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CHAPTER 26

Stravinsky, Modernism and Mass Culture

Ross Cole

On witnessing the first performance of Stravinsky's new chamber work, *Ragtime*, at London's Aeolian Hall in April 1920, several commentators sensed a disconcerting shift in the composer's stylistic evolution. Conducted by Arthur Bliss and scored for an unconventional array of eleven instruments including a cimbalom, the piece appeared to be an unpleasant joke. According to *The Observer*'s music critic:

> When good-natured elder people attempted to amuse me as a child by tickling me or pulling my hair I laughed, as I was expected to do, but was not amused, because it hurt. Their joke failed, as, I think, Stravinsky's does, in this new 'Ragtime' ... The idea of taking the most banal ragtime rhythms and clothing them in outrageous harmonies and even more outrageous orchestration, might be successful if it did not pain the ear. I can stand Stravinsky's ultra-modernities in 'Petrouchka,' 'The Rite of Spring,' and 'The Nightingale,' because there he uses them for purposes of expression, but to accept them bare of meaning is more than I can do.[1]

Noting Stravinsky's recent interest in African American music in the *Manchester Guardian*, Ernest Newman remarked that *Ragtime* might have been better received in a cinema or restaurant. As a tribute to vapid entertainment, he averred, the piece was 'hardly worth the while of a man of original genius'; Stravinsky, Newman claimed, had exhausted his compositional resources and – 'having nothing urgent or vital of his own to say now' – was busy 'larking about boyishly among the more stereotyped musical humours of the day'.[2] As a caricature of popular culture, in other words, *Ragtime* was beneath Stravinsky and, by extension, inappropriate fare for the concert hall. How should we understand this strange act

[1] P. A. S., 'Music of the Week: A New Stravinsky and Some Classics', *Observer* (2 May 1920), p. 11.
[2] Ernest Newman, 'Music in London', *Manchester Guardian*, 5 May 1920, p. 7; Ernest Newman, 'Music in London', *Manchester Guardian* (16 June 1920), p. 5.

of aesthetic transgression? Isn't modernism supposed to maintain distinctions between 'high' and 'low'?

A clue to this puzzle can be found on the cover of the piano edition of *Ragtime*, published in Paris by Editions de la Sirène in 1919 – a fluid line drawing of two harlequin-like banjo players by Stravinsky's friend Pablo Picasso. Harlequins, acrobats and other circus performers abound in Picasso's painterly imagination, particularly during his blue and rose periods – figures emblematic of popular entertainment and a burgeoning metropolitan leisure industry. This beguilement with aspects of 'low', outcast or vernacular culture is found most strikingly in his 1907 depiction of female prostitutes, *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon*, and it extends to the representation or collage of consumer items in analytic and synthetic Cubism: guitars, candlesticks, violins, bottles of alcohol, playing cards, pipes, sheet music and that crucial signifier of urban modernity, the daily newspaper. Tellingly, Picasso's subjects in his two versions of the *Three Musicians* from 1921 are an enigmatic trio of entertainers in the *commedia dell'arte* tradition; they could even be playing ragtime. We find a similar preoccupation with the minutiae of quotidian life in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* published the following year: the sound of a gramophone record, the clatter and chatter of a bar in Lower Thames Street, gossip about the war and a typist who 'lays out food in tins' (tin cans standing synecdochically for disillusionment with industrialised mass production and ersatz mass culture more broadly). What is significant about all these instances of the popular making an appearance in modernist art and literature is that such material is transmuted, to borrow Eliot's words, into 'a heap of broken images'. Such techniques do not simply represent the popular, but fragment it, rearrange it, and recontextualise it: in the language of Russian formalism, they defamiliarise, forcing us to examine ordinary things anew.

We can see a parallel with the way that Picasso and Eliot enfold aspects of the modern world into their work in Stravinsky's turn to ragtime – a hugely popular and notorious symptom of the American music publishing industry pejoratively dubbed Tin Pan Alley.[3] As with the contemporaneous Cubist styles of Picasso, Georges Braque and Juan Gris, we thus hear ragtime music in *Ragtime* as if through a fairground mirror or kaleidoscope, its familiar sounds and structures distorted, thrown out of shape,

[3] See Ross Cole, 'Notes on Troubling "the Popular"', *Popular Music* 37, no. 3 (2018), pp. 392–414; and Keir Keightley, 'Tin Pan Allegory', *Modernism/modernity* 19, no. 4 (2012), pp. 717–36.

abstracted and reclothed in a modernist guise – elevated from kitsch to avant-garde. Indeed, this was precisely what Stravinsky had intended:

> [*Ragtime*] is indicative of the passion I felt at that time for jazz, which burst into life so suddenly when the war ended. At my request, a whole pile of this music was sent to me, enchanting me by its truly popular appeal, its freshness, and the novel rhythm which so distinctly revealed its Negro origin. These impressions suggested the idea of creating a composite portrait of this new dance music, giving the creation the importance of a concert piece, as, in the past, the composers of their periods had done for the minuet, the waltz, the mazurka, etc.[4]

However debatable the details of this story are, what attracted Stravinsky above all was the genre's defining characteristic: rhythmic syncopation. In order to highlight accented offbeats via a predictable metrical framework the piece is in 4/4 throughout. As he later noted, this relational tension was critical to the production in jazz of 'an amusing sensation approaching giddiness' in which 'the real or implied presence of the beats' brings 'the rhythmic invention of the soloist into relief'.[5]

Stravinsky was not alone in declaring that syncopation was a distinctively African or African American technique. Many critics of the day saw ragtime and its associated dance craze among the young as a kind of modern cultural epidemic, equating the genre with mental illness, hysteria and moral corruption – diagnoses underpinned by the genre's troubling associations with racial alterity. Writing in New York's *Sun*, for example, Walter Kingsley likened jazz to a form of 'delirium tremens . . . an attempt to reproduce the marvelous syncopation of the African jungle': awakening 'the savage in us with a pleasant tickle', syncopated music conjured up 'the underworld resorts of New Orleans . . . refuges of basic folklore and primeval passion'.[6] When viewed as American folklore, however, such music took on a new light for some commentators, who saw it as the foundation for a national school of composition; others simply dismissed it as the irksome invention of an unscrupulous and profit-hungry music industry. For Stravinsky, ragtime evidently appealed as an indication of exotic otherness – an inspiration analogous to the African masks that Picasso drew upon amid a Parisian environment enthralled by colonial expositions, blackface stereotyping and the erotically charged performances of Josephine Baker. Somehow at once alluringly primitive and yet

[4] Igor Stravinsky, *An Autobiography* (New York: Norton, 1962), pp. 77–8. See also Barbara B. Heyman, 'Stravinsky and Ragtime', *Musical Quarterly* 68, no. 4 (1982), pp. 543–62.
[5] *Poetics*, pp. 28–9. [6] Walter Kingsley, 'Whence Comes Jass?', *Sun* (5 August 1917), p. 3.

ultra-modern, black music afforded Stravinsky a way to subvert Western art traditions – its very atavism, much like *The Rite of Spring*, paradoxically being a sign of its modernity.

It was this twin infatuation with the primitive and the popular that troubled not only the Frankfurt School theorist Theodor Adorno, but also Stravinsky's detractors during the early decades of the twentieth century. An article in the British periodical *The Sackbut*, for instance, outlined a strikingly similar argument to the one that Adorno would famously articulate in his *Philosophie der Neuen Musik*:

> After *Petrouchka* Stravinsky seems to have abandoned as a bad job any attempt at organic development in his music, which begins to proceed almost entirely in repetitions or *ostinato* figures reiterated with such maddening insistence that one might almost suppose his sole object to have been to reduce his audience to a condition of St. Vitus' dance ... The object of such music is not to stir natural impulses but to provoke involuntary reactions. Here we have in an extreme form the commonest and most unmistakable symptom of decadence – the inability to take life whole, the fear and resultant atrophy of vital instincts – life must be 'simplified', spontaneity must become automatic, everything must be reduced to its lowest terms – and so to absurdity.[7]

As a Dadaist gesture, in short, *Ragtime* flirted with the most troubling aspects of contemporary society. According to this view Stravinsky's music (like ragtime) abandons dialectical impulses in favour of vulgar noises and repetition, engendering a kind of mad, mechanistic puppet show. The issue for such writers was not merely that Stravinsky was drawing on mass-produced music, but – more ominously – that his compositional philosophy and even the internal details of his works seemed to mimic the underlying logic of commodity capitalism driving the culture industry itself. Ever sensitive to echoes of authoritarianism and mass conformity, Adorno detected a yet more disturbing political phenomenon in this music: fascism.

The widespread existence of fascism as a latent ideology in Europe during this period and its eager adoption by certain members of the literary intelligentsia has been well documented.[8] Stravinsky's preoccupations with

[7] 'Sound for Sound's Sake', *The Sackbut* (August 1920), pp. 153–6 (p. 154). See also Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

[8] See Zeev Sternhell, *Neither Right Nor Left: Fascist Ideology in France*, trans. David Maisel (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); and John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880–1939* (London: Faber and Faber, 1992).

unity, order, mysticism, ritual and submission certainly share in this complex cultural ferment. Adorno's scathing denunciation of popular music as a mirror of authoritarianism, moreover, revolves around the hit music of Paul Whiteman – the so-called king of jazz and the artist for whom Stravinsky wrote his *Scherzo à la russe* in 1944. Grateful for the money it brought, Stravinsky accepted the commission for a jazz piece, recycling elements from an aborted film score. By this point, he had moved permanently to the United States after a series of tragedies during the late 1930s in which he lost his wife Catherine, their daughter Ludmila and his mother within the space of just six months as World War II broke out. Settling in West Hollywood having married his longtime mistress Vera de Bosset Sudeikina, Stravinsky situated himself at the heart of America's film industry, hoping to contribute to this flourishing form of popular entertainment. His score for *The Rite of Spring* had already made its way into the commercial limelight through Disney's epic animation *Fantasia* in 1940 – liberally rearranged (owing to a lack of copyright in the USA) to fit a sequence described in the film as 'the story of the growth of life on earth' according to science. Although Stravinsky's music was an appropriate choice for the depiction of a volatile primeval landscape and was not unsuited to the lexicon of Hollywood musical cues (such as those by Bernard Herrmann, who would provide the score to *Citizen Kane* the following year), music critics were not sympathetic. In the *New York Times*, Olin Downes protested at the misuse of Stravinsky's 'pure' masterpiece for the cinema: 'to impose upon this music a children's lesson in geology, zoology and bacteriology', he wrote, was 'a far cry indeed from the quality of Stravinsky'.[9]

A 'serious' composer writing film music, however, was not unusual at the time: Aaron Copland, Darius Milhaud and Sergei Prokofiev had all written film scores, not to mention Hans Eisler and Erich Korngold. Despite beginning work on several scores during the early 1940s – including *The Song of Bernadette*, *Jane Eyre*, *Commandos Strike at Dawn* and *The North Star* – Stravinsky failed to see any through to completion, unwilling to reconcile himself with the studio system. Rather than abandoning what he had produced, Stravinsky deftly repurposed these pieces as new works or used them to fill out others, giving us (respectively) the *Symphony in Three Movements*, *Ode*, *Four Norwegian Moods* and *Scherzo à la russe*. Shortly after becoming an American citizen, Stravinsky made his views

[9] Olin Downes, 'Disney's Experiment: Second Thoughts on "Fantasia" and Its Visualization of Music', *New York Times* (17 November 1940), p. 143.

on film music explicit, publishing an acerbic critique in the *Musical Digest* in 1946:

> I realize that music is an indispensable adjunct to the sound film. It has got to bridge holes; it has got to fill the emptiness of the screen and supply the loudspeakers with more or less pleasant sounds. The film could not get along without it, just as I myself could not get along without having the empty spaces of my living-room walls covered with wall-paper. But you would not ask me, would you, to regard my wall-paper as I would regard painting, or apply aesthetic standards to it?[10]

At the core of his reasoning was the aestheticist ideal that music is inherently non-representational, that it cannot explain or narrate cinematic action and was at its best not in a position of subservience, but in a relation of equality with the other arts. In order to justify this argument, Stravinsky invoked Cubism, comparing references to 'the external world' in his compositions to 'a guitar in a Picasso still-life' – something 'caught as pretext or clothing for the inherent abstraction'.[11]

Here, of course, we find Stravinsky's great Apollonian philosophy of order and detachment characteristic of his neoclassical style – the realm of Apollo, as Camille Paglia later claimed, encompassing the 'harsh and phobic' realm of all art-making distinguished by reason, logic, structure, individuation, masculinity and a cold rejection of Dionysus, 'ruler of the chthonian whose law is procreative femaleness'.[12] If the history of jazz is indebted to a Dionysian spirit, Stravinsky's appropriation of the idiom represents an Apollonian attempt to discipline unruly aspects of improvisation and syncopation through notation. Emblematic of this fascination with jazz transposed into the concert hall is the *Ebony Concerto* of 1945 – the title of which conjures up a nexus of connotations from colonialist exoticism and African skin tone to the wood of a clarinet or the pentatonic scale of the piano's black keys long associated with the primitive. Written for white jazz clarinettist Woody Herman and later recorded by Benny Goodman, the piece is scored for an ensemble of saxophones, trumpets, trombones, bass clarinet, French horn, piano, harp, guitar, bass and percussion. As he emphasised in his article on film music, Stravinsky was interested in juxtaposition and confrontation: fittingly, the *Ebony Concerto*

[10] 'Igor Stravinsky on Film Music (1946)', in Mervyn Cooke (ed.), *The Hollywood Film Music Reader* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 273–80 (p. 277).
[11] Ibid., p. 278.
[12] Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (London: Yale University Press, 1990), p. 12.

presents us with the signifiers of jazz (via instrumentation, timbre, rhythm and blue notes) struggling against the signifiers of European modernism (via dissonance, stringency and fragmentation). The result is an estrangement of both jazz and concert music that anticipated by a decade the 'third stream' approach of Gunther Schuller. Herman considered the result to be 'grotesque' and demanding to the point of irritation, having 'nothing to do with a jazz band'.[13] His comments are not entirely unfounded – the piece's construction was at odds with the freedom and intricate drive of bebop epitomised by the contemporaneous work of Charlie Parker, Dizzy Gillespie and Thelonious Monk. Stravinsky, much like Adorno, appeared unwilling to take note of what amounted to a new and vital form of African American musical modernism founded on complexity, dexterity and aversion to the mainstream.

Within the 'civil war' between Dixieland and modern 'hot' music aficionados of the time, Stravinsky was nevertheless considered a modernist alongside bebop artists and the Herman band.[14] For other writers, Stravinsky had in fact been a jazz composer in disguise all along, a populist sheep in wolf's clothing: dubbing him the 'superman' of jazz owing to his fixation with rhythmic ostinati, one critic highlighted a 'curious aesthetic kinship', pointing out that 'Stravinsky is much more closely akin in spirit to Irving Berlin and other American ragtime kings than his admirers, in their more serious moments, would like to admit'.[15] As Christopher Butler has pointed out, Stravinsky's work during the interwar period aligns with a fashionable and pluralistic 'jazz modern' style typified by figures such as Jean Cocteau and the Delaunays.[16] Stravinsky, in other words, willingly traversed what Andreas Huyssen portrays as the 'Great Divide' between modernism and mass culture that arose during the second half of the nineteenth century.[17] Or did he? As Huyssen notes, although a modernist sensibility recurrently ransacked or suffused the popular domain, thus ostensibly destabilising binaries, such transgressions ultimately served to

[13] Quoted in Ira Gitler, *Swing to Bop: An Oral History of the Transition in Jazz in the 1940s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 195.

[14] 'Public Gets Hep to Big Issues in "Hot" Carnegie Hall Concert', *Washington Post* (14 April 1946), p. 4. On hipness see Phil Ford, *Dig: Sound and Music in Hip Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

[15] 'Stravinsky as a "Superman of Jazz" is Local Commentator's View', *New York Times* (3 May 1925), p. 6; Prosdocimus, 'Contingencies', *The Sackbut* (May 1920), p. 29 (pp. 27–31).

[16] Christopher Butler, 'Stravinsky as Modernist', in Jonathan Cross (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Stravinsky* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 19–36 (p. 26).

[17] Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture and Postmodernism* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988).

uphold divisions between high and low. For all his gestures of radical inclusivity – incorporating some of the most conspicuous and demonised forms of twentieth-century mass consumer culture into his writing – it is clear that Stravinsky knew exactly where such music stood and what it represented: raw material. His fascination with ragtime, jazz and Hollywood is notably lacking any fear of contamination, betraying an unshakeable confidence that popular and art musics are independent, hermetic and ordered in a hierarchical relationship in which one will always tower above the other.

Author's Recommendation

Ragtime for 11 Instruments (1918)

In this piece we hear Stravinsky's playful remodelling of syncopated popular music – an excursion into the realm of Tin Pan Alley and blackface caricature in the tradition of Debussy's *Golliwogg's Cakewalk* (1908). Associated with newly liberated forms of dancing, gramophone technology and the rise of a globalised entertainment industry, ragtime signalled a new experience of modernity for many listeners. In *Ragtime*, this familiar idiom is fragmented, parodied and recomposed like an aural Cubist collage, its textures made deliberately alien and uncanny. Listen in particular for the cimbalom, the sonority of which ingeniously conjures up banjo strings or a barrelhouse piano.