

PART III

Reception

## 9 Stravinsky conducts Stravinsky

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All truly modern musical performance (and of course that includes the authenticist variety) treats the music performed as if it were composed – or at least performed – by Stravinsky. TARUSKIN<sup>1</sup>

The years 1928–9, when Stravinsky first recorded his Russian ballets, have not yet passed beyond living memory.<sup>2</sup> And yet, when it comes to the history of performance (and especially of orchestral performance, since recording so large a group of musicians became possible only with the development of electrical recording around 1925), this is a remote and only just recoverable past. It is true that the pianola versions of *The Firebird*, *Petrushka* and *The Rite of Spring* push the horizon back to the early 1920s, but the ballets' premieres, from the last years before the First World War, lie altogether within the long, silent, initial phase of music history. Stravinsky recorded each of them on a number of occasions (he recorded *The Rite*, for instance, in 1929, 1940 and 1960), and in this way the history of these works unfolded, as Peter Hill puts it, 'exactly in tandem with the emerging record industry'.<sup>3</sup> Successive developments in recording technology represent one of the reasons why Stravinsky recorded many of his works several times: the 78 gave way to the LP in 1948 and to the stereo LP in 1957. ('Last year's record is as *démodé* as last year's motor car,' Stravinsky wryly observed.<sup>4</sup>) But there were further reasons. One was Stravinsky's financial dependence on recording and more generally on conducting, as a result of the drying up of his Russian royalties following the 1917 Revolution; there is a terrible irony in the fact that Stravinsky's career as neoclassical and serial composer was bankrolled by nearly a thousand performances of *The Firebird*.<sup>5</sup> The other reason takes longer to explain, for it opens up the whole issue of Stravinsky's intentions as a recording artist.

Stravinsky's attitude towards recording was formed largely by his experience with the pianola or player-piano.<sup>6</sup> He first encountered the instrument in 1914,<sup>7</sup> and composed an *Étude* for it in 1917. But it was only in the 1920s, when he held successive contracts with Pleyel (1921–4) and Aeolian (1924–9), that he created arrangements of his Russian ballets: 'created' rather than 'recorded', because many of them, including that of *The Rite*, were not taken from live performance but rather cut into the roll by hand, under the composer's more or less close direction. Stravinsky stressed that

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this made the pianola versions just that: *versions* of the music rather than ‘recordings’ in any normal sense. In 1925 he referred to them as ‘Not a “photograph of my playing”, as Paderewski has made of his . . . but rather a “lithograph”, a full and permanent record of tone combinations that are beyond my ten poor fingers to perform’;<sup>8</sup> three years later he explained in an interview that he saw the pianola as ‘not an instrument to *reproduce* my works but one that could *reconstitute* them’.<sup>9</sup> Such statements – along with Stravinsky’s later claim that the pianola’s metronomic quality, its ‘absence of tempo nuances’, influenced his compositional style in the 1920s<sup>10</sup> – must make problematic any claim that the pianola versions provide a direct guide to the original performance practice of the Diaghilev ballets.

Stravinsky carried this thinking over into sound recording. In the same 1928 interview, he said that ‘the gramophone produces the image of an image and not simply a transferral’, and stressed the non-naturalistic circumstances under which early, non-editable recordings took place (‘one’s weariness accumulates, and when nerves are about to snap, the violinists’ arms to succumb, and the mind to go blank with the monotony of the task, that is the moment when one must be perfect for the “take” which is to be recorded.’) Paradoxically, however, he saw the introduction of editing technology in the 1950s as only furthering the separation between live and recorded performance: ‘Natural balance, natural dynamics, natural echo, natural colour, natural human error’, he told *Seventeen* magazine, ‘have been replaced by added echo and reverberation, by a neutralizing dynamic range, by filtered sound, by an engineered balance . . . The resulting record is a super-glossy, chem-fab music-substitute never heard on sea or land, or even in Philadelphia.’<sup>11</sup> Add to all this ‘the carelessness, the tension, and incompetence which usually pervade recording enterprises’, as a jaundiced Claudio Spies put it,<sup>12</sup> and it is hard to know how far Stravinsky’s recordings can be taken as a guide to his conception of the music, or even to the reality of contemporary concert performance. An early recording is not a kind of fly on the wall or historical surveillance technology. It is a historical document, presenting as many difficulties of interpretation (though different ones) as any other kind of documentary evidence.

The first recording Stravinsky ever made was a private one (intended presumably for his own study purposes), now lost: it was of his Octet, and was made in Paris in 1923, shortly after he premiered the work at one of Koussevitsky’s Symphony Concerts. This was the first time Stravinsky had ever premiered one of his works as a conductor,<sup>13</sup> and it was in an article entitled ‘Some ideas about my *Octuor*’<sup>14</sup> that he first set out the philosophy of performance which he reiterated and elaborated in his *Autobiography* and *Poetics of Music*,<sup>15</sup> as well as in some of the conversation books with Robert Craft. Central to this philosophy was his distrust of conductors and ‘their

notorious liberty, . . . which prevents the public from obtaining a correct idea of the author's intentions';<sup>16</sup> this, he said, is what drove him first to the pianola and then to the gramophone. (Age did not soften his opinion of conductors: even at the end of his life, in 'On conductors and conducting', he described them as 'a tremendous obstacle to music-making'.<sup>17</sup>) Such views were not, of course, exactly unique: Schoenberg was hardly less cutting ('Does not the author, too, have a claim to make clear his opinion about the realization of his work, even though no conductor of genius will neglect to override the author's opinion when the performance comes?'<sup>18</sup>), while Ravel's maxim, 'I do not ask for my music to be interpreted, but only for it to be played', sounds almost more Stravinskian than Stravinsky.<sup>19</sup> But there are three ways in which Stravinsky went beyond a merely conventional expression of this chronic composer's complaint.

First, in the Octet essay, but more systematically in the *Poetics*,<sup>20</sup> Stravinsky rationalised his distrust in terms of a distinction between 'execution' and 'interpretation': the former (corresponding to Ravel's 'playing') was to be understood as a strict and faithful realisation of the music itself and hence a characteristically modernist sweeping away of the Romantic indulgences of the latter. (The ethically charged vocabulary is an integral part of the message: interpretation 'is at the root of all the errors, all the sins, all the misunderstandings that interpose themselves between the musical work and the listener and prevent a faithful transmission of its message'.<sup>21</sup>) Second, Stravinsky translated his distrust of interpreters into action by performing his music himself. His conducting career took off rapidly after the Octet premiere, while his serious pianistic career as an exponent of his own music (which lasted about fifteen years) began after Koussevitsky suggested that he take the solo part in his Concerto in 1924; in his *Autobiography* Stravinsky commented that 'the prospect of creating my work for myself, and thus establishing the manner in which I wished it to be played, greatly attracted me'.<sup>22</sup> But third, and perhaps most intriguingly, he made a conscious attempt to build his distrust of performers into his music by making it, in effect, interpretation-proof. This meant more than simply transcribing rubato passages into strict rhythmic notation, so that a literal performance would produce a flexible effect, though Stravinsky did on occasion do this.<sup>23</sup> Traditionally, he explained in the Octet essay, it is the nuance which forms the 'emotive basis' of music,<sup>24</sup> and because of the difficulty of specifying nuance in the score such music is open to deformation (that is, 'interpretation'). By contrast, he says, the emotive content of the Octet has been built into the play of the musical materials, into the 'musical architecture'<sup>25</sup>: it has been drawn out of the performance and into the work itself. The music is, so to speak, pre-interpreted.

The performer's contribution, then, is already determined by the music itself: 'to the executant', Stravinsky continued in the Octet essay,<sup>26</sup> 'belongs

the presentation of [the] composition in the way designated to him by its own form', while in the *Poetics* he was even more emphatic, referring to 'the great principle of submission' and explaining that 'The secret of perfection lies above all in [the performer's] consciousness of the law imposed on him by the work he is performing.'<sup>27</sup> This is not exactly to say that there is only one way in which a given work may be legitimately performed, but it limits the scope of performance variance to essentially technical issues of presentation: creative revelations of new and perhaps unforeseen aspects of the music are apparently precluded. (Here there is an unlikely but close parallel with Schenker's contemporaneous theory on performance,<sup>28</sup> which could quite reasonably be seen as another product of the 'new objectivity' that pervades the Octet essay.) And once performance is seen as bound in this intimate manner to composition, it follows that recordings can be no less definitive of the musical work than scores. Stravinsky reiterated this principle over a period of more than thirty years:

1928: 'the phonograph is currently the best instrument through which the masters of modern music can transmit their thoughts.'<sup>29</sup>

1935 (of his Columbia recordings from 1928): 'far better than with piano rolls, I was able to express all my intentions with real exactitude. Consequently these records . . . have the importance of documents which can serve as guides to all executants of my music . . . [E]veryone who listens to my records hears my music free from any distortions of my thought, at least in its essential elements.'<sup>30</sup>

1954: 'When I conduct, the music is presented pretty nearly the way I want it. That is why I've been conducting recording sessions of most of my music. In the future there will be no doubt as to how it should be played.'<sup>31</sup>

1959: 'I regard my recordings as indispensable supplements to the printed music.'<sup>32</sup>

In short, Stravinsky saw his recordings as establishing an authoritative performance tradition and in this sense as an extension of the compositional process. As usual, his aesthetics masked commercial acumen, for this represented the perfect sales pitch for a relatively inexperienced conductor competing with the likes of Monteux (the original conductor of *The Rite*, whose own recording was apparently made just a few weeks after Stravinsky's<sup>33</sup>) and Stokowski (whose recording appeared in 1930). And by emphasising the authority which only he could bring to the performance of his own music, Stravinsky succeeded in establishing the framework within which his concerts and recordings were received throughout his lifetime; hence the 'Stravinsky conducts Stravinsky' slogan which CBS employed to publicise their exclusive contractual relationship with the composer, which lasted from 1951 to the end of Stravinsky's life, and which included not only new recordings of the earlier works but more or less timely issues of new compositions. (In the early 1970s it emerged that some of these recordings should in fact have been labelled 'Craft conducts Stravinsky',<sup>34</sup>

and Sony now market the recordings under the more discreet title ‘Igor Stravinsky Edition’.)

Indeed, something like a standard Stravinsky record-review format emerged. First, you summarised the nature, historical significance, and/or aesthetic premise of the music. Then you acknowledged Stravinsky’s technical shortcomings as a conductor, optionally contrasting his performances with those of other conductors, but turning this round into a recognition of the composer’s special authority. (‘Stravinsky is not a great conductor’, wrote a reviewer of the 1940 *Rite*, ‘but he manages to get results.’<sup>35</sup> By 1960 this has turned into ‘At least we can be sure that when a composer conducts his own music the essentials are right, even if the inessentials give him trouble; as a result we get a directness of impact that we may look for in vain from more polished but less understanding performances.’<sup>36</sup>) A few complimentary comments on the quality and character of Stravinsky’s performance follow (‘The rhythms are sharp and savage still,’ Edward Greenfield wrote of the 1960 *Rite*, ‘enough to make this as much a physical experience as ever, but more satisfying in purely musical terms’;<sup>37</sup> there is a general assumption of both technological and interpretative progress). And finally you reiterate the indispensable nature of Stravinsky’s own recordings: ‘Traditions do not live by scores alone,’ proclaimed the *Gramophone* reviewer, ‘and every scrap of evidence about how the greatest composer of our day wants his music to sound is invaluable.’<sup>38</sup>

All this assured a remarkably favourable critical response; a summary, published in *Notes*, of fourteen reviews of the 1960 double issue of *The Rite* and *Petrushka* reveals that thirteen rated it as excellent, one as adequate, and none as inadequate.<sup>39</sup> But the account of Stravinsky’s conducting which most strikingly evokes the spirit in which his performances were received comes from the pianist Leo Smit,<sup>40</sup> referring to a 1960 concert performance of *Les Noces* in which Smit took part:

Stravinsky started conducting with great energy and confidence. Gradually, imperceptibly the pace began to slacken and his interest seemed to shift from the players and singers to the score itself. By the time the basso had finished his concluding solo and the final piano-bell-cymbal chords were reverberating through space, Stravinsky’s bent head was hovering just above the open pages, his motionless arms outstretched like some prehistoric bird mantling its helpless prey.<sup>41</sup> We held the last clang for a very long time while Stravinsky seemed lost in an ancient dream. The hall had been completely silent for what felt like minutes, when someone, far away, applauded, breaking the spell. Stravinsky looked up as though surprised to find himself in public . . .

The resonances with Beethovenian mythology, and with the subjectivity central to the Romantic construction of genius, are unmistakable and

revealing. Smit's account vividly conveys the manner in which the reception of Stravinsky was moulded by the judgement which the *Gramophone* reviewer makes of him in the manner of a simple statement of fact: 'the greatest composer of our time'.

If Stravinsky's claim that his recordings 'express all my intentions with real exactitude' was in this way a highly effective rhetorical ploy, then it goes without saying that it invoked a thoroughly problematic concept: the concept of compositional intentionality falls to pieces as soon as there is any variance in its expression. (If Stravinsky plays *The Rite* one way and then another, which expresses his 'real' intentions? If we cannot answer that question, what does the concept of 'intention' add to a simple statement that he played it one way and then another?<sup>42</sup>) However, Robert Fink gives the argument an interesting twist when he demonstrates how many of the most characteristic features of *The Rite* emerged over a period of years, sometimes through a process of negotiation between Stravinsky and Monteux. An example of the former is the repeated downbows at the beginning of 'The augurs of spring', which first appear as a pencil marking in Stravinsky's copy of the 1922 full score, and of the latter the interaction between the ways Stravinsky and Monteux parsed the rhythms of the 'Sacrificial dance', the outcome of which was the 'revised first edition' of 1929 (itself revised in 1943<sup>43</sup>). As Fink puts it, it was only the experience of the music under Monteux's baton, and from 1926 his own,<sup>44</sup> that showed Stravinsky what 'he "had always wanted"',<sup>45</sup> which is a way of saying that he had not always wanted it at all. That is, he wanted it played one way, and then another.

Fink's demonstration forms part of a larger project, the purpose of which was to attack the assumption that *The Rite* was always associated with the metronomic strictness, the absence of 'interpretation' in Stravinsky's pejorative sense, that generally characterises present-day performances of it (and to a greater or lesser degree everything else). From around 1920, Stravinsky went to extraordinary lengths to rewrite the history of *The Rite*, claiming at one time or another that Nijinsky's choreography was a travesty, that the dances were in any case no more than a 'pretext' for the music, that his original conception of the work had been a purely musical one, and that apart from the opening bassoon solo there was no folk material in it. All these claims controvert Stravinsky's earlier statements, or the known facts, or both.<sup>46</sup> their purpose was to legitimise *The Rite* in the context of the aesthetic of autonomous music to which Stravinsky pinned his colours in the 1920s, for example in the Octet essay ('My Octuor is a musical object... I consider that music is only able to solve musical problems; and nothing else, neither the literary nor the picturesque, can be in music of any real interest'<sup>47</sup>). To these revisions of history we can now add, as a result of

Fink's researches, Stravinsky's invocation of *The Rite* as a prime example of music that requires only execution, not interpretation: 'the *chef d'orchestre* is hardly more than a mechanical agent, a time-beater who fires a pistol at the beginning of each section but lets the music run by itself'.<sup>48</sup>

Through an exhaustive study not only of the early recordings but also of the documentary evidence that predates them, Fink shows how early performances of *The Rite* involved the kind of large-scale tempo modification that we nowadays associate with Romantic interpretative traditions. This is a matter not just of local nuance (audible, for example, in the coupled crescendos and accelerandi of Stravinsky's 1929 performance of the opening bars of the 'Spring rounds'<sup>49</sup>), but of what might be termed structural nuance, or the differentiating of structural sections in accordance with their rhythmic or melodic nature: Monteux's 1929 interpretation [*sic*] of the 'Sacrificial dance', generally assumed to be the closest we can get to what the 1913 audience heard, begins at a vertiginous  $\text{♩} = 160$  but is full of unnotated tempo changes,<sup>50</sup> and their traces are also to be heard in Stravinsky's and Stokowski's earliest recordings. The 'metronomic strictness, no *rubato*' and 'mechanical regularity' which Stravinsky<sup>51</sup> himself saw as fundamental characteristics of his music were not, then, always there in *The Rite*: they were created over a period of years and retrospectively imputed to it as part of Stravinsky's 'back to basics' ideology. And so the subsequent performance history of *The Rite* unfolds, as illustrated by Stravinsky's later performances and by those of virtually all other conductors, involving what Hill calls an increasingly 'monolithic' approach to the 'Sacrificial dance',<sup>52</sup> with steadily maintained tempos adapted to the clear rendition of orchestral detail. In this way, 'now, finally', as Fink puts it, 'Stravinsky sounds like Stravinsky'.<sup>53</sup>

The danger in all this is of replacing one myth by another. Certainly Stravinsky became an influential exponent of a 'strict' performance style, to borrow his own word, applying it not only to his own music but also to mainstream repertoire, on the relatively rare occasions when he performed it. And certainly a comparison of Stravinsky's 1928 and 1960 performances of *Petrushka* reveals an increasingly monolithic conception, with the abrupt generic shifts of the earlier recording (for instance between the 'real' and the 'mechanical' music) being replaced by the continuity and orchestral sheen of the later one, in which the piece is well on the way to acquiring its present status as a benchmark for the latest hi-fi gear.<sup>54</sup> But the real picture is more complicated, and in particular Stravinsky's views on performance tempos were more complex than a cursory reading of the polemics of the 1920s and 1930s might suggest. (A more careful reading might, for example, ponder the significance of Stravinsky's statement in his *Autobiography* that recording 'enabled me to determine for the future the relationships of the movement (*tempos*) and the nuances in accordance with my wishes',<sup>55</sup> given that this is the composer who supposedly shunned nuance.)



The key text in this context is a section called ‘The performance of music’ from the *Conversations*<sup>56</sup> in which, instead of simply saying that music should be executed and not interpreted (and, as in the *Poetics*, that interpretation is inherently sinful), Stravinsky draws a distinction between two musical traditions. On the one hand, there is the Romantic tradition represented by Berg, which ‘depends strongly on mood or interpretation. Unless mood dominates the whole, the parts do not relate, the form is not achieved, detail is not suffused, and the music fails to say what it has to say.’<sup>57</sup> Accordingly, the aim should be not a ‘strict or correct’ performance, but an ‘inspired’ one, and this means that ‘considerable fluctuations in tempo are possible in a “romantic” piece . . . “freedom” itself must be conveyed by the performer’. On the other hand, there is the ‘classic’ tradition, which ‘eliminates the conductor’,<sup>58</sup> which requires execution instead of interpretation – and, Stravinsky adds, ‘I am speaking of my music’, as if it were not already obvious. The complaint, then, is not that interpreters interpret as such, but that they interpret music that should not be interpreted, such as Stravinsky’s, or for that matter Mozart’s. (‘Isn’t this’, Stravinsky asks rhetorically, ‘why Mozart concertos are still played as though they were Tchaikovsky concertos?’<sup>59</sup>)

What the Stravinsky of 1959 is doing here is rehabilitating the idea, which his own polemics of the 1920s and 30s had done more than anything to undermine, that different music should be played in different ways. Rubato is no longer a sin: it is a technique appropriate to certain genres or styles (including opera, which Stravinsky described as ‘the field of the elastic beat’<sup>60</sup>), but not others. Similarly the mainstream (Germanic) conducting style represented by ‘the silver-haired Karajan’<sup>61</sup> represents not so much the work of the devil as an approach inappropriate to Stravinsky’s music: ‘I doubt whether *The Rite* can be satisfactorily performed in terms of Herr von Karajan’s traditions . . . I do not mean to imply that he is out of his depths, however, but rather that he is in my shallows . . . There are simply no regions for soul-searching in *The Rite of Spring*.’<sup>62</sup> And what would be the principle of a performance style that eschews soul-searching? Stravinsky spelled out the answer when, with immediate reference to *Pulcinella*, he said that

eighteenth-century music is, in one sense, *all* dance music. Performance tradition ignores this. For example, in the famous recording of an eminent conductor rehearsing the *Linz* Symphony, he is continually heard inviting the orchestra to ‘sing’, while he never reminds it to ‘dance’. The result of this is that the music’s simple melodic content is burdened with a thick-throated late-nineteenth-century sentiment that it cannot bear, while the rhythmic movement remains turgid.<sup>63</sup>

In this way the distinction between the tradition of Tchaikovsky and Berg, on the one hand, and that of Mozart and Stravinsky, on the other, becomes one of subjectivity and sentiment versus objectivity and physicality.

Or, to go back to the terms of the Octet essay, whereas in Romantic music the expression has to be brought out through an exercise of subjectivity, Mozart and Stravinsky compose the expression into the music itself, thereby rendering it interpretation-proof.

This conjunction of Mozart's and Stravinsky's names might be seen as a further example of the latter's astute image management, but there is also a theoretical point behind the distinction Stravinsky is making. It would be hard to think of a conductor whose aesthetics and performance style were more different from Stravinsky's than Mahler (though we should remember that the youthful Stravinsky heard Mahler in St Petersburg, and described him as 'the conductor that impressed me the most'<sup>64</sup>). One of Mahler's contemporaries, Natalie Bauer-Lechner, quotes him as calling for 'a continual elimination of the bar . . . so that it retreats behind the melodic and rhythmic content' of the music.<sup>65</sup> One could translate this into the terminology of another of his contemporaries, Heinrich Schenker, and say that nuance – especially what I called structural nuance – comes from the middleground. (That is, one might think of it as a means whereby the musical surface is interpreted in the light of the middleground.) And what Robert Philip describes as the 'evening out of traditional expressive nuances'<sup>66</sup> that became more or less general in orchestral conducting after the 1930s is the correlate in performance of what Schenker attacked as the foreground (read: shallow) nature of Stravinsky's compositional style.

Rather than invoke Schenker's elaborate, and not entirely relevant, argument at this point, I shall quote another attack on Stravinsky's music, this time by Cecil Gray, who wrote in 1927 that

The *Sacre du Printemps*, so far from being the triumphant apotheosis of rhythm, the act of restoration to its rightful supremacy of the most important and essential element of musical expression, is the very negation and denial of rhythm . . . Strip the music [of the 'Sacrificial dance'] of the bar-lines and time-signatures, which are only a loincloth concealing its shameful nudity, and it will at once be seen that there is no rhythm at all. Rhythm implies life, some kind of movement or progression at least, but this music stands quite still, in a quite frightening immobility.<sup>67</sup>

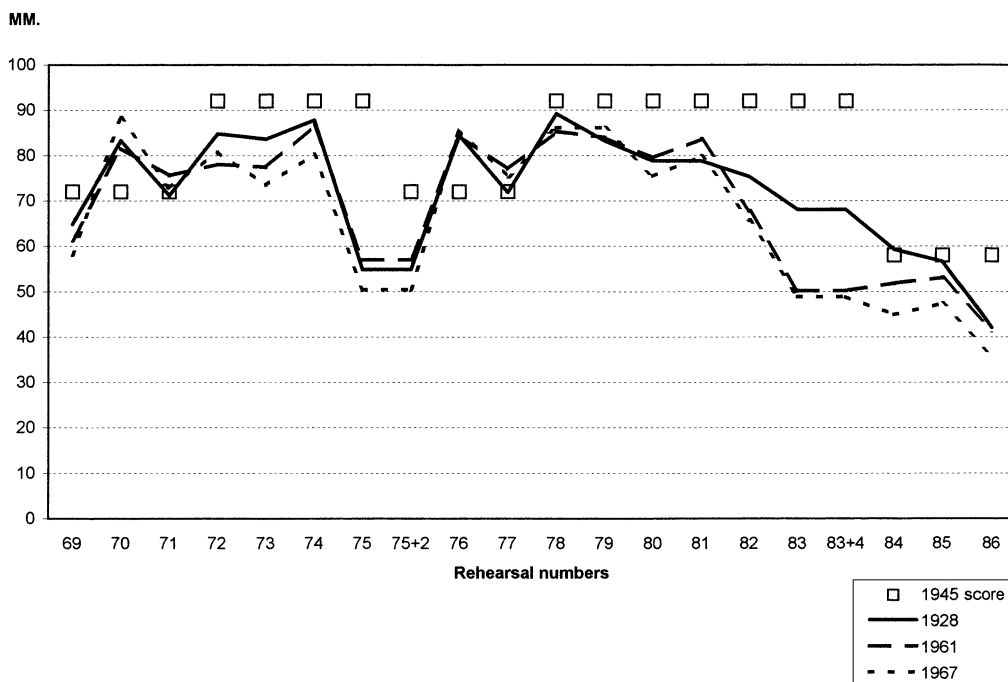
Many writers have commented on the way in which Stravinsky's music is built up from the combination and juxtaposition of single beats: that is the source of its rhythmic vitality.<sup>68</sup> But Gray does not hear the rhythmic vitality of the music's surface: he tries to hear *through* the surface to a rhythmic vitality that lies behind it and, being unable to do so, assumes that there is none. And this provides a context in which we can understand Stravinsky's apparently strange remark about Karajan being not out of his depths, but in Stravinsky's shallows.

It should follow from all this that Stravinsky conducted in a Stravinskian manner, so to speak, only music of the 'classic' tradition (including his own). What is the evidence of his recordings of Romantic music? There is an obvious problem here: he conducted little music by others (generally, as he explained, concertos for soloists with whom he was working, though the first two symphonies of Tchaikovsky were also in his repertoire), and recorded none.<sup>69</sup> There is a commercially released extract from a 1963 rehearsal of Tchaikovsky's *Sleeping Beauty*, in which he can be heard lovingly crafting the minutiae of articulation and texture.<sup>70</sup> More to the point, however, are the extensive passages of Tchaikovsky's music (sometimes unalloyed but generally reminded) in *The Fairy's Kiss*: in particular the 'Scène', based on Tchaikovsky's song 'Ah! qui brûla d'amour', incorporates phrase-based rhythmic patterns co-ordinated with harmonic and cadential structure and building to a fully Romantic climax. Stravinsky's 1965 recording<sup>71</sup> perfectly embodies the Romantic tradition of structural nuance: he takes the whole of the introduction at a flexible tempo centring on  $\downarrow = 50$ , way below the notated  $\downarrow = 76$ , making a drastic but unnotated change to around the notated tempo at rehearsal number 207. He then uses tempo to shape the successive phrases, developing the notated caesuras into arch-shaped tempo profiles but at the same time highlighting the sequential organisation around rehearsal number 208. And he gives the sudden undercutting of the climax at rehearsal number 211 a positively Mahlerian interpretation, the effect being magnified by the registrally exposed counterpoint and high solo horn of the following bars. Are we meant to hear this 'straight', as conveying a degree of identification with the Romantic tradition that dangerously reduces the critical distance between Stravinsky and Tchaikovsky? Or is the intention to parody the Romantic performance style along with the music itself? It is difficult to see how the question could be decided one way or the other.

If there is a particular musical style that forms a bridge between the *fin-de-siècle* Russian Romanticism of Stravinsky's earliest works and the foundation works of twentieth-century modernism, it is the 'changing background' variation technique. 'The princesses' *khoro* (round dance)' of *The Firebird*, which corresponds to the 'Rondo (*khoro*)' of the 1945 Suite, is unmistakably in the tradition of Glinka's *Karaminskaya*; it is even structured the same way, around two contrasting folk melodies, each of which has its own tempo. The resulting notated tempo changes are shown by the squares in Fig. 9.1 ( $\downarrow = 72$  and  $92$  for the respective tunes, and  $58$  for the coda).

The graphs superimpose on this the tempos of three of Stravinsky's recordings, from 1929, 1961 and 1967,<sup>72</sup> and should lay to rest once and for all any misconception that Stravinsky only knew how to conduct metronomically. Particularly striking is the overall similarity of the profiles (the major difference is the anticipation of the slower tempo of the coda in the

Fig. 9.1 Tempos in the 'Princesses' round dance.



two later versions), while the tempo modifications are always co-ordinated with the phrase and sectional structure. All three performances, in other words, embody similar interpretations; on the basis of Fig. 9.1, it would be hard to argue for any consistent chronological evolution in the manner in which Stravinsky performed this music.

Rather than the 'Spring *khorovod* (round dance)' of *The Rite* (now usually abbreviated to 'Spring rounds'), it is the Introduction to Part Two, leading into the 'Mystic circles', that most clearly represents Stravinsky's modernist updating of the changing background technique: there are again contrasted folkloristic ideas which recur against different textures, though they are more fragmentary and the patterns of repetition less regular, and the cross-cutting form is underlined by alternations between  $\text{♩} = 48$  and 60. How might this interpolation of a Romantic compositional technique within a modernist ('classic') context be reflected in terms of performance style? In many respects, performance practice in *The Rite* seems to have converged by the time of the early sound recordings; in the Introduction to Part One, for instance, there is a considerable degree of consistency in conception and even sonority between the first recordings of Stravinsky, Monteux and Stokowski (and the same goes for the somewhat bowdlerised recording that Stokowski made for Disney's *Fantasia* at the end of the 1930s). But the

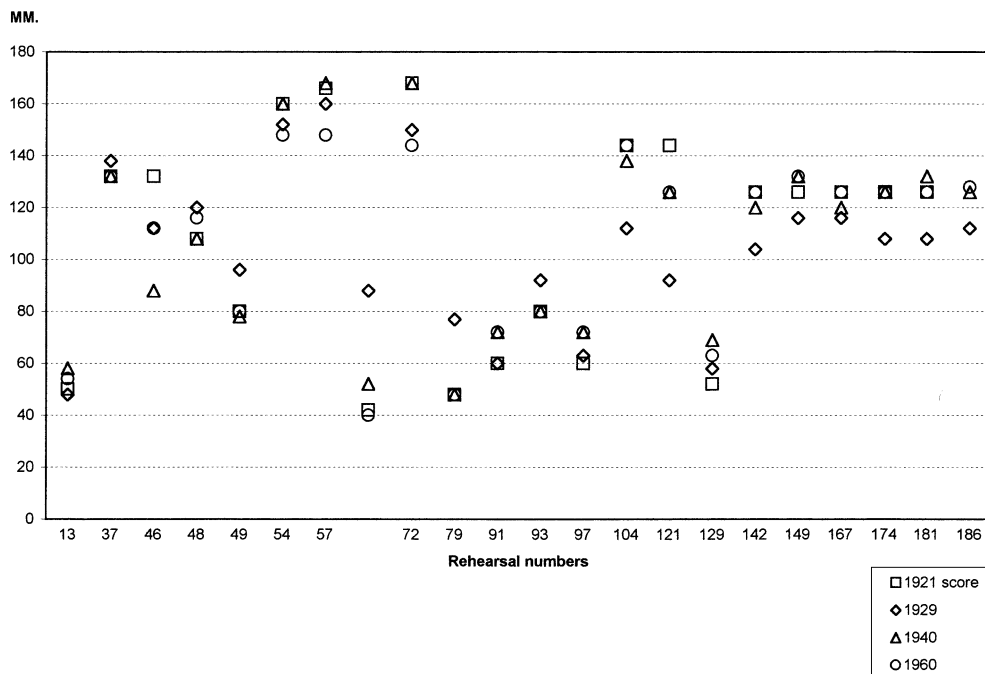
**Table 9.1.** Stravinsky, 'Sacrificial dance': comparison of tempos in score and recording

Rehearsal no.	1929 score	1960 recording
79	T° 1 (48)	T° 1 (50)
86		T° 2 (62)
89	T° 2 (60)	T° 3 (82)
90	T° 1	T° 2
91	T° 2	T° 3
93	T° 3 (80)	T° 4 (110)

same cannot be said of the Introduction to Part Two, where Monteux starts at  $\text{♩} = 42$ , way below the 48 of the 1921 and subsequent published scores, whereas Stravinsky takes off at something approaching  $\text{♩} = 80$ . This fast tempo, though wildly inconsistent with the score, allows for a streamlined and relatively unnuanced (in this sense literal) performance.

The 1960 recording, by contrast, begins at  $\text{♩} = 50$ , close to the notated tempo, but anyone expecting a literal execution out of the ageing composer is in for a rude shock. Already at the end of the second bar there is a marked though unnotated *Luftpause* in the best Romantic tradition, and Stravinsky underlines the phrase junctions at rehearsal numbers 80, 81 and 82 in the same way. The same effect reappears on a larger scale with a *ritardando* down to about  $\text{♩} = 45$  in the bars up to the flute and violin solo at rehearsal number 83. And while the kind of structural tempo change Fink notes in early recordings of the 'Sacrificial dance' is effectively composed into the Introduction to Part Two, Table 9.1 shows how Stravinsky's performance at once contradicts his own score and further develops the tempo-change principle embodied in it: at the trumpet duet (two bars before number 85), instead of continuing at the opening tempo, Stravinsky shifts gears to  $\text{♩} = 62$ , returning to this tempo instead of the notated 'Tempo I' at 90. The faster tempos of the 1921 score –  $\text{♩} = 60$  at 89, and 80 at 93 – are also shifted up a notch, resulting in an interpretation (no other word will do) that adheres to the original constructive values but realises them in terms of four rather than three distinct tempos.

*Luftpausen*, structural tempo changes and disregard of the score: Stravinsky's 1960 performance of the Introduction to Part Two goes a long way towards rehabilitating Romantic performance traditions and, in so doing, rendering audible the very continuity between *The Rite* and the traditions of Russian Romanticism that, perversely, he was to deny just two years later, when he claimed that 'very little immediate tradition lies behind *Le Sacre du printemps*'.<sup>73</sup> It is equally hard to square this passage, at least, with Fink's description of the 1960 recording as 'grimly geometric',<sup>74</sup> and this illustrates the danger to which I referred of replacing an old myth by a new

Fig. 9.2 Tempos in *The Rite of Spring*

one: Fink recounts the story of how Stravinsky came to sound like Stravinsky, but here we have an example of a Stravinsky who no longer sounds like Stravinsky at all. And, in truth, trying to create any grand narrative out of Stravinsky's successive recordings is a recipe for frustration. After discussing Stravinsky's 1929 recording of *The Rite* at some length and charting the discrepancies between it and the 1921 piano roll, Hill concludes that Monteux's 1929 recording is a safer bet as a 'guide to Stravinsky's earliest intentions.'<sup>75</sup> Add Stravinsky's 1940 and 1960 recordings, he continues with mounting exasperation, and the picture

becomes not clarified but more confused. Attempt a comparison of all the Stravinsky sources – his own recordings, the various editions of the score . . . and Stravinsky's written views on how the work should be performed – and one finds that all frequently contradict one another. Moreover, it is often on matters on which Stravinsky is most insistent that he differs most in his own recordings.

Certainly a tabulation of the tempos for each of Stravinsky's three performances (Fig. 9.2<sup>76</sup>) proves a poor basis for any kind of generalisation. (As in the case of Fig. 9.1, the squares represent notated metronome markings.) It is a general principle in the history of twentieth-century performance that the range of tempo both within and between movements is smaller in the

second than in the first half of the century, and that the effect is more marked in the case of fast tempos, in line with the modern practice of setting tempos so as to allow clear articulation of the shortest note values.<sup>77</sup> It follows that in general one should expect a lower average tempo and a higher degree of tempo convergence in more recent performances. But it is difficult to see any respect in which Stravinsky's successive recordings of *The Rite* conform to this picture: on average, the fastest tempos are found in 1940, and the slowest in 1929 (largely as a result of the cautious tempo of the 'Sacrificial dance'). Even more tellingly, it is the 1929 recording that has the lowest standard deviation between its tempos: the history of Stravinsky's recordings of *The Rite* is one of divergence, not convergence. The conclusion to be drawn, perhaps, is that overall trends in the history of performance represent the sum of an indefinite number of micro-histories: individual works and even individual movements may have their own, largely independent, historical trajectories.

As Hill suggests, the discrepancies between Stravinsky's scores, recordings and pronouncements about performance are notorious, and it is easy to make fun of them. In the course of the series of 'reviews' of *The Rite* that he published in the two final conversation books,<sup>78</sup> for example, Stravinsky criticised Boulez's 1963 performance of 'The sage'<sup>79</sup> as 'more than twice too fast', and adds rhetorically, 'if there were an Olympic Games for speedy conductors . . .'. He might have finished the sentence, 'then he would have come in third', for Boulez's ♩ = 52, a mere ten metronome points above the notated 42, trails well behind Stravinsky's 1929 recording.<sup>80</sup> Then again, Karajan is criticised for performing the 'Ritual action' at the notated ♩ = 52 (unlike Stravinsky, who successively recorded it at ♩ = 58, 69 and 63), though here Stravinsky at least evinces a trace of embarrassment: 'Whether or not metronomically correct, this *tempo di hoochie-koochie* is definitely too slow . . . duller than Disney's dying dinosaurs'. What this goes to show, of course, is the limited value of measuring tempo when divorced from the other, generally non-notatable factors involved in performance: rhythmic articulation, sonority and the acoustic properties of the hall, for example. But then, where does that leave Stravinsky's insistence that, in performing *The Rite*, he was 'particularly anxious to give the bars their true metric value, and to have them played exactly as they were written'?<sup>81</sup> Or where does it leave his claim that 'any musical composition must necessarily possess its unique tempo . . . the variety of tempi comes from performers who often are not very familiar with the composition they perform or feel a personal interest in interpreting it'?<sup>82</sup>

Stravinsky appears to have found such questions unanswerable, for in the last decade or so of his life he began to dismantle the certainties of his pre-war philosophy of performance. One has the impression that the process was not an easy one.<sup>83</sup> A page after the statement I have just quoted,

he is already qualifying it: ‘a tempo can be metronomically wrong but right in spirit, though obviously the metronomic margin cannot be very great.’<sup>84</sup> And later, on the same page, there is a further slippage. He repeats that his music requires execution, not interpretation, and continues, ‘But you will protest, stylistic questions in my music are not conclusively indicated by the notation; my style requires interpretation. That is true . . . But that isn’t the kind of “interpretation” my critics mean.’ He goes on to explain that the sort of interpretation they mean is whether or not a particular passage signifies ‘laughter’. But this kind of hermeneutic commentary has nothing to do with the issue of interpretation versus execution that Stravinsky started out talking about, and so the statement about performance interpretation remains unchallenged. It is as if Stravinsky felt the need to backtrack on the whole issue of execution, but having done so, wanted to cover his tracks.

Nine years later, the retrenchment has become quite explicit, and he no longer ascribes to metronome markings the same absolute value that he once did:

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 performer is a different equation of them. I would be surprised if any of my own recent recordings follows the metronome markings.<sup>85</sup>

And by the time of the final conversation book he confesses that

I have changed my mind . . . about the advantages of embalming a performance in tape. The disadvantages, which are that one performance presents only one set of circumstances, and that mistakes and misunderstandings are cemented into traditions as quickly and canonically as truths, now seem to me too great a price to pay. The Recording Angel I am concerned with is not CBS, in any case, but the One with the Big Book.<sup>86</sup>

‘One performance represents only one set of circumstances’: at last, it seems, Stravinsky recognises the indispensability as well as the inevitability of difference between one performance and another, and hence the necessity of performance interpretation. It hardly comes as a surprise when, towards the end of the book, we find him mocking the very principle on which he had insisted for half a century: speaking of Koussevitsky’s conducting, he refers to ‘execution – firing-squad sense’.<sup>87</sup>

If Stravinsky did not in the end conform to his own prescriptions about performance, then he was at least conforming to an established pattern of composers who say one thing and do another; among his contemporaries, Elgar and Rachmaninov are illustrious examples. Maybe there is a basic



incommensurability between saying and doing, such that you talk most about what you are least sure how to do: that would explain why, as Hill complained, it is just where he is most insistent that Stravinsky's recordings differ the most.

But what is perhaps surprising is the extent to which, though Stravinsky did not do what he said, others did. Whatever reservations one may have about premature grand narratives in performance history, it is clear that after the 1920s and 1930s there was in orchestral performance as a whole a progressive 'evening out of traditional expressive nuances', to repeat Philip's phrase, a pursuit of clarity in rhythmic detail and strictness in execution – in short, a move towards making *everything* sound like Stravinsky (or 'Stravinsky', as we should perhaps say, to distinguish the critical construction from the man who died in 1971). And here there is a paradox. Richard Taruskin has persuasively demonstrated the affinities between Stravinsky's concept of 'execution' and what he calls 'authenticist performance':<sup>88</sup> early-music spokesmen such as Norrington and Hogwood appropriated Stravinsky's values and rhetoric in opposition to what they saw as the one-size-fits-all philosophy of mainstream performance. Yet that mainstream was largely moulded by the same rhetoric and values and, as I previously suggested, it was Stravinsky's polemics of the 1920s and 1930s that crucially undermined the idea that different music should be played in different ways, and so created the idea of a 'mainstream' in the first place. The recent history of performance, then, can be seen as revolving around the collision of two successive waves of Stravinskian modernism.

And this reflection prompts another. If Stravinsky's rhetorical question of 1959 could now be rephrased, 'Isn't this why Mozart concertos are still played as though they were Stravinsky concertos?', then we may need to re-think the composer's importance for twentieth-century music. 'Stravinsky's performance style gained an enormous prestige among progressive musicians in the 1920s and 30s', writes Taruskin.<sup>89</sup> But perhaps even more influential was the series of writings, beginning in 1920s Paris and culminating in the Charles Eliot Norton lectures at Harvard, through which Stravinsky disseminated a fashionable philosophy of music that encapsulated the 'new objectivity' of the inter-war years – but that formulated it in absolute terms and so gave a quality of self-evidence and permanence to an aesthetic that in other arts rapidly became as *démodé* as last year's recording. (The records changed, that is to say, but the philosophy endured.) In which case, maybe Stravinsky's most effective legacy was not the modernist scores through which he adumbrated a new musical future, nor the neoclassical scores with their incorporation of old styles into new contexts, but his fusion of the power of the baton and the word (even the ghost-written word) to create, through performance, a new musical past.