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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>



Classical music gets unstuck from the 19th century



By [Jon Caldwell](#) on Apr 04, 2011 | [Add a Comment](#) (0)



If you have never heard of DC-based Post-Classical Ensemble, you should get acquainted. This group, under the leadership of Artistic Director Joseph Horowitz and Music Director Angel Gil-Ordóñez is challenging the ways in which we listen to, think about, and talk about classical music and performance. Their newest venture, “The Stravinsky Project”, hosted by Strathmore, Georgetown University, and the National Gallery of Art, is sure to test even our most closely held opinions of this titan of 20th

century music. Over the festival's three days (April 8-10), attendees will be treated to orchestral and chamber music concerts, films, lectures and discussions, and piano performances—it is sure to be a weekend that the musician and non-musician will not want to miss.

Post-Classical is both a term and a mindset—a way of approaching music and music performance in a new and fresh way. Classical music for a long time has been stuck in the 19th and early 20th centuries, refusing to move past the traditions and practices of the past. However, ensembles like the Post-Classical Ensemble are working to break down the barriers that have existed between musicians and audience for the better part of the last century. When asked about the term post-classical, Horowitz explains:

In an attempt to find a term for the musical world into which classical music now fits, I for a long time have used the term post-classical. Post-classical music includes world music, popular music, and classical music. I also feel that a lot of the most important activity nowadays is in between these various genres and certainly classical music has been vitally refreshed by non-Western music and popular music. We engage in a much broader world of music and spend a lot of time in between the cracks.”

The case of Igor Stravinsky is an interesting one. Regarded as one of, if not the, greatest composers of the 20th century, Stravinsky left Russia at the age of 28 to move to Switzerland after being commissioned to compose for the Ballets Russes in Paris. He lived in exile in Switzerland, France, and the United States and did not return to Russia until he travelled to the then Soviet Union in 1962 at the age of 80. During his exile, Stravinsky developed into a man who shunned his Russian heritage while simultaneously rejecting any notion of interpretation of his music. The notation of the music was enough and his music was not to be influenced by the whims of individual performers and he identified himself not as Russian but as European. While Russians followed Stravinsky's early career, by the time Stalin rose to power, Stravinsky's music was no longer allowed in Russia—he was a cultural pariah. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Russian performers and scholars have approached Stravinsky's music with fresh interpretations and thoughts about his music leading to an explosion of new research on the composer and his music.

The Stravinsky Project is challenging these most commonly held beliefs about Stravinsky, in many ways based on this new research. As Horowitz explains: “In the case of the Stravinsky festival, we mount an argument that Stravinsky is ultimately a Russian composer and that, only because of what I call ‘the psychology of exile’, was he forced to deny his Russian heritage which was really a synthetic and artificial move” and going on to say that “We are interpreting Stravinsky and we are challenging his own self-interpretation.”

But, for the non-musician, what does this weekend's festival hold? The films on Saturday will explain about the “psychology of exile” in Stravinsky's life and how it affected his music. His is a story about separation from the homeland and the films create a vivid picture of Stravinsky the man. But, for the non-musician, Ordóñez explains that “We

want the normal person who has never heard of Stravinsky to come and say ‘Oh my God-how is it possible that I haven’t been listening to this music all my life?’” The unique presentation and interpretation of Stravinsky’s music will almost certainly appeal to the musician and non-musician.

Every day we hear reports of classical music’s demise. Orchestras are shuttering their windows (Detroit Symphony Orchestra, Syracuse Symphony Orchestra), classical audiences are getting older and older, and the common refrain is that people do not like classical music anymore. To that, Ordóñez responds:

People love classical music. What we feel is not working is the format in which classical music is presented. It is not attractive to new people, so we have to bring elements that enhance the performance, that explain the music, that bring context to the music we are performing and this is what we do. We don’t create performances—we create festivals.”

The Stravinsky Project will certainly challenge the musical archetypes that we have created about classical music and Igor Stravinsky. With a weekend filled with music, film, and lectures, something is sure to appeal to every kind of art lover. The Stravinsky Project will take place on April 8-10, 2011 and is hosted by Strathmore, Georgetown University, and National Gallery of Art. You can find more information on the Stravinsky Project at <http://post-classicalensemble.org/igor-stravinsky/> and <http://www.strathmore.org/stravinskyproject/>.

<http://pinklineproject.com/article/classical-music-gets-unstuck-19th-century>