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Music

Rethinking Stravinsky

Post-Classical Ensemble spotlights the Russian roots of the infamous composer of Rite of Spring



By [Samantha Buker](#)

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The Stravinsky Project

April 8-10 at various locations

Visit post-classicalensemble.org for full program

Don't be embarrassed if all you know about composer Igor Stravinsky is Walt Disney's dinosaur dance to *Rite of Spring*. Post-Classical Ensemble's April 8-10 *The Stravinsky Project* can set you straight. This powerful combination of a Georgetown University symposium, Music Center at Strathmore concerts, and National Gallery film screenings reveals sides of Stravinsky that may shock newbies and music mavens alike. It's also a great occasion for any modern dance lover, since Stravinsky collaborated with everyone from George Balanchine to the Ballets Russes. And the performance repertoire features a lineup of five Russian and Georgian pianists playing Stravinsky's neoclassical works with the raw, earthy quality of *Rite of Spring*.

The *Stravinsky Project* seeks to display the unshakable influence a composer's country has on his music, contextualizing and honoring his Russian heritage. P-CE music director and 2010 Wammie winner Angel Gil-Ordóñez, who will conduct the festival, is a Spanish specialist, but his provenance is fully international. The mentor who influenced

him the most was Romanian conductor Sergiu Celibidache, with whom he studied in Germany; in France, Gil-Ordóñez studied with Pierre Boulez and Iannis Xenakis.

The performance's five pianists—Alexander Toradze, Vakhtang Kodanashvili, Edisher Savitski, George Vatchnadze, and Genadi Zagor—all hail from Russia and Georgia. These pianists all grew up under the Soviet system before emigrating to the United States, while Stravinsky lived first in France then in the United States. This migratory internationalism points to the crux of this festival: Does nationality matter? After all, these pianists followed a similar route that Stravinsky himself took.

Gil-Ordóñez loves the excitement of working with performers who share the same nationality as the composer. “They feel at home,” he says by e-mail, “the same way, I feel at home conducting Spanish and Latin American music.” There's a naturalness to the approach, a common linguistic thread that you might even hear as an outsider.

Having just heard the Leipzig Quartet execute an unearthly all-Beethoven performance with knife-point humor, levity, and darkness at the National Gallery last month, this reporter agrees there's something about localized vernacular. The April 8 concert includes Symphonies for Wind Instruments, Stravinsky's 1920 memorial work for Claude Debussy. Listen for Russian liturgical melodies to make their appearance in the final chorale.

The richest Russian vein in the concerts will be the seminal works *Danse Sacrale* and *Les Noces*. *Danse Sacrale* was born first as a dream inside Stravinsky's head in 1910: A girl literally dances herself to death. Part of the inspiration came from the peasants on the estate Stravinsky had in Ustyluh where the first notes of the work were composed. *Les Noces* has similar roots. Sure, the subject matter is a wedding—not a sacrifice—but aurally you'd be hard pressed to think it an innocent peasant occasion of unbridled celebration. In Alex Ross' *The Rest is Noise*, music critic, Emile Vuillermoz called *Les Noces* “a machine to hit, a machine to lash.”

“I try to blank my mind and concentrate on the music as much as I can,” Gil-Ordóñez says about conducting works such as *Danse Sacrale* or *Les Noces*. “No room for daydreaming here!”

The *Stravinsky Projects*'s tale won't be told by music alone. Two amazing films have been unearthed for a free screening at the National Gallery. Filmmaker Richard Leacock will be best remembered for being one of the camera operators capturing Jimi Hendrix setting his guitar alight for D.A. Pennebaker's 1968 concert documentary *Monterey Pop*. Others remember him for his cinema vérité/direct cinema technique. Leacock died in Paris March 23 at 89, and used his friend Stravinsky as his subject.

Leacock's 1966 TV film *A Stravinsky Portrait* finally receives its Washington, D.C., premiere at the National Gallery in a free screening as part of *The Stravinsky Project*. The film was made for German TV, and Parisian theaters later championed this intimate, all-access portrait. But it never made it to America. “I don't think anybody will ever make a

better film about Stravinsky or any functioning genius,” said Pennebaker, Leacock’s collaborator on the project, in a recent indieWIRE piece following Leacock’s death. “The more I saw it, the more I realized what a great film it is.”

In his day, Stravinsky was the Andy Warhol of classical music. Frank Sinatra wanted his autograph. Jackie Kennedy asked him to dine at the White House with Leonard Bernstein. (Stravinsky left early; he was drunk.) By the time Stravinsky came to the United States in 1939 he did far less composing and far more talking. According to Leacock’s memoirs, Stravinsky had been filmed by CBS and hated it. And he’d been filmed by Canada’s CBC and despised it.

Stravinsky, however, loved Leacock’s *Portrait*. In it, you see interviews with Stravinsky, his wife Vera, and the dubious collaborator Robert Craft at Stravinsky’s West Hollywood home. You follow along on a rehearsal with the Hamburg Orchestra, and watch Balanchine rehearse *Les Noces* with dancer Suzanne Farrell. Stravinsky moves from French, German, and Russian throughout, while Leacock whispers narrations along the way, layering the film with music, mysteries, gossip, and personal discovery.

Tony Palmer made *Stravinsky: Once at a Border*, the other documentary in the film program, in time for Stravinsky’s 1982 centennial. Many of the figures he captured were soon to pass: the daughter of Vaslav Nijinsky (who choreographed *Rite of Spring*); Marie Rambert, who aided in the choreography of the premiere; and three of Stravinsky’s children.

Palmer’s film features *Les Noces*, which will be performed at the Strathmore, in a wonderfully danced sequence set to the original score. And it also includes rare 1920s silent film footage of Stravinsky conducting in Russia. The film climaxes when it shows a physically extinguished Stravinsky display mentally perfect acumen while conducting the *Berceuse* and *Finale* from *The Firebird*. Palmer—a filmmaker who has tackled composers from Richard Wagner to John Adams, though *Stravinsky* is considered one of his finest portraits—will be on hand to talk about his work.

For the record, Gil-Ordóñez didn’t pay mind to films of Stravinsky conducting when preparing for the program, since “as usually happens with composers, they are music geniuses, but terrible conductors,” he says, “most of the time the worst interpreters of their music.” ?

The Stravinsky on Film screenings take place April 9 at the National Gallery from 1-6:30 p.m. The Stravinsky and the Piano music program takes place April 10 at the Music Center at Strathmore at 4 p.m. Visit strathmore.org for ticket details.

<http://citypaper.com/music/rethinking-stravinsky-1.1128298>

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Stravinsky Reignited

Written by Rachel Bade

With its asymmetric rhythms, unpredictable sharps, flats and crescendos, and swift background pulse — like an adrenaline-pumping heart — Igor Stravinsky's "The Rite of Spring" shattered traditional classical music in the early 20th century.

At its debut in 1913, the Russian composer's infamous work, accompanied by a ballet choreographed by Vaslav Nijinsky that depicted a violent pagan sacrificial ritual, elicited boos from the audience and caused fistfights in the aisles.

Contrast that with Stravinsky's "Pulcinella," a Mozart-like rendition of neoclassic music, written during his exile from Russia around World War I.

Those didn't occur in a vacuum: The difference between Stravinsky's early folksy works, including "Firebird" and "Les Noces," and his later compositions such as "Scherzo à la Russe" and his opera "The Rake's Progress," is as stark as night and day. The early pieces are saturated with emotion; the latter, a colder execution of notes.



Credit: Tom Wolff

Post-Classical Ensemble, led by Music Director Angel Gil-Ordóñez, dissects Igor Stravinsky using its signature blend of music, film, theater, dance and discussion to examine the iconic composer's Russian roots.

"As a young man, [Stravinsky] was considered a rebellious and controversial composer but adopted neoclassicism in West," said Post-Classical Ensemble Artistic Director Joseph Horowitz. "He had a different public image, and it was in some ways more French than Russian. People expected a kind of music that is emotionally distanced and very different from his early works."

The dramatic change in the musical genius's work takes center stage at a three-day musical showcase in April staged by Post-Classical Ensemble, an orchestra that prides itself on being more than an orchestra by linking classically tinged concerts with film, theater, dance and discussion to provide a comprehensive, thematic exploration of individual composers and their music (also see "Classic Innovation" in the March 2009 issue of *The Washington Diplomat*).

It's concerts with context — and the context here is Stravinsky's Russian roots, unearthing them even in his later works after he resettled in Paris and then eventually Hollywood.

In collaboration with the Music Center at Strathmore, the Post-Classical Ensemble's "The Stravinsky Project" will feature concert performances, film and discussions about the torn man who inspired legions of musicians, some of the most beloved ballets, and even Walt Disney.

For years, American musicians attributed the change in Stravinsky's work to his exile, claiming the composer became an entirely different musician — more cosmopolitan French than Russian after the 1920s and '30s. But this festival challenges that notion. For Post-Classical Ensemble, Stravinsky's Russian identity was as tangible and enduring as his love for music.

"The whole festival has to do with the question of whether Stravinsky is Russian," Horowitz explained. "He tried to distance himself from his Russian roots, physically and emotionally. But toward the end of life Stravinsky discovered that he felt Russian, and this entire exercise of distancing himself was part of the trauma of exile. He had to cope with the fact that he lost his homeland."

The main event on April 8, titled "Stravinsky's Russian Accent," features five world-renowned, Russian-trained pianists joining the Post-Classical Ensemble in three major Stravinsky works.

The evening opens with "Symphonies of Wind Instruments," a nine-minute piece inspired by Debussy, which Stravinsky described as the first of his "so-called classical works," according to Horowitz.

In addition, the Russian wedding-inspired "Les Noces" will be performed by members of the Washington Bach Consort Chorus. Composed for the Ballets Russes, the dance cantata tells the story of a traditional Russian folk marriage. Guests will instantly recognize the wailing mother who fears losing her daughter, the proud papa of the groom and the hopeful young couple — as soloists belt out Stravinsky's score amid the roar of a wild wedding celebration.

It was said to be one of Stravinsky's favorite pieces and is rarely played by orchestras because it calls for four lead pianists.

The evening will end with the sacrificial dance passage from "The Rite of Spring," which catapulted Stravinsky to fame, and infamy.

Stravinsky's career though was not only revolutionary, it was wide-ranging — earning him fame as a composer, pianist and conductor (and even author) who influenced ballet, theater and opera while veering over the years from neoclassicism to modern classical music.

And there's perhaps no better medium to fully examine that diversity than the Post-Classical Ensemble. Staying true to its reputation for breathing originality and novel interpretations into the classics by interweaving dance, film, discussion and even pop music, Post-Classical Ensemble elevates the festival — as it does all of its performances — beyond just a regular night out at the concert. It presents a holistic view of Stravinsky and his talents.

The guest artists embody this approach. Horowitz said the pianists' rendition of Stravinsky is "more Russian and romantic, emotional and visceral, rawer" than people might hear from American-trained orchestras.

Trained in the former Soviet Union during the Cold War, the pianists were forbidden to play Stravinsky due to the composer's anti-communist views. But these pianists, most of whom discovered Stravinsky's work mid-career, were able to identify the Russian elements of the composer's work and claim his as one of their own.

Expanding a night of classical music into a weeklong educational series is another signature Post-Classical element.

"At the Post-Classical Ensemble, we are very obsessed with creating several events around a topic," said Music Director Angel Gil-Ordóñez. "We bring context to the performance, showing that it's not just about a beautiful piece, but it's also how it was conceived and under what circumstances."

To that end, the group hosts "Stravinsky on Film" on April 9 with three biographical screenings at the National Gallery of Art. The festival continues April 10 with "Interpreting Stravinsky" at the Strathmore, documenting Stravinsky's odyssey from Russia to Switzerland to France to California.

Gil-Ordóñez and Horowitz hope "The Stravinsky Project" will inspire Washingtonians to learn more about the musical mastermind and look beyond what they encounter in the theater or hear in a concert hall.

"This event is an extended experience," Gil-Ordóñez said. "We want people to go to the performances and the lectures and become part of a Stravinsky community."

It's a big goal for a relatively small musical group. But Post-Classical got a major boost in these tight economic times — with arts groups in particular feeling the pinch — when the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation awarded it with a \$200,000 grant in January.

Gil-Ordóñez called the grant a "big prize" — part of which funded "The Stravinsky Project" — but not so much for the money as for the prestige. He said the grant puts "us at a higher level on the musical scene map" and shows the value of the Post-Classical Ensemble's unique programming of festivals instead of isolated musical events.

"Mellon is attempting to find innovation ... and we view ourselves as an experimental laboratory in the symphonic field," added Horowitz. "In this case, the 15-hour immersion experience and allowing the audience to mingle with the performers and learn more is a new idea. It's unprecedented. I don't think anything like this has ever happened in D.C."

About the Author

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http://www.washdiplomat.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=7300:2011-03-29-18-25-46&catid=1089&Itemid=2



Lou Harrison Feted in D.C.

By Brett Campbell

MusicalAmerica.com

March 14, 2011

WASHINGTON, D.C. -- The shimmering, seductive sounds of the Javanese gamelan beguiled American composer Lou Harrison (1917-2003) from the first time he heard them, in 1939 at San Francisco's Golden Gate Exposition. Harrison [Musical America's 2002 Composer of the Year] composed dozens of works for gamelan beginning in the mid-1970s, and often called its sound the most beautiful on the planet.

The Post-Classical Ensemble, of which Joseph Horowitz is artistic director, recently presented a mini Harrison festival on the campus of George Washington University, featuring two and one-third of the composer's finest works. By way of introducing Harrison's oeuvre to the uninitiated, a symposium on March 4 at the Indonesian Embassy included a brief demonstration and explanation of traditional Javanese gamelan music, drawing a capacity crowd of more than 200. The event also featured a symposium in which Wesleyan University's gamelan

ensemble director and scholar Sumarsam, biographer Bill Alves and Indonesian Ambassador Dino Patti Djalal persuasively distinguished Harrison's sensitive, thoughtful "confluence" of Western and Asian musical forms from "exotic" cultural forms appropriated by commercial interests.

The discussion/demonstration provided nourishing context for the following evening's concert in GWU's Lisner Hall. The Wesleyan gamelan performed Harrison's jubilant "Bubaran Robert," with trumpeter Chris Gekker playing his processional phrases on stage and in different parts of the hall. The gamelan ensemble was sensitive throughout, as it was to former Bang on a Can pianist Lisa Moore on the next piece, the first movement of the composer's brilliant, dramatic 1987 Concerto for Piano and Javanese Gamelan. Horowitz later told me they had decided to omit the other two movements for fear of taxing listeners' stamina, but truncating such a stirring showpiece left the concert's first half feeling imbalanced. (The complete work is available on a splendid new recording by Seattle's Gamelan Pacifica.)

The concert also offered excerpts from longtime Harrison colleague Eva Soltes' new documentary, "Lou Harrison: A World of Music," which had premiered a week earlier at the National Gallery of Art. Seeing and hearing the composer — a pioneer in restoring historical and natural tunings displaced by the severely compromised equal tempered system that conquered Western music at the end of the 19th century — rhapsodize about the importance of tuning and nature (complete with images of his lovely garden) served to connect Harrison's warm, expansive personality to his path-breaking music, which much of the audience was probably hearing for the first time. Other Harrison experts were on hand to provide illuminating insights into the composer's life and work during set changes and in a post-concert discussion.

Horowitz called Harrison's other piano concerto -- for orchestra, written a few months earlier than the gamelan concerto -- "the most formidable concerto for any instrument written by an American composer." Having heard performances featuring Keith Jarrett, Ursula Oppens, and Marino Formenti (with the Los Angeles Philharmonic last year), I can't argue. From the majestic Brahmsian opening to the tart tone clusters and prominent percussion of the piquant "Stampede" and on through the poignant Largo and final movement, P-CE and soloist Benjamin Pasternack delivered a spectacular performance that pushed audience members to the edges of their seats and the pianist several inches above his bench.

Accepting an invitation Harrison noted in the piano part, Pasternack (like Harrison, a long time improvising dance accompanist) improvised a sparkling, searching first-movement cadenza. Charismatic P-CE Music Director Angel Gil Ordonez led a taut, unforgettable reading.

The practicalities inherent in performing the Whitman-esque "Four Strict Songs"

helps explain the relative obscurity of much of Harrison's music. The first piano concerto required tuning to the gamelan's intonation; the second specified a tuning devised by one of J.S. Bach's students. "Four Strict Songs" -- set to Harrison's own poetry to celebrate his return to the pastoral beauties of his native West Coast in 1953 after a turbulent decade in New York -- required a third, natural tuning, along with a second re-tuned harp. Financial constraints evidently precluded the availability of either, and harsh dissonances occasionally emerged, somewhat vitiating the impact of a work whose beauty is largely inherent in its tunings.

The GWU Chamber Choir acquitted itself well, but its sound, while attractive, was too thin for the exultant opening song, "Here is Holiness." (This performance used Harrison's later arrangement for mixed chorus rather than the eight baritones he originally specified.) The gentler pastoral movements fared better, with young baritone Andre Lamar Smith lending a fine vocal presence despite his decidedly un-Harrisonian vibrato. Still, the engaging performance, expertly shaped by Gil Ordonez, made a strong case for "Strict Songs" to be in the pantheon of American vocal music.

That the logistical challenges of presenting Harrison's under-performed works — including others that require odd combinations of global instruments or Harrison's own American gamelan — are well worth the effort was proven by the music's insistent allure and the audience's enthusiastic response, arrived at in no small part from P-CE's smart, context-laden approach.

Brett Campbell is the co-author with Bill Alves of a biography in progress on Lou Harrison.