

Igor Stravinsky

“Petrushka,” Burlesque in four scenes (1947 version)

IGOR FEDOROVICH STRAVINSKY was born at Oranienbaum, Russia, on June 17, 1882, and died in New York on April 6, 1971. He composed “Petrushka” at Lausanne and Clarens, Switzerland, at Beaulieu in the south of France, and in Rome, between August 1910 and May 26, 1911. The first performance was given by Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes at the Théâtre du Châtelet, Paris, on June 13, 1911. Scenario, scenery, and costumes were by Alexandre Benois, to whom the music is dedicated, and whose name appears on the title page as co-author of these “scènes burlesques.” The choreography was by Michel Fokine. Pierre Monteux conducted, the principal roles being taken by Vaslav Nijinsky as Petrushka, Tamara Karsavina as the Ballerina, Alexander Orlov as the Moor, and Enrico Cecchetti as the Magician. It was also Monteux who conducted the first concert performance, on March 1, 1914, at the Casino di Paris, with Alfredo Casella playing the piano solo. Stravinsky reorchestrated “Petrushka”—reducing the original instrumentation somewhat, particularly in the woodwinds and brass—in 1946, the new edition being generally identified by the date of its publication as the “1947 version.” It is the 1947 version that is being played in these concerts.

THE SCORE OF STRAVINSKY’S “PETRUSHKA” IN ITS 1947 VERSION calls for three flutes (third doubling piccolo), two oboes and English horn, three clarinets (third doubling bass clarinet), two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, cymbal, bass drum, tambourine, side drum, tam-tam, xylophone, celesta, harp, piano, and strings.

In 1910 Stravinsky became the darling of Paris with a brilliant ballet, *The Firebird*, produced by Diaghilev’s Russian Ballet. The impresario had risked failure with a young and relatively unknown composer (Stravinsky turned twenty-eight a week before the premiere) and had enjoyed a resounding triumph. Naturally he wanted a new Stravinsky ballet for the following season, and he was overjoyed with the proposed scenario: an exotic picture of life in prehistoric Russia featuring the sacrifice of a maiden, who is chosen for the honor of dancing herself to death for the fertility of the earth. The work promised wonderful richness of orchestral color and rhythmic energy, two features that Stravinsky had already demonstrated in abundance.

After the Paris season ended, the young composer went off with his family for a vacation in Switzerland, first to Vevey, then to Lausanne, with every intention of composing his planned ballet. But his musical fantasy took him in an utterly unexpected direction. Before starting the ballet (which he eventually did finish as *Le Sacre du printemps*), he wanted to compose something quite different by way, almost, of recreation. He had in mind a little concerto-like piece for piano and orchestra; his first image was of a romantic poet rolling two objects over the black and white keys, respectively, of the piano (this image was to give rise to the complex bichord consisting of C major and F-sharp major simultaneously arpeggiated). Later his image became more detailed, with the piano representing a puppet suddenly come to life and cavorting up and down the keyboard, metaphorically thumbing his nose at the orchestra, which would finally explode in exasperation with overwhelming trumpet blasts. “The outcome,” Stravinsky wrote, “is a terrific noise which reaches its climax and ends in the sorrowful and querulous collapse of the poor puppet.”

Having finished this little piece, Stravinsky hunted for a suitable title and was delighted when it occurred to him to call it *Petrushka*, after a puppet character (roughly the Russian equivalent of Punch) popular in Russian fairs. Soon after, Diaghilev came to visit, expecting to hear some of the new ballet. As Stravinsky recalled,

He was much astonished when, instead of sketches of the *Sacre*, I played him the piece which I had just composed and which later became the second scene of *Petrushka*. He was so much pleased with it that he would not leave it alone and began persuading me to develop the theme of the puppet’s sufferings and make it into a whole ballet.

While he remained in Switzerland we worked out together the general lines of the subject and plot in accordance with ideas which I suggested....I began at once to compose the first scene of the ballet.

The work was put on the stage with the collaboration of designer Alexandre Benois, who entered enthusiastically into Stravinsky’s vision, eager as he was to “immortalize” the character of Petrushka, “my friend since my earliest childhood.” The choreography was created by Michel Fokine, who described the rehearsals, on the stage of the Paris Opera, as often degenerating to lessons in mathematics, since the dancers had so much difficulty with Stravinsky’s irregular fast rhythms. Once orchestral rehearsals started with Pierre Monteux, some of the players were offended at the curious sounds they were asked to make with their instruments. The scene changes were hampered by the fact that they had to be made in total darkness, and it was a noisy darkness, since Stravinsky had placed four drums in the prompt corner to play a continuous racket of sixteenth-notes to link scenes. Yet all the problems vanished in that most magical of balms, a successful opening night. One critic hailed the work as “a masterpiece, one of the most unexpected, most impulsive, most buoyant and lively that I know.” Though the success was credited to the

effectiveness of all the elements—not least Nijinsky’s brilliant performance as the mechanical puppet with searing emotions—the music came in for lavish praise.

Petrushka became a banner work for the Russian Ballet, enjoying enormous success all over Europe and even in America, where in most cities it was the first work of Stravinsky’s to be performed. Of course no one at the time could predict that Stravinsky would go on very soon to an even more astonishing and seminal work, *Le Sacre du printemps*, one that proved disconcerting, even to many of Stravinsky’s warmest admirers. Still, even though *Le Sacre* is universally regarded as the more important work, *Petrushka* remains as fascinating and delightful as these early appreciative critics found it. From the opening measure it positively dazzles the listener with its color and energy, and it moves with easy assurance between the “public” world of the fairground and the “private” world of Petrushka and his fellow puppets. The music is often so gestural that even in a concert performance, the images of the dancers are likely to perform in the listener’s mind’s eye.

The scenario is divided into four scenes, of which the first and last take place on the Admiralty Square in St. Petersburg during the 1830s during the Shrove-Tide fair (just before the beginning of Lent). These scenes are filled with incident and with elaborate overlays of musical figures representing the surge of characters coming and going at the fair. The second and third scenes of the ballet are interiors, devoted to the private emotional life of the puppet Petrushka, who is in love with the ballerina, while she in turn is enchanted by the Moor. Only at the very end of the work do the “public” and “private” worlds—or should one say “reality” and “fantasy”?—become entangled with one another.

The “plot” as such can be briefly told: the crowds at the fair are drawn to a small theater, where a showman opens the curtains to reveal three lifeless puppets, Petrushka (a sad clown), the pretty but vacuous ballerina, and the exotic but dangerous Moor. He charms them into life with his flute and they execute a dance, first jiggling on their hooks on the stage, then—to the astonishment of the spectators—coming down from the theater and dancing among the crowd.

The second scene begins as Petrushka is kicked or thrown into his little cell. He picks himself up and dances sadly, conscious of his grotesque appearance. He wants to win over the ballerina, but when she enters, his ecstatic dance of joy is so uncouth that she flees. The third scene takes place in the Moor’s cell. The ballerina captivates him, but their tryst is interrupted by the entrance of the jealous Petrushka. They quarrel, and the powerful Moor throws him out. The final scene reverts to the main square, where the revelry has reached a new height. Crowds surge forward as all seek to celebrate the final evening before the start of Lent. Suddenly a commotion is heard in the little theater; Petrushka races out, closely pursued by the Moor, who strikes him down with a scimitar. The crowd is stunned by this apparent murder, and the showman is summoned. He, the supreme rationalist, demonstrates that the “body” is nothing more than a wooden puppet stuffed with sawdust. The crowd disperses. As the showman starts to drag the puppet offstage, he is startled to see Petrushka’s ghost on the roof of the little theater, thumbing his nose at the showman and at all who have been taken in by his tricks.

The first and last tableaux, which take place in the “real” world of the fair, have little in the way of storytelling; instead they rely on multiplicity of incident to suggest the throngs and the surge of life. The orchestra is full and busy, enlivened by various layers of frenzied activity. The inner tableaux differ strikingly in musical character. The orchestra often plays in smaller units, the music is more disjunct, and there is a marked avoidance of the folk material that fills the “public” sections of the score. Even the scale on which Stravinsky builds his melodies and harmonies is different. Here he exploits what theorists call the “octatonic” scale, a pattern especially favored by Stravinsky; it is a series of eight pitches alternating half-steps and whole-steps within the octave. Even without the visual element, the shape and character of the story are projected in Stravinsky’s score.

We know that *Petrushka* was first conceived as a *Konzertstück* for piano and orchestra, and the music that Stravinsky wrote first corresponds to the Russian Dance at the end of the first tableau and the bulk of the second tableau, in which the piano plays a central role. But once he had embarked on the full-scale ballet, Stravinsky rather surprisingly forgot his musical protagonist, and the piano scarcely appears again, even when Petrushka is supposed to be onstage. When he rescored the work in 1946-47, Stravinsky corrected this oversight to some extent and gave the piano considerably more to play. It is usually claimed that Stravinsky’s sole motivation for the revised orchestration was to enable him to copyright the work again, so that he could collect performance royalties. Though the financial consideration certainly played a role in Stravinsky’s thinking, Robert Craft notes (in an appendix to the first volume of Stravinsky correspondence that he edited) that many of the changes had been marked by Stravinsky years earlier as improvements that he desired after the experience of hearing *Petrushka* frequently in performance. In addition to increasing the piano part, the revision was also designed to correct many mistakes that had not been caught in the original edition and incorporate second thoughts to improve the projection of musical lines. Generating income from performance fees was a happy by-product.

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