

# Stravinsky's Last Works

by Charles Wuorinen



Igor Stravinsky during a rehearsal at Carnegie Hall

I was in my early twenties when I first encountered the new twelve-tone works of Stravinsky, and they made an instant and profound impression. Even before I had managed to digest them, and in spite of the now quaint-seeming polemic that surrounded their emergence, I had a strong sense of their vital importance—certainly to me as a young composer, but more broadly to music as a whole and to the large continuity of Western musical thought. To this day—I still believe—the importance of Stravinsky's last-period music is underestimated, performances of it are too few, and we remain encumbered with still-quaint discussions about whether or not twelve-tone music is a good thing.

Notice that I do not call these pieces "serial." This latter term, if it has any meaning at all, should really refer to a music in which not just the notes, but other dimensions of the musical

fabric as well (above all time), are controlled in some way by some sort of ordered-set constraints. But Stravinsky, for all the structural elegance of his late pieces, never engaged himself with anything beyond the "serial" organization of pitch. In this he might have been any old twelve-tone composer, but for the fact of his peculiar genius, and for the additional fact that he adopted tactics to turn himself (in his old age!) from a diatonic into a chromatic composer. Here in these strategies—beyond the individual excellence of the works themselves—lies the crucial importance of this body of his music. For it was in the survival of diatonic biases, references, and associations into his twelve-tone music that Stravinsky (knowingly or not, it doesn't matter) made what I think is the major historical contribution of his last-period music. The music itself is wonderful, and the individual works do not need

any larger embedding to justify them, nor do we need a sense of historical context to find them beautiful. But even in our present Post-Modern minute, a sense of historical development is vital; and in his last works, Stravinsky provided a key to the linking of the music of the tonal past to that of the chromatic present.

One must remember the environment in which these works emerged. The 1950s and early 1960s were a period of avant-garde ferment, very different from the bland consumer-oriented music life of today. What is artistically newsworthy today is crowd-pleasing, artistic compromise, and ignorance; but what attracted attention then were attempts to expand the boundaries of what might constitute music, to find new ways to write it, new forms for it to express. The fact that many of these attempts proved unfruitful, and not a few were just silly, does not diminish the quality of aspiration that characterized the epoch. In this setting, one heard most progressive voices trumpeting the absolute break between new music and old, the unbridgeable chasm between tonal music and that which succeeded it. For Stravinsky then to emerge in his much-heralded (and equally often denounced) new twelve-tone outfit was of course a major event; but when these new works of his showed strong local connections with the diatonic past, there was puzzlement, some condescension, and even some sweeping under the rug.

The truth is that although Stravinsky in his long (and mis-called) “neo-classic” period was the darling of those who feared the new world created by Schoenberg and his followers and was hailed as the pre-eminent tonal composer in the world, he never really was a tonal composer in the strict sense. Two basic properties of his music even then—properties that carried over largely unchanged into his last-period music—set him apart from the world of genuine tonal composition. One was his penchant for sectional, discontinuous formal design. His works famously feature abrupt changes of texture, speed, rhythm, and the like, and a glance at his sketches shows that the juxtaposition of independently composed chunks was often basic to his composing practice. The fact that locally a lot of his musical fabric could be heard as diatonically tonal does not mean that in the large his middle-period works add up as instances of real tonal music. The basic principles undergirding historical tonal composition are absent here. Different forces bind these large designs together.

The other big divergence from “real” tonal composition in Stravinsky’s mid-career production is more crucial for my discussion here: his tendency to generate and treat musical ideas permutationally. As early as the *Three Pieces for String Quartet* of 1914 the making of a form through the permutation of its constituent elements is a marked characteristic of the Stravinskian world. And what is twelve-tone (or “serial”) composing if not the creation of musical structure and expression through the transformation of entities (fundamentally ordered strings of notes—or, more correctly, pitch classes) by means of essentially permutational operations? This basic fact, when set beside Stravinsky’s own long-held habits, makes his transformation into a twelve-tone composer a much less surprising and drastic event than might at first appear.

And so, as he began to become a twelve-tone composer, Stravinsky gravitated first not toward the Schoenbergian chromatic-saturation aspect of the twelve-tone

idea, but toward the ordered-set or permutational. In the early 1950s he produced a series of works whose materials were fundamentally diatonic—the Shakespeare songs, the Septet, the Cantata for women’s voices, *In Memoriam Dylan Thomas*—but whose structures adumbrated the twelve-tone world to come. These pieces feature fancy canonic imitation and other contrapuntal devices, and diatonic pitch groups permutated this way and that: his handling of the materials shows that for Stravinsky it was the *ordering* of elements that was crucial. If later what got ordered was the group of all twelve pitch-classes (what we in its

unordered state call the total chromatic), that was just a detail. And when Stravinsky first began to write “real” twelve-tone music in the second half of the 1950s—say in selected movements of *Agon* or the *Canticum Sacrum*, the way he often and typically articulated these constructs new to him was as far from Schoenbergian “antitonicity” as one could get.

Not only was he not Schoenbergian, he wasn’t Webernian either. At the time Stravinsky began his “serial” adventure, the post-war European fixation on Webern was still a significant bump on the musical landscape. Many people therefore tried to tie the spare textures of Stravinsky’s new pieces to the world of Webern. But the two composers couldn’t be further apart. The first thing that comes to mind about Webern is *symmetry*. Palindromic or symmetrical forms, registral deployments, rows, and so forth abundantly characterize his mature music.

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Stravinsky was always just the opposite: if there is any one feature that holds through all of his oeuvre, it is asymmetry.

All this is really just a way of saying that Stravinsky's artistic personality was strong enough to dominate whatever method he might take up. But one must not forget how daunting it must have been for him to enter a new and perhaps alien world at an advanced age. Here his ties to his own diatonic past proved crucial to his successful transformation. All of his last pieces abound in puns on tonal relationships, references to diatonicism, but all, equally, are freed—as his “neoclassic” music had been too—from genuine tonal functionality. Two examples of these ligaments to the tonal past will show what I mean.

This brief passage (Example 1) occurs near the beginning of *Threni* and offers a convenient instance of diatonic punning and allusion. Although the music states a complete form of a twelve-tone row, in each of the first three measures one finds a pitch-group that could be extended into a tonal cadence. Now actually making such extensions in this work would be as idiotic as emptying the whole saltshaker into our omelet because we wanted a little flavor-enhancement. But these suggestive instants, coming in rapid succession, create a link to other, older musics;

EXAMPLE 1:  
STRAVINSKY *Threni*, mm. 23–26

and so, while the passage as a twelve-tone instance is integral to the work as a twelve-tone work, it also sends out filaments elsewhere, enriching the meaning of the music.

This climactic chord (Example 2) occurs near the end of the *Movements for Piano and Orchestra*. It could have been found in any of Stravinsky's middle-period works as a good instance of his habit of fusing diatonic chords that in “real” tonal music are always obliged to be successive. Thus here we find what in a diatonic context would be heard as a fused tonic-dominant-subdominant of C. But of course it has no such meaning here; it functions integrally in the “serial” design, following the E, F-sharp, and C-sharp at the start of the bar. Yet it evokes that other older world, not with a feeble nostalgia, but with vigorous gestural, rhetorical, and structural force.

As we live through the waning days of post-modernism—a surprisingly short-breathed episode considering all the blather that has surrounded it—we might profit once more by turning to larger time-spans and higher ideals than those recently proclaimed. If we do, one of our musical concerns will likely involve the re-connection of the past with the compositional present. Nostalgia for past styles and practice, regurgitation of

the musical rhetoric of yester-century, will not do. But if we heed the example of Stravinsky's last works, we can see that the sonic surface of a new work can be filled with allusions, references, reminiscences to past and other musics, while still projecting radically new ways of articulating musical time. In his last works, this great composer has shown that there need not be a war between the past and the present, and that recovering the past can be accomplished in an organic, life-affirming way; a way in which the sentimental or the saccharine have no place, where the panderer is absent.

EXAMPLE 2:  
STRAVINSKY *Movements*, m. 183