

Capriccio for Piano and Orchestra

Igor Stravinsky

Igor Stravinsky felt no compunction about adding to the literature of such time-honored genres as the symphony or the concerto; but, radical musical thinker that he was, he allowed himself the leeway to rethink basic assumptions when he did involve himself in those classic types. His list of works includes three items “in the piano concerto line,” but each departs in an obvious way from the classic formula of a piano concerto. The one he actually titled Concerto (from 1923–24) is indeed a piano concerto, but the accompanying ensemble consists only of winds, timpani, and double bass, rather than a standard symphony orchestra. The work he originally named Concerto for Piano and Groups of Instruments was re-titled Movements (1958–59), and its serial processes do not involve the contrast between piano and “accompanying” ensemble one expects in a concerto.

In between those two he wrote the Capriccio (1928–29), in which the piano does play a concertante role but also works within a framework of contrasting orchestral units that harks back to the make-up of a Baroque concerto grosso. Stravinsky had been in demand as a soloist in his Concerto since unveiling it several years earlier, and this emboldened him to have a go at another work in which he might showcase himself as pianist. Or, as he put it in his *Autobiography*:

I had so often been asked in the course of the last few years to play my Concerto ... that I thought that it was time to give the public another work for piano and orchestra. That is why I wrote another concerto, which I called Capriccio, that name seeming to indicate best the character of the music. I had in mind the definition of a capriccio given by Praetorius, the celebrated musical au-

thority of the eighteenth [sic] century. He regarded it as a synonym of the *fantasia*, which was a free form made up of fugato instrumental passages. This form enabled me to develop my music by the juxtaposition of episodes of various kinds which follow one another and by their very nature give the piece that aspect of caprice from which it takes its name.

He shared his work-in-progress with Sergei Prokofiev and Ernest Ansermet when they dropped in to visit him during the summer of 1928, explaining that he was deriving inspiration from the music of Carl Maria von Weber. (In *Dialogues and a Diary*, he observed that Weber’s piano sonatas “may have exercised a spell over me at the time I composed my *Capriccio*; a specific rhythmic device in the *Capriccio* may be traced to Weber, at any rate.”) Prokofiev passed on word to his friend Nikolai Miaskovsky, saying that Stravinsky

IN SHORT

Born: June 17, 1882, in Oranienbaum, now Lomonosov, near St. Petersburg, Russia

Died: April 6, 1971, in New York City

Work composed: December 1928–November 9, 1929; revised slightly in 1949

World premiere: December 6, 1929, at the Salle Pleyel, Paris, by the Paris Symphony Orchestra, Ernest Ansermet, conductor, with the composer as soloist

New York Philharmonic premiere: January 14, 1937, with the composer as conductor, Beveridge Webster, soloist

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: March 6, 2012, David Zinman, conductor, Peter Serkin, soloist

Estimated duration: ca. 18 minutes

was determined not to call it a concerto so as to avoid a repeat of the charges of insufficient virtuosity that critics had leveled at his earlier piano concerto. He was thinking of calling it a divertimento until (according to Prokofiev) he learned that Prokofiev and Miaskovsky were both writing pieces under that title just then, at which point he veered away from that idea, too.

Stravinsky began by composing the third movement, the *Allegro capriccioso*; the idea of “capriccio” was therefore embedded in the score from the outset. Capricious this music surely is, and irreverent, too, leaping about with Jazz Age abandon. The first movement is not less rambunctious; after an exchange of pompous, Tchaikovskian outbursts at the beginning, it settles into rhythmic punchiness and stops just short of a tango. The second movement is perhaps the most surprising of all. Its somber

beginning quickly yields to a double-reed texture that begs comparison to the deep-oboee writing of Bach’s *Passions*, but then a central section erupts in hysterical panic. Francis Poulenc wrote an admiring review of the *Capriccio* in 1931, and obviously its content stuck with him. He all but quoted a couple of passages in his own concertos, particularly in his *Organ Concerto* of 1938. Another admiring composer was Virgil Thomson, who judged Stravinsky’s *Capriccio* to be “jolly and brilliant.”

Instrumentation: three flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes and English horn, two clarinets (one doubling E-flat clarinet and one doubling bass clarinet), two bassoons, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, and strings (including a “concertino” group of solo violin, viola, cello, and bass), in addition to the solo piano.

Stravinsky and His Conductors

An entire book could be devoted to Stravinsky’s run-ins with conductors. For some reason, his *Capriccio* engendered more than its fair share of abrasive encounters, even giving rise to hurtful incidents involving his devoted champions Ernest Ansermet and Charles Munch. Since Stravinsky was preternaturally suspicious of Germans, it comes as no surprise that one of his Teutonic colleagues, Wilhelm Furtwängler, also came in for a rough assessment, as reported in *Themes and Episodes* (1966), one of the memoirs he prepared with his amanuensis, Robert Craft:

When I played my piano concerto under Furtwängler’s direction in Leipzig and in Berlin, he was at the height of his reputation (“the last of the great tradition,” people were saying, though I thought myself it would be better to call him the first of the small). ... A few years after the Berlin performance, while on vacation in the Villa d’Este at Como, I received a telegram from Furtwängler requesting first-performance rights to my *Capriccio*. I replied that the piece had already been played twenty times (this was in 1931), but that he was welcome to play it for the twenty-first. I blame his telegram, and my less than perfect sobriety, for the misdemeanor that has troubled my conscience, though slightly, in the years since. That night, walking between a pair of “Greek” statues on one of the Villa’s garden paths, I saw that the marble figures were covered with tourists’ signatures, and took a pen myself and scrawled WILHELM VON DER FURTWÄNGLER on the *gluteus maximus* of the most obviously ersatz Apollo.



Stravinsky and Furtwängler, in an undated photo