

# Stylistic Consistency In Three Choral Works Of Stravinsky

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Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971) is one of the major composers of the twentieth century. This statement is especially true when considering compositions for choral groups since he is certainly among the most important twentieth-century composers in this genre. The major influences on his compositional career were from Rimsky-Korsakov, Tchaikovsky, Diaghilev and the group associated with the Ballet Russe in Paris, and some influence from Debussy. His choral works, particularly those of the Neo-classical period, were influenced by the composers of the Baroque period, especially J. S. Bach and Handel.<sup>1</sup>

Certain attitudes toward music and certain compositional techniques are apparent throughout Stravinsky's creative life. He never used traditional means as mere formulas; he studied and reworked them, brought a freshness to them, and fully incorporated them into his own personal compositional style.<sup>2</sup> Although Stravinsky's works are divided into three style periods, there are many stylistic consistencies spanning the three periods. These consistencies in his choral compositions are the focus of this discussion and will demonstrate that there is indeed a continuity of style in Stravinsky's choral works.

Stravinsky's earliest style period is the Russian or national period which lasted into the early 1920's. It is characterized by the use of actual Russian folk music or material which is based on the modal and/or rhythmic qualities associated with Russian folk music.<sup>3</sup> *Les Noces* is an excellent example of the choral works of this period. The vocal parts of *Les Noces* were composed between 1914 and 1917, although the orchestration was not completed until 1923. The composer called this work "Russian choreographic scenes," and it is scored for a mixed chorus and four soloists accompanied by four pianos and a large group of percussion instruments. The work is divided into two parts with Part One containing three scenes and Part Two the fourth scene. The text was taken from a collection of folksongs made by Kireievsky.<sup>4</sup>

The mid-1920's constitutes the beginning of Stravinsky's Neo-classical period. In the *Poetics of Music*, the composer speaks of his attitude toward the use of the older, more traditional compositional processes. He states, "The more art is controlled, limited, worked over, the more it is free."<sup>5</sup> He further states that "... I always use academic formulas knowingly and voluntarily. I use them quite as knowingly as I would folklores. They are raw materials for my work."<sup>6</sup> Stravinsky did not limit himself to the musical types and processes of the Classical period; he relied on the whole wealth of his musical tradition. The opera-oratorio, *Oedipus Rex*, serves as a representative of the Neo-classical choral works. Composed in 1926-1927, *Oedipus Rex* consists of two acts with six sections and is scored for six soloists, narrator, men's chorus and orchestra.<sup>7</sup>

Stravinsky entered into his last, or serial, period in the early 1950's. Encouraged by Robert Craft, Stravinsky began to be receptive to the music of some serialists, Webern in particular. However, his embracing of serialism within his own compositional techniques was a cautious one.<sup>8</sup> Composed in 1957-1958, *Threni* is Stravinsky's first completely serial

composition. The work is scored for six soloists, mixed chorus and orchestra and has a tripartite structure:

- I. De Elegia Prima
- II. De Elegia Tertia
  - A. Querimonia
  - B. Sensus Spei
  - C. Solacium
- III. De Elegia Quinta

Each section in Parts One and Two is introduced by settings of the Hebrew letters which formed a part of the original text.<sup>9</sup>

The differences in choral works from each style period are ones involving compositional processes. When the actual style features are examined, one is able to identify many elements that Stravinsky retains throughout his choral works. These melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic elements are the hallmarks of a Stravinsky choral composition.

Stravinsky's treatment of the text in his choral works is a characteristic which spans all three of the style periods. The text is always carefully chosen, but Stravinsky views the words as sound materials and often sets them without regard to accent.<sup>10</sup> In *Oedipus Rex*, although the narration is in the vernacular, Stravinsky purposely chose to set the sung text in Latin, a language no longer used and which could be more fully exploited musically.<sup>11</sup> The methods with which Stravinsky unifies his choral works also remain consistent throughout his career: analogous openings and closings, symmetrical layouts, ostinato figures, and cellular processes.

The melodies in *Les Noces* are almost all derived from one cell composed of a major second and a minor third within a perfect fourth.<sup>12</sup> The opening soprano solo is one such melody based on this cell (Example 1). Melodies based on this cell are also found at the beginnings of the second and third scenes as well as in the choral parts. The style of *Les Noces* achieves great unity through the cellular structures which permeate most of the melodic writing in both the choral and solo material.

Example 1 (*Les Noces*, p.1)

① *Quoniam - Ridreu*  
♩ = 180

Sf  
1) He - чопъ - то - онъ - оу - ма - ма - - - - - ты - зна  
2) Ma - ма - ма - ма - ма - ма - ма - ма - ма - ма - ма - ма - ма - ма  
3) Ce - ce - ce - ce - ce - ce - ce - ce - ce - ce - ce - ce - ce - ce  
4) Trise, elle - та - та - та - та - та - та - та - та - та - та - та - та - та

II. IV  
Piano  
Tacet

In *Oedipus Rex*, there is an emphasis on the interval of the minor third. Creon's aria (Example 2) illustrates this em-

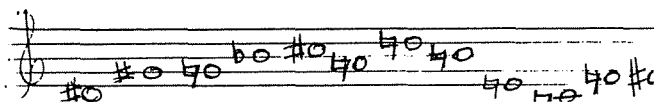
phasis at the most immediate level of perception. Minor third patterns figure extensively in the accompaniment also. This cellular interval of the minor third is a governing factor for the entire work including the key structure. The minor third unfolds, with intervening keys, from the beginning in B-flat minor to the ending in G major.

Example 2 (*Oedipus Rex*, p. 22)

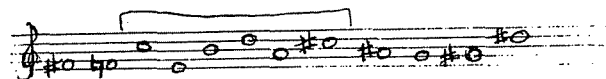


Serial procedures are an extension of the cellular processes that were already apparent in Stravinsky's earlier choral works. The melodies in *Threni* are formed from the set (Example 3), permutations of the set or parts of the set. The set is first stated in the opening soprano solo passage while the alto solo presents the inversion of the set. The first serial statement of the chorus occurs as the retrograde inversion of the set, and the tenor solo introduces the retrograde. Stravinsky uses techniques that involve segments of the set or the alternation of members of the set to form his melodies.<sup>13</sup> Milton Babbitt sees an "imbedded" hexachord (Example 4), which is a palindrome taken from the inversion of the set, as a pivotal point between the set forms used. This hexachord opens the *Querimonia* section of the second movement.<sup>14</sup>

Example 3 (*Threni*, the set)



Example 4 (*Threni*, imbedded hexachord)



Another consistency found in Stravinsky's choral style is his use of melodies of small range. In *Les Noces*, this feature results from the nature of the cell. The melodic style of *Oedipus Rex* is generally of a declamatory nature.<sup>15</sup> This fact, together with the emphasis on the minor third, creates melodies which move within a limited range. Stravinsky uses a type of chanting, part singing/part speaking, for some of the choral sections in *Threni*. Although the solo parts contain some wide leaps which create a disjunct feeling in certain sections, the choral parts tend to move within a more moderate range.

Stravinsky's melodies are also characterized by their tonal focus. The composer states that there is the

... necessity of affirming the axis of our music and to recognize the existence of certain poles of attraction. Diatonic tonality is only one means of orienting music toward these poles. The function of tonality is completely subordinated to the force of attraction of the poles of sonority. All music is nothing more than a succession of impulses that converge toward a definite point of repose.<sup>16</sup>

Much of the focus of *Les Noces* is Dorian in flavor<sup>17</sup> due to the nature of the cell. In *Oedipus Rex*, the axis of the entire work is the Gloria in C major which bridges the two acts.<sup>18</sup> Creon's aria (Example 2) shows the relatively straightforward diatonicism that Stravinsky employs throughout

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the work. With his use of repeated notes and phrases in his melodies, Stravinsky provides more of a tonal focus in *Threni* and his other serial compositions than composers who employ a stricter use of the set.<sup>19</sup>

Another style feature which is found in works from all of Stravinsky's style periods is the use of ostinato figures. In the choral works, these figures occur with great frequency in the accompaniments. The beginning of *Les Noces* (Example 1) is one such occurrence. The accompaniment of *Oedipus Rex* makes use of a minor third ostinato pattern in several sections. Ostinato and ostinato-like figures are a dominant stylistic feature in the accompaniment of *Threni*. This use of ostinato accompanimental patterns enhances the predominance of the voices in Stravinsky's choral works.

In much of Stravinsky's output, the temporal features provide the most interest and are structurally significant. The choral works are no exception although this rhythmic dominance acquires greater subtlety throughout the progress of his works. In the opening soprano solo of *Les Noces* (Example 1), Stravinsky uses constantly shifting meters and makes use of irregular meters, such as 5/8, in some parts. The pervasive use of driving rhythms gives the work its impetus. In *Oedipus Rex*, Jocasta's "oracula" aria is an instance in which the typical driving rhythms of Stravinsky are heard. Each part of this aria is built upon a single rhythmic pattern.<sup>20</sup> *Threni* shows the rhythmic devices and metrical schemes which mark a Stravinsky work but with greater subtlety. In several of the solo sections (Example 5), two parts have such diverse rhythms that bar lines are omitted. This use of polyrhythms is more apparent in his serial works than in the choral works from earlier periods.<sup>21</sup>

Example 5 (*Threni*, p. 9)

Harmonic stasis is another hallmark of a Stravinsky choral work. In *Les Noces*, this stasis is confined to sections of the accompaniment (Example 6). This type of accompaniment serves to heighten the predominance of the vocal parts as well as creating an effect of "musically mechanized ritual."<sup>22</sup> The accompaniment of *Oedipus Rex* is illustrative of the same harmonic style mentioned in *Les Noces*. However, in

this work, Stravinsky carries the practice into his choral writing. Example 7, as well as the Gloria chorus, demonstrates this point. In the Gloria, the harmonically static sections are repeated so that the effect of the changes in the final phrase are magnified. *Threni* contains many examples of harmonic stasis but the effect is more subtle due to the rhythmic context. These sections are again confined to the accompaniment with a hint of the technique in a few choral sections.

Example 6 (*Les Noces*, p. 11)

Example 7 (*Oedipus Rex*, p. 20)

The three works under discussion show much unison writing for chorus. Often two parts will move in parallel motion at equal intervals (Example 8), usually in thirds. Stravinsky favors tertian sonorities in most of his larger choral sections. In *Les Noces* and *Oedipus Rex*, this feature is quite obvious and marked. *Threni* contains less of this due to the serial process, but the settings of the Hebrew letters show more of a conformity to this norm. These three works also demonstrate Stravinsky's use of polytonality. Near the beginning of *Les Noces*, the four pianos are sounding F major and Eb minor chords simultaneously. At one point in *Oedipus Rex*, the basses have a C major chord while the tenors sing B major. Even in *Threni* these polytonal devices are apparent. In the Sensus Spei section, the bass and soprano lines create a Db major sonority while the alto and tenor lines form Eb major. These uniformities in harmonic

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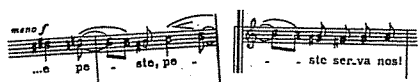
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style aid in pointing to the overall stylistic consistency in Stravinsky's choral works.

Example 8 (*Oedipus Rex*, pp. 9-10)



Although it is readily apparent that Stravinsky's works can be catalogued into three distinct style periods, the personal style features discussed above permeate all of his works and serve to identify a composition as a Stravinsky work. Often appearing rather abrupt, the changes seen in his compositional techniques are evolutionary in nature and show an underlying consistency in his musical growth.<sup>23</sup> The choral works discussed reveal this consistency so that a general survey of Stravinsky's choral style is indeed valid. Stravinsky's interest in choral music was maintained throughout his entire life; these consistencies can also be seen in his other works. They may be found in both long and short choral compositions and help reflect his position that "The more art is controlled, limited, worked over, the more it is free."<sup>24</sup>

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#### FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup>Eric Walter White and Jeremy Noble, "Igor Stravinsky," *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, edited by Stanley Sadie, 6th ed., Vol. XVIII, pp. 241-242, 245, 254.

<sup>2</sup>Eric Walter White, *Stravinsky: The Composer and his Works*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979), p. 556.

<sup>3</sup>Roman Vlad, *Stravinsky*, translated by Frederick Fuller, 3rd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 67.

<sup>4</sup>White, pp. 250-251.

<sup>5</sup>Igor Stravinsky, *Poetics of Music*, translated by Arthur Knodel and Ingolf Dahl (New York: Vintage Books, 1947), p. 66.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 88.

<sup>7</sup>White, p. 327.

<sup>8</sup>Vlad, p. 176.

<sup>9</sup>White, pp. 497-498.

<sup>10</sup>Igor Stravinsky, *An Autobiography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1936), p. 128.

<sup>11</sup>White, p. 328.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 255.

<sup>13</sup>Vlad, p. 218.

<sup>14</sup>Milton Babbitt, "Remarks on the Recent Stravinsky," *Perspectives on Schoenberg and Stravinsky*, edited by Benjamin Boretz and Edward T. Cone (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), pp. 180-181.

<sup>15</sup>Roger Sessions, "On Oedipus Rex," *Modern Music* (V, March-April, 1928), p. 9.

<sup>16</sup>Stravinsky, *Poetics*, pp. 37-38.

<sup>17</sup>White, p. 254.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 334.

<sup>19</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 498-499.

<sup>20</sup>Vlad, p. 108.

<sup>21</sup>White, p. 502.

<sup>22</sup>Robert Craft, *Stravinsky: Chronicle of a Friendship, 1948/71* (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), p. 283.

<sup>23</sup>Vlad, p. 214.

<sup>24</sup>Stravinsky, *Poetics*, p. 66.

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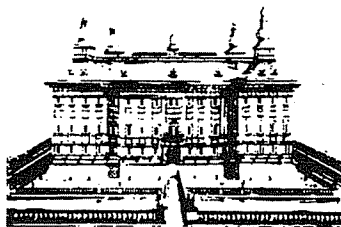
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