

Igor Stravinsky

His life, times and music

From Russia with Love

"I know that the twelve notes in each octave and the varieties of rhythm offer me opportunities that all of human genius will never exhaust."

– Igor Stravinsky

Two Birthdays?

How would you like to have two birthdays? That seems to have been the case with Igor Stravinsky, one of the most notable composers of the twentieth century. He was born on the 17th or 18th of June, 1882, in Oranienbaum in Russia. The confusion around his actual birthday stems from the fact that until quite recently, countries where people worship in the Orthodox Eastern religion used a different calendar from the one used in North America.

A Musical Family

The Stravinsky family was originally Polish, but had settled in Russia many years before Igor was born. As is often the case in the families of great composers, they loved music. Stravinsky's father was a bass-baritone singer in the Imperial Opera in St. Petersburg, and although he insisted that young Igor should study law (and indeed, Igor Stravinsky received a law degree from the University of St. Petersburg in 1905), he also fostered a love of music in his son.

A Glimpse of Tchaikovsky

Igor first saw his father perform in Glinka's opera *Ruslan and Ludmilla*. After the performance, he was allowed to go backstage, and there he caught a glimpse of Tchaikovsky, whom he greatly admired, only two weeks before Tchaikovsky's death from cholera.

A Musical Education

Igor's music studies began when he was nine years old, with lessons in piano and harmony. At the age of 18, he met Vladimir, the son of the famous Russian composer Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov. Through his friend, he met the composer and began studying orchestration and musical form with him. Rimsky-Korsakov used to hold weekly gatherings at his house where his pupils' compositions would be played. This was a valuable experience for the young Stravinsky. Rimsky-Korsakov died in 1908, and Stravinsky never studied with anyone again. In later years, Stravinsky credited Rimsky-Korsakov, as well as Glazunov, Wagner and Tchaikovsky, with influencing his own work. He also loved to go to the theatre and the opera, and to read the many books in his father's library.

Kissing Cousins

As a teenager, Igor and his brother Goury spent their summers at a remote village called Oustilug, about a two-and-a-half day's journey from St. Petersburg. Here their uncle, Gabriel Nossenko, had purchased land for his daughters Ludmilla and Catherine. Catherine and Igor had been childhood friends and had a great deal in common. They both loved painting, amateur theatre and, of course, playing the piano. Catherine studied singing in Paris and was to be a great source of encouragement to the composer. So, it was not surprising when they married in 1906. They built a home on the Nossenko estate in Oustilug, by the river, which Stravinsky described as a "haven for composing", and there they stayed until 1914. The couple had four children, two sons and two daughters.

The Firebird

In 1910, the founder of the Ballets Russes, Serge Diaghilev, commissioned Stravinsky to write the music for a ballet based on *The Firebird*, a Russian folktale. This ballet turned out to be a brilliant work of orchestral effects! The first performance took place in Paris on June 10, 1910. The audience included French composers Claude Debussy and Maurice Ravel! It was an overwhelming success, and as a result, Stravinsky's fame and that of the Ballets Russes was assured. For

Stravinsky, it was the beginning of his relationship with western culture. Unfortunately, as is all too often the case, his success was both envied and resented by his colleagues in St. Petersburg. The rift between them became permanent.

A Riot!

In 1913, Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* premiered in Paris, but a riot erupted in the audience, partly because of the music and partly because of the explicit choreography of the *Danse des adolescents!* Later productions were more successful. Unfortunately, shortly after the riotous premiere, Stravinsky fell ill with typhoid fever and spent six weeks in a nursing home recuperating.

The Russian Revolution

In 1914, the Stravinskys moved to Clarens in Switzerland for the winter. In preparation for the move, Stravinsky made a trip to Oustilug in order to collect some of his material. Little did he know that this would be his last visit there; he never saw Oustilug again. When the Russian Revolution came in 1917, he found himself cut off from Oustilug and indeed from most of his possessions, which were still in Russia. He spent the next several years in Switzerland, and was not entirely unhappy. Although cut off from Russia, he had many friends in the arts community.

The Soldier's Tale

Nonetheless, it was a difficult period in his life. The Revolution had deprived him of his income and his properties. Short of money, Stravinsky and his friend poet Charles Ramuz set up a mobile miniature theatre that they could take around to the villages, as a way of earning a living. He assembled an orchestra in miniature consisting of only seven players, representing the major groups of instruments (for example, brass and woodwinds). It was with this in mind that he composed *The Soldier's Tale (L'Histoire du soldat)*. His idea was to place the orchestra on one side of the stage in full view of the audience, with a small platform for the narrator on the other side, and a space in the middle for the action to take place. It was an appropriate theme for a war-torn continent.

An Unlikely Spy

In 1917, Stravinsky met the great artist Pablo Picasso in Italy. They had a lot in common in that they both viewed the act of creating something as a problem to be solved! Picasso did a drawing of Stravinsky. It was in his luggage when he returned to Switzerland. The customs officials, who could not have known much about art, interrogated the composer. The exchange went something like this:

“What is this sketch?”

“My portrait drawn by Picasso.”

“Nonsense. It must be a plan.”

“Yes – the plan of my face.”

However, the customs officials remained unconvinced. With World War I raging, they thought it was a secret plan of military importance and confiscated it. It was necessary for Stravinsky's friends at the British Embassy to intervene and retrieve it for him.

Pulcinella

From 1919 to 1920, he worked on the music for another ballet, *Pulcinella*. It was produced on May 15, 1920, at the Paris Opera House.

A Period of Intense Productivity

In 1920, with the war over, Stravinsky settled in France. It was a logical move. Many of his main works had first been staged in Paris and he was popular with the musical and artistic elite of the city. He embarked upon a period of his life that saw him touring around Europe and America as a conductor and pianist. Although he composed at the piano, which he described as “the fulcrum of all my musical discoveries”, he was more interested in composing than performing. In 1925, he made his first appearance in the United States.

The next several years were productive ones for him. In 1927, he composed his *Oedipus Rex* in collaboration with the French dramatist Jean Cocteau. It was intended as a gift for Serge Diaghilev on the twentieth anniversary of his Ballets Russes. Diaghilev died soon after in 1929, a devastating personal loss for Stravinsky. In 1934, he became a French citizen and published his memoirs in French.

Personal Tragedy

In 1937, with the clouds of World War II gathering over Europe, Stravinsky experienced his own personal losses. His wife Catherine and daughters Ludmilla and Milena were in a sanatorium in Switzerland, receiving treatment for tuberculosis. In 1938, while he was on a concert tour in Italy, Ludmilla's condition deteriorated suddenly and she died. Stravinsky's grief was intense. Sadly, a year later, in 1939, his beloved wife Catherine also died, followed three months later by his mother.

Stravinsky himself was diagnosed with tuberculosis. He entered the sanatorium where his surviving daughter Milena was already a patient, and spent five months there. Milena received treatment for six years.

A Move to the United States

The loss of three close family members within a few months of one another was a terrible blow. Stravinsky left Europe in 1939 and settled in the United States. His first stop was Cambridge, Massachusetts, where he had been invited by Harvard University to deliver a series of six lectures on music. The text of the lectures has since been published.

Happy Again!

In 1940, Stravinsky married Vera de Bosset, who had been a close friend for many years. They settled in Los Angeles, California, and in 1945 Stravinsky became an American citizen. The years were busy ones for him as he continued with his composing and concert tours. He traveled around the world, and on his 80th birthday in 1962 accepted an official invitation to visit the Soviet Union (Russia), the land of his birth, 48 years after leaving it! In 1965, he visited Poland, but was unable to go to Oustilug, his former home.

Life was pleasant. When he was at home, his day began with 15 minutes of exercising. He was very concerned about his health; he had not been well as a child, and had lost so many family members to tuberculosis. The rest of the morning was spent composing. He ate lunch at 2 p.m., and after lunch played Chinese checkers, a game he

loved – although he did not like to lose! He pattered in his garden and paid attention to a cage of pet birds. The rest of the day was spent attending to his correspondence and other matters. Order was very important to him. His compositions and his workroom were all kept very tidy.

His daughter Milena moved to California and settled near her father. Her husband André Marion became Stravinsky's accountant and business manager. One son remained in Switzerland while the other took up residence in the United States.

In 1953, he met the poet Dylan Thomas and hoped to compose an opera with him, but Thomas died before anything took place. In 1960, influenced by cinematography (movies) and its visual effects, Stravinsky composed *The Flood*. This meant that he was able to dispense with "connecting" music (overtures, entr'actes etc.).

In 1962, Stravinsky and Vera were the honoured dinner guests of then United States President John F. Kennedy and Mrs. Kennedy. He was saddened by Kennedy's assassination one year later, and composed *Elegy for JFK* for him.

In 1962, inspired by a visit he made to Israel, he composed a vocal work, *Abraham and Isaac*. The Committee of the Festival of Israel invited him to visit again in 1964 for the premiere of *Abraham and Isaac* during the Festival of Israel. Stravinsky described this as the highlight of the year.

The honours continued. In 1965, while in Italy, Stravinsky was decorated by Pope Paul VI at a concert in the Vatican. It was at this time that he began work on what was to be his last major composition, *Requiem Canticles*.

The Final Years

In 1967, Stravinsky gave his final concert. This concert took place in Toronto. He conducted *Pulcinella* and for the first and last time in his conducting career, he remained seated.

Stravinsky was now 85 years old. At this point in his life, he was no longer able to compose, although he retained the will to do so. His greatest pleasure came from listening to recorded music.

In 1970, Stravinsky was hospitalized, but recovered sufficiently to make one last visit to Europe. In April of 1971, he suffered his final illness, and died on April 6, 1971. A private funeral service took place on Good Friday, April 9. Three days later, his body was flown to Venice in Italy for a public funeral. The funeral Mass included his own *Requiem Canticles*. The coffin was borne by gondola to the island of San Michele. There he is buried, his grave near that of his old friend Serge Diaghilev.

Stravinsky's Music

Stravinsky: Greetings Prelude

Stravinsky wrote this arrangement in celebration of the 80th birthday of Pierre Monteux, a French conductor who conducted the premieres of several of Stravinsky's works for ballet, including *The Rite of Spring* (*Sacre du printemps*) and *Petrushka*.

Stravinsky's The Firebird

The Firebird, composed by Stravinsky in 1910, is a ballet with an oriental theme. The audience is treated to a magnificent visual spectacle that today continues to surprise and delight spectators! *The Firebird* tells the story of a magnificent bird that hovers around a fairy tree hoping to gather the golden apples it has seen in the moonlight. The bird is pursued by Ivan, the handsome hunter, but the bird always manages to elude him. However, Ivan does manage to catch a golden feather, which helps him to overcome his fear of Kashchi, an immortal giant with green claws who petrifies all who come within his grasp. Ivan takes Kashchi's soul, which is in the shape of an egg. He breaks the egg and finds trapped inside it, several captive princesses. He marries the most beautiful of the princesses and the ballet ends with a joyful celebration at an enchanted castle.

Stravinsky's The Soldier's Tale (L'Histoire du soldat)

The story is based on a Russian folk tale. A soldier sells his violin to the devil in exchange for a book that gives the answer to every question. He spends three years with the devil (he thinks he has only spent three days with him). When he returns to the village, nobody recognizes him, not even his fiancée or his mother. The magic book helps him to become rich, but he is not any happier. He throws the book away and returns to being a soldier. One day he hears that the King's daughter is ill, and that the King will give her hand in marriage to the man who can cure her. He decides to try his luck. On his way there, he meets his old friend the devil, who is also going to try his luck, and who happens to have the soldier's violin with him. They play a game of cards during which the soldier loses all his money, but does recover his violin. The playing of the violin cures the princess and the soldier marries her. The devil is furious and swears revenge if the soldier ever returns to his native land. After awhile, the soldier gets homesick and foolishly returns home. He is captured by the devil and carried off before his wife's eyes and that is the end.

Stravinsky drew on music from around the world in composing *The Soldier's Tale*. He wanted it to appeal to audiences everywhere. American ragtime, Argentine tango, Swiss brass bands, the Spanish pasodoble, Bach's chorales and preludes, Viennese waltzes – all are sources for the music.

Stravinsky's Pulcinella

Pulcinella was conceived of as a "ballet in one act." Pulcinella is a young man who is attacked by a number of other young men who are jealous of him. Thinking they have killed him, they steal his clothes. However Pulcinella is not dead. He cleverly hires an actor, Furbo, to impersonate him, by pretending to be fatally injured in the attack. Pulcinella dresses up as a wizard and pretends to revive Furbo. Thinking Pulcinella dead, his assailants go off to visit their girlfriends, but Pulcinella, in his disguise as a wizard, appears and marries all the couples, while he himself marries his own sweetheart. Furbo takes over the wizard's disguise and gives the couple his blessing.