers seem to be masters of orchestral colour if of nothing else, but to my mind Strawinsky easily surpasses them all, the effects he produces being often highly original and almost invariably effective.

Although in most of his works he employs a very large orchestra and the harmonies are sometimes so strange as to be repellent, the mass of sound is always sonorous and never blatant.

In some of his works, notably in *Petrouchka*, very striking combinations of tone colour are obtained by the employment of a pianoforte in the score, and Strawinsky, like the majority of modern writers, composes much at that instrument, but there is nothing pianistic in his orchestral part-writing, although it is possible that a thoughtful student might be led to surmise this practice of his through indications scattered here and there in the scores. For instance in the charming little opera *Le Rossignol* the barbaric Chinese March is written mainly in the keys of five and six sharps,—most evidently selected on account of the facility with which experiments with the pentatonic scale could be carried out on the black keys of the pianoforte. As to his passion for harmonic experiment, I shall never forget the eagerness with which he hurried me to the pianoforte one day to exhibit the capabilities that he had just discovered in that Chinese pentatonic scale.

I have called *The Nightingale* an opera, and it is so named on the programmes of its performance for lack of a better description, but by the composer it is entitled a "Lyric Tale." It is to my mind a most exquisite little composition, and I was fortunately able to witness its production in London the year before last. It follows very closely the lines of Hans Andersen's delightful tale, and musically it seems to me to illustrate the story to perfection, and also to show us Strawinsky's art at its best though not at its deepest, for naturally the composer has not employed his most intricate contrapuntal devices to adorn such a simple plot. If it has a fault it is that of over-compression. I think that the action, slight as it is, might well be allowed more time to unfold itself. It is here that Strawinsky's ruthless excision of all that can be deemed redundant fully shows itself, and the effect is rather brusque. Unfortunately at Drury Lane the work suffered much from imperfect staging and insufficient rehearsal; not so much musically, for its direction by M. Emile Cooper and rendering by the orchestra were superb.

It conveyed even to me who knew its music so well the impression of a music drama whose action was compressed in places to such an extent as to be almost unintelligible, and I was not surprised to read criticism of it as "potted opera." Not until I had the chance to examine the printed score did I realize in how many cases the explicit directions of the composer had been ignored in performance.

Each act should last about twelve minutes; at Drury Lane the intervals between the acts extended each of them to about twenty minutes. The composer has indicated in the score no such intervals whatever, and if it was found needful to drop the curtain for a few seconds the breaks should have been made as short as possible. Then a considerable portion of the second act is directed to be played behind a gauze curtain, so that the scenic impression may be to a certain extent that of moving tableaux;—at the production in London the picturesque Chinese courtiers bustled about and posed like an Italian opera chorus. The singer, too, who took the part of the Nightingale faced the audience and bowed her acknowledgements of the applause with which her fine vocalisation was greeted just as appropriately as an average operatic tenor; and the final curtain—enjoined to be lowered very slowly—came down with a run, so that the fisherman sang his philosophical epilogue while the puzzled audience wondered whether the opera was finished or not!

With such inept stage-management it is amazing that the work created any favorable impression at all. Most of these defects that I have noted were probably due to the attempt made to produce too large a number of new works during a short season, and before *The Nightingale* is given during another season they will, I hope, have been remedied, in which case I shall indeed be surprised if its reception is not an enthusiastic one.

The Chinese March already mentioned illustrates fairly and simply Strawinsky's attitude not only towards unusual harmonic but also towards rhythmic combinations. Russians, like the majority of Eastern races possess almost invariably a fine feeling for rhythm, and no composer handles and superposes unusual and intricate rhythms with greater freedom, ease and sureness of touch than the subject of this article.

Le Sacre du Printemps is worthy of close study if for that reason alone. Indeed the early symphony to which I have already referred is perhaps more original and interesting in this respect than it is harmonically.

The song of the true "Nightingale" in the second act of the Lyric Tale is a fine instance of the composer's melodic conception. On paper it seems complicated and distinctly vague in tonality, but in performance it is exquisite, and has a peculiar wild charm of its own.

Indeed, *The Nightingale* is throughout most interesting, and especially so because it marks the advance made by the composer in the course of a few years. The first act has not been much altered since it was completed about six years ago, and while there is perfect unity throughout the composition the music of the other acts is unquestionably riper, the harmonic and orchestral effects are more assured than in the earlier portion of the work.

There is one feature in Strawinsky's treatment of the orchestra that I must emphasize more strongly, because it runs counter to an idea rather prevalent among those who have not heard much of his music. They read statements such as that the Russian composer "begins where Richard Strauss leaves off," and knowing that he employs a very large orchestra they are naturally led to believe that his principal aim is to produce a great mass of sound.

Nothing is further from the truth. Strawinsky obtains many of his most wonderful effects by means that are really strikingly simple, however complicated they may be in appearance in the score.

There is a short passage in one of three Japanese songs published in 1912, descriptive of bud-sheaths bursting under the influence of April's breath, and the instruments employed to accompany the voice are piccolo, flute, clarinet and strings (with a note or two upon the pianoforte, *una corda*). Hardly ever are more than three instruments employed at one time, but those few bars are marvellous in the impression that they make upon the hearers.

Strawinsky's creative energy was temporarily checked, like that of most musicians, by the outbreak of the war, but he soon recommenced steady work. Besides various small compositions he has been engaged upon two of considerable dimensions and of rather unusual character. One of these is laid out for voices and instruments treated for the most part independently, somewhat after the style of chamber music, and it unfolds the tale of a "Village Wedding," the words being drawn from traditional love-poems gathered far and wide throughout Russia.

I await its production with considerable interest, for the composer's art has to my mind hitherto seemed to possess one defect,

—if it be a defect—an entire absence of anything approaching sentimentality, and one cannot imagine a pure love-story treated really well without some amount of tender sentiment.

Since Strawinsky strikes me as (above everything else) sincere in all that he does, I am curious to find out whether my impression of his attitude to the prevalent theme of nearly every opera that has been written is correct, and in that case whether he may not after a time have discovered that his unemotional temperament hampered him in this work, which was nearly completed at the time of writing this article (1915), and may be called a ballet-cantata.

The other important composition, to which he was giving much thought during this winter of 1915-1916, is of a religious character (*Liturgie*), but is not yet sufficiently advanced to be here described.