Expressiveness in Stravinsky's Late Works

Christoph Flamm[1]
**Department of Musicology, Heidelberg University,
Heidelberg, Germany**

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Експресивност у касним делима Стравинског

Кристоф Флам
Одсек за музикологију, Универзитет у Хајделбергу,
Хајделберг, Немачка

Abstract

Igor Stravinsky's late style is usually considered in terms of the works' structure. Following Joseph N. Straus, this article attempts to highlight expressive, semantic and self-referential dimensions in Stravinsky's late compositions. These dimensions emerge there with particular clarity and partly contradict the usual assessments of this music as abstract and constructivist; as such, they also challenge the composer's own statements.

Keywords: Igor Stravinsky, late style, serialism, expression, self-reference.

Апстракт

Касни стил Стравинског обично се разматра са становишта структуре композиција. Ослањајући се на Јозефа Н. Штрауса, овај чланак настоји да нагласи експресивне, семантичке и самореферентне димензије у касним композицијама, које се указују с посебном јасноћом и делом противрече уобичајеним одређењима ове музике као апстрактне и конструктивистичке, а такође преиспитују и композиторове личне изјаве.

Кључне речи: Игор Стравински, касни стил, серијализам, експресија, самореференца.

1 christoph.flamm@zegk.uni-heidelberg.de

Music can express nothing. That's my conviction. It can express itself only. The music expresses itself, and very eloquently. Eloquently. Expressing itself, it creates forms. Musically speaking, purely musically speaking, there are rules, like rules in any game. Each game must have its rules, otherwise it is an anarchy, which means nothing. I can be what you want, I can be the worst of communists in the world, you know, but not a[n] anarchist – [not] even the *nicest* anarchist. (smiles)[2]

In this excerpt of a filmed speech of Stravinsky, taken from Tony Palmer's famous documentary, the composer repeats two of his *idées fixes*: first, that music is "essentially powerless to express anything at all", as he has already told us in his autobiography (Stravinsky 1936, 83); and second, that he considers it to be an abstract game with rules. In his fundamental study of Stravinsky's late music, Joseph N. Straus resumes: "The Stravinsky literature normally describes him as an arch-structuralist, the creator of forms for their own sake. And the sense of Stravinsky's music as inexpressive is often taken as particularly true of his late works, with their elaborate serial plans. Indeed, Stravinsky himself encouraged the idea of his music as absolute, pure interval music […]" (Straus 2001, 183). Straus then goes on, in a very remarkable chapter called "Expression and Meaning", to which the present author is strongly indebted, to uncover the so-to-say hidden symbolism in Stravinsky's late works. He justifies his exegesis not least by the fact that the composer himself had limited the scope of his statements on expression (without excluding "meaning"), for example in *Expositions and Developments*: "That overpublicized bit about expression (or non-expression) was simply a way of saying that music is suprapersonal and superreal and as such beyond verbal meanings and verbal descriptions" (Stravinsky and Craft 1962, 101). Thus, what Stravinsky really decried was not musical expressiveness, but personal (subjective) self-expression and literal meaning in music.

Already here we feel that there is a certain terminological confusion. To express something, expression, expressivity and expressiveness are by no means equivalents when it comes to music. Without entering into a terminological or philosophical discussion of these notions, one could distinguish between three aspects at least: first, the potential of music to be experienced intensely, let's say the sheer power of expression (this power Stravinsky's music has always had); second, the ability to evoke extramusical images both abstract or concrete (here, Stravinsky's music does seek abstract symbolism, as Straus's analyses show convincingly); and third, the overt emotional side of music, its interest in depicting states of emotion or arousing empathetic feelings, maybe even tears (the latter might be seen as the late-romantic standard attitude which Stravinsky wanted to overcome almost from the beginning).[3] Irrespective of these three categories and authorial intentions, music – even if it should seem absolutely hermetic in its total abstraction or haphazardness

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2   TV Interview taken from the film by Tony Palmer, *Stravinsky – Once at a Border*, 1982, at 1:48:50 – 1:49:45.

3   The most explicit example for an esthetical standpoint which sees music as a means to make cry would probably be Puccini, cf. Erkens 2017.

– willy-nilly does transport meaning, not least since meaning is ascribed to it in the process of reception; it may suffice here to mention Umberto Eco's notion of the *opera aperta* (1962).

The conventional view of Stravinsky as a representative of coolness and objectivity, i.e. the image he has created for himself, is doubtable. The absence of traditional expressive gestures in Stravinsky's music surely does not amount to a complete "lack" (Straus 2001, 184), but rather a decisive reduction, since there still are traditional rhetoric elements such as sighing motifs, even if these are not entrusted to the yearning voices of the strings. And sometimes typical means of expression, such as changes in dynamics (the many decrescendi in the Prelude of the *Requiem Canticles*) and tempo (the accelerando of the initial melisma in the "Lacrimosa" of the same work), resurface within the overall block-type stasis, especially in the late music. In this respect, Roman Vlad singles out the *Song* of *In Memoriam Dylan Thomas* – full of *dolce*, *cantabile*, and dynamic shifts – as "una delle poche pagine stravinskiane effettivamente e direttamente improntate ad un esplicito pathos espressivo" ("one of the few Stravinskian pages actually and directly marked by explicit expressive pathos"; Vlad 2021, 343). Straus is less interested in such relics of (romantic) tradition than in the symbolical elements and musical gestures of Stravinsky's language as bearers of meaning. These (as it were) compensate for the loss of traditional signifiers which, as said before, cannot be called complete. But the aim of this article is not to reflect on a grand scale about Stravinsky's music. Instead, it will follow the paths of Joseph N. Straus and others who have looked into the scores and sketches of the late works, and ask how far types of "expression" are reflected.

Topoi, New and Old

In his study, Straus (2001, 186–187) defined a number of topical elements which are detectable in Stravinsky's late works:

E to D
A
F
Bells
Chorale
Canon
Diatonic versus Chromatic
Stutter
Silence
Coda

It is a wide spectrum ranging from symbolic meanings of certain tonal centres, and traditional musical topoi, such as bells, chorale and silence, to structural features, like harmonic and melodic aspects or elements of form. Despite their individual characteristic appearance in Stravinsky's music, many of them have deep roots in

music history, such as bells and choral evoking a sacred aura (not only in Russian music), or the typical dichotomy of diatonic versus chromatic idiom as a Russian heritage going back to Glinka via Rimsky-Korsakov (cf. Taruskin 1996, 255–306). Conventional rhetorical means are stutter or silence; and the potential function of a coda as a place for transcendence is following convention as well. But some elements can be called idiosyncratic, especially the semantic layers of tonalities (F: "Death, funerary, dirge, mourning"; A: "garden of delight; love's kingdom; a transcendent realm beyond the vicissitudes of daily life"; Straus 2001, 186) or the tonal shift from E to D ("Motion from grief and lamentation to acceptance or transcendence of death"; ibid,). In Straus's study, these topics (or topoi) almost add up to a system, a network of meanings (he calls them "expressive associations") which allow for a hermeneutical reading of the scores. Yet the heterogeneity of these topics, which are lying on completely different analytical levels, contradicts the assumption of intentionally interrelated elements, and others might be added (e.g. some of the "universalia" singled out by Svetlana Savenko, though she only partially ascribes extra-musical meaning to them; Savenko 2001, 105–152). Probably Straus goes too far when he tries to extract a narrative out of the first movement of the Septet which, in his reading, comes up to "a musical journey" (Straus 2001, 240–241).

Yet even if we judge such symbolic decipherment as analytical overeagerness, and dismiss some of the associative interpretations of Straus's topics, it remains evident that Stravinsky's late music, in a most paradox way, combines heightened structural strictness (that is, his idiosyncratic treatment of serialism) with a reappearance of traditional musical gestures. Stravinsky was well aware that his public had heavily decreased in his serial period, and that his former devotees struggled to follow him further. It could be that he himself felt a need for more plasticity to counterbalance the abstract structural procedures lying underneath.

Structural Invention

One of the main principles of generating pitches in Stravinsky's late music is hexachord rotation: the twelve-tone row gets split in two halves which are then permutated by starting the hexachord on each of the six notes, transposed to the pitch of the first note. Stravinsky took this idea from Ernst Krenek. But additionally, he extracted harmonic structures by reading the verticals as chords. Stravinsky's method is clearly visible in his sketches where he is singling out such verticals by framing them, e.g. in a famous sketch for *Variations* (Taruskin 1996, vol. 2, 1655; Straus 2001, 202). Often whole passages of his late works are nothing else than a succession of these "verticals" generated by hexachordal rotation.

Interestingly enough, some sketches show that Stravinsky did not necessarily start with inventing the row in itself, but with complex motivic ideas from which the row would then be derived. In the case of a sketch leaf for *Requiem Canticles*, the original thematic invention – a setting of 12 tones laid out as a dotted progression of three-part chords – underwent some correction, and only then did the composer extract the row (Krahe 2014, 226). Even in his last works, the composer wanted to

explore ever new possibilities of generating material. It seems as if he was looking consequently towards the future, not to the past.

Yet this assumption is only partly true. On the other side, an astonishing amount of musical traditions comes to the surface, not in the neoclassical way of creating a distance between past and present, but as elements and signifiers in their true sense. This refers to some of the topics Straus has described, as well as specific features of his own oeuvre, such as the emergence of clear diatonic and octatonic structures.

Echoes of the Past

Among the sketch material for the biblical TV opera *The Flood*, there is a fully diatonic passage, written beneath the twelve-tone row (Rogers 2004). Stravinsky invested much time before he arrived at the definitive version of these few bars. As Lynne Rogers remarks, "the musical realizations of his rows and the counterpoint he created between row forms frequently produce diatonic regions, leading-note effects, suggestions of tonicizations, perfect fifth relations, tertian structures and allusions to dissonance and resolution" (Ibid., 238). Though in the finished version the initial diatonicism has been reduced and the passage, all in all, undergone many transformations, it remains obvious that in Stravinsky's thinking resurfaced a sort of primordial idiom, not incidentally connected to a religious subject (text underlay of last chords: "LAU-DA-MUS").

In fact, the increase in the use of religious subjects in his late period is a sign in itself of a changing attitude towards the communicative function of music. It is in this context that the most clearly discernible "simplifications" or "traditionalisms" occur, in other words, musical means to make the message of music more readily understandable. After all, in such works with liturgical or in any case religious elements, music *had* to express something. Stravinsky's aesthetical attitude towards the sacral has generally been described as ritualistic austerity; the composer himself is reported to have said, in connection with his *Mass*, "that he wanted to write 'very cold music, absolutely cold, that will appeal directly to the spirit'" (White 1979, 447). The idea of music as ritual is one of the central elements in all of Stravinsky's aesthetics. The stronger his religious convictions became since his return to Orthodoxy in 1926 (cf. Moody 2021), the more his works tended towards the sacred, including *Oedipus Rex* as a sort of pseudo-sacral reflection on man and destiny, but above all the three sacred choruses *Otche nash*, *Veruyu* and *Bogoroditse devo*. While Stravinsky here eschews the models of *Fin-de-siècle* Russian church music settings in favour of rigour and simplicity, the psalmodic sacrality as such has personal roots in the enigmatic chordal world of *Zvezdoliky* (cf. Savenko 2001, 168ff.).

Whereas the Chorale, written to the death of Debussy, ultimately becoming the final section of the *Symphonie d'instruments à vent*, had exposed blatant objectivity devoid of all personal mourning as much as the *Symphony of Psalms* – which for Ernest Ansermet seemed to express "the religious feelings of 'others'" (as reported by Boucourechliev 1987, 185) – in Stravinsky's late works there is a decisive shift towards a more traditional approach of setting religious texts or images. This seems

to contradict the increasing structuralist aspect of his works. But it might be seen as well as a strategy of balancing out abstraction and concretion. These observations or hypotheses can be confirmed with reference to *Requiem Canticles*.

The impact of the "Libera me", taken from the burial service after the celebration of a *missa pro defunctis*, with its combination of a parlando chorus and four chanting soli (probably inspired by the pendant in Verdi's *Requiem*; cf. Spies 1967, 112), doubled by four horns, is immediate: the music recurs to both hints of triadic harmony and unison psalmody, that is to real liturgy, but without running the risk of sentimentality or musical nostalgia. When it comes to expression, the "Libera me" is one of the most accessible of all of Stravinsky's late pieces. Nicolas Nabokov was astonished by this unexpected directness: "Toward the very end of Stravinsky's life something changed. He wrote a piece, his last grand piece of music, the *Requiem Canticles*. Though in it he used the novel devices of serial technique, he somehow overpowered them. It was immediately, instinctively, totally loveable to me. I was able without any effort to penetrate into the essence of its tragic beauty. I was as fully taken and shaken by it as I used to be in the thirties and forties by every new composition of Stravinsky" (cited in Taruskin 1996, vol. 2, 1649).

Naturally, one has to take into account that this "pocket-Requiem", as Stravinsky famously coined it, was ultimately directed not so much at the deceased person for whose commemoration it had been commissioned, nor at those persons whose recent obituaries Stravinsky pasted in the sketchbook,[4] but at the composer himself – at least this is what Vera Stravinsky told Robert Craft when it came to Stravinsky's own burial.[5] If so, the general idea of ritualistic, objective dignity would be enriched by a personal dimension.

The Hidden Return of the Lyrical "I"

It is exactly this autobiographical dimension that can be demonstrated analytically. Richard Taruskin has detected in this last major work of the composer an "abundance of traditionally Stravinskian material" (Taruskin 1996, vol. 2, 1649). The bell-like chord successions of the Postlude – played by vibraphone, tubular bells and celesta – are derived from the two sets of rows which until then had determined alternately the movements of the *Canticles*; but, at the same time, these chords are symmetrically centred around the central F which is held out in the horn, and they display multifold affinities to whole-tone, diatonic, and octatonic collections. Taruskin sees here not only a return to characteristic features of the Early Russian

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4   "[A]n extraordinary reversal of his habitual refusal to associate his work with current events or feelings" (Walsh 2006, 523).

5   "Later in the day we play the *Requiem Canticles*, which V[era]'s letter has specified as the work *she* wishes to be performed in his memory, when the time comes, 'since *he* and *we* knew he was writing it for himself'" (Craft 1994, 512). The autobiographical subtext is implicitly questioned by Stephen Walsh who remarks that "Stravinsky was frail, certainly, but so he had been for some time, and there is no particular sign that he regarded the *Requiem Canticles* as his swan song" (2006, 525).

period, but ultimately a new step towards another simplification (*uproshchenie*) which was about to take place, had Stravinsky lived longer.

What remains unremarked by Taruskin (and seemingly by anybody else) is that both the solo horn and the chord succession in 7/4 metre, with elided first beat, remind us very strongly of the respective variation in the Finale of the *Firebird* (see Rehearsal Number 203, *Allegro non troppo*). This allusion is even more plausible since in November 1965, exactly while working on the *Requiem Canticles*, Stravinsky had just composed the *Canon for Concert Introduction or Encore* built on the *Firebird* final tune and intended as a memorial piece for Pierre Monteux, thus combining his first international signature as a composer with the idea of "memoria". The same combination shines up again in the Postlude of the *Canticles*. True, at an earlier stage, quite near to completion of the work, Stravinsky had intended to use the harmonium instead of horns for sustaining long notes (Krahe 2014, 226), probably reflecting Rossini's *Petite Messe solennelle* (cf. Vlad 2021, 342). This would have given a decisive ecclesiastical (and thus probably inappropriate) atmosphere to the work, and of course weaken somehow the obvious Ivan Tsarevich association. Still, there is enough evidence that, in one way or another, Stravinsky not only set out to new shores: he also closed the circle of his own compositional career very consciously with the *Requiem Canticles*. In this case, André Boucourechliev's general observation that "his religious music […] never says 'I' or 'thou', but always 'we'" (1987, 185) is no longer fully true. The composer's "I" is present both in self-references and in meaningful expressiveness based partly on traditional ingredients, partly on structural symbolism. One could even go farther and wonder if Stravinsky – consciously or subconsciously – at this late stage identified himself with the hero of his first ballet, once the presumed total objectivity of his works is put into question.[6]

The Expression of Freedom

The framing "chords of death"[7] in the Postlude are delineating a move from complex to simple vertical structures, from chromatic to diatonic, finally resulting in a triad-plus-one chord, thus fulfilling a symbolic "simplification and clarification" (Straus 2001, 248). What is more, the sketch material and the analytical insight into the score show that Stravinsky made several deliberate changes in the structure of the hexachord rotation rows when choosing the vertical harmonies for these "chords of death".[8] And this was unusual: Claudio Spies, who had proofread most of the late

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6   Arguments for such self-portraits can be found in *Petrushka* (cf. Flamm 2013, 118–122).

7   Robert Craft first introduced this term without comment (as if it had already been commonplace) in his description of the performance of the *Requiem Canticles* at Stravinsky's burial in Venice: "Worst of all, the celesta player fills in one of the pauses in the Postlude, nearly ruining that explicit structure: the chord of Death, followed by silence, the tolling of bells, followed by silence, all three thrice repeated, then the final three chords of Death alone" (Craft 1994, 552).

8   Richard Taruskin (1996) and Joseph Straus (2001) differ in their analyses as to the derivation of the chords' individual pitches from (altered) arrays and the explanation of their structural context; yet

works of Stravinsky, always communicated to the composer errors of pitch according to his serial analysis, and Stravinsky, through Robert Craft, usually corrected them before print in order to re-establish perfect consistency with the pre-determined material (see Straus 1999 and 2001, 71–80). But still, there are cases like the *Requiem Canticles* which make clear that Stravinsky retained a sense for breaking the rules. Whereas Joseph Straus interprets the general willingness of correcting pitch "errors" as a confirmation of Stravinsky's seeing music as a game with strict rules (Straus 2001, 80), I would question the extent to which such strictness exists. These alleged errors are, at least sometimes, licences which the composer allowed himself exactly to break the system. He was not only making the rules for his game, but he took great pleasure in ignoring them from time to time. This ambiguity could relate to harmonic respects, but we can see it as well with regard to the metrical complexities in *Sacre du printemps*. There, according to the analysis of Matthew McDonald (2010), the initial idea probably had been to shape the metrical distance between the accents in the *Augures printaniers* according to the pitch distance of the intervals which build up the chord; in other words, horizontal and vertical construction are based on the same principle. But not exactly: here as well, there is no perfection in the sense of an absolute, 100 percent identity of theoretical model and analytical result.[9] It seems to be one of the innermost principles of Stravinsky's aesthetical thinking to invent ever new rules – only to break them at a certain point.

We all know the famous words of Stravinsky's *Poétique musicale*: "My freedom will be so much the greater and more meaningful, the more narrowly I limit my field of action and the more I surround myself with obstacles. Whatever diminishes constraints, diminishes strength. The more constraints one imposes, the more one frees one's self of the chains that shackle the spirit" (Stravinsky 1947, 65).

Such freedom meant for Stravinsky not only to be master of the rules, but also to overcome some of his self-imposed chains, and this is especially true for his late works: First, instead of expressing nothing at all, these works give clear representations both of feelings (sighing, mourning, lamenting) and of certain topical images (bell, chorale); second, there is "self-expression" in a literal sense, even if hidden, in the references to the very beginnings of his creative career; third, breaking up the rules not only of orthodox serialism, but also of his own recent structural inventions – such as the return of overt diatonicism – became a major feature in his works like the *Requiem*. Thus, his latest compositions are (potentially) more straightforward, more personal – and more liberal.

both authors remark on the significative number of deviations from the matrix, which is what counts here.

9   The discrepancies between the presumed system and the realization are undeniable, but not so significant as to call into question the system as a whole: "But here and elsewhere, my assumption is simply that generating durational patterns from intervallic ones was a compositional starting point for Stravinsky, that he modified the results of the initial generation to whatever extent necessary in order to achieve the musical results he desired, and that he saw no need to deny himself flexibility when employing these generations" (MacDonald 2010, 508).

Definitively, Stravinsky was no anarchist; but neither was he a strict constructivist. Instead, he could be seen as a subtle breaker of rules within a cosmos of strictness. Stravinsky was usually cultivating his image as an agile player according to strict rules, but at the same time he was able to confess certain "violations" and incongruencies imposed by his personal aesthetical feeling – apparently, he even once admitted such rule violations, although they did not take place at all (Straus 2001, 74). Both with regard to his broader audience and to his musicological or analytical admirers, he liked to assume the role of the cheater.

The *nicest* cheater, of course.

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Кристоф Флам

Експресивност у касним делима Стравинског

(Резиме)

Чувена тврдња Игора Стравинског да његова музика не изражава ништа дуго је доминирала у аналитичкој перспективи музичког истраживања. Чињеница да се у касним делима – упркос строгоћи структуралних процедура, као што је ротација хексакорада (или можда управо због ње) – поново појављује више традиционалних елемената – на пример, октатонике и дијатонике (cf. Richard Taruskin) – и да је цео арсенал делимично конвенционалних топоса препознатљив (cf. Joseph N. Straus) – тек је недавно описана. Такви елементи, од којих су неки видљивији у скицама, показују да јасни семантички нивои испливавају нарочито у касним делима, а посебно у композицијама с религијским конотацијама. Сасвим супротно од идеје о апстрактној игри с тоновима, жеља за отвореним и скривеним порукама у делима тако је откривена. Ово такође укључује самореферирајуће аспекте. Чини се да алузије на *Жар-птицу* у делу *Requiem Canticles* затварају нешто што би се могло описати као биографски круг. Лирски его се тако изражава још јасније у касним делима Стравинског. Једна карактеристика овог стваралачког ега је тенденција да се успостављена правила (композиционе процедуре) третирају нарочито стриктно с једне стране, али да се намерно и крше с друге – тренутак уметничке слободе који истовремено спречава потпуну транспарентност музичке логике и спашава дело од потпуног декодирања. Овај став подудара се с парадоксалном политиком вербалних изјава Стравинског.