

The Three Great 'S's in Modern Music

This is not a very good title as there have been so many great musicians and composers in the last century whose names begin with the letter "S" but the three selected are certainly the giants.

It is now the centennial of Richard Strauss, born in 1864 to live on to 1949. It is noteworthy here that all of these composers lived a long, long time, to be recognized and rewarded by their contemporaries, thus changing that trend which martyred a Mozart, a Schubert, a Van Gogh and others.

In his early days there was a struggle going on between the Brahmsian classicists and Wagnerian romanticists, and Strauss fell under the influence of Hans Von Richter and the conductor Van Bulow who were leaders in the Wagnerian camp. Many of his earlier compositions show Wagnerian influence, e.g. "Don Juan." But this very title showed he loved Mozart deep in his heart and in his later days this classical element came to the fore.

But Richard was also influenced by Liszt, and this comes out in his attention to the tone poem form and especially in his "Death and Transfiguration." In this work also he shows the dramatic power and worth of cacophony, not for its own sake, but for psychological purposes. And until pretty late in life Richard Strauss was the composer for psychologists and philosophers.

He also drew on folk lore but his "Till Eulenspiegel" shows how a master can provoke humor and laughter. In "Also Sprach Zarathustra," "Don Quixote" and "Ein Heldenleben" (A Hero's Life) we see the philosopher-composer at work. He has expressed the blending of theme—the continuation of Wagner's leitmotif with the gamut of emotions and it is hard to sit through his works without being moved.

One of his poorer works was the "Domestic Symphony." While it is supposed to portray the life of a bourgeois Viennese family it is full of condescension and does not stand up to other works. On the other hand his "Alpine Symphony" is Turneresque. Both of these accept the general principles of the classic symphony. It is possible that the "Alpine Symphony" influences Copland's "Appalachian Spring," but in turn it did lean a little on Rossini's "William Tell."

Freud's influence in the Greek Drama was followed by Strauss adopting themes from the same, such as Electra, Ariadne and Daphne. He also drew a little from Grecian moods, which have been rather neglected in our musicological studies.

But there was another Strauss, or several of them. "Don Quixote" has made a marvelous ballet.

And he comes to a great climax in as “Die Rosenkavalier” and in the later “Annabelle from Stephan Zweig.

This composer had a great struggle because of his name. He was “Richard” and so Wagner #2. He was Strauss and so was for a long time way down on the list, but no relation to the family or families that have done so much for Viennese music. But in one gigantic effort, he threw off Wagner, called in Mozart and defeated all the Strauss’s and Strases in his “Rosenkavalier.” In another sense he also rivals or defeats the adoption of legends and folk-lore in music.

This opera combines stage-craft, dance, drama, music and everything in one and is as “anti-Straussian as one can imagine. Or rather here the composer has entirely freed himself from Richter and Von Bulow.

I understand the same is even more true of his “Arabella,” adopted from Stephen Zweig and in another late opera of which I could not get notes. Anybody can dislike Strauss, and in turning away from some of his compositions can find solace in others.

Sibelius

There were many Richards Strauss in one man and there was just one Jan Sibelius in this Finnish contemporary who outlived him, born in 1865 and continuing on till 1957. And whereas Strauss was expressionistic, so to speak, Sibelius was impressionistic. He was a poet, not a philosopher, using the art-forms of music. I used to say that Sibelius wrote one symphony in 40 movements; seven were published in his life-time and there is evidence of two more.

Whenever you listen to Sibelius you “see” lakes and birch-forests and “hear” great silences. You are never far from nature. His first great inspiration was the traditional Kelavala and he never got far from lit. But contrary to Strauss he was anti-Wagnerian.

Finland lies between Norway and Russia and so the musical forms of Sibelius are drawn from Grieg on the one side and the two Russian schools, nationalist and romantic on the other. His feelings always come close to Grieg; his general form is often close to Tchaikovsky but like the nationalists he depends much more on oboe and English horn while Tchaikovsky used the clarinet.

Sibelius never lost sight of the single instrument, and yet he also used choirs, but in harmony. This resulted in a gradual appearance of Wagnerian forms because of instrumentation but not because of choice. Sibelius would always have supported Debussy against Wagner. His works are pictures.

Part of his fame was due to an accident. Asked to write a piece on a graveyard theme he composed “Valse Triste” which immediately took on and for which he repented in vain. It remained popular throughout his life and is included in nearly all class-room studies. His “Finlandia” has been imported into the world’s themes both as a national anthem for his country and in church

music.

His “Swan of Tuonela” is definitely Dantesque reminding one of anti-purgatory. But as time went on, more attention was paid to his symphonies. His apologists say they will outrank and outlive Beethoven. It is very hard to prove anything here. It is the difference between the revolutionary and the impressionist who is also a revolutionary in a different way.

Sibelius believed in theme and melody and he felt that theme and melody are both the mind and soul of music. No matter how complex his pieces appear to be at times, they never depart from melody and harmony. So musicologists by-pass him saying he never contributed to music. No, he did not contribute to musicology, but he did contribute to art. He was an artist, not a theorist.

Sibelius differs from both Strauss and Stravinsky in that his music is music, not subject matter for essays.

Igor Stravinsky

Igor Stravinsky is just the opposite here. His music is subject for essays and he has contributed enormously to musicology. But one is not sure whether he has given much to music itself; or rather, his compositions are “Wagnerian” in the sense that many of them depend on stage settings, ballet, costumes, etc. But he differs from Wagner in that he was not a master of painting or of stage craft and his biography is also Wagnerian in that he has been intensely critical of famous and near-famous collaborators.

Stravinsky was born in Russia in 1882. He had as teacher and mentor Rimsky Korsakov and for a while adhered to the Russian naturalist school. This came to fruition in his “Firebird” written in 1910. This is an excellent work in a traditional style, abandoned soon to Liadov, Ippolitov-Ivanov and especially Prokofieff whose “Stone Flower” is certainly the logical successor to the “Firebird.”

But Stravinsky seems to have been concerned with the ballet and stage, almost obsessively. He had Bakst, Roerich, Diageleff and Nijinsky with him and he adorned them as he adorned tradition.

His first great climax came in 1913 when he produced “Le Sacre du Printemps” (The Rites of Spring). This was the beginning of his French period. He broke and broke more and more away from the Russian nationalist in form but kept to them here in feeling for it was the first effort to express the Scythian tradition in music. He held to rhythm and harmony but not to melody—at least not as melody as then understood. But he also abandoned this type of combination to others, and there have been several successors in this method, but not Igor Stravinsky.

Having explored harmony without too much melody, he began exploring melody without too much harmony. One sees or rather hears it in his “Les Noces,” “Pulcinella,” “L’Histoire du Soldat” and later works. If Sibelius wrote one symphony in forty movements, Stravinsky wrote a long, long

family saga full of new incidents, new themes, yet rather connected.

The politics and complications of Europe brought him to the United States and ultimately to Los Angeles where he was placed in charge of the Music department of the University of Southern California in rivalry and opposition to Schulenburg who had a similar position at the University of California, Los Angeles. But after Schulenburg died, Stravinsky also became his successor. He delved into the twelve tone scale, into combinations of harmonies and cacophonies, the exploration of solo instruments with orchestra, the small and chamber orchestras.

He selected Grecian themes like "Orpheus" (musical) and "Oedipus Rex" but one feels he did this more for exploration or scientific purposes than adding to art. He also turned to the Bible and his "Symphony of Psalms" at least marked out a later Stravinsky who was a Stravinsky and nobody else. His used choirs and the subtle harmonies of overtones may delight musicologists or people with keen ears but miss the deep feelings. He made use of jazz not because he had any feeling for it—you could never imagine him dancing so, but because it added to his materiel.

He seems to have gotten along well with Balanchine much better than with his predecessors. And his "The Rake's Progress" makes another departure, with some evidence that it will become a part of actual repertoires. He seems to have the feeling of Hogarth much more than that of the Bible or the Greeks.

I met Stravinsky once. Years ago I was the critic for the now defunct "Department of Music and Art" at the International Institute. It endeavors to preserve every form of folk-art and folk-craft. Some of the people I had to examine became world famous and have long since forgotten me and some of the lesser fry who were then their boon companions.

There was a Russian-Ukrainian group and I used to think that only Ukrainians and American Negroes could really sing. So this added to my love for the Russian Nationalist and distaste for the Tchaikovsky-Rachmaninoff School resisted in an invitation to a production of "A Life for the Czar" by Glinka.

The presentation of this opera was preceded by a long study of the successors to Glinka and so finally the disciple of Rimsky-Korsakov was invited to direct the orchestra and opera. This was a different Stravinsky. He did not lead by being one over many; he led by being one of many. The more he blended his person and his position into the whole production the more the finer sides of his nature became manifest. He led something like the old kapellmeister, but at an imaginary "organ" rather than at the clavier. You would think he was Glinka himself; he acted like that and there as not the slightest sign of hauteur. I think he could have ranked among the great conductors of the age but he has stuck mostly to composition.