

STRAVINSKY AND THE ART OF SHOOTING THE BOLT

In 1991 Sony Classical re-issued *The Recorded Legacy* of Stravinsky on CD. Following a few changes in repertoire and performance, the 32 gramophone records from 1982 comprising virtually the composer's entire oeuvre became 22 CDs. It does not take long to work out that this edition, without alternative versions, consists of 90 compositions with a total duration of just under 24 hours and with an average length of 15 ¹/₂ minutes.

This is a surprising result for a composer whose oeuvre consists almost entirely of free-standing 'major works': ballets, orchestral compositions, music theatre pieces, cantatas, concertos, and none of these mass-produced. The 55 minutes of *Perséphone* cannot be compared to the 3 minutes of the *Three Japanese Lyrics*, but both pieces are equally complete. They are as different as Piazza Armerina and Nagasaki, even though they belong unmistakably to the same Creation by the same Creator and even though there is only one of each. The same goes for the 32 minutes of *The Rite of Spring* and the scarcely 4 minutes of the *Scherzo à la Russe*. You cannot say that the one is a whole lot and the other a little bit of Stravinsky. Both are reflections of the complete Stravinsky, the parts are all representative of the whole, in that they differ fundamentally but never - and in this Stravinsky differs from the 'anything goes' post-modern composer - obscures the view of the whole.

As early as 1929, even before the birth of the *Symphony of Psalms*, Boris de Schloezer, in a monograph on Stravinsky, coined the concept 'oeuvre type' with regard to his compositions. 'His Sonata is not a sonata, but the pre-Mozart sonata.' And *Mavra* is not a Russian-Italian Opera Buffa, but '*l'image concrète de ce genre musical*', whilst the historical representatives of the genre may be considered variants. Instead of 9 symphonies, 15 string quartets, or 6 *Kammermusiken*, Stravinsky composed 1 *Violin Concerto*, 1 *Concerto for Strings*, 1 *Les Noces* and 1 *Agon*. No one would dream of calling the *Symphony of Psalms* Stravinsky's Second, or the *Symphony in C* Stravinsky's Fourth. In the category of wind symphonies the *Symphonies of Wind Instruments* is the only one.

Rarely, for that matter, was Stravinsky more brief and more complete than in the *Symphonies of Wind Instruments* (one work, despite the plural). In less than minutes the listener experiences more than in many a romantic masterpiece four times its length. So much more in fact that he cannot imagine it *could* last any longer. Even before Eisenstein formulated his theory on dialectical film montage - well before Jean-Luc Godard had even been born - Stravinsky heralded the zap era. In the eight or nine minutes of the *Symphonies*

of *Wind Instruments* there are approximately (that is to say, marginally depending on interpretation) 31 shifts, of which 21 are ‘hard’. In a shift of this kind one type of music makes way for another, whereby types of music should not so much be understood to mean ‘themes’, but rather musical archetypes. These archetypes, such as the chorale and the fanfare, are the building blocks of the composition.

Out of these 31 shifts 21 are accompanied by tempo changes. Because the *number* of archetypes and tempi which alternate is limited (5 and 3 respectively), to the listener the result is not a catalogue or collage, but a cohesive, albeit discontinuous form, achieved by what is called *cross-cutting* in film terminology: the composer is telling five stories in one. He does so by moving continuously, gradually or abruptly between one plotline and the other, and in this he resembles a train driver in a shunting-yard, or a sound engineer behind a mixing desk continuously switching tracks. Four out of the five stories eventually turn out to be sub-plots of what, at the end of the narration, reveals itself to be the main plot. As so often in Stravinsky (*Les Noces*, *Symphony of Psalms*, *Symphony in C*, *Requiem Canticles*) this is the chorale, or rather, the Faltering Chorale, the Song of Songs which unwinds in concentric circles.

In the era of the video clip a tally of 31 shifts in eight or nine minutes is on the face of it not particularly impressive (even though the *music* in a video clip often has to make do with no shifts at all), but the statistical average is in this case misleading. The final chorale alone (1 theme, 1 tempo) takes up a quarter of the entire duration, and the main climax of the composition, which immediately precedes this, covers a sixth of the total with 3 shifts. For the remainder, approximately three-fifth of the composition, 27 shifts remain, which sounds a lot more impressive. As the ‘archetypes’ hardly develop (what we hear are variations: a bit shorter, a bit longer, sometimes a transposition and very occasionally a combination of archetypes), the fluctuation in the number of shifts per unit of time is the decisive factor in how form is experienced. In other words, what makes us prick up our ears is not so much the biography of the musical material as the rhythm of the montage. This rhythm reaches its culmination point a moment before the general climax: what happens here¹ may be just as revolutionary as what happens in the *Sacre*. 5 ‘Hard’ shifts, 5 tempo changes in less than 20 bars of music; in 1920 there cannot have been a greater contrast with the preceding era of symphonies of heavenly length.

The figures above (they are fairly accurate as Stravinsky’s music does not allow for much leeway as far as tempo is concerned) are based on the analytical research which preceded the making of Frank Scheffer’s film about Stravinsky, *The Final Chorale*. In the

¹* For those who want to know the exact details: between number 42 and 46 in the score.

preparatory stage we, that is to say the editorial team and the director of the film, conducted a few experiments that led to informative conclusions. The original plan was to let the *Symphonies of Wind Instruments* find its shape through trial and error - the trial and error of the editor who has to create the best possible film out of a limited amount of material. This plan turned out to be impossible to implement, but did produce an interesting spin-off - not included in the film in the end - of takes of a hypothetical proto-version of the *Symphonies of Wind Instruments* which we christened the 'mini-version'. If the archetypes (we called them 'families') did not really develop and there was no essential difference between them at 'entry' and 'exit', then it should be possible, our theory went, to make an ultra-short masterpiece out of this short masterpiece; a resumé, perhaps a trailer, but in any case an instance of synecdoche.

Like true pop producers we created an edited version and tried to keep the character of the original work as intact as possible, and to retain the structure, including the climax and relatively long final chorale, albeit in miniature format. The result ran to approximately an eighth of the original number of bars, contained the essence of all the musical data, in all cases except one even at the original pitch, and... turned out to be hilarious. It proved conclusively that the secret of the *Symphonies of Winds Instruments* was to be found in the rhythm of the 'montage'; in relative durations and in real durations, in literal and varied repeats. The bolt is important, but the art of shooting it at the right time is at least as important.

Maybe good art is art which, like the *Symphonies of Wind Instruments*, makes you realise it could have been different, but on the other hand leaves you tongue-tied when you are asked to explain *how exactly* it could have been different.

Stravinsky's music gives the listener an excitingly contradictory feeling of simultaneous randomness and inevitability.

translation: Suzanne Jansen

originally published as
 'Stravinsky en de kunst van het kruitverschieten'
 in: Elmer Schönberger, *De kunst van het kruitverschieten*
 (De Bezige Bij, Amsterdam 1998)

