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Contrapuntal Elements In Selected Passages from Igor Stravinsky's Concerto for two solo pianos (1932–1935)

ABSTRACT

Background

Igor Stravinsky began writing his Concerto for two solo pianos in 1932 while he and his family were living in Voreppe, France, and completed it in Paris three years later. My presentation will include a slideshow and a handout showing selected diplomatic transcriptions of musical sketches (from sources at the Paul Sacher Stiftung) that illustrate Stravinsky's approach to his ever-present 'interval patterns' that appear as far back as the *Funeral Chant* (1909) and *Firebird* (1910) and continue forward to *Variations in Honor of Aldous Huxley* (1965). Audio excerpts will be drawn from the historic recording of Stravinsky's *Concerto per due pianoforte soli* by Stravinsky and his son Soulima, produced by *Columbia Recordings* France in 1938. (The Mozart Fugue in C Minor, K. 426 is found on the second side of this recording.) When Soulima was interviewed by Thor Wood about how he might have assisted his father at the time he was composing the Concerto, Soulima said that 'While he was writing it, page after page he played it with me, tried it out'. (From the transcript of the interview of Soulima Stravinsky by Thor Wood, see references.)

Aims and repertoire studied

There are seven freestanding sketches for this work, most of which appear to be earlier than those in Sketchbook IX that contains 87 pages of sketches. I will argue that a diplomatic transcription of one of these early sketches provides insights into Stravinsky's compositional process by showing how he systematically displaced notes at the octave as if to dramatize the zig-zag effect that exists in other works such as *Perséphone* (1933–34).

Methods

Analysis will include incipits drawn from the published score that track the appearance of two interrelated motives and one motivic expansion. Stravinsky uses these motives to create the feeling of 'balance in motion' as if in a Calder mobile; the Piano I material of m. 95 is imitated by Piano II starting in m. 109. At the same time, Stravinsky creates a type of melodic rotation in Piano II while at the same time preserving the intervallic content of motives A and B. The meter of 12/16 is now equated with 2/4 while changing the triple division of the beat (m. 95) to duple (m. 106). It is curious how Stravinsky maintains his melodic and rhythmic precision in keeping with his goal of composing a concerto for two solo pianos.

Given that these motives alternate with contrasting material that is both juxtaposed and superimposed while maintaining a

consistent rhythmic pulse reflects Stravinsky's use of block form that he used earlier in his compositional process even though he allows himself to reorder intervals within these melodic and rhythmic cells that participate in a *motoric* style. In 1931, Stravinsky used a similar metaphor when he described his Concerto for Piano and Winds (1923–1924) as 'tractor music' (Helmut Kirchmeyer, cited by Michael Druskin).

A more definitive example of Stravinsky's use of contrapuntal principles in his Concerto for two solo pianos is easily detected in the fugue of the last movement. The genesis of the fugal subject, however, is difficult to trace since this movement was originally intended to be the third movement. A study of the sketches for the Prelude and Fugue (found in Sketchbook IX) provides some insights into Stravinsky's *modus operandi*. Analysis will demonstrate how Stravinsky balances the entries of the fugal subject in light of the two solo pianos. In a way, the material that recurs between entrances of the subject helps Stravinsky to re-create his earlier explorations with block form.

A comparison between this fugue in the last movement of the Concerto and the final fugue of the last movement of Beethoven's Piano Sonata no. 31 in A-flat Major (Op. 110) suggests that Stravinsky used the Beethoven as a model — not only with the way in which the framework of both movements resemble each other but also with Stravinsky's use of the same tempo marking at the point of melodic inversion: the tempo marking Stravinsky uses at m. 99 of the Concerto is *Lo stesso tempo della Fuga nell'inversione*, precisely the same marking that Beethoven toward the end of his fugue.

In his review (March 23, 1944) of a performance of Stravinsky's Concerto in New York's Town Hall (Celius Dougherty and Vicenz Buzicka, pianists), Virgil Thompson concludes that 'The subject matter of Stravinsky's Concerto for Two Pianos Alone, is, if I mistake not, the style of Beethoven's later period, in particular that of the last four or five piano sonatas'.

Implications

Further discussion will include: (1) Stravinsky's approach to 'interval patterns' in other passages of the Concerto, (2) Virgil Thompson's concept of 'Style as Subject' in his review of a performance of the Concerto, (3) the balance between the two solo piano parts, and (4) further analysis comparing the fugue of Beethoven's Piano Sonata no. 31 in A-flat Major (Op. 110) with the Fugue in the last movement of Stravinsky's Concerto for two solo pianos. This material is part of a larger study of the influence of Bach models on Stravinsky's compositional process.

Keywords

Music analysis, composition, analytical theory, counterpoint, style, structure, instrumental music

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