

Stephen Walsh. *Stravinsky: Oedipus Rex*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. 118pp.

Anyone wishing to track down the biography of Stravinsky's opera-oratorio, *Oedipus Rex*, can do so fairly easily. The period of its composition, January 1926 to May 1927, is well documented. Stravinsky was traveling constantly at the time, mostly between Paris, Nice, and London, and so corresponding not only with his librettist Jean Cocteau but with others as well on matters relating to translation, performance, and finances. We know, for example, that *Oedipus* was composed in sequence, that its costs were borne by Gabrielle ("Coco") Chanel and Mme. de Polignac (following prolonged negotiations), and that the finished product was presented to Diaghilev as a gift to commemorate the twentieth anniversary of the Ballets Russes ("un cadeau très macabre," was Diaghilev's response). All this is treated in vivid detail in Stephen Walsh's *Stravinsky: Oedipus Rex*.

Wonderfully perceptive, too, are Walsh's comments on the staging of *Oedipus*, the austere, "still life" conception envisioned initially by the composer and then also by Cocteau. Stravinsky's idea of a translation "backwards" from secular French to sacred, "monumental" Latin is discussed at length, as is the neoclassicism of the music. Indeed, the first two chapters are devoted entirely to general matters of this kind, supplemented by three appendices on the libretto, Latin translation, and orchestration. Chapter 3 turns to the music more specifically while chapter 4 addresses the reception of *Oedipus* both as a concert piece and as an opera. (The premiere featured its concert version, while the opera was first performed in Vienna, 23 February 1928.) Walsh's format is tight and amazingly insightful and informative at the same time.

Surprisingly, many specific features planned for the decor and stage action are traceable to Cocteau's two earlier adaptations, *Antigone* (1922) and *Orpheus* (1925). Cocteau is known to have been the source of the speaker device, the idea of a narrator narrating in French (as opposed to Latin) and appearing in evening dress. As Walsh notes, however, a similar device was employed at the premiere of *Histoire du Soldat* (1918), where the narrator also appeared in a dinner jacket. (Stravinsky would later regret the role of the Speaker, eliminating it from several performances of *Oedipus* during the 1950s.) Meyerhold's ideas are also discussed, although only as they pertain in general to Stravinsky's earlier stage works. Central to this entire history are the composer's initiating ideas about a "waxworks opera,"¹ ideas dealing with the characters of the drama in particular,

¹ Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Dialogues and a Diary* (New York: Doubleday, 1963), 6.

characters who were to relate to each other by words rather than movement or gesture, addressing the audience directly; masked so as to preclude facial expression, they were to remain rigid, moving "only their heads and arms . . . like living statues."² Indeed, Stravinsky would later recall that his interest lay not in Oedipus the man or in the other characters as individuals, but, rather, in the "fatal development" of the play, and in the "geometrical" rather than "personal" lines of that "development." The "geometry of tragedy" is what interested him, "the inevitable intersection of lines," and he felt that "the portrait of the individual as a victim of circumstances could be made far more starkly effective by a static presentation."³

And all this fits the neoclassical mold, of course, musical as well as aesthetic. Views expressed in the rather extensive Preface to the published score of *Oedipus* are entirely consistent with those contained in an earlier publication on the instrumental *Octet* (1923), the latter a kind of manifesto of neoclassicism.⁴ Stravinsky sought cold and mechanical approaches to music and music making, approaches without interpretative nuance, and for reasons that were practical as well as aesthetic: for its point to be made, its displacements of accent to be heard and understood, the rhythmic-metric play of his music had to be exact, metronomic, and even percussive in articulation. (See, for example, the accentual shifts of examples 1 and 2, which would become blurred if subjected to any fluctuation of the beat.)

But it is nonetheless with the larger aesthetic issues that Walsh is primarily concerned—above all, with Stravinsky's vehement anti-individualistic stance at the time. Uncomfortable with propositions of self-expression and expressivity, the composer sought to restore distance, order, and a sense of objectivity, envisioning these as part of a removed and idealized Classical past; his stance was anti-progressive, anti-Schoenberg, anti-modernist, anti-Wagner, and so forth.

No less complex than these issues is the libretto and its musical treatment. According to Walsh, the translation of Cocteau's French into "Ciceronian Latin" by Jean Danielou was no routine Latinization but, on the contrary, a skillful Classical conceit complete with the sorts of repeti-

² Preface to the score.

³ Stravinsky and Craft, *Dialogues*, 6-7.

⁴ "Some Ideas about My Octuor," *The Arts* (January 1924); reprinted in Eric Walter White, *Stravinsky* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 528-30. See also "Quelques Confidences sur la Musique" (1935), reprinted in White, *Stravinsky*, 535-39; and "Interview" (1938), also reprinted in White, *Stravinsky*, 539-41.

tions and reorderings of word, phrase, and line that Stravinsky would have required of any libretto, Russian, French, Greek, or Latin in origin. (Walsh suspects that the final draft was the result of a close collaboration between Stravinsky and Danielou. The matter is difficult to discern since Cocteau's original French drafts, sent to Danielou for translation, have been lost.)

As is well known, word and phrase repetitions permitted a changing of accent, the juxtaposition of different accentuations, and different metrical placements of a given word, techniques analogous to the accentual displacement that marks the repetition of motives and fragments in Stravinsky's music.⁵ The verbal accent works against the musical, or, more commonly, the accents of a given word or phrase are changed as a result of a changed metrical placement. Either way, attention can shift away from the meaning of a word or phrase and on to its sound. More particularly in *Oedipus*, the identity of various characters can seem affected. As names, places, and events are constantly reordered and reaccented, the characters themselves can seem to lose a degree of self-determination, to become increasingly ambiguous. In turn, the sense of their helplessness is reinforced; at the mercy of forces outside themselves, they are no less at the mercy, in the articulation of their lines, of schemes of rhythm and displaced accents, a form of manipulation over which, likewise, they have no control. The following is the text of the Messenger at Rehearsal nos. 139–141 with English translation; observe, in particular, the repetition not only of words but of phrases and lines as well.

NUNTIO

Repperam in monte
puerum Œdipoda,
derelictum in monte
parvulum Œdipoda,
foratum pedes

MESSENGER

I found on the mountain
the child Oedipus,
abandoned on the mountain,
the infant Oedipus,
his feet pierced,

⁵ For a revealing discussion of the role of flexible stress in Stravinsky's text-setting, especially as it concerns the origin of this technique in Stravinsky's early Russian-period works, see Richard Taruskin, "Stravinsky's 'Rejoicing Discovery' and what it meant: in Defense of his Notorious Text Setting," in Ethan Haimo and Paul Johnson, eds., *Stravinsky Retrospectives* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1987), 162–99. The musical equivalent of this accentual displacement is discussed at length in my own studies of Stravinsky's music, *The Music of Igor Stravinsky* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), 214–51, and *Stravinsky and the Rite of Spring* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 97–114. More recently I have compared displacement in Stravinsky's music with its occurrence in the music of Berlioz and Debussy; see Pieter C. van den Toorn, *Music, Politics and the Academy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 220–36.

vulneratum pedes	his feet wounded,
parvulum Œdipoda,	the infant Oedipus,
Reppereram in monte,	I found on the mountain
attuleram pastori	and took to the shepherd
puerum Œdipoda	the child Oedipus

Scenes featuring the Messenger and/or the Shepherd precede the celebrated coda in act II, the accompaniment to Oedipus's threefold confession ("I was born against divine law; I married against divine law; I killed against divine law") and final resignation (*Lux facta est*). Walsh remarks quite rightly that, in contrast to the square phrasing and metric regularity of much of *Oedipus*, the Messenger and the Shepherd mark a return to the chopped-up meters and incantatory style of earlier Russian works; their music is modal, in fact, and often Dorian. At the same time, however, Walsh might have supplied an illustration not only of this return but also of the various ways and means of displacement.

Example 1 shows Stravinsky's adaptation of the first five lines of the above text of the Messenger. The passage itself consists of an initial five measures which are repeated verbatim at no. 140; the first phrase at no. 139 covers the first two lines, the second at no. 140 covers the remaining three. Yet the repeat at no. 140 conceals a displacement hinging on a background steady meter and featuring the quarter note as pulse; see the $\frac{3}{4}$ brackets in example 1 according to which, in example 2, the passage is rebarred. (The passage directly preceding no. 139 is in $\frac{2}{4}$ and features the quarter note as a distinct, unmistakable pulse.) In effect, the G-F-G neighbor-note figure, initially off the beat at no. 139, is subsequently contradicted by an on-the-beat placement at no. 140. Hence, too, even when the notated meter indicates an exact repetition, an underlying periodicity can prompt a sense of displacement. (Stravinsky would later confess that he often barred according to phrasing with material of this kind. A more detailed analysis would have addressed the rationale of the notated irregularity.) In the present case, the concealed $\frac{3}{4}$ meter at nos. 139 and 140 is brought to the surface as the notated meter at no. 144. In example 1, a dotted line connects this later $\frac{3}{4}$ meter with the earlier divisions and brackets at nos. 139 and 140.

If I have a specific reservation about Walsh's approach, it is that its impressionistic accounts of the music do not translate often enough into detailed analysis, and that the general description is not pursued in greater detail, more closely and hence in ways more readily to the point. Close analysis has been harshly dealt with in the past decade, of course, often dismissed as "formalist," "elitist," "insular," "specialist," "Westernist," "masculinist," and so forth. But Walsh does not dismiss analysis along

Example 1.

Example 1 is a musical score for a vocal piece with piano accompaniment. It consists of three systems of music. The first system (measures 139-143) features a vocal line in bass clef with lyrics: "Re- ppe - re - ram in mon - te pu - e - rum Oe - di - po -". The second system (measures 140-143) continues the vocal line with lyrics: "da, de - re - li - ctum in mon - te par - vu - lum Oe - di - po - da etc.". The third system (measures 144-146) shows the piano accompaniment for oboe (obs.) and bassoon (bn.) in treble and bass clefs respectively. The music is in 3/4 time with a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The vocal line includes fingerings (1, 2, 3) and breath marks. The piano accompaniment includes articulation marks like accents and slurs.

Example 2.

Example 2 shows two systems of a vocal line in bass clef. The first system (measure 139) and the second system (measure 140) are in 3/4 time with a key signature of two flats. The notation includes various rhythmic values and articulation marks.

these lines, and his comments on the music would have been more effective had he been willing to take an occasional plunge. I would insist, in any case, that the advantage of close analysis lies in its ability to reach into the detail of music, saying something about how we process and organize detail, segment and group it. Methods of theory and analysis are distinguished not by their "technical" means, but by their study at close range, their determination to come to grips with the details of musical structures; the "technical" angle, which necessarily is descriptive and metaphorical, the label notwithstanding, is also symptomatic of intimacy and of an overriding focus on detail. And rather than being dry or mechanical, then, unresponsive to larger aesthetic ends, close work with the materials of music can be a way of sustaining a musical presence, intensifying a sense of immediacy.

Thus, for example, on the matter of tonality in *Oedipus*, Walsh can claim with some justification that Stravinsky was “less interested in tonal functions than in tonal imagery” (p. 56). Apropos of the celebrated Coda alluded to above (see example 3), he can claim that the reiteration of (D F A) at no. 167 + 3 represents “D minor,” that that of (D F#) in the flutes at no. 167 + 4 represents “D major,” and that the triadic outline of (B D F#) at no. 168 (*Oedipus*) is “in B minor.” He can suggest that these separately juxtaposed triads, complete and incomplete, reflect a “D minor/D major-B minor” ambiguity, indeed, a neoclassical “fondness” for ambiguities involving “keys a third apart” and often “created by the omission of chord tones,” a “fondness” as well for ambiguities between “major and minor modes on the same tonic” (p. 61). But at some point he is obliged to pursue these ambiguities a bit more rigorously and question the assumptions that underlie his use of an established terminology.

Example 3.

The musical score for Example 3 consists of four staves. The first staff is for flutes (fls.), the second for clarinets (cls.), the third for timpani (timp.), and the fourth for strings. The music is in 3/4 time. The first staff (fls.) shows a triad of D, F, and A in the right hand, with a D in the left hand. The second staff (cls.) shows a triad of D, F, and A in the right hand, with a D in the left hand. The third staff (timp.) shows a single note D in the right hand, with a D in the left hand. The fourth staff (strings) shows a triad of D, F, and A in the right hand, with a D in the left hand. The score is labeled "167 + 3" and "OEDIPUS".

Is the music at nos. 167–170 truly ambiguous? Or is the ambiguity conceptual? Does it spring from the application of tonal terms and concepts which are no longer sufficiently relevant? More to the point, what does “key” mean here? And how is it that in Walsh’s account, as indeed in so many accounts prior to his, mere triads are dubbed “keys” or “tonic” triads? With little or no definition of “keys” or “tonics,” and little or no dominant preparation, how is it that Walsh and others can think in these terms? (Strictly speaking, a regular sense of harmonic progression is missing at nos. 159–170, replaced by the static reiteration of (D F A), (D F#),

(D F), and (B D F#). (D F A) stems from a preceding diatonic context which, featuring the Messenger and the Shepherd at no. 139 and again at nos. 159 and 163, is modal and Dorian rather than minor and, as such, tonal.) Were we to pursue such a familiar path vis-a-vis tonality and its neoclassical manifestation, how could its qualification be judged?

One option would be to retreat to a more neutral and hence less determinate level of analysis than that defined by tonality and its functions. Indeed, retreating to an abstract (unordered) pitch-class set, we could total the content at nos. 167–170, a content which, excluding C# as a passing tone between B and D at no. 168, is octatonic in terms of B, D, F, F#, and A, and accountable to the second of the three content-distinguishable octatonic collections or transpositions, Collection II in terms of B, C, D, Eb, F, F#, G#, and A.⁶ This is not, however, the collection that ultimately announces this particular stretch of interplay between the octatonic and diatonic sets. Rather, the announcement comes earlier with Collection I, and in the form of a descending scale passage at no. 158, at the end of Oedipus's aria, "Nonne monstrum." As shown in example 4, this octatonic descent imitates a still earlier diatonic flourish within the aria itself and its quasi-F-major tonality. Still more significantly, the diminished-seventh chord (D F Ab B) that closes the aria serves to connect Collection I not only to Collection II but also to the "D minor/major–B minor" complex referred to by Walsh. The specifics are outlined in figure 1:

Figure 1

Collection I	D	E	F	G	Ab	Bb	B	C#	(D)
3-cycle	D		F		Ab		B		(D)
Collection II	D	Eb	F	F#	G#	A	B	C	(D)
pc content, nos. 167–170	D		F	F#		A	B		

As has frequently been observed, a retreat into greater abstraction entails risks. Here, however, as indeed with sets in general that are highly symmetrical and hence redundant in character (easily recognizable and manageable as such), the retreat can effectively qualify the meaning of a

⁶ See van den Toorn, *The Music of Igor Stravinsky*, 31–98. The octatonic set is limited to three transpositions: ascending at C# with the semitone-tone interval ordering of the scale; I have labelled these Collection I (at C#), Collection II (at D), and Collection III (at Eb). The passage at nos. 167–170 in *Oedipus* has been discussed elsewhere, indeed, in the above-noted Stravinsky volume, 298–305, 318. See also the discussion in Joseph N. Straus, *Remaking the Past: Musical Modernism and the Influence of the Tonal Tradition* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 90–93.

Example 4.

residual tonality in *Oedipus*. It can explain the absence of a sense of harmonic progression at nos. 159–170, for example, and the lack of “dominant” triads in support of “tonics.” (“Dominant” triads with leading tones are not available to the four (0, 3, 6, 9) symmetrically defined major and minor triads of the octatonic set.) And were we to include the (F A C) “tonic” triad of *Oedipus*’s aria in our calculations, the entire triadic complex, consisting of the pairs (F A C) (D F A) and (D F# (A)) (B D F#), would be stretched to include B, C, D, F, F#, and A, implying, however, as shown in figure 2, the same referential alignments apropos of the octatonic Collection II:

Figure 2

triads		C							
		A	A	(A)					
		F	F	F#	F#				
			D	D	D				
									B
3-cycle	B		D	F					
pc content	B	C	D	F	F#		A	(B)	
Collection II	B	C	D	E \flat	F	F#	G#	A	(B)

The diatonic sets implied by the same complex could also be considered, as shown in figure 3. Significant, too, as part of this final consideration, would be the functional residue, specifically, the intersection of the complex with the convention of “relative keys” and that of the *tierce de Picardie*, the relation of (D F#) to (D F A), both of which are highly qualified (each side of the referential interaction being qualified by the other). Both conventions would represent the Classical and tonal side of the bargain, a more specific and hence more determinate, inherited diatonic use, Walsh’s “keys a third apart” and his “major and minor modes on

the same tonic." The advantage of the present analysis, however, is that the qualifications are given a more specific definition.

Figure 3

diatonic			F	G	A	B \flat	C	D	E	(F)
scales		D	E	F	G	A	B	C	(D)	
		D		F \sharp						
	B	C \sharp	D	F \sharp						

Pointing to the later octatonic scale passages at no. 186 of the score, Walsh remarks that the role of the octatonic set in *Oedipus* is a limited one (p. 65). So it is, although, judging from the passages surveyed in examples 3 and 4, it is a good deal more suggestive than Walsh implies. The point here, however, is that a more extensive analysis of such relations can illuminate the detail not only of *Oedipus* but of its relations with other works, including Stravinsky's neoclassical works. To take but one example: the triadic complex shown in example 2, if transposed down a semitone, is no different from that complex which, twenty years later, governs large portions of *Orpheus* (1947). The transposition aligns itself to Collection I rather than Collection II, however.

Figure 4 (*Orpheus*)

triads		B								
		G \sharp	G \sharp		A \flat					
		E	E		F	F				
			C \sharp		D \flat	D \flat				
						B \flat				
3-cycle		B \flat	C \sharp	E						
Collection I	B \flat	B	C \sharp	D	E	F	G	A \flat	(B \flat)	

Indeed, the (B D F F \sharp A) content in *Oedipus* at nos. 167–170 is no different from that which opens the string Concerto in D (1946) at nos. 0–5, a fact I mention not because of the equivalence in itself but because of the greater distinctions such an equivalence can afford: in the Concerto, the B functions as a neighbor-note to the A rather than as the root of (B D F \sharp).

All of which is not to suggest that Walsh's book is less than useful because of omissions in detailed analysis and theory. On the contrary, and as indicated already, anyone seeking information about *Oedipus* and the neoclassical era in general will find *Stravinsky: Oedipus Rex* immensely insightful. My advice, however, is that a more detailed analysis be pursued alongside Walsh's comments. The latter will prove all the more rewarding as a result.

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