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Stravinsky, Tempo, and *Le sacre*

Erica Heisler Buxbaum

Performing the works of Igor Stravinsky precisely as he intended would appear to be an uncomplicated matter: Stravinsky notated his scores in great detail, conducted recorded performances of many of his works, and wrote commentaries that contain a great deal of specific performance information. Stravinsky's recordings and published statements, however, raise as many questions as they answer about the determination of tempo and the documentary value of recordings. Like Wagner, Stravinsky believed that the establishment of the proper tempo for a work was crucial and declared that "a piece of mine can survive almost anything but wrong or uncertain tempo."¹ Stravinsky notated his tempi precisely with both Italian words and metronome markings and asserted on many occasions that the primary value of his recordings was that they demonstrated the proper tempi for his works. In the recordings, however, Stravinsky often departed from the metronome markings, creating doubt about which should be considered definitive, the markings or the performance tempi.

Stravinsky's ideas about the value of recordings and about tempo changed significantly between 1934 and 1971:

1. Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, "The Performance of Music," *Conversations with Igor Stravinsky* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Company, 1959), 135.

[Transcriptions for mechanical piano] enabled me to determine for the future the relationships of the movements (tempi) and the nuances in accordance with my wishes. These transcriptions enabled me to create a lasting document which should be of service to those executants who would rather know and follow my intentions than stray into irresponsible interpretations of my musical text. (1934)²

The essential thing, without which it would be impossible to form any idea of the composition [is] the pace of movements and their relationship to one another. (1934)³

A recording is, or should be a performance, and who can suffer exactly the same set of performance limitations more than once — at least with familiar music? (1961)⁴

I could not do any of [the recorded performances] the same way again. But even the poorest are valid readings to guide other performers. (1961)⁵

If the speeds of everything in the world and in ourselves have changed, our tempo feelings cannot remain unaffected. The metronome marks one wrote forty years ago were contemporary forty years ago. Time is not alone in affecting tempo — circumstances do too, and every performance is a different equation of them. I would be surprised if any of my own recent recordings follows the metronome markings. (1961)⁶

I have changed my mind . . . about the advantages of embalming a performance in tape. The disadvantages, which are that one performance represents only one set of circumstances, and that mistakes and misunderstandings are cemented into traditions as

2. Igor Stravinsky, *An Autobiography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1936; paperback reprint, New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, Norton Library, 1962), 101 (page references are to reprint edition). Dates given for quotations are for completion of the work, if known, or first copyright. These dates are not in agreement with publication information for the sources from which the quotations were taken.

3. *Ibid.*, 150.

4. Igor Stravinsky, *Dialogues*, originally published as *Dialogues and a Diary* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday and Company, 1963; reprint, Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1982), 120 (page references are to reprint edition).

5. *Ibid.*, 121.

6. *Ibid.*, 122.

quickly and canonically as truths, now seem to me too great a price to pay. (1969, revised 1971)⁷

As these quotes reveal, Stravinsky's statements raise questions about the determining of a single, enduringly correct tempo, and about the documentary value of his recordings. For if time and circumstances render metronome markings obsolete, what guidelines may we use to determine the proper tempi? Are the performance tempi of more recent recordings to supersede the markings in the scores? If so, how might we determine which of these performance tempi represent "mistakes and misunderstandings" and which illustrate "truths"?

Stravinsky's conception of the role of the interpreter also changed, subtly but meaningfully, over the years. In 1934, he wrote that Monteux "was able to achieve a very clean and finished execution of my score. I ask no more of a conductor, for any other attitude on his part immediately turns into *interpretation*, a thing I have a horror of."⁸

He maintained that "music should be transmitted and not interpreted"⁹ and that "an executant's talent lies precisely in his faculty for seeing what is actually in the score, and certainly not in a determination to find there what he would like to find."¹⁰

In 1961, however, Stravinsky stated that "the most nearly perfect musical machine, a Stradivarius violin or an electronic synthesizer, is useless until joined to a man with musical skill and imagination."¹¹ He asked, "What, to a composer, is most important about a recorded performance?" and answered, "The spirit, of course, the same as in any performance . . . Next to the spirit come the two chief questions of the flesh: tempo and balance."¹²

And in 1970, Stravinsky described a performance of *Le sacre du printemps* conducted by Zubin Mehta as "always exciting, at least" despite "many errors, especially in tempi."¹³ Thus, although Stravinsky's attitude toward interpreters did not change as radically as did his thoughts about

7. Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Themes and Conclusions*, originally published in two volumes as *Themes and Episodes* and *Retrospectives and Conclusions*, single volume version (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966, 1961, 1972; paperback reprint, 1982), 139 (page references to reprint edition).

8. Stravinsky, *Autobiography*, 34.

9. *Ibid.*, 74.

10. *Ibid.*, 75.

11. Stravinsky, *Dialogues*, 126.

12. *Ibid.*, 122.

13. Stravinsky, *Themes and Conclusions*, 215.

definitive recordings and tempi, his gradual acceptance of something more than "transmission" or "execution" from a performer is significant.

Among the most informative of Stravinsky's writings are his reviews of six recorded performances of *Le sacre du printemps*, including one of his own.¹⁴ Several of the performances Stravinsky described have been re-issued;¹⁵ when studied in relation to the detailed, specific reviews, these recordings provide enormous insight into Stravinsky's preferences regarding articulation, balance, and particularly tempo.

A comparison of Stravinsky's comments regarding tempo in five of these performances with the actual tempi on the recordings suggests that while Stravinsky's metronome markings are on the whole a more reliable guide to his enduring conception of the work than even his own performance, the tempi which elicited the most favorable responses from the composer were more varied than the absolute markings in the score would imply. Other of his comments, however, reveal either that his original markings did not adequately convey his intentions, or that his ideas about tempo in some portions of *Le sacre* had, in fact, changed with the passage of time, and that his own recording was not always the clearest guide to the precise nature of these changes.

Stravinsky's review of his own recorded performance of *Le sacre du printemps* provides valuable insights regarding the composer's intentions regarding tempo, but not without raising additional questions. For example, Stravinsky indicated dissatisfaction with several performance tempi that departed from the metronome markings:

14. "Stravinsky Reviews 'The Rite': a Review of Recent Recordings of *Le sacre du printemps*," in Stravinsky, *Dialogues*, 81-90. A footnote explains that the review was "written in October 1964 for *Hi-Fi Stereo* magazine, New York, partly out of annoyance with the 'useless generalities of most record reviewing.'" This review discusses performances by Herbert von Karajan (Berlin Philharmonic, DGG), Pierre Boulez (Orchestre national de la R.T.F., Internationale guilde du disque), and P. Kpaøt (Moscow State Symphony Orchestra, Amalgamated Unions Gramophone Studio). Reviews of performances by Pierre Boulez (Cleveland Orchestra, CBS Records), Zubin Mehta (Los Angeles Philharmonic, London Records), and Igor Stravinsky (Columbia Symphony, Columbia Records, 1960, re-issued 1970), dated June 1970, appear in "Spring Fever: a Review of Three Recent Recordings of 'The Rite of Spring'" in Stravinsky, *Themes and Conclusions*, 234-41.

15. Von Karajan's performance has been re-issued as DGG CD 423 214-2. Boulez's performance with the Orchestre national de la R.T.F. has been re-issued on cassette tape by Nonesuch (71093-4), while that with the Cleveland Orchestra is available as part of the CBS "Great Performances" series (cassette tape MYT 37764 or CD MYK 37764). Mehta's performance is available on London "Jubilee" JL 41002, and Stravinsky's on CBS Masterworks cassette tape MPT 38765. Stravinsky's recording has also been re-issued by CBS as MS6319, D3S 705, MG 31202, and LXX 36940.

Rehearsal Number	MM	Tempo on recording	Comment ¹⁶
48	♩ = 108	112	"too fast"
54	♩ = 160	144	"too slow"
57	♩ = 168	152	"too slow"
72	♩ = 60	80	"too fast"
93	♩ = 80	108	"too fast"

What tempi, then, might he have preferred?

Stravinsky's observations concerning other passages, however, raise questions about the markings in the score. For example, his performances of "The Sage" and "Introduction II" were described as "too fast" although both were performed at the tempi indicated. Again, what tempi would have been preferable?

Stravinsky's reviews of four other performances provide additional clarification of his ideas about tempo in *Le sacre du printemps*. The following table correlates the metronome markings and the tempi of the five performances with Stravinsky's remarks in the reviews. By comparing Stravinsky's evaluations of several tempi in selected passages, we may begin to draw conclusions about a range of tempi he most likely considered acceptable and to see how and where his ideas on tempo in *Le sacre* may have changed over the years. In the reviews, Stravinsky's comments regarding tempo were plentiful enough to suggest that tempi that he failed to mention lay within an acceptable range where no contrary evidence exists.

16. Stravinsky's comments are quoted from the review in *Themes and Conclusions*, 234-41.

Stravinsky's Comments Regarding Tempo in Five
Recordings of *Le sacre du printemps*

Title	Rehearsal Number	MM	Tempo of Performance ¹⁷	Stravinsky's Comment ¹⁸
Augurs of Spring	13	♩ = 50	K 50	"much too fast" "the tempo is good" "vitiatingly fast"
			B1 56	
			B2 52	
			M 56	
			S 54	
Ritual of Abduction	37	♩. = 132	K 132	"the tempo, though very fast, is good" "perniciously slow" "sluggish"
			B1 126	
			B2 116	
			M 116	
			S 120	
Spring Rounds	48	♩ = 108	K 69	"on the slow side, but greatly to be preferred to my own very hurried reading" "too slow" "too fast" "brisk and good" "too slow"
			B1 104	
			B2 100	
			M 69	
			S 112	
	54	♩ = 160	K 160	
			B1 160	
			B2 168	
			M 168	
			S 144	
Ritual of the Rival Tribes	57	♩ = 168	K 168	
			B1 160	
			B2 160	
			M 160	
			S 152	
The Sage	4 before 72	♩ = 42	K 52	"more than twice too fast" "approximately twice too fast" "too fast" "my performance is no better than the other two"
			B1 58	
			B2 52	
			M 52	
			S 42	

17. Letters preceding numbers identify conductors. K=von Karajan; B1=Boulez, Orchestre national de la R.T.F.; B2=Boulez, Cleveland Orchestra; M=Mehta; S=Stravinsky. See note 15 for recording citations.

18. Comments on K and B1 are from Stravinsky, *Dialogues*, 81-90. Comments on B2, M and S are from Stravinsky, *Themes and Conclusions*, 234-41.

Dance of the Earth	72	$\text{♩} = 168$	K	160	"a slightly faster tempo than the metronomic 168 would not be amiss"
			B1	152	
			B2	144	
			M	160	
			S	152	"this may be the slowest Prestissimo ever clocked."
			M	160	"this is the best performance of the three"
			S	152	"too slow"
Intro II	79	$\text{♩} = 48$	K	44,46*	"sleepy tempo"
			B1	52	"too hurried"
			B2	48,54	"a shade too fast"
			M	48	
			S	48,58	"too fast"
	89	$\text{♩} = 60$	K	50	
			B1	69	
			B2	76	
			M	54	
			S	72	
Mystic Circles	91	$\text{♩} = 60$	K	60	"the tempo is too fast, being in fact the tempo of the 'più mosso' at 93"
			B1	66	
			B2	80	
			M	72-84	
			S	80	"this is not only too fast but pushed"
					"too fast"
Glorifi- cation of the Chosen One	104	$\text{♪} = 144$	K	132	"the tempo is good"
			B1	132	
			B2	138	
			M	138	"this sounds rushed all the way"
			S	132	
Evoca- tion of the Ancestors	121	$\text{♩} = 144$	K	112	"this is too slow!"
			B1	138	"the tempo is perfect and so is the articulation"
			B2	132	"this is perfect — exactly the way the music should be performed"
			M	116	"the pulsation...should be exactly the same as in the previous dance, and not, as here, adjusted to a slower tempo."
			S	126	

* The second tempo occurs at 1 before 85.

Ritual Action of the Ancestors	129	$\text{♩} = 52$	K	52	"whether or not metronomically correct, this tempo di hoochie-koochie is definitely too slow"
			B1	69	"— but <i>this</i> is too fast"
			B2	56	"this is good"
			M	60	"this is good"
			S	66	"the passage is better played here as a whole than in the other recordings."
Sacri- ficial Dance	142 (157) 142	$\text{♩} = 126$	K	116	"sluggish tempo"
			B1	132	"fast but good"
				138	"unsuitably fast"
			B2	120	"a little slow, but clear, and incomparably better than Boulez's old recording"
			M	132	"rushed"
			S	120	

For "Augurs of Spring," (marked $\text{♩} = 50$), a range of 50-54 was apparently acceptable, while 56 was definitely too fast. Stravinsky's own tempo of 54 seems to set an absolute upper limit, and even here he commented that "the end of the movements is rushed."¹⁹

The marked tempo for "Ritual of Abduction," $\text{♩} = 132$, was judged "very fast, but good," suggesting this as an upper limit, while a "perniciously slow" or "sluggish" tempo of 116 should be avoided at the other extreme. Speeds of 120-132 seemed to be acceptable here, with a preference for the marked tempo.

Stravinsky's comments on the tempi of "Spring Rounds" (marked, at 48, $\text{♩} = 108$) clearly illustrate his predilection for favoring a narrow range of possibilities. His remark that Boulez's tempo of 100 was "on the slow side, but greatly to be preferred to my own very hurried reading" ($\text{♩} = 112$), suggests a preferred range of 104-108, as marked. The passage beginning at 54, however might be taken slightly faster than the marked $\text{♩} = 160$ (Mehta's 168 was judged "brisk and good"), but not more slowly.

Neither the three performances of "Ritual of the Rival Tribes" ($\text{♩} = 168$) at 160 nor the one at the marked speed elicited comments, suggesting a possible range of 160-168. An even slightly slower tempo, however, should be avoided (152 was "too slow").

19. Stravinsky, *Themes and Conclusions*, 235.

Stravinsky's comments on tempi for "The Sage" imply, for the first time, a real dissatisfaction with the marking in the score ($\downarrow = 42$). He judged his own performance at the marked tempo "no better than the other two," in other words, too fast. If Boulez's $\downarrow = 52$ was "approximately twice too fast" and his $\downarrow = 58$ was "more than twice too fast," perhaps a tempo of $\downarrow = 50-54$ might be appropriate. In any case, the tempo should not exceed the indicated speed, and should probably be slower.

Stravinsky's suggestion that "a slightly faster tempo than the metronomic 168 would not be amiss" for "Dance of the Earth," and his comment that Mehta's performance at $\downarrow = 160$ was "the best of the three" implies a tolerance of a range of tempi from about 160-176 for this dance, with a preference for the faster tempi. A speed of 152, on the other hand, is definitely too slow.

Establishing the proper tempo for "Introduction II" (marked $\downarrow = 48$) is problematical. As in "The Sage," another relatively slow tempo, Stravinsky did not seem satisfied with any of the performance tempi. Von Karajan's performance at 44 was described as "sleepy," while those of both Boulez and Stravinsky himself, which begin at the marked speed but accelerate to 54 and 58 respectively at one measure before 85 were "too fast." Although Stravinsky was usually clear in distinguishing between unacceptable basic tempi and undesirable (always, unless marked) modifications of tempo, it is possible that his real dissatisfaction here was with the later, faster tempi. Craft's statement that "the composer upholds the metronome marking in the score"²⁰ supports this view. Perhaps the solution would be to perform the movement at the marked tempo throughout.

"Mystic Circles" ($\downarrow = 60$) should evidently not exceed a speed of 66 — tempi of 72 and faster are "too fast." "Glorification of the Chosen One" ($\downarrow = 144$), however, may be effectively performed at 132 ("the tempo is good"). Stravinsky's observation that Mehta's tempo of 138 "sounds rushed all the way" may refer more to an instability of tempo than the basic speed, since Boulez's performance at the same tempo elicited no comment.

A slightly slower tempo than is marked ($\downarrow = 144$) seems appropriate for "Evocation of the Ancestors" as well, since Boulez's performances at 138

20. Robert Craft, "The Performance of the 'Rite of Spring,'" in Igor Stravinsky, *The Rite of Spring: Sketches, 1911-1913* (London: Boosey and Hawkes, Ltd., 1969), Appendix IV, 46-47.

and 132 were enthusiastically praised as "perfect." Tempi of 112-126 are, however, too slow.

"Ritual Action of the Ancestors" ($\text{♩} = 52$) is another relatively slow tempo about which Stravinsky apparently had second thoughts, as his remark about von Karajan's performance makes abundantly clear. Tempi of 56 and 60 were described as "good," while 69 was "too fast." Stravinsky favored his own performance at 66 overall, although he did not comment specifically on the tempo. A range of 56-66 may be postulated, with 66 as an absolute upper limit.

Stravinsky seemed to favor his marked tempo of $\text{♩} = 126$ or one slightly faster for "Sacrificial Dance." The range of possibilities is narrow here, and the limits are clearly drawn — 120 was "a little slow," 132 was "fast but good," and 138 was "unsuitably fast."

Thus, in seeking to establish performance tempi for *Le sacre du printemps* in accordance with the composer's conception, we cannot unquestioningly accept either his metronome markings or his own recorded performance tempi as reliable guidelines. A study of his reviews of five performances of the work suggests that preferred tempi encompassed a range more flexible than the markings in the score would imply, but less so than his own performance tempi might suggest. The limits of what Stravinsky considered acceptable or desirable are narrow, but may, in a number of cases, be clearly defined when his evaluations of several different tempi are considered.