

ation (because all obsessive influences are cruel), the Stravinsky of today, at the age of 85, continues to be a strong and vital force in the formation of our youngest composers. His surprising change of direction which began soon after the end of the last war, towards a concise and linear style, has been imitated by thousands of composers, including those of Latin America. And so Stravinsky once more becomes the standard-bearer of the *avant-garde*, and continues, possibly without intending to, to guide new generations of composers along new and hitherto untrod paths.

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STRAVINSKY AND JAZZ

Jazz was a product of the confrontation of two worlds. The African Negro, transported in slavery, took with him to his new land his native musical traditions, which were corporeally rhythmic and vocally modal; and these came into contact—and before long into conflict—with the harmonic conventions of the West (specifically those of the march and hymn). Out of this tension was generated the classic form of the blues, the traditional basis of jazz. During the first two decades of the twentieth century the black man in America created a music that expressed not only his powerful protest against dispossession, but also a nostalgia for ‘the beauty of his wild forebears’; and (which was more remarkable) the white man too came to recognize in the black man’s music a vitality and spontaneity which he, in his modern self-consciousness, had lost.

While this was happening in America, Stravinsky, a cosmopolitan European, was turning away from the moribund artistic traditions of nineteenth-century romanticism, seeking renewal through a rediscovered primitivism. The improvising Negro jazzman found his primitive vigour in creative tension with the harmonic and tonal prison of the West; Stravinsky tried to throw aside these conventions in being rhythmically reborn. But of course as a European, with centuries of tradition behind him, he could rediscover the primitive only by being selfconsciously unselfconscious: as is indicated in the very fact that *The Rite of Spring* is scored for a mammoth symphony orchestra, an instrument which was a triumphant achievement of nineteenth-century industrialism—however savagely Stravinsky may employ conventional instruments in defiance of what had come to be accepted as their ‘true’ natures. And although in *The Wedding* he attempted to emulate the sound of a peasant orchestra and originally intended to use authentic peasant instruments, he does not pretend that the mimed ritual is ‘real’, any more than is the sacrificial murder of *The Rite*. Both works are ballets, stylized games of ‘let’s pretend’. They remind us of vitality we had forgotten (to our cost); but their negative, therapeutic value, ridding us of the violence of the war-years, is perhaps stronger than their positive revocation of vanished power.

It is certainly true that the negative, deflationary impulse gains the upper hand in the chamber works that, during the war years, immediately followed the two great eruptive ballets; and that these works are also the first overt reference Stravinsky makes to the existence of jazz. It is significant that at this time Stravinsky had heard no jazz, merely seen a few printed copies of piano rags, which were the Negro’s attempt to create a ‘respectable’ music in conformity with the

white traditions of march and quadrille. The inately euphonic manner of the piano rag was no doubt a kind of wish-fulfilment, a desire to pretend that the new Negro in his new land was on top of the world. Rag could cheekily and jauntily and a bit precariously disturb by syncopation the self-confident rhythms of dance or march, but could never manifest the essential characteristic of jazz—the creative tension between a freely pitched and rhythmised solo line and the regularity of the beat and the formality of western harmony. This is why rag tended to sound like, and to be played as though it were, a music of automatons; the ‘nigger minstrel’ grin is a mask, and the glinting texture and chirpy regularity of metre must at all costs disguise the existence of a heart. The appeal to Stravinsky, at this point in his career, is obvious. Rag sounded like pianola rolls and was frequently recorded on them; Stravinsky devised works for pianola more or less contemporaneously with his ragtime pieces.

To be specific: Stravinsky’s pianola studies were written in 1917; *The Soldier’s Tale*, the first of his works overtly to use jazz techniques, appeared in 1918. The scoring of this piece has similarities to the New Orleans or Dixieland band, though Stravinsky more probably picked it up from the street bands of Europe, and Erik Satie had employed a comparable group for his *Le Piège de Méduse* as early as 1913. It is, however, significant that Stravinsky gives to the fatuously cheerful sound of the Dixieland band an astringently satirical note; and that he here unequivocally associates jazz with the principle of negation, indeed with the Devil himself, who, in *The Soldier’s Tale*, corrupts the hero, destroys his soul, by hypnotic boogie rhythm and disruptive syncopation. It may be described as anti-jazz, for the obsessive boogie thrust freezes the marrow instead of liberating the body. The nagging of the open-stringed double-stops sounds like a rattling of bones; the unexpected contractions or elisions of metre give one a stab in the solar plexus: so that in total effect the specifically jazzy techniques deny the springy vivacity inherent in the bright sonorities of the ensemble. The lyrical and rhythmic verve of classic New Orleans jazz are utterly remote from the music; but of course this is not a criticism of Stravinsky’s marvellous score, which deliberately and legitimately exploits jazz in this ‘negative capability’.

Stravinsky’s first piece of abstract, non-theatrical jazz followed immediately after *The Soldier’s Tale*. Indeed the *Ragtime* for eleven instruments (flute, clarinet, horn, cornet, trombone, two violins, viola, double bass, cimbalom and percussion) is not much more than an appendix to the devilish jazz fiddle-music, the only new element being the prominent concertante part given to the cimbalom. Again, the music is anti-jazz in its chilly lack of lyrical impulse and in its wryly destructive dislocation of rhythm. It does not wear well outside the context of the theatre and the Soldier’s Faust-myth; the only positive element that survives is a clown-like pathos, reminiscent of an early Chaplin film. Even so, it is a Chaplin without the humour: almost as melancholy an abstraction as jazz without true body rhythm and lyrical potential.

The *Piano Rag Music* of the following year (1919) has more positive virtues because it sprang, as Stravinsky himself has recorded, from the composer’s delight in the percussive possibilities of the piano. While the clusters of ‘added notes’ clearly derive from the tango and rag in *The Soldier’s Tale* they can be treated more expansively in pianistic form; and Stravinsky has even said that he wished the music to sound improvised, a hurly-burly of sound without prearranged order. To encourage this effect he notated much of it without bar-lines; and

played with appropriate abandon the music can remind us of the earthily swinging vigour of barrelhouse piano, whether or no Stravinsky had any experience of this unlettered and scarcely notatable music. Of course the lyrical element that, in tension with the beat, makes swing possible is still absent: which is why Stravinsky's piano rag is inferior to the piano rag sections (most of them written a decade or so earlier) in the keyboard music of Ives. This, again, is hardly a criticism of Stravinsky. He could use elements of jazz for his own, cosmopolitan, largely negative purposes; Ives could exploit barrelhouse piano positively because it was part of his own environment, experienced from within.

After the years of the First World War Stravinsky continued to draw intermittently on jazz techniques; but it was not until 1945 that he produced another full-scale jazz composition, the *Ebony Concerto* dedicated to Woody Herman's band, by whose performance Stravinsky had been impressed. By this time Stravinsky, now an American citizen, had heard a little Negro jazz in Harlem and Chicago; and it says much for his self-knowledge and acute intelligence that, having heard the music, he makes no attempt to emulate it. The *Ebony Concerto* is easily the most successful and convincing of Stravinsky's jazz compositions: but is so because it is good minor Stravinsky, not because it is jazz.

Basically, the work is a neo-baroque concerto, a slighter complement to the contemporary *Symphony in Three Movements*, which powerfully employs jazzy rhythmic distortion to build up cumulative tension. The first movement of the *Ebony Concerto* (which is scored for Herman's normal big band resources, with the addition of French horns) is a comic complement to the tragedy of the *Symphony in Three Movements*. It is in orthodox classical sonata form, the point of the first subject consisting of the ambiguously syncopated treatment of a trumpety trumpet fanfare. The second subject, traditionally cantabile, is given first to solo trombone, then to solo clarinet, and is in the subdominant, rather than the conventional dominant. The cantabile tune gradually triumphs over the dislocated fanfares and at the end is heard on trumpet, in the home key of B flat; yet the tune is so comically corny, even cornet-y, that its apotheosis sounds slightly cynical. There is nothing funny about the slow movement, nor is it particularly 'blue' (as Stravinsky says it is), except in so far as it reiterates blue false relations. The slowly nagging exfoliation of the melody sounds, however, more middle-eastern than negroid; neither lyrically nor rhythmically can the tune 'take off'. The music is devoid of what jazzmen call 'flight'; and for that reason, perhaps, seems immensely ancient and melancholy—a quality we may associate with eastern cultures and with the Russian steppes, but hardly with the American Negro. Something of this feeling survives in the final variation set: for though the rhythms and figurations recall the clown-like antics of the first movement, the theme itself is an undulation of pentatonic minor thirds that could not well be more archaically primitive. The coda, after the corybantics, is stark in the extreme: time stops in Stravinsky's typical telescopings of tonic, dominant and subdominant—the norms of progression in European music.

Woody Herman's band did not enjoy themselves playing Stravinsky's concerto, and maybe the composer did not expect them to, for its virtues are not those of jazz. Its virtues are, however, considerable: so it is the greater pity that, its instrumentation being what it is, performances are bound to be infrequent.

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