

## Violin Concerto in D Symphonies of Wind Instruments

### Igor Stravinsky

In 1930 the German publishing company of B. Schott's Söhne gained the rights to a number of works Igor Stravinsky had composed early in his career. The following year one of the firm's directors, Willy Strecker, broached the possibility of the composer writing a brand-new piece for their catalogue. Strecker had recently made the acquaintance of the young American violinist Samuel Dushkin, whose musical outlook he believed might appeal to Stravinsky — perhaps even enough to merit the full-blown **Violin Concerto in D**. Stravinsky later recalled in his *Autobiography*:

I hesitated because I am not a violinist, and I was afraid that my slight knowledge of that instrument would not be sufficient to enable me to solve the many problems which would necessarily arise in the course of a major work especially composed for it.

Stravinsky sounded out his colleague Paul Hindemith, who was a professional violist as well as a composer. Hindemith assured Stravinsky that lack of firsthand experience with the violin would be no impediment; on the contrary, he imagined that it would help Stravinsky “avoid a routine technique and would give rise to ideas which would not be suggested by the familiar movement of the fingers.”

Stravinsky and Dushkin hit it off splendidly, and the composition of the concerto turned into a deeply collaborative work. Stravinsky took Dushkin's advice about technical matters very seriously, but applying those ideas was not a simple matter of changing a note here and there. Dushkin reported:

Whenever he accepted one of my suggestions, even a simple change such as extending

the range of the violin by stretching the phrase to the octave below and the octave above, Stravinsky would insist on altering the very foundations correspondingly. He behaved like an architect who if asked to change a room on the third floor had to go down to the foundations to keep the proportions of his whole structure.

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### IN SHORT

**Born:** June 17, 1882, in Oranienbaum, now Lomonosov, Russia

**Died:** April 6, 1971, in New York City

**Works composed and premiered:**

Violin Concerto composed 1931 in Nice and Voreppe (Isère, France); premiered October 23, 1931, in Berlin, with the composer conducting the Berlin Radio Symphony, Samuel Dushkin, soloist. *Symphonies of Wind Instruments* composed 1920; revised 1945–47 into the version performed here; dedicated to the memory of Claude Debussy; premiered June 10, 1921, at Queen's Hall, London, with Serge Koussevitzky conducting; in its revised form, on April 11, 1948, at The Town Hall in New York, with the composer conducting

**New York Philharmonic premieres and**

**most recent performances:** Violin Concerto premiered February 2, 1961, Alfred Wallerstein, conductor, Zvi Zeitlan, soloist; most recently performed April 29, 2010, Valery Gergiev, conductor, Leonidas Kavakos, soloist. *Symphonies of Wind Instruments*, premiered March 8, 1958, Leonard Bernstein, conductor; most recently played, April 22, 2010, Valery Gergiev, conductor

**Estimated durations:** Violin Concerto, ca. 22 minutes; *Symphonies of Wind Instruments*, ca. 10 minutes

The Violin Concerto was first performed on a Berlin Radio Symphony Orchestra broadcast, which by reports was just barely up to the task. When Dushkin and Stravinsky introduced the composer's version of the piece for violin and piano a year later, the critic and musicologist Alfred Einstein observed that "this time the Berlin Radio Orchestra made a better showing and hit off the work's precision-based style more faithfully."

This work finds Stravinsky in his neo-Classical — or, better put, neo-Baroque — mode, right down to the fact that the principal theme of the first movement is little more than an ornament, a curlicued elaboration on a single note. Its most fundamental characteristic is a ceaseless, ebullient sense of rhythmic pulse. That is surely one reason why choreographer George Balanchine employed it for his ballet *Balustrade*, in 1941. Stravinsky considered that setting to be one of the most successful of all ballet productions using his music.

The title of Stravinsky's *Symphonies of Wind Instruments* might not strike the

casual reader as much different from "Symphony of Wind Instruments," though that is not what the composer chose to call his piece. It is not a "symphony" at all, at least not in the way that term is used to denote a particular kind of multi-movement orchestral work. Instead, it traces its meaning back to where the word "symphony" began, to the Greek roots signifying a "sounding together." Since Stravinsky uses the plural form of the word, his title conveys the idea of the "soundings together" — the sonic combinations — of wind instruments.

Stravinsky was not deaf to the possibilities of string instruments, which generally make up the core of a symphony orchestra. A sumptuous work like *The Firebird* stands as ample testimony to that. However, as the decade of the 1910s progressed, he seems to have grown increasingly suspicious of the tendency of string instruments to be "expressive," a characteristic that did not jibe well with the way his particular form of sonic modernism was playing out. When he did use strings, he increasingly did so in a non-traditional way, as in the entirely "objectified," partly percus-

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## In the Composer's Words

While consulting with Stravinsky on the **Violin Concerto**, the soloist, Samuel Dushkin, raised a question concerning rhythm with the composer, who had subjected a certain rhythmic accompaniment to an alteration that made it suddenly unsymmetrical. Stravinsky responded:



In mathematics there are an infinite number of ways of arriving at the number seven. It's the same with rhythm. The difference is that ... in mathematics the sum is the important thing; it makes no difference if you say five and two or two and five, six and one or one and six, and so on. With rhythm, however, the fact that they add up to seven is of secondary importance. The important thing is, is it five and two or is it two and five, because five and two is a different person from two and five.

Violinist Samuel Dushkin and composer Igor Stravinsky during intermission at the World Premiere of the composer's *Violin Concerto*

sive approach to string playing required in his Three Pieces for String Quartet of 1914. *Symphonies of Wind Instruments* is an orchestral work that disposes of the string component entirely. Stravinsky found the wind instruments well suited to the kind of uninflected sound he was after. In a commentary he prepared to accompany early performances of this work, he described *Symphonies of Wind Instruments* as “tonal masses ... sculptured in marble ... to be regarded objectively by the ear.”

Stravinsky dedicated the work to his fellow composer, Claude Debussy. They had met in 1910, when Debussy congratulated him enthusiastically following the premiere of *The Firebird*, and they remained friends from then on. In 1913 Stravinsky dedicated his cantata *Zvezdoliki (Le Roi des étoiles)* to Debussy; in 1915 Debussy dedicated the third movement of his two-piano suite *En blanc et noir* to Stravinsky. The latter felt the loss keenly when his older colleague died, in March 1918. Not long after that, Stravinsky inscribed in a sketchbook the sonority that became known as the “bell motif” that would later appear in *Symphonies of Wind Instruments* — very possibly, some scholars believe, inspired by thoughts of Debussy.

In 1920 the *Revue musicale*, a distinguished Parisian publication, began planning an issue in tribute to Debussy, and the editor approached various composers about contributing memorial pieces that might be included in a musical supplement titled *Le Tombeau de Debussy*. Stravinsky had recently sketched a solemn chorale, tentatively for the harmonium, and decided to submit that as his piano piece. In orchestrated form (beginning with brass choir) it would serve as the conclusion of *Symphonies of Wind Instruments*, and Stravinsky expanded it with preceding sections as he built up his single-movement piece.

The work met with predictable resistance

## In Revision

When Stravinsky’s ***Symphonies of Wind Instruments*** was new, the conductor led from a manuscript score. Stravinsky’s publisher, Edition Russe de la Musique, didn’t issue the work in print until 1926, when it was released as a piano reduction made by the composer Arthur Lourié. The company generated three sequential proofs of the orchestral score in 1933, and Stravinsky (as well as colleagues) entered substantial revisions onto two of them; but still the piece was not seen through to printed form. The composer used the first of these proofs, and Lourié’s piano reduction, when creating a new full score of the work from 1945 to 1947, as he did not have access to his own manuscript. The resulting score, published as the “1947 Revised Version,” therefore differed considerably from the 1920 original, moving the piece a step further in the direction of an “objective” and even acerbic sound.

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at the outset. “Cheers, hisses and laughter,” wrote Ernest Newman, critic for *The Musical Times*, following the premiere. “I had no idea Stravinsky disliked Debussy so much as this.” Stravinsky disliked the performance, too, if for different reasons. “The audience did not hiss enough,” he wrote, placing the blame in conductor Serge Koussevitzky’s lap. “They should have been much angrier. ... The radical misunderstanding was that an attempt was made to impose an external pathos on the music.”

**Instrumentation:** Violin Concerto calls for two flutes and piccolo, two oboes and English horn, two clarinets and E-flat clarinet, three bassoons (one doubling contrabassoon), four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, and strings, in addition to the solo violin. *Symphonies of Wind Instruments* employs three flutes, two oboes and English horn, three clarinets, three bassoons (one doubling contrabassoon), four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, and tuba.