

Igor Stravinsky

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'Even during his lifetime, Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971) was a legendary figure. His once revolutionary work were modern classics, and he influenced three generations of composers and other artists. Cultural giants like Picasso and T. S. Eliot were his friends. President John F. Kennedy honored him at a White House dinner in his eightieth year.

Stravinsky was born in Oranienbaum, Russia, near St. Petersburg (Leningrad), grew up in a musical atmosphere, and studied with Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov. He had his first important opportunity in 1909, when the impresario Sergei Diaghilev heard his music. Diaghilev was the director of the Russian Ballet, an extremely influential troupe which employed great painters as well as important dances, choreographers, and composers. Diaghilev first asked Stravinsky to orchestrate some piano pieces by Chopin as ballet music and then, in 1910, commissioned an original ballet, *The Firebird*, which was immensely successful. A year later (1911), Stravinsky's second ballet, *Petrushka*, was performed, and Stravinsky was hailed as a modern master. When his third ballet, *The Rite of Spring* (a savage, brutal portrayal of a prehistoric ritual in which a young girl is sacrificed to the god of Spring.), had its premiere in Paris in 1913, a riot erupted in the audience--spectators were shocked and outraged by its pagan primitivism, harsh dissonance, percussiveness, and pounding rhythms--but it too was recognized as a masterpiece and influenced composers all over the world.

'During World War I, Stravinsky sought refuge in Switzerland; after the armistice, he moved to France, his home until the onset of World War II, when he came to the United States. In the 1920s and 1930s he was an international celebrity, constantly touring in Europe and the United States, and his compositions--which had originally been inspired by Russian folk music--became cooler and more objective. During his years in the United States (he lived outside Los Angeles), his young musical assistant, Robert Craft, familiarized him with the works of Schoenberg, Berg, and Webern, and in the 1950s Stravinsky astonished his followers by adopting Schoenberg's twelve-tone system.

'Unlike Schoenberg and Bartok, Stravinsky got well-paying commissions for his work and was an astute businessman; he also loved order and discipline and said that he composed 'everyday, regularly, like a man with banking hours.' In his seventies and eighties he was still touring conducting his rich and intense late works.

Stravinsky's Music:

'Stravinsky's extensive output includes compositions of almost every kind, for voices, instruments, and the stage; and his innovations in rhythm, harmony, and tone color had an enormous influence on twentieth-century music.

His development shows dramatic changes of style. The three early ballets--*The Firebird* (1910), *Petrushka* (1911), and *The Rite of Spring* (1913)--call for very large orchestras and draw upon Russian folklore and folk tunes. During World War I, he wrote for chamber groups, using unconventional combinations of instruments and incorporating ragtime rhythms and popular dances (an example as *The Soldier's Tale*, 1918). From about 1920 to 1951 (the 'neo-classical' era) he was inspired largely by eighteenth-century music; the ballet *Pulcinella* (1920) was based partly on the music of Giovanni Battista Pergolesi (1710-1736), and the opera *The Rake's Progress* (1951) was modeled on Mozart. His neoclassical works emphasize restraint, balance, and wit and are far removed from the violence of the *Rite of Spring*. But his shift to the twelve-tone system in the 1950s was an even more dramatic change of approach, since until then all his music had a clear tonal center. Taking inspiration from Anton Webern (1883-1945), Stravinsky now wrote brief works in which melodic lines were 'atomized' into short fragments inconstantly changing tone colors and registers.

'Despite such stylistic changes, however, all his music has an unmistakable 'Stravinsky sound.' Tone colors are dry and clear; the beat is strong. His work abounds in changing and irregular meters, and sometimes several meters are heard at once. Ostinatos--repeated rhythmic or melodic patterns--often unify sections of a piece. His treatment of musical form is also unique: rather than connecting themes with bridge passages, he makes abrupt shifts, but his music nevertheless sounds unified and continuous. The effectiveness of his rhythms, chords, and melodies often depends largely on his orchestration, in which highly contrasting tone colors are frequently combined. And his music has rich, novel harmonies--he makes even conventional chords sound unusual.

'Stravinsky drew on a wide range of styles, from Russian folk songs to baroque melodies, from Renaissance madrigals to tango rhythms. He sometimes used existing music to create original compositions, but more often the music is entirely his own, while vaguely suggesting a past style.'