

Igor Stravinsky

Les Noces

(1914-17; 1921-23)

Instrumentation: 4 pianos, 4-part chorus, 4 soloists, percussion

1. Chez la Mariee
2. Chez le Marie
3. Le depart de la Mariee
4. Le repas des Noces

Context

Les Noces reflects the trend of works with Russian themes written by Stravinsky between 1910-19, especially in the aspect of rhythm, melody, form, and subject. The work is considered as the central work of his 1914-20 "Russian period", during which a shift occurred in his use of large orchestras to small "soloist" ensembles. This shift is observable in Stravinsky's many changes of orchestration from large forces to small while he was working on *Les Noces*, which was composed from 1914-1923, during which time his self-imposed interruptions were necessary for the composition of

Renard

(1916),

Histoire du Soldat

(1918),

Pulcinella
(1920),
Symphonies of Wind Instruments
(1920),
Concertino
(1920), and
Mavra

(1922). Uncharacteristic of Stravinsky was the indecision in orchestrating the work, as were the many interruptions. Considering the amount of time Stravinsky spent in completing the work, which preoccupied Stravinsky for the longest time of any other work, *Les Noces* is essentially a summation of ingredients and attitudes of Stravinsky's "Russian" period.

The concept of the work is of the ritualistic and non-personal, rather than a dramatization of a village wedding with descriptive music; instead, the wedding material is presented through direct quotations of popular verse. Stravinsky describes *Les Noces* as "... a suite of typical wedding episodes told through quotations of typical talk... a collection of cliches and quotations of typical wedding sayings..." There are no individual roles, only solo voices which impersonate different types of characters. The proper names that are used belong to no one individual in particular, but are rather chosen for their sound, syllables, and Russian typicality.

The implications of culture and cultural applications of words in the text are many; words are used which have double or implied meanings in the Russian language: "A knowledge not only of cultural customs, but also of the language of *Les Noces* is necessary to anyone aspiring to a true appreciation of the work... But I wonder if

Les Noces

can even completely reveal itself to a non-Russian." (Stravinsky in *Expositions and Developments*,

1962) The swan and goose in the Wedding Feast tableau are Russian folk characters; the solo voices that impersonate them are enacting a traditional folk game, but this use also refers to popular forms of endearment in reference to the bride and groom.

Les Noces is also influenced by the Russian Orthodox Church, in which invocations to the Virgin and the saints are heard throughout the work. The names of Cosmos and Damian, who are recognized in Russia as wedding saints, are heard most often; Cosmos and Damian are also worshipped as deities of a peasant fertility cult. Another aspect of ritual practice is evident in the first scene, where the bride weeps not because of sorrow at her prospective loss of virginity, but because "...ritually, she must weep. (Even if she had already lost it and was looking forward... she still must weep.)" (Stravinsky in *Expositions and Developments*

, 1962)

Asaf'yev, (1982) in his analysis of *Les Noces*, describes how the texture and action is unified by the use of three stylistic elements:

- 1) Grief and lamentation associated with loss of virginity
- 2) Celebration of the invocation and excitation of the male procreative force (!)
- 3) Humor and buffoonery-counters seriousness of female grief as well as "...blunts wild impulsiveness of male procreative energy..." Asaf'yev also links this same type of sly laughter with the arousal of passion and intensification of orgiastic tendencies. (Whew)

Asaf'yev's analysis that follows is rather flowery and descriptive "play by play" account of the music. Peter van den Toorn takes a more objective approach in his analysis of pitch sets that do not take other parameters fully into consideration.

Stravinsky adapted his libretto on Kireievsky's collection of Russian popular poems; however, the work of Pushkin may have been included in this collection. Stravinsky notes that the dance/cantata format was suggested by the work, and manipulated the texts and materials cleverly so as to appear to be based on folk material:

"I had composed my music without borrowing anything from folk music with the exception of the theme of a factory song which I used several times in the last scene...All the other themes, airs, and melodies were of my own invention." (*Autobiography*, 1936)

The vocal melodies are based on Stravinsky's *pribaoutki* folk style as well as Russian Orthodox chant, emphasizing diatonicism, limited motivic content and a free approach to accentuation, influenced by the Russian language. Stravinsky was dissatisfied with French and English language performances of the work, since performance in other than Russian language guarantees false accentuation of the syllables, but this was reconciled by the increase in audience comprehension and awareness of the Russian cultural context.

Genesis of *Les Noces*:

1912-first ideas for a choral work on the subject of a Russian peasant wedding; title occurred to Stravinsky at almost the same time; however, he had to wait two years before discovering source materials in Kireievsky's anthology.

1914-Stravinsky constructed libretto: selections from Kireievsky's collection; set words for four-part chorus and four soloists

1914-15-winter: worked on *Les Noces* in Clarens, Switzerland.

1917-short score completed 11 October

1917-1921-"No work of mine has undergone so many instrumental metamorphoses." (Stravinsky): several versions of the work: one for large orchestra of strings, winds, plus harpsichord, piano, cimbalon and percussion of first tableau; another version of first and second tableaux for two cimbalons, harmonium, pianola and percussion. This was abandoned because synchronization of mechanical piano was too difficult to realize. Another version divided instruments by families into groups; keeping instrumental groups separate on stage. In another version Stravinsky combined pianolas with "bands of instruments that included saxhorns and flugelhorns." Stravinsky mentioned that he still possessed 7 pages of an early version of *Les Noces* scored for 3 violins, 2 violas, 2 cellos, 1 bass, cimbalon, 1 clarinet, 2 flutes, oboe/english horn, 2 bassoons, 2 horns and tympani. In the end, however, the fixing of a definite date for the first performance influenced the final orchestration:

"Then, one day in 1921, in Garches... I suddenly realized that an orchestra of four pianos would fulfill all my conditions. It would be at the same time perfectly homogeneous, perfectly impersonal, and perfectly mechanical."

1923-Final version reduced for 4 pianos, and percussion, with chorus and 4 voice parts;

completed 6 April in Monaco

Les Noces was transcribed by Stravinsky for pianola between 1921 and 1924 for the Pleyel company in Paris.

The work was dedicated to Diaghilev, who was ecstatic upon first hearing sketches from the first two scenes, proclaiming the work "...the most beautiful and the most purely Russian creation..." of the Russian Ballet. However, it is not exactly clear when Diaghilev first heard this work, as Stravinsky contradicts himself:

"When I first played *Les Noces* to Diaghilev-in 1915, at his home in Bellerive, near Lausanne-he wept..." (Stravinsky, in *Expositions and Developments*, 1962)

"Diaghilev visited me in Ouchy in January or February, 1917, and I played *Les Noces* for him. He wept..." (Stravinsky, in *Conversations*, 1959)

The vocal score was published in 1922, while Chester published the full score in 1923.

While *Les Noces* is quite distinctive in its sound and choice of materials, there are many similarities with *Le Sacre du Printemps*:

- ritual celebration of life
- obvious sexual undertones (overtones)
- Russian themes based on pagan peasant religions
- basic cell construction and manipulation: melodic and rhythmic
- quasi-rondo form
- use of pan-diatonicism
- sense of rhythmic pulse; direct; strong accents
- juxtapositions of mixed meters

Performance History and Reception

- First performed 13 June 1923 at the Theatre de la Gaite Lyrique in Paris by Diaghilev's Ballet Russe with Ernest Ansermet conducting pianists Georges Auric, Edouard Flament, Helene Leon and Marcelle Meyer
 - Nijinsky choreographed the work-ethnic attitude reflected in the use of mass blockings; individual personalities could not emerge; arched arms and crossed legs.
 - dancers never left the stage during course of the work
 - Natalia Goncharova designed the decor and costumes which were based upon peasant designs; costumes stripped of their color and decor simplified at Stravinsky's request-mirrors his "black and white" orchestration
 - Four pianos filled corners of scene; were separated from percussion ensemble, chorus and soloists in pit; this arrangement was argued for by Diaghilev on his aesthetic grounds, while Stravinsky's original conception was that the musicians and dancers should all be on stage as equal participants.

"I must say that the stage production of *Les Noces*...did not correspond with my original plan... According to my idea, the spectacle should have been a *divertissement*, and that is what I wanted to call it." (*Autobiography*, 1936)

- First performed in England on 14 June 1926 at His Majesty's Theatre, with Sir Eugene Gossens conducting.
- American premiere sponsored by International Composer's Guild, founded by Varese and harpist Carlos Salzedo

Critic Constant Lambert writes of *Les Noces*: "*Les Noces* is one of the masterpieces of this ["Russian"] period and possibly the only really important work that Stravinsky has given us." (Asaf'yev, 1982)

Sound-

- 4 pianos, 4-part chorus, 4 soloists, percussion
- Homophony, polyphony, heterophony
- Antiphony
- Vocal portamento
- Syllabic setting of text

Harmony-

- Tonal, non-functional
- Modal
- Parallel fourths

Melody-

- Mostly conjunct; some skips
- Dorian, phrygian modes; octatonic
- Motivic
- Embellishments
- Ostinato
- 3-note motive which pervades entire work

Rhythm-

- Pulse; mechanical
- Eighth-note as basic unit
- Polyrhythms, resultant rhythms
- Abrupt shifting meters
- Ostinato; syncopation; accentuation
- Rhythmic motives

Growth-

- Return/processive
- Rondo, quasi-sonata form, canon
- Episodic
- Basic cells or blocks which are processed and juxtaposed
- Rhythmic and melodic processing of material

Work as a Whole

Unity

- Pervading 3-note motive throughout work: B, D, E, w/F# grace note
- Octatonic scale (F-G-Ab-Bb-B-C#-D-E)
- Basic rhythmic pulse pervades work
- Cell structure
- Repetition; basso ostinato
- Syllabic setting of text; orientation of text
- Idea of life celebration
- 4 pianos, 4 solo parts, 4-part chorus, 4-part organization of work

Contrast

- Diatonic/octatonic materials
- Mood
- Sound resources
- Female/male voices, outlook on procreation
- Abrupt shifts of meters, texture, tempo, dynamics, rhythm, cells

-Different aspects in text focus

Balance

- Aspects which provide contrast but also provide unity when viewed on a large scale create a sense of balance-i.e, abrupt parametrical shifts
- Female/male dichotomy; also balanced by use of that which is humorous
- Work, while essentially a cantata, is incomplete without the instrumental accompaniment; balance in use of forces
- Micro-macro proportions

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