

Charles M. Joseph. 2011. *Stravinsky's Ballets*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Reviewed by Maeve Sterbenz

Charles M. Joseph's recent monograph explores an important subset of Stravinsky's complete oeuvre, namely his works for dance. One of the aims of the book is to stress the importance of dance for Stravinsky throughout his career as a source of inspiration that at times significantly shaped his development as a composer. Joseph offers richly contextualized and detailed pictures of Stravinsky's ballets, ones that will be extremely useful for both dance and music scholars. While he isolates each work, several themes run through Joseph's text. Among the most important are Stravinsky's self-positioning as simultaneously Russian and cosmopolitan; and Stravinsky's successes in collaboration, through which he was able to create fully integrated ballets that elevated music's traditionally subservient role in relation to choreography.

To begin, Joseph introduces his motivation for the project, arguing for the necessity of an in-depth study of Stravinsky's works for dance in light of the fact that they comprise a significant fraction of the composer's output (more so than any other Western classical composer) and that these works, most notably *The Rite of Spring*, occupy such a prominent place in the Western canon. According to Joseph, owing to Stravinsky's sensitivity to the "complexly subtle counterpoint between ballet's interlocking elements" (xv), the ballets stand out in the genre for their highly interdisciplinary nature. In the chapters that follow, Joseph examines each of the ballets, focusing alternately on details of the works, histories of their production and reception, and their biographical contexts.

The first chapter broadly contextualizes Stravinsky's work, offering an introduction to the cultural history and musical traditions that Stravinsky inherited at the turn of the twentieth century in Russia. Joseph provides a thorough account of the practical realities of musical life in St. Petersburg that resulted in certain developments in Stravinsky's compositional style and early career. One of the major focuses of the chapter is the tense institutional divide in the mid-to-late nineteenth century between the Western European classicism of the St. Petersburg Conservatory and the Russian nationalism of the New Russian School. While Joseph acknowledges that, "ultimately, these highly charged contraries would prove not so contrary after all" (12), he argues that the reconciliation and integration of musical Slavophilia and Europhilia would greatly influence Stravinsky's training (particularly under the tutelage of Rimsky-Korsakov) and eventually shape

his compositional commitments. Joseph goes on to describe the gradual escalation of Stravinsky's reputation during his early career, while admitting that his father's celebrity as an opera singer enabled many of the composer's opportunities.

The Firebird, Stravinsky's first ballet, is the focus of chapter two. Joseph first adumbrates an historical backdrop for the work, providing relevant biographical details about *The Firebird*'s producer Serge Diaghilev and the inception of the *Ballets Russes*. Interestingly, Joseph notes that Stravinsky only fell into the commission by chance and was actually Diaghilev's last-minute backup choice of composer (Nikolai Cherepnin, Anatoly Lyadov, and others had previously declined Diaghilev's offers). By exploring primary source material—testimony from dancers and collaborators involved in the ballet as well as information provided by Stravinsky's sketches—Joseph goes on to describe how the work came together. These details go a long way in making a case for the interdisciplinary and collaborative nature of *The Firebird*. Comparison between the finished score and the piano autograph completed about a month before the debut, for instance, suggests that the composer responded to choreographic needs over the course of rehearsals. Joseph also discusses musical details of the score—especially its orchestration—and points to the ways in which the music serves as a “handmaiden to the dance” (40). While expressing admiration for certain aspects of the work, Joseph acknowledges the sometimes derivative nature of Stravinsky's musical style, citing in particular its resemblance to the music of Rimsky-Korsakov. Often, however, Joseph attributes weaknesses in the score to the limiting force of the choreographer, Michel Fokine. He observes, for instance, that during the build up to the villain Kashchei's climactic death the music is “embarrassingly histrionic”; he also speculates that Stravinsky was “severely limited by the demands of the libretto” because “Fokine must surely have stipulated such insipidly programmatic music” (44). Nonetheless, as Joseph makes clear, the ballet enjoyed an enthusiastic reception in Paris.

The third chapter discusses the 1911 *Ballets Russes* work, *Petrouchka*. Similar to the previous chapter, Joseph's study of *Petrouchka* comprises a mixture of biographical history, sketch study, and music and dance analysis, forming a richly contextualized picture of the work. Joseph acknowledges the practical nature of Stravinsky's career trajectory, noting that the success of *Firebird* positioned Stravinsky as a marketable celebrity to the benefit of Diaghilev, who consequently commissioned Stravinsky's second ballet. One of the interesting analytical claims that sketch study enables Joseph to make is the idea that *Petrouchka*'s pitch collections are rooted in piano technique. According to Joseph, sonorities and melodic lines that have previously been understood in the octatonic scale or as instances of bitonality are better

explained as originating from the black and white keys of the keyboard. The arpeggiated Petrouchka chord, for instance, “has everything to do with the division inherent in the keyboard’s layout . . . whereby the black keys and white keys retain their own autonomy in sharpening the clash desired” (51). Joseph examines earlier drafts of the score in order to show that the piano served as a “primary shaping force” in the ballet (50), both in terms of pitch materials and in terms of musical symbolism. According to Joseph, compositional features of many works in Stravinsky’s literature are attributable to their origins at the piano.

A major theme that surfaces in this chapter is the influence of Stravinsky’s Russian heritage on his work. In *Petrouchka*, an element of Russian nationalism is most apparent in the ballet’s plot, which is derived from Russian folklore, and scene, which is largely based on *balagni*, vibrant Russian fairs of the nineteenth century. Joseph devotes the majority of the chapter to describing how the work was created and emphasizes that “the role of music seems to have been elevated to a status equal to that of dance” (72). At the same time, Joseph positions Stravinsky as a kind of visionary whose collaboration with other artists created difficulties in rehearsals when dancers and orchestra alike were left “baffled” by his score (54). Joseph also attends to details of the work, and sometimes provides blow-by-blow accounts of the ballet’s music and choreography. These accounts are quite effective in bringing an evocative sense of the ballet to the reader, though they serve much less often as sites of critical analysis of the work.

In the fourth chapter, which focuses on *The Rite of Spring*, Joseph spins his discussion around threads begun earlier in the book, especially Stravinsky’s balance of Western European cosmopolitanism with Russian nationalism. *The Rite* is contextualized largely in terms of the metaphorical “distance between St. Petersburg and Paris” (73). While revolutionary energy continued to build in Russia, Stravinsky, embracing European modernism, rode the momentum of his blossoming career. Perhaps because of the copious ink already spilled over this ballet, Joseph largely avoids description and analysis of the work; instead he focuses on the historical context that lead to its production as well as its famously contentious reception. Joseph mostly foregoes the project of unpacking the various “isms” (modernism, primitivism, etc.) with which *The Rite of Spring* is typically associated, though he recapitulates interpretations of the work given by several historians, including Modris Eksteins, who reads *The Rite* as an allegory for Russian revolutionary ideology (Eksteins 1989). Once again, Joseph looks to Stravinsky’s sketches and commentary, which he believes to “provide a revealing a roadmap of the composer’s thinking” (88). One of the interesting results of Joseph’s sketch study in this chapter is confirmation that Stravinsky

used pre-existing Russian folk songs as the basis for melodies in the score as opposed to an unconscious, impressionistic “folk memory.” To Parisian audiences, the ballet “overstepped the limits of propriety” (74), in both musical and choreographic features, an offense that Joseph argues was calculated: “The Parisian upper crust in attendance that opening night got what they bargained for: an inflammatory, sublimely unintelligible desecration to fuss over in chic conversation” (97). Still, Joseph exalts *The Rite* as a landmark achievement of the twentieth century.

In chapter five, Joseph discusses the development of Stravinsky’s neo-classical style, which would eventually lead to the composition of *Apollo*. Joseph does not identify a clear motivation for this change, but cites “clarity of contrapuntal textures and ostensibly unethnic spirit” among its stylistic markers (103). In passing, mention is made of Stravinsky’s 1920 *Ballets Russes* ballet *Pulcinella*, one of the earliest works for dance to feature this new musical style (103). Though the reader is offered little detail here, *Pulcinella* receives further attention in the penultimate chapter. More central to this chapter are Stravinsky’s initial encounters with George Balanchine, a figure whose collaboration with Stravinsky would prove crucial in shaping the rest of his career. Joseph describes their first collaboration, *Chant du rossignol* as a work that, while not responsible for “blazoning a new path” artistically, was nonetheless important as a precedent for future work between the two artists (111). Joseph emphasizes the integrated, interdisciplinary approach that both artists exhibited even at this early stage in their relationship: “Just as Stravinsky carefully monitored the way Balanchine choreographed in the studio . . . so Balanchine learned from Stravinsky’s physically demonstrative, kinesthetic approach to working with dancers” (110). Joseph also notes Balanchine’s particular sensitivity to and comprehension of music, even in comparison to Stravinsky’s previous choreographic collaborators, such as Vaslav Nijinsky. According to Joseph, the success of Balanchine’s choreography in this and later ballets lies in his nuanced approach to the music–dance relationship wherein the choreography provided a subtle counterpoint to the music (as opposed, for instance, to Nijinsky’s more obvious articulation of every accented beat in *The Rite of Spring*).

This collaborative spirit is cited by Joseph as a crucial factor in the success of their next, better-known collaboration, *Apollo*. Joseph positions *Apollo* at the pinnacle of Stravinsky’s neoclassicism and claims it represents a renunciation of his previous musical styles—a change that the author links biographically to Stravinsky’s personal search for orderliness, serenity, and repentance (112–14). In *Apollo*, Joseph claims, “Stravinsky sought a melodic style that demonstrated pure beauty, free of ethnicity” (111). This statement is certainly suggestive, especially when considered alongside

Joseph's earlier theme of Stravinsky's bridging Western and Eastern European compositional styles; unfortunately, however, Joseph never makes this connection explicit. Some unpacking and contextualization of the rhetoric surrounding Stravinsky's neoclassicism would have been welcomed here.¹ Nonetheless, Joseph's analysis of *Apollo's* score, along with information provided by sketches and correspondences, reveals interesting features of the music's structure and its relationship to the choreography.

Several neoclassical ballets that Stravinsky composed in the period after Diaghilev's death, between 1928 and 1948, are examined in chapter six. Many of these ballets were collaborations between Balanchine and Stravinsky that prefigured the 1948 formation of the New York City Ballet by Balanchine and Lincoln Kirstein. Among the works explored are: *Le Baiser de la fée* (originally choreographed by Bronislava Nijinska), *Jeu de cartes*, *Danses concertantes*, *Scènes de ballet*, and *Orpheus*. Joseph focuses on varying mixtures of each work's historical context, compositional and choreographic content, and process of creation. Similarly to other parts of the book, Joseph provides more in the way of detailed accounts of how each work is assembled than critical analyses or interpretations.

Chapter seven centers on Stravinsky and Balanchine's final major ballet *Agon*. Joseph suggests that *Agon*, far from serving as a final chapter in a neatly packaged Greek trilogy, was separated by nearly thirty years from *Apollo*—it was completed in 1957—and “stood a world apart from *Orpheus*” (167). *Agon* marked a significant change in Stravinsky's compositional style, mixing Renaissance music and serial techniques. *Agon* thus stands as an exemplar of one of Joseph's central claims, namely, that ballet stood out as a particular site of compositional innovation for Stravinsky. While Stravinsky began to explore alternatives to the diatonicism of his neoclassical works in a number of concert pieces dating from the early-to-mid 1950s, it was ultimately ballet that “provid[ed] the testing ground for a new direction” (167). In addition to explaining the motivations for Stravinsky's serial turn, Joseph traces the many artistic influences informing *Agon*. These included Greek verse, the poetry of T. S. Eliot, and, especially, *Apologie de la danse*—a seventeenth-century dance manual by François de Lauze with accompanying music by theologian, mathematician, and musician Marin Mersenne. Once more, Joseph stresses the highly collaborative nature of Stravinsky and Balanchine's project, citing each artist's immersive engagement with the other's medium. Stravinsky precisely timed the music to accompany the choreography and was “immersed in the choreographic conception from the outset, often notating specific dance patterns as he worked through his initial compositional sketches” (174). In the other direction, Balanchine “understood the basic compositional principles at work” and created “a

choreographic parallel that could be grasped only through understanding the complex interior network of Stravinsky's intricate score" (186). Thus, *Agon* represents "a synergistic achievement if ever there was one" (186). Going beyond a purely formalist discussion of the ballet, Joseph contextualizes *Agon* in terms of relevant contemporary social issues: the ballet was described as "futuristic" and emblematic of the dawning Space Age; it also featured interracial partnering and choreography that asserted female sexual agency and empowerment, both of which Joseph argues were suggestive of a "bold new spirit" in 1957 (187).

Joseph devotes chapter eight to what he calls Stravinsky's "terpsichorean hybrids": "compositions incorporating dance in a rich variety of guises, many of which could hardly be classified as traditional ballets" (197). Since these hybrids appear throughout Stravinsky's corpus, this constitutes the first break from the book's chronological organization. Among the works discussed are *Renard*, *L'Histoire du soldat*, *Pulcinella*, *Les noces*, *Perséphone*, and *The Flood*. On the whole, however, the chapter uses a similar methodology to that of the preceding chapters: references to sketches, primary sources, and the author's own analyses are mobilized in order to contextualize and investigate the works at hand.

The ninth and final chapter of the book considers Stravinsky's enduring legacy in the world of dance in the latter half of the twentieth century as well as into the twenty-first. Joseph cites Balanchine's continued engagement with Stravinsky's compositions after the latter's death, as well as the countless restagings of Stravinsky's ballets by a diverse range of dance companies, as evidence for the composer's lasting and ever-evolving impact on the world of dance and music.

In pulling together such a wide range of primary sources and providing an in-depth and comprehensive study of Stravinsky's ballets, Joseph's book presents an important resource in Stravinsky scholarship. Though at times the book tends to adopt an aggrandizing rhetoric that seems out of place in its otherwise thoroughly historicized accounts (works are frequently exalted as timeless masterpieces, for instance), the writing style is engaging and accessible to a wide variety of readers—perhaps even those looking for an introductory text. The reasons for limiting the scope of the book to Stravinsky's dance works are obvious; however, one of the major aims of the book—to show that ballet as a compositional impetus served to shape Stravinsky's career as a whole—is somewhat difficult to convincingly achieve without recourse to analyses of the concert works themselves. Still, as Joseph notes towards the end of the book, "these ballets provide a looking glass into Stravinsky's compositional evolution . . . [E]ach is replete with observable stylistic changes, discrete turns in the road, and overarching commonali-

ties that speak to matters of unity and coherence” (247). As such, Joseph’s investigations provide useful information, not only with regard to the ballets he studies but also with regard to Stravinsky’s entire compositional oeuvre. Readers approaching the book from any number of perspectives will likely find Joseph’s research both stimulating and illuminating.

Notes

1. This charged rhetoric might warrant unpacking especially given how much it seems to resonate with efforts of Stravinsky’s artistic contemporaries in the US and Europe, such as Isadora Duncan, to employ Greek classicism as a strategy for white self-determination. See, for instance, Duncan, 1995 [1927]: 242–245.

References

- Duncan, Isadora. 1995 [1927]. *My Life*. New York: Liveright.
- Eksteins, Modris. 1989. *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.