

A Brief Exploration of Stravinsky's Nationalism

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Igor Stravinsky's music-writing went through what we refer to as his "Russian period", a term with many connotations. Most broadly placed between 1907 and 1920 (although some scholars narrow that gap), it is a time period in which Stravinsky composed a number of works based on Russian ideas, with a strong focus on national folklore. However, there is still some mystery as to why Stravinsky chose to focus on this. Was the shift toward such nostalgic or perhaps nationalist music a fully conscious or deliberate one, and if so, did that inspiration strike long before his "Russian period" music was composed? When Stravinsky made such prolonged use of material inspired by (or outright native to) his homeland, why did he do so right around the time he moved away from Russia to Paris, in 1911? Was he influenced in some way by Russian nationalism in the years leading up to World War I and the Russian revolution? Did these two dramatic shifts in the Russian political landscape perhaps give him cause to *end* his "Russian period" of art-making?

We could begin to trace the possible influence of Russian nationalism on Stravinsky by examining the work of his predecessors- especially the "Mighty Handful", a group of Russian composers thought to be among the first to compose new music in a truly Russian idiom (at least within the confines of the Romantic music era). They conveyed this spirit in a myriad of ways, such as with Borodin's use of Russian folk music for his opera *Prince Igor* (written gradually between 1869-87 and completed by his peers), or Mussorgsky's use of Russian

literature in his opera *Boris Godunov* (completed 1874), which was based on a play by early 19th century writer Alexander Pushkin¹. It might be said that Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, who also wrote several operas making use of Russian folk music, made an even more direct contribution to this newfound traditionalist devotion found in Russia's musical elite with his *Collection of 100 Russian Folk Songs*, presented in what was a thoughtful and polished style but without simply "appropriating" the music as material for his original work. Rimsky-Korsakov brings us directly to Stravinsky, who studied composition privately with Rimsky-Korsakov around age 20, and who later remarked that "he had my deep affection, and I was genuinely attached to him."² It is possible that the first work which falls under Stravinsky's "Russian" period is the "*Chant Funebre*" he wrote for the occasion of Rimsky-Korsakov's passing. Stravinsky was only able to remember vague details about the nature of the work and its reception; he explained (with a distinctly bitter tone) that the score "unfortunately disappeared in Russia during the Revolution, along with many other things which I had left there."³ Some scholars, such as Romanian musicologist Roman Vlad, have theorized that Stravinsky's hope in studying with Rimsky-Korsakov was to acquire a strong foundation in the technical aspects of music writing rather than to emulate his teacher's style, citing some similar techniques of orchestration and composition between teacher and pupil in contrast with the markedly different musical language they each employed.⁴

It was not long after Rimsky-Korsakov's passing that Stravinsky wrote *The Firebird*, *Petrushka*, and *The Rite of Spring*, three ballets all deeply drenched in Russian themes and folklore. In his autobiography, Stravinsky makes little mention of the Russian nature of these works- he identifies his longtime collaborator Sergei Diaghilev (the founder of the Ballet Russes)

¹ J. Peter Burkholder, *A History of Western Music* (Norton, 2014) pp. 709-710

² Igor Stravinsky, *An Autobiography* (Simon and Schuster, 1936) p. 23

³ Igor Stravinsky, *An Autobiography* (Simon and Schuster, 1936) p. 24

⁴ Roman Vlad, *Stravinsky* (Oxford University Press, 1967) p. 4

as the one who had initially “fallen in love with the Russian fairy story” (referring to *The Firebird*), as though the source material was of no real consequence to Stravinsky, who preferred to focus on the musical content. In a passage describing how the setting of *The Rite of Spring* came to him in a sudden vision, he makes no mention of the “pagan ritual” it depicts having anything to do with Russia- although, notably, he does mention returning to his old estate in Russia in order to complete work on it. Lawrence Morton, a close friend of Stravinsky’s during the composer’s time in Los Angeles, has suggested that *The Rite* might have (perhaps unconsciously) been inspired by the poem *Yarlia* by Sergey Gorodetsky⁵ (Stravinsky had previously set some of his other poetry to music). This does contain some elements of *The Rite* (the sacrifice of maidens at the direction of the elder sages, etc⁶) but other specific elements, such as the chosen maiden being forced to dance until death, or the sacrifice being made to the springtime god, are absent- both of which Stravinsky claimed to have visualized himself⁷.

Others have pointed out that Stravinsky may have downplayed the influence of Russian folk music on his work, especially with regard to *The Rite*. Working together, the musicologist Richard Taruskin and the ethnographer Dmitri Pokrovsky have discovered many transcriptions of folk melodies in the composer’s notebooks, and have also demonstrated the powerful effect which Russian neo-nationalist painting of the late 19th century must have had on him⁸. Diaghilev himself was the chief editor of *Mir iskusstva* (“*World of Art*”), a Russian publication which drew attention to such works. However, Stravinsky only ever pushed back against any supposed influence of Russian nationalism in his work, sometimes to such an extent that it seemed to carry a shameful connotation for him. Long after his “Russian” period had ended, he

⁵ Lawrence Morton, *Footnotes to Stravinsky Studies: ‘Le Sacre du Printemps’*, Cambridge University Press, 1979

⁶ https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Modern_Russian_Poetry/Yarila

⁷ Igor Stravinsky, *An Autobiography* (Simon and Schuster, 1936) p. 31

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<https://mobile.nytimes.com/1994/05/10/arts/critic-s-notebook-the-influence-of-stravinsky-s-russian-roots.html>

asked:

“Why do we always hear Russian music spoken of in terms of its Russianness rather than simply in terms of its music? Because it is always the picturesque, the strange rhythms, the timbres of the orchestra, the orientalism- in short, the local color, that is seized upon; because people are interested in everything that goes to make up the Russian, or supposedly Russian, setting: troika, vodka, isba, balalaika, pope, boyar, samovar, nitchevo, and even bolshevism. For bolshevism offers similar displays which, however, bear names that conform more closely to the exigencies of its doctrines.

However, one might alternatively interpret this quote as a lament for that which is *authentically* Russian, rather than simply giving a populist impression of something Russian, perhaps especially when viewed through a western lens. He seems to be looking down on a westerner’s perspective of Russian material, reinforced by the fact that he made this statement in the US not too long after the fear of Russian communism had reached its height, during the McCarthy era. Regarding this “westerner’s perspective”, Richard Taruskin directs us to the great difference in reception Stravinsky received for *The Firebird* and *Petrushka* in Russia and France, respectively; although *The Rite* was famously met with a riot in Paris, his previous works were “welcomed enthusiastically by the organized avant-garde”- whereas in Russia, the composer was met with such criticism as from the composer Nikolai Myaskovsky:

“...where’s the music? What kind of nonsense is this! Talent, talent, uncommon, astounding talent, and yet the very thing that provides that talent with its medium is lacking. What is this- incomprehension or disingenuousness?”⁹

So we can see that Stravinsky may easily have felt torn between accusations of disingenuousness by his Russian peers and the expectations of foreign audiences, which themselves may not have been entirely reasonable. Taruskin also notes:

⁹ Richard Taruskin, *Stravinsky and the Russian Traditions - Part I: A Biography of the Works Through Mavra* (University of California Press, 1996) pg. 988

“From the very beginning, French critics tended to see in the Ballets Russes- or, perhaps to project onto them- the fulfillment of their own national creative aspirations”.

Perhaps it is because of this constantly shifting equilibrium between accusation and expectation, or perhaps Stravinsky simply had come to detest the apparent inseparability of a Russian composer’s music and his heritage, but he began to move away from Russian-inspired music. Following the three ballets and a few other “Russian” works (including *Renard*), he adopted a “neoclassical” style, one which seemed particularly far-removed from the drastic rhythms, timbres, and harmonies of the Russian period, as though only in making a complete 180-degree shift in style would he successfully shake off such associations. This new music explored everything from Greek mythology (*Three Greek Ballets*) to Christian theology (*Symphony of Psalms*) to English stories of temptation and loss (*The Rake’s Progress*)- but he never quite returned to a “Russian” idiom once he turned his back on it. Are we, as listeners, meant to find elements of nationalism in these earlier works of the Russian period? Or should we attempt to follow Stravinsky’s apparent lead in separating a musical work from any possible political associations?