

Robert Craft on Stravinsky and Schoenberg

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Two composers dominated the music of the 20th century: Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971) and Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951). Robert Craft was especially close to the former and knew the latter, whom he called “the one composer who challenged Stravinsky’s supremacy in 20th-century music.” Maestro Craft has had a front-row seat on the most important musical developments of our time. More than an observer, he influenced those developments. From 1948 to Stravinsky’s death in 1971, Craft served as Stravinsky’s musical assistant and confidant. Maestro Craft has published five volumes of essays; five books of conversations with *Stravinsky; Chronicle of a Friendship*, documenting their years of work together; and other books. His most recent book is *Places—A Travel Companion for Music and Art Lovers*. His *Memoirs* will be published later this year. As a conductor, Maestro Craft has made a series of legendary recordings of both Stravinsky’s and Schoenberg’s works. Now, he has embarked on a new traversal of the seminal works of both composers, most of which have already been issued by Koch International Classics.

Reilly: Let me begin by simply thanking you. You have certainly played a role in my life. I devoured your books of conversations with Stravinsky when they came out. I absolutely loved them, as I did, of course, Chronicle of a Friendship, and your other books. To my mind, they are simply some of the most literate and insightful writings in the field of music.

Craft: Oh, that’s nice. Thank you.

What you are doing is so fascinating. Its as if a conductor in the late 19th century were to say, “Now I’m going to do Wagner’s Ring and the Brahms’s four symphonies.” Yet these two composers were considered the antipodes. You were either in one camp or the other but not both. And here you are, in an analogous situation, embracing both Stravinsky and Schoenberg and presenting them together. You must be trying to teach us something by doing that.

All I mean to say is that certainly both are worth the attention and the interest. That they are extremely different makes life very difficult for me. I cannot record a Stravinsky session on one day and the next day record Schoenberg. I would have to put weeks in between before I could

go from one to the other. It is easy to go back to Stravinsky but very difficult to go from Stravinsky to Schoenberg. There are, of course, innumerable questions of style, of articulation, of attack, and that's where conductors spend most of their time anyway. And also dynamics: There are very few dynamic markings, comparatively in Stravinsky's music to Schoenberg's, because Stravinsky assumes that you know what he would do with these notes.

Don't you think that's because the musical pulse in Stravinsky is so much more natural, and Schoenberg is so highly artificial?

Yes. In Schoenberg, it is often actually against the pulse, and the pulse is against the phrase. You get that, too. We have recently recorded *Erwartung*, and he wants this expressionism. There are 400 measures of music. There are 111 tempo changes by metronome alone, and there are some 150 more, which are tempo nuances such as ritards and accelerandos and fermatas. So you don't have a steady pulse, and that's what is wrong with all the performances of it, so far as the score is asking for particulars.

Can I ask you about the larger point that the music of Schoenberg and his disciples raises? And that is that this system, which purportedly was necessary because of the exhaustion of tonal resources, really wasn't needed for that reason. It was a reflection of the spiritual collapse of Europe.

Oh, yes, that goes way down. You asked in one of your written questions about Schoenberg guaranteeing a century of the continuation of German music and German musical values. And, of course, that has not happened at all, except it is German in the sense of pathos, of which Stravinsky has none whatsoever. The great moments in Stravinsky are never blowing the roof off, which is exactly what *Le Sacre* does but in a different way. Stravinsky's music is pure, and it is completely controlled; it's always controlled. Schoenberg is always asking for something beyond human possibility, as in the Violin Concerto.

Schoenberg is really asking for a reconstruction of reality. One of my favorite sayings of Stravinsky is that "the old original sin was a sin of knowledge; the new original sin is a sin of nonacknowledgment." This is one of the reasons why I find him intellectually and spiritually to be a conservative. I don't know whether you agree with that.

Oh, yes.

But I find Schoenberg to be almost an ideologue, because one of the principal features of modern ideology is a loss of reality. And the loss of reality that takes place in his system is, of course, of tonality and of harmonic structure and melody. He claimed that we would be hearing dissonance as if it were consonance. Hearing something as its opposite really requires a kind of metaphysical operation.

Yes, of course. First of all, harmony has been known for centuries. It's out the window with him. There isn't harmony. You are not listening to harmony. Almost every single chord in *Erwartung* has six different pitches and many go up to eight. So the chords have too much in common, the same eight notes, let's say, throughout an entire piece. So you are not moving harmonically at all. Everything that he is doing that is a semblance of movement, of propulsion forward, is done by other means. It is done by emotional extravagance.

So there is no forward motion in Schoenberg except through rhetorical devices?

Yes, everything except harmony, except harmonic movement, which is what the music of Beethoven depends on. You never, in any music written, get the sense of movement, of direction, and of the necessity of that direction, as in Beethoven. And here it is the exact opposite. Everything but harmony is what brings you through the piece; you don't quite know. You don't know where the piece is going. It's rare that you have a sense that it can't last forever. You may know the difference between a piece that is going to last five minutes or 25, but never does that sense come from harmonic substance. And that seems to me a large element to pick out of music. There is one person who didn't go along with him on all of this, and that's Alban Berg, who would not give up the two modes, major and minor. When you realize what an immense arsenal of musical power you have in Franz Schubert, how he can go so quickly to the minor and then back to the major. What this means as a resource is endless.

In a biography of Oscar Levant, there is a very amusing anecdote. Levant was talking about the string quartet he was writing for Schoenberg. He said, "The constant acerbity which tonally characterized the piece forced me suddenly to rebel. So I inserted two bars of rather agreeable harmony and counterpoint, which didn't germinate from what had preceded them." When Schoenberg saw these two innocent bars, he asked suspiciously, "How did this evolve?" And Levant answered, "Your system doesn't work for me." Schoenberg replied, "That's the beauty of it: It never works."

[Laughter] Oh, I think it's marvelous.

*I was reading this fascinating book by an English philosopher, Roger Scruton, who is also a composer. In *The Aesthetics of Music*, he makes the point that serial music works, to the extent that it does, despite itself not because of its serial procedures.*

That's a way of putting it. I certainly would agree with that. I won't play anything of Schoenberg's that I think I can't get music out of. And there are a lot of pieces that I don't like and probably will not play.

For instance?

Well, the Fourth Quartet is to me an absolute abstraction from beginning to end and kind of ugly. For me, the tune in the slow movement for the cello is fairly close to torture. I like the Third Quartet because it bounces along, but there is nothing more to it than that. And the two earlier ones are too dense and too heavy for me. The Schoenberg piece that I love most is *Five Pieces for Orchestra*. It has wonderful colors, and each piece is the right length. It's still tonal music in my view. The recording that just came out of *Pierrot Lunaire*, with the *Pelleas*, also makes me think of how much Schoenberg was returning to tonality in *Pierrot Lunaire*.

Would you speak to the larger legacy of both of these men? The significance of Schoenberg can't be denied. It looms too large in the century he dominated so much of through his genius. But it seems to have reached a dead end well before now. I think he will be a history-book figure, with the exception of some of the extraordinary pieces, like Gurrelieder and maybe Pelleas, which will always be played. But what strikes me is that serial music really is a language of irresolution and, therefore, ultimately of angst. It repels people. I think that its influence, after dominating both the academy and the prize system, is over. Whereas with Stravinsky, musicians still love to play him and audiences to hear him. These are the two opposing forces of the century, and one led into a dead end and the other one didn't. Do you think I'm overstating this?

No, I don't. I agree completely. It has come to a dead end. Audiences are just going to walk out. They are not going to listen to it. And I find my own feelings have changed in regard to so many pieces. Once, I recorded the complete works of Anton Webern. I was fascinated by each piece, but with the exception of the early pieces for orchestra, I didn't find anything in them that stayed with me very long. Pieces like the concerto for nine instruments I was interested in when I did it but strictly for technical reasons. I tried conducting it a couple of years ago, and I couldn't stand it. I thought it was so arid, nothing to it except this rhythmic problem, and

everything off the beat. You don't hear any Webern anywhere. Have you ever heard a live performance of a Webern cantata? No. Now in Schoenberg, in *Erwartung*, it seems that he deliberately never writes a close interval. The voice has to sing impossible pitches, and no instrument in the orchestra ever is playing the note that the singer needs or even hinting at it. And I have found there are many octaves in the orchestra (you can't help that with a huge orchestra and the great expanse and range), but they won't be heard as octaves. There is one place where he has the whole orchestra playing octaves, because that's the dramatic high point of the piece. But you don't know what it is about.

What do you think of the contemporary music scene, and do you think that Stravinsky's music is still influencing it?

Well, I know it is still influencing it. There are certain composers I can name—for example, Peter Lieberson. His music sounds sometimes like imitations of Stravinsky's, but I don't know enough of it to pronounce on it. I can tell Stravinsky's influence when I work with orchestras, with the Philharmonia, for example. The orchestras immediately come together; they like it. You don't have to say everything; they do it on their own, and they make music out of it. It's a great joy.

In respect to Schoenberg's legacy, I read a funny remark Honneger made more than 40 years ago. Honneger said, "I strongly fear that the twelve-tone fad—we already see its decline—may initiate a reaction towards a too simplistic, too rudimentary music. The cure for having swallowed sulfuric acid will be to drink sirup."

Yes, that's a pretty astute forecast.

There is the case of the late Italian composer, Giacinto Scelsi. He is a sort of cult composer whom the French particularly love. Scelsi immersed himself in the serial system and had a breakdown.

That figures [laughter].

He was put in an asylum, and he effected his own cure by sitting at a piano and simply striking the same note again and again.

Yes, that's infantile. That is minimalism. Yes.

You said that what you can tolerate in serial music has changed over the years, particularly in respect to Webern. Has anything changed in the way you listen to Stravinsky? Does it speak to you any differently now than when it was fresh for you?

Yes. Forty years ago, I found many things in Stravinsky a little too complex, a little acid, and unnecessarily so. And I don't feel that at all now. Everything seems logical, holds together, and I look forward to all of the music. There is not enough of it played. The very late music should be given at least a chance. It is getting that chance in England, in London. There are young people who prefer that to any other music.

Now, you are the person who gets either the credit or the blame...

Both. I get both.

...for that late music. Can you talk a little about your role in inducing Stravinsky to get what he could out of the twelve-tone system?

It's all accidental. There is no ideology there. There is no plan there. It happened because, in 1951, I was conducting this Monday evening concert series in Los Angeles. I was asked to conduct these pieces by Schoenberg, and I did. We did pieces like the Serenade and the Septet for the first time on the West Coast. I was very close to Stravinsky, and he came to every rehearsal. He had scores sometimes, and he did get to know these pieces. Of course, some he liked; some he considered strictly theoretical. The Septet suite never went down with him as a satisfying piece of music, though he found its construction fascinating. But a piece like the Serenade is Stravinsky music. I mean, it has a lot to do with *Renard*, even *Histoire du Soldat*. The march movements at the beginning and end certainly were inspired by *Histoire du Soldat*. Schoenberg's son-in-law, Felix Kreisler, told me that.

That piece also has that kind of rhythmic vivacity that you find in Stravinsky.

Yes. It has that rhythmic life, and it's one of the few pieces that has. But, anyway, that's how Stravinsky got involved with that. And so he experimented a little bit, but it's entirely different. What he does with a series is totally different from Schoenberg and is put to different purposes.

You seem to indicate in some of your writings that Stravinsky had reached a creative impasse and that this helped him out of it.

Well, yes. He had finished *The Rake's Progress*, which was his biggest work, and it took him three years. He was a certain age. He was not in great health, and he felt that he had to go in a different direction than what he was doing. But if you trace that path, it's very logical and very simple. He started using a series, but it's not a series in the Schoenberg sense. *In Memoriam Dylan Thomas* is a very moving, profound piece of music. I've seen people holding back tears with that. And that is all done with a series, but it is entirely tonal. It is composed according to tonal harmonic rules, but the combinations are triadic. The most popular of all of his ballets is *Agon*. It begins and ends in C major, but that is not the reason. Of course, *Agon* is half-tonal. There is a mixture that he puts together very ingeniously. It's all traditional Stravinsky music: rhythmic invention everywhere, wonderful dance rhythms, and music that anybody can like. The next piece, *Threni*, is impossible. It is so complex nobody understands it. The *Requiem Canticles* has caught on. It is an established piece. It is always going to be a popular Stravinsky piece. It will stand up with the *Mass* and the *Symphony of Psalms*. It is light. It is performed much more in Europe than here. In the last part of it, there are supposed to be serial melodies, but these are tonally formed melodies. I don't think Stravinsky could get away from that. In fact, I'm not at all sure that Schoenberg could get away from that entirely, but in the first act of *Moses and Aron*, he certainly does pretty well by getting away from it. I can't listen to that, by the way. For me, that is either way over my head or just not in my ears.

It is very interesting as to why Schoenberg didn't finish it. There has been a lot of speculation, but he himself said something about it that no one pays attention to. He came to the impasse because he could not understand why Moses was punished for striking the rock a second time. This question absolutely tormented him.

I'm sure it did because he was deeply into theological problems. But the problem is that he does not take the Bible as is. He has to do his own version—that's with everything. He has written Psalms, but he has to write moderna psalms.

That makes it all the more interesting that he allowed this to stop him. He had plenty of time to finish that opera, and he simply couldn't do it. The answer to the dilemma is in a place where it was unavailable to him, because it is explained by St. Paul in the New Testament.

Well, that certainly closes the door on his Moses.

In one of your books of conversation, I came across this marvelous statement from Stravinsky: "The stained glass artist of Chartres had few colors, and the stained glass artists of today have hundreds of colors but no Chartres. Not enlarged resources then, but men and what they believe. The so-called crisis of means is interior." It seems to me that there is a great recovery taking place in music today precisely on those grounds that Stravinsky always insisted upon. I have always been so moved by Stravinsky because of his deep appreciation and, indeed, promotion of music as a spiritual communication.

Oh, yes. Music was sacred to him. And Stravinsky is the composer of joy. His music is joyful whether it is *The Symphony of Psalms* or something else.

Did you know that, in one of these millennial exercises, Time magazine had to pick the composition of the century, and it was The Symphony of Psalms.

I didn't know that. I think it might be pretty close to my choice. It is happy music. All of his music is happy music.