

Igor Stravinsky

Suite from the ballet “Pulcinella”

IGOR FEDOROVICH STRAVINSKY was born at Oranienbaum, Russia, on June 17, 1882, and died in New York on April 6, 1971. He began the ballet “Pulcinella” in the fall of 1919, completing it on April 20, 1920; it was first performed on May 15, 1920, by Serge Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes at the Paris Opera, under the direction of Ernest Ansermet, with choreography by Leonid Massine, and scenery and costumes by Pablo Picasso. Stravinsky prepared the suite about 1922; portions of the suite, played from manuscript, received their first-ever performances in Boston Symphony concerts led by Pierre Monteux on December 22 and 23, 1922, with further performances the following month in Brooklyn, New York, Cambridge, and Providence.

THE SCORE OF THE “PULCINELLA” SUITE in its 1947 revision (the version typically heard) calls for two flutes, two oboes, two bassoons, two horns, one trumpet, one trombone, a quintet of solo strings (two violins, viola, cello, and bass), and a medium-sized group of orchestral strings.

After the end of World War I, Serge Diaghilev was eager to bring his prize composer, Igor Stravinsky, back into the fold of his Ballets Russes, where he had achieved such epochal pre-war successes as *Firebird*, *Petrushka*, and *The Rite of Spring*. Big ballet productions had not been practical during the war, and Stravinsky had worked during that time with a Swiss writer, C.F. Ramuz, in the creation of a small stage work, *The Soldier’s Tale*, which had been produced with great success. Diaghilev was jealous and sought a project to attract Stravinsky’s interest. The Ballets Russes had recently produced a piece based on old works by Scarlatti dressed up in new orchestrations, and Diaghilev thought Stravinsky might enjoy a similar undertaking. The new idea was first proposed to Stravinsky in a letter of June 10, 1919, from Ernest Ansermet, who was then conducting the Ballets Russes. When Stravinsky first learned that Diaghilev wanted him to arrange the music of Pergolesi, the composer thought the impresario had taken leave of his senses. He knew little of Pergolesi’s work—only the little intermezzo *La serva padrona* and one liturgical work, the *Stabat mater*—and he didn’t think much of that little. Diaghilev, who was an experienced musician as well as an impresario, had already gathered pieces that he thought might be suitable in a balletic context (mostly by buying them from a Neapolitan professor who had a lucrative sideline in selling copies of music from the Naples Conservatory), and he finally persuaded Stravinsky at least to look at what he had collected—much of it, he said, completely unknown. The composer fell in love with what he saw and agreed at once to accept the commission. We do not know exactly when he reached this decision, but he began actively composing in early September, though he only signed a contract for the ballet in December. Diaghilev, Stravinsky, and the choreographer Massine jointly created a scenario for the course of the action, and Stravinsky set to work choosing and “coloring” the 200-year-old scores.

Stravinsky did not realize at the time, though we now know, that of the selections he finally used in his ballet, fewer than half were actually by Pergolesi, so the official title of the full work—“*Pulcinella*, Ballet in One Act for Small Orchestra and Three Solo Voices, Based on Music of Pergolesi”—is actually, at least in retrospect, seriously misleading. And, considering that the genuine Pergolesi is to be found almost entirely in the songs (which are not included in the orchestral suite), the title is even more thoroughly incorrect for the suite. The other composers, who have since been identified, are almost entirely unknown, though no doubt worthy in their own way: Domenico Gallo and Alessandro Parisotti. Gallo, in particular, composed the original material on which Stravinsky based the Overture; the Scherzino, Allegro, and Andantino group; and the Finale. The Tarantella comes from a series of six *Concerti armonici* once considered to be among Pergolesi’s most famous works, but actually they are by a Dutch count named Unico Wilhelm von Wassenaer (these were copied out from originals in the British Museum by the Belgian musicologist E. van der Straeten). The Toccata and the following Gavotta are from a harpsichord work by that favorite composer, “anon.” And, finally, the Serenata, the Trio of the Scherzino, the Vivo, and the Minuetto are based on originals by Pergolesi himself. When doing his work of “recomposition,” Stravinsky often worked directly on the manuscripts sent for his consideration, working out the details of his own version before then writing them directly into the full score, as he reported he was doing on December 5.

Of course, the actual source of the originals need not trouble us in the slightest when listening to Stravinsky’s witty score. What matters in the concert hall is the use to which Stravinsky put these borrowed ideas, and on that point there has been general agreement from the very beginning: they have become thoroughly and delightfully Stravinskyized. For the most part he retained the original melodies and bass parts, but he made the phrases less regular using unexpected repetitions or elisions, and he elaborated the harmonies by adding ostinatos or prolonging chords beyond the point at which they would normally change. He chose to write for a fairly standard classical

orchestra—woodwinds in pairs without clarinets, no percussion, and the strings divided in concertino and *ripieno* sections. The one rather unlikely component (from the 18th-century point of view) is the trombone, but Stravinsky's amusing writing for that instrument, especially in conjunction with the double bass in the Vivo, more than justifies its inclusion.

Stravinsky confessed that he had a wonderful time working on this score, and although it had no immediate repercussions in his next compositions, it undoubtedly brought home to him some unexplored possibilities of 18th-century style treated anew in the twentieth century and ultimately led to such neoclassical marvels as *Oedipus Rex*, the *Symphony in C*, and *The Rake's Progress*. And quite aside from the role *Pulcinella* played in engineering Stravinsky's turn to neoclassicism, the joyous wit inherent in the score itself remains its own justification.

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