

STRAVINSKY GETS A MEDAL

STRAVINSKY has been made respectable. His name joins those of Gounod, Brahms, Elgar and Rachmaninoff. He has been given the Gold Medal of the Royal Philharmonic Society of London.

That is quite an honour from a society which, in its early days, commissioned the Ninth Symphony from Beethoven and the "Italian" Symphony from Mendelssohn.

Stravinsky is 71. When he was younger, he came in for no such veneration. Turn to a description by Jean Cocteau, the French dramatist, of the first performance of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*:

"The public laughed, spat, hissed, imitated animal noises. . . The riot degenerated into a fight. Standing in her box, her diadem askew, the old Countess de Pourtales brandished her fan and shouted, all red in the face: 'This is the first time in 60 years that anyone has dared to make a fool of me!'"

That was in Paris in 1913, when Igor Stravinsky was 30. Russian-born, he settled in France, then in the United States, becoming an American citizen in 1945.

Nothing like the gigantic animal frenzy of *The Rite of Spring* had been heard in music before. The music outlived the ballet which it originally accompanied. Eugene Goossens introduced the score to London concert audiences in 1921. Walt Disney put it into the film *Fantasia* in 1940.

But Stravinsky had gone on to new things. Abandoning the big-noise manner, he produced works which seemed austere and angular. That description fits even such different works as his "Dumbarton Oaks" Concerto, his ballet

by Arthur Jacobs

"Apollo, Leader of the Muses," and his Mass.

I met Stravinsky recently in Rome, where we were both attending a conference on 20th Century music. "Do you consider *The Rite of Spring* a turning-point in your work?" I asked him.

"I do not know. Revolution or evolution?" he answered. "I am so far away now from that sort of thing—the big orchestra. I am now a chamber-orchestra and contrapuntal man."

(What he really said was "contrapuntical," one of the few mistakes he made in English. He speaks fluently and expressively, but finds it convenient to slip into French sometimes.)

Does this attitude mean that he has renounced his older works?

Not at all. "I deny nothing. I just compose other things. I am now interested particularly in the music of the 15th and 16th Centuries."

Stravinsky spoke of the work he has just completed, a dirge for Dylan Thomas. This Welsh poet, whose premature death was so deeply felt in English literary circles, was to have written an opera libretto for Stravinsky.

Stravinsky took the words for the dirge from a poem that Thomas himself wrote in memory of his father. Preceding the setting of the poem are what



STRAVINSKY in 1920; from the drawing by Picasso

Stravinsky calls "dirge-canon" for four trombones, a striking and unusual idea.

Stravinsky has many followers but no pupils. "I never have. I am bored by pupils." About his living contemporaries, he will say nothing. About the recently dead Prokofieff (who, unlike Stravinsky, went back to live in Soviet Russia): "A very powerful talent. But I am too far from his aesthetic. I am absolutely contrapuntal, like very few composers even of the past."

My questions to Stravinsky were answered undogmatically and with good

humour. Here was not the stern oracle which I had half expected from his writings.

He even apologised to me for saying that music critics are "not competent." He thinks today's literary critics are the best, critics of painting next, music critics lowest of all.

On first seeing Stravinsky in his hotel I noticed his short stature, his unassuming dress and manner, but, above all, his sprightliness. He fairly scurried across the sitting-room.

Two days later, conducting a concert of his own music for the Rome radio, he was still scurrying. Almost running off the platform afterwards, he might have been a very young composer overjoyed with a first performance.

Agilely, too, he mounted the platform at another concert to congratulate the musicians who had given the first performance in Europe of his new Septet. A few weeks later this work was heard in London.

In the score of the last movement of this Septet, Stravinsky marks what he calls the "row" of notes used by each instrument. Seizing on the word, critics have claimed that here is an approach to the technique of Arnold Schoenberg, that other giant of 20th Century music. For much of Schoenberg's work is based on the use of a "twelve-note row."

Stravinsky squashes these critics. "There is no such *rapprochement*," he told me emphatically. "I use only eight notes."

"I use an absolutely classical tonality," he continued. "That's funny! (a new thought seemed to strike him), 'You know, in Russian the word for a note or sound is *zvuk*, and the word for row is *ryad*. But if you put them together, *zvuk-ryad*, you have just the ordinary word for scale. It is really a scale, not a row."

The Septet is in three movements and lasts less than fifteen minutes. It is for three strings (violin, viola, and cello), three wind instruments (clarinet, horn and bassoon) and piano. It is dry and angular. Strictly "contrapuntal," too, of course. The musical analyst in his study will get more satisfaction from it than the listener in the concert-hall.

The London public was not attracted. Rarely has the Royal Festival Hall been more empty than when this work was performed there, although two previous broadcast performances might have warmed up interest if there were any warmth in the music.

But what a contrasting scene had taken place a few nights previously! The same hall was packed full for an all-Stravinsky orchestral concert. For on that occasion the composer himself was to be presented with his gold medal.

The bust of Beethoven stood on the platform, as it always does at the Royal Philharmonic Society's concerts. The Royal Philharmonic Orchestra, usually conducted by Sir Thomas Beecham, played instead under the precise, purposeful beat of Stravinsky himself.

In the interval, the medal was presented by Sir Arthur Bliss, Master of the Queen's Musick. Paying tribute to Stravinsky, Sir Arthur said that future generations "would have to reckon with the disturbance of his personality."

He has disturbed the present generation of musicians, too. For forty years his music has been jogging at their elbows, suggesting that they take a peek round this or that undiscovered corner.

And yet what irony! His most popular works are *Petrushka* (played at this

(continued on next page)

(Solution to No. 701)

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Clues Across

- This bird begins with a song and ends with a knowing look.
- Confused prose.
- One who capers.
- A bird unpopular with batsmen.
- Point with clean pin?
- A thousand, in sooth is even.
- Gilded bronze.
- Jeopardise with a command to put a stop to rage.

Clues Down

- Person who suffers from morbid depression without cause.
- Inquisitive.
- Damage.
- Tyros.
- Here you may find a nice lady cope with a volume of information.
- A soap-bubble has this quality.
- Incapable of being made smaller.
- Distinctive flag.

"THE LISTENER" CROSSWORD

- The wise men from the East.
- Here you find me upset under a broken reed.
- Heroic poem.

No. 702 (Constructed by R.W.H.)

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