

The International Russian

This month Valery Gergiev leads the New York Philharmonic's first three-week festival, titled *The Russian Stravinsky*. **Harlow Robinson** explains how the Russian-born composer, who spent much of his career in France and the United States, remained, in a sense, Russian at his core.

Composers are citizens of the world, whatever their birthplace. More than any of the arts, music transcends geographic and national boundaries: an audience in Tokyo can listen to a Beethoven symphony just as easily and fully as one in Vienna, without need of translation from German to Japanese.

Yet, no one would deny that national origin and local tradition play a crucial role in the evolution of a composer's artistic style. Take the case of Igor Stravinsky. Born in czarist Russia in 1882, he left his homeland in 1913 (at age 31) and never returned to live there again. After residing in Europe (mostly in France) until 1939, he moved to the United States at age 57 and remained there (mostly in Los Angeles) until his death in 1971. Proudly cosmopolitan and a polyglot, Stravinsky resisted labels of all kinds, including national ones. Given his biography, one could reasonably call him a Russian, French, or American composer, but Stravinsky had a more global and atemporal self-image: "I live neither in the past nor in the future. I am in the present."

The composer's feelings about his homeland were, of course, considerably complicated by the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, which established a Communist regime in Russia that he regarded with undisguised antipathy. Like many other leading pre-Revolutionary artists and intellectuals, he chose a life of emigration. He would return to Russia only once, in 1962, at the age of 80, as an honored guest of the Union of Soviet Composers. He rebuffed suggestions that he should be buried in St. Petersburg next to the tombs of Tchaikovsky and other important Russian composers, and instead chose for his final resting place a cemetery on the island of San

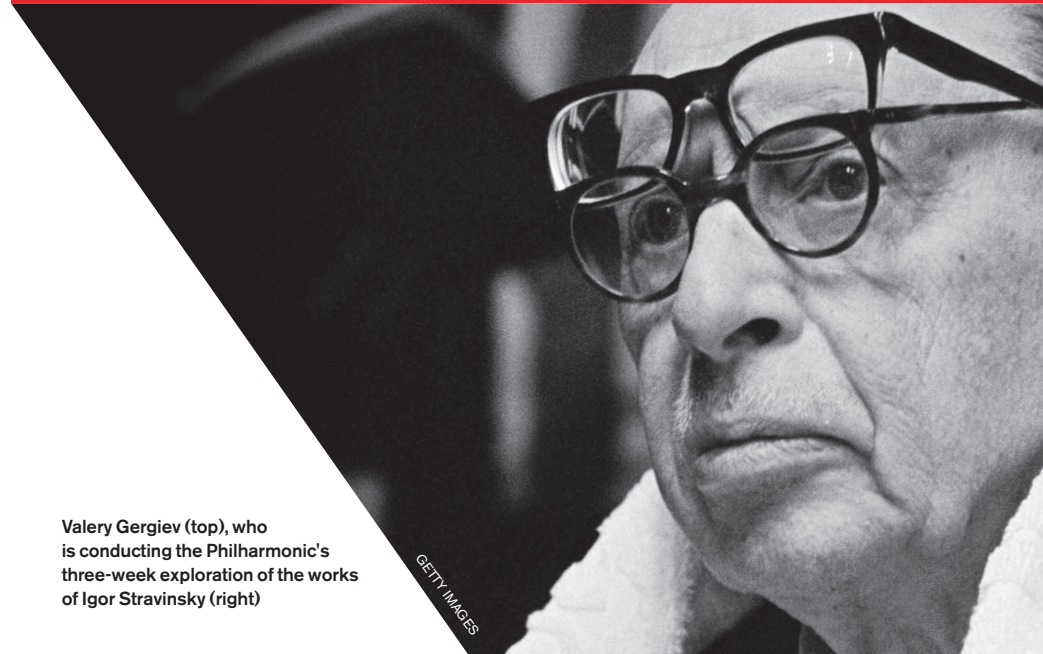


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GERGIEV


The Russian Stravinsky: A Philharmonic Festival

STRAVINSKY



Valery Gergiev (top), who is conducting the Philharmonic's three-week exploration of the works of Igor Stravinsky (right)

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Valery Gergiev

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Igor Stravinsky

Michele near Venice, Italy, close to the grave of his most important artistic patron and collaborator, the equally international Ballets Russes impresario, Serge Diaghilev.

Nevertheless, Stravinsky was connected to Russian culture, language, and music by a firm bond that he could never break. The son of an operatic bass at the Imperial Mariinsky Opera House of St. Petersburg, he grew up surrounded by the unique musical and theatrical traditions of Russia during a particularly brilliant period (“The Silver Age”) in their development. Despite his reluctance to be categorized, Stravinsky famously observed in Russian: “U menya slog russkii” – which translates to something like “I have a Russian idiom,” or “I have a Russian voice.”

For conductor Valery Gergiev, this “Russian voice” is a key to understanding the music of Stravinsky’s entire career, from the early ballets (*Firebird*, *Petrushka*, *The Rite of Spring*) staged in Paris before World War I, to the orchestral works (*Symphony in C*, *Symphony in Three Movements*) first heard in the United States in the 1930s and 1940s, to the complex serial pieces of his final decades, composed under the influence of Arnold Schoenberg and the Second Viennese School. From April 21 to May 8, Mr. Gergiev will lead the New York Philharmonic in *The Russian Stravinsky*, a festival of eight different programs exploring the composer’s Russian roots. In announcing the festival, Philharmonic Music Director Alan Gilbert said: “I can’t think of anyone I’d rather have doing this than Gergiev. Everything he does is based on drama, and so much of Stravinsky’s music needs to be treated that way.”

Born in Russia and trained in St. Petersburg, where he serves as general director and artistic director of the Mariinsky Theatre, Mr. Gergiev reflected in a recent interview on the complex personal and artistic relationship between Stravinsky and Russia. Even when Stravinsky was using Latin texts (as in the opera/oratorio *Oedipus Rex*, to be heard on two different

Philharmonic programs with the Mariinsky Theatre Chorus), the conductor said, “His approach was still Russian, and reflected his connection to the heritage of Pushkin and Glinka and Tchaikovsky. And the piece will sound different when performed by a Russian choir, with their special intonation.”

That the New York Philharmonic has chosen to celebrate Stravinsky’s extremely varied musical legacy seems especially appropriate given the composer’s long history with the Orchestra. On January 8, 1925, at the age of 42, Stravinsky made his first appearance with the Philharmonic, conducting a program of his own works. He led the Philharmonic on 32 subsequent occasions, including the world premiere of the *Symphony in Three Movements* (a Philharmonic commission) on January 24, 1946. Valery Gergiev said that he finds this work to be “what I would carefully describe as a war symphony. Not like Shostakovich’s *Leningrad Symphony*, of course, but there is something about this symphony that tells you it’s about the drama of the time.” The final program of *The Russian Stravinsky*, on May 7 and 8, will include this work, along with *The Rite of Spring*, the ballet score that scandalized Paris at its premiere in 1913.

To Mr. Gergiev, this festival’s primary goal is to show how Stravinsky’s music has now entered the mainstream international orchestral repertoire, something that had been difficult to imagine 40 or 50 years ago. “He has become one of the Russian classics, like Tchaikovsky and Glinka,” the maestro observed. “The language of his music no longer sounds so ‘modern’ or strange to us. And for us in St. Petersburg, the increasingly global acceptance of his music is a logical extension of the cosmopolitan spirit of our city.”

Harlow Robinson, Matthews Distinguished Professor of History at Northeastern University, is author of *Sergei Prokofiev: A Biography* and other books. He is a frequent lecturer for the Boston Symphony Orchestra, Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts, and the Metropolitan Opera Guild.

For Information / Avery Fisher Hall Box Office / nyphil.org / 212 875-5656