

# A Polyphony of Purposes

## Archive Materials Regarding the *Première* of Stravinsky's "The Rake's Progress"

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**Abstract**—The object of this study is the reconstruction of the prehistory of the *première* of Stravinsky's opera "The Rake's Progress" on the basis of previously-unknown archive materials. Furthermore, some elements of the plot, as well as some key motifs of the libretto will be compared with Alexander Pushkin's prose narratives, including a proto-text of his Petersburg tales, which has so far never been analysed from this point of view. The object of his relationship are: information about the productions of Stravinsky's works and his popularity in Italy and about his relationship with Italian musicians; facts and statistical data; an overview of previously-unknown archive materials about the Italian *première* of the opera and new information about its production as well as the composer's "polyphony of purposes". New facts taken from unknown correspondence of the author; a comparison of the motifs of the libretto with a previously-ignored proto-text by Pushkin.

**Keywords**—Stravinsky; opera; Rake's Progress; libretto; archive materials; proto-text; Pushkin

### I. INTRODUCTION

Since the 1920s Stravinsky's popularity in Italy has been amazingly persistent. His works have been constantly performed and greeted with enthusiasm, his music as well as his personality have been permanently at the centre of interest. In Italy in the period 1935-1945 performances of his operas were more frequent than those of other contemporary composers of the twentieth century, with the exception of Richard Strauss. Stravinsky's works were performed 10 times, Prokofiev's once, Bartók's once, Shostakovich's never and Strauss's 24 times [1].

At the Venice Biennale Stravinsky's music was an important feature. A example of the general attitude towards the maestro is the fact that after the first Festival of Contemporary Music in 1930 the Italian composer Renzo Massarenti, "in spite of his being a fervent Fascist, harshly criticized the artistic nationalism of a certain critic from Bologna, who declared that Respighi was better than Stravinsky" [2].

### II. NEW INFORMATION ABOUT ITS PRODUCTION OF "THE RAKE'S PROGRESS"

I have gathered information about the Italian productions of Stravinsky's operas "The Nightingale" (*Le Rossignol*),

"Mavra", "Persephone" and of his opera-oratorios "Oedipus Rex" and "The Rake's Progress" in another study [3]. In "The Rake's Progress" Stravinsky's personal passions and artistic projects find a synthesis: his interest in eighteenth-century English culture, the eternal motif of the relationship with the Devil, the libretto of a brilliant English-speaking poet and an ironic, albeit tragic, sketch of neo-classicism.

In February 1951 The New York Times, reporting the publication of the musical score of the opera by the publisher Boosey and Hawkes, announced that the *première* would take place at London Covent Garden. In fact the opera was performed there only in December of that year. There was also talk of a possible production at the Central Opera House in Colorado in the summer of 1952 [4]. At the time a possible *première* in Italy was not even mentioned. In 1951 the Great Return to Europe of the Russian emigré who had settled down in the US took Stravinsky to Naples, Milan and Venice. The setting of the world *première* of "The Rake's Progress" was to be Stravinsky's beloved country and in particular the city where Diaghilev was buried. The "dialogue" with the impresario had a lasting echo in the composer's works. Stravinsky's opera was to be revived in the theatre of the city that marks the symbolic border between Western and Eastern civilization. It had been conceived a long time before and foreseen after the ballet "Orpheus". Since the 1930s Stravinsky's neo-classical period had been tending towards this composition, which in fact completed that period. Why was it revealed to the world in Italy?

In the shadow of the English component of "The Rake's Progress", which the composer considered of paramount importance, there is an "Italian presence". It is one of the important stylistic and semantic points of origin of the system of characters, of the plot and the sound content of the opera. Starting from the principles and the values of the 'commedia dell'arte', the musician transforms them destroying the harmony of the previous world.

It would seem that everything is known about the conception and the history of the creation of this opera, the target the composer was setting himself, the musical characteristics of the opera, the contacts with the authors of the libretto (W.H. Auden and Chester Kallman), the atmosphere and the location of the first production at the La Fenice Theatre on September 11th 1951, during the fifteenth

festival of La Biennale. During my work in Italian archives, however, I have found new materials that shed new light on the history of this production and the previous purposes of the author. I am going to present some previously-unknown excerpts from the composer's correspondence concerning the location of the *premi ère*, which also show his strategy about the destiny of the opera [5].

In September 1951 during an interview he said, "The sound dimension which from the very beginning I conceived for the opera was that of a small orchestra, just a few characters and a small choir. In a word a sort of 'chamber music', as for example 'Così fan tutte'. This is why from the very beginning I strongly wished for the world *premi ère* to take place in a frame like that of the La Fenice Theatre, rather than La Scala or the New York Metropolitan Theatre, which in fact was the first to ask for the opera." [6].

If we put in chronological order the scattered pages of the previously-unknown documents concerning the production of the opera found at the ASAC, we can follow the progress of "the Rake" toward the 'Serenissima'.

On February 17th 1951 the Extraordinary Commissioner of La Biennale, Giovanni Ponti, informs the Minister that "the news of the absolute world *premi ère* at the Venice festival has already been published in The New York Times and, probably, proceeds from Stravinsky himself." Pleased with this piece of news, \$5,000 are sent to California in compliance with the contract signed on February 6th 1951. The contract stipulates the *premi ère* in Venice and the participation of the composer as director of the orchestra during the first performance. A further \$15,000 are sent to Bank of America in June 1951 [7].

However, for the *premi ère* the energies and the means of Milan La Scala are essential. From a letter dated April 2nd sent by La Fenice to Rodolfo Pallucchini of the "Giornale di Venezia", we learn of a telegram received from Stravinsky. He presses for an agreement with La Scala. Giovanni Ponti writes two letters to the Director of La Scala Antonio Giringelli asking for cooperation but he receives no answer. La Scala, however, demands to take its own orchestra to Venice, while the management of La Fenice does not want to spend extra money because it already has a contract for the performance of the orchestra and the choir of the Italian Radio which involves no charge.

Here is where we discover facts unknown before. The previous year the composer had promised to let La Scala have the opera for the Italian *premi ère*. Because of the ban of the Archive on the verbatim publication of the documents, I will limit myself to summarizing the gist of the problem. Dr Ernst Roth, manager of Boosey and Hawkes, and the composer were concerned about Giringelli's threat to raise a public scandal in the press and in Parliament. If the director of La Scala put into practice his threat to persecute the composer for failing to comply with his promise to give his opera to La Scala, the Biennale might see the musical score of the opera seized by the court. The Venetian party reacted by threatening a huge scandal. After all they had the contract with Stravinsky's signature and the receipt of the payment of the first instalment [8].

### III. THE COMPOSER'S "POLYPHONY OF PURPOSES"

If La Scala could threaten legal action, they must have had some kind of documental proof of Stravinsky's earlier commitment with them. Trying to settle the conflict, Ferdinando Ballo assured Giringelli that the negotiations of the Venetian party with the author and his publisher, which had begun in 1948, had got back to the starting point, that is to say the initial proposal of a world *premi ère* to be held in Venice. The author's demands had been accepted. The libretto would be in English. On April 9th 1951 Ferdinando Ballo wrote to Stravinsky about the most important issue. He could continue his preparatory work on the opera and there would not be any need to bother the maestro with the conflicts between the Milan and Venice theatres, because all negotiations would be in the hands of the Ministry, on which both La Scala and the Festival depended. They would come to an agreement and there would be no scandal [9].

Indeed a compromise was reached. The event would be the result of the cooperation of all parties: the Festival, the La Scala and La Fenice Theatres and the Italian Radio. The issue seemed settled, but materials from another archive have revealed more details about the hidden circumstances of the pre-history of the opera.

Until 1951 Florence remained focused on Stravinsky's desires and problems, in an effort to obtain as many musical works by the Russian paradoxicalist as possible. There is a lively correspondence between Francesco Siciliani, at the time the Art Director of the Teatro Comunale and of the "Florence Musical May", and Stravinsky from Hollywood [10]. On May 29th 1949 the composer assured in a letter that he still did not know when he would complete his work on the opera on the basis of the English libretto, possibly for a production in the USA or in England:

"Dear Sir, I have received your letter from May 19. First of all let us define plans before I finish my work; this will probably not take place before the end of 1950.

On the other hand, this opera being composed in English, must have its *premi ère* in an English-speaking country, or, in other words, either in the USA or in England. If you are interested to have it later on, of course not as a World *premi ère* performance, you can contact my publishers: Boosey and Hawkes Inc. 30 West" [11].

Stravinsky and his publisher received from Florence the proposal to perform the opera in Italian, which they both rejected. On June 14th 1949 Siciliani received, from the London delegate of the composer, Dr Roth, "a kind rejection" of his proposal based on the uncertainty of the period when the opera would be completed. Dr Roth, however, confirmed his great appreciation of the quality of the Florence Musical festival, as well his desire to reach a mutually-satisfactory agreement:

"Cher Monsieur, Je vous remercie per vos amables lettres du 3 e 4 juin concernant le nouvel opéra ... Je crois qu'il trop tôt de prendre des dispositions à l'heure actuelle parce que Stravinsky a seulement terminè la composition du premier acte (il y en trios en tout) et n'a pas encore commencè l'instrumentation. Je ne pense donc pas que l'opera soit

terminé avant le printemps de 1950 et Stravinsky lui-même croit pouvoir achever la composition de l'opéra seulement en hiver 1950-1951 ce qui fait qu'il m'est impossible de m'engager à présent et en cas je dois consulter Stravinsky lorsque l'œuvre sera terminée. Je vous tiendrai au courant de ce qui se passait et je voudrais de vous dire que je connais bien la haute qualité du MMF et que je serais très heureux s'il était possible d'aboutir à un arrangement" [12].

The Florentine party wrote that it was willing to wait for a new work by the composer and fervently asked to be kept informed about the progress of its creation, undoubtedly hoping to be able to produce a world première of Stravinsky's opera [13]. This was all in vain.

As it turns out on the basis of these newly-discovered archive materials, Stravinsky was 'flirting' at the time with these three Italian theatres for the 'right of the first night' for this so very meaningful, for him, new work. In 1949, even before his negotiations with La Scala and Venice started, he intended the opera to be produced in Florence. But the Florentine party demanded that the opera should be performed in Italian, and when they understood that in order to obtain the exclusive, they would have to agree to its being in English, it was too late. The composer was no longer so keen to see his work performed at the Teatro Comunale in Florence. In spite of this of being a world première, the event would probably not have achieved the needed resonance in the media and with the public. The two parties were unable to agree not only about the language of the possible production, but also about the material conditions of this event. Judging from the archive materials of the Biennale ASAC, the Maestro was particularly careful and strict and he valued his own work as a composer extremely highly. At this point Stravinsky was already negotiating with La Scala. Judging from what Giringelli says about the author's promises for the autumn of 1950, there were talks about getting the new opera for the main Italian Opera house.

However, a series of reasons for the composer's final decision can be found. For the first performance of "The Rake's Progress" the environment of the La Fenice theatre, as ancient and cozy as Venice itself, was more suitable than that of the Milan theatre. Stravinsky chose to ignore the massive and powerful machine of La Scala, so similar to that of the Bolshoy. The author's artistic instinct turned out to be right. In the initial programme of the 1951 Venice Biennale there was no mention of the "Rake". However, on the basis of archive materials, the Maestro signed his contract with the Venice Biennale only at the end of January or even early in February 1951. What was crucial in this decision was his old passion for this city, his artistic connections, the certainty that in that context the inaugural performance of his beloved composition would receive a huge resonance. Furthermore, the better economic conditions of the golden "Venetian Autumn" also played a key role.

Considering the autobiographical element that lies at the basis of this opera (according to Akopyan), I would suggest that the idea of "The Rake's Progress" cast its shadow on the history of its production, through that ambiguity which we can call the author's "polyphony of purposes" regarding the

material production and the venue of the first performance of his work.

#### IV. NEW MATERIAL FOR THE PURPOSE OF RECONSTRUCTING THE PROTO-TEXT OF THE OPERA LIBRETTO

Stravinsky admitted that he immediately "recognized his subject in Hogarth's works" [14]. Probably this also conditioned his requirements for the libretto. From a letter to Auden dated October 6th 1947 it is already clear that from the very beginning he defined the genre of this work, which should be analogous to that of his "The Soldier's Tale": "Bear in mind that I will compose not a musical drama, but just an opera with definite lyseparated number sconnect ed by spoken (notsung) words of the text, because I want to avoid the customary operatic recitative" [15].

The finale of the opera is also clearly defined: "The main character ending up in a lunatic asylum scratching his violin is a fit conclusion for his turbulent life" [16]. The mentions of "scratching the violin" did not, however, get to the final version. A question remains open: why did Stravinsky immediately recognize his subject in Hogarth's prints?

It is well known that in "The Rake's Progress" the linguistic expressions of the contemporary age are mixed with traces of the English eighteenth century and of the European lyric of the past, deriving from Edvard Grieg's Peer Gynt. The Russian aura is suggested not so much by the intonation as by signs, associations, such as the ironic transformations of the aesthetics of Russian Symbolism, which in turn reflected the influence of the Rococo period. In the finale of the opera the transformed reflection of Romanticism and of the Russian cultural tradition is particularly evident in the theme of the "deadly lullaby". In it there are reminiscences of Mussorgsky's "Songs and Dances of Death", Rimsky-Korsakov's "Volkhova's Lullaby" from "Sadko", the final scene from Tchaikovsky's "Mazepa", where insane Maria sings a lullaby for Andrei who is dying. In the character of Baba the Turk we can find traits from the "Queen of Spades" and a shadow of Hermann when he ends up in a lunatic asylum. Akopyan highlights another intersection with the Russian theme in a typical fairy tale topos: the fulfilment of the protagonist's three wishes in the opera. The motif of the triple testing of the main character is deeply rooted in initiation rituals and ancient folklore. Another important theme is the fatal alliance between the protagonist and the forces of evil in all of their inhumane manifestations, which through a series of tests can lead either to salvation or damnation.

I would like to add another type of influence on the opera deriving from the Bildungsroman, the novel of formation, with its edifying morality [17]. We can talk about an "opera of formation" which is revealed by the plot, the character of the drama and its musical content, in which allusions from the music of the past are implanted in the language of the contemporary age. The elements of the operatic "cultural heritage" are actualized but they are exquisitely "tainted". This is clear for the public, in particular that of the Biennale, who can detect sounds typical of Baroque music alongside

extremely avant-garde elements. Instead of catharsis, there are two “musical conclusions”: one hinting at final Opera of the Russian Enlightenment and another, a morality play with a secret devilish sneer in the spirit of Mozart. “The Rake’s Progress” is a travesty of the “opera of formation”, also from the point of view of its dissemination in the society contemporary to its creation. The opera has become extremely popular, is frequently performed and has had a deep influence on public opinion. It has been imitated in music, theatre and even cinema (in my opinion, it has even influenced Peter Greenaway).

As regards the debate as to whether this work is to be considered to have affinities with the poetics of Russian opera or to be completely extraneous to it. I will add an argument that has never been considered before. The plot of the libretto seems particularly similar to the story “The solitary house on the Vasilievsky island”, which Pushkin narrated in the Karamzin’s salon in 1828. The following year it was published in an almanac by Titov, who many years later revealed Pushkin’s real authorship. This story can be considered the proto-text of the poet’s three Petersburg tales, as Vladislav Khodasevich showed in an article written in 1914 and published in 1922 [18]. In this tale by Pushkin the Russian critic identified the main subject lines that are developed in “The little house in Kolomna”, “The Bronze Horseman” and “The Queen of Spades” and which connect the three tales into a “closed and unitary cycle”. The main motifs are: temptation, alliance with the forces of evil, and, in the last two stories, the main character ending up in lunatic asylum. According to Khodasevich, the central theme of this inextricable cycle is “the intrusion of supernatural forces into a person’s everyday life” [19]. It is possible that Stravinsky knew Khodasevich’s article and took inspiration from it?

## V. CONCLUSION

Bearing in mind this sequence of literary motifs, the libretto of “The Rake’s Progress” can be considered a sort of “post-text” of Pushkin’s Petersburg tale. Thus it becomes clear why the author of the opera based on “The little House in Kolomna” immediately “recognized” and identified a congenial plot line in Hogarth’s series of prints, which would become the basis of the new opera. Furthermore, in this context the importance of the condition that Stravinsky imposed on the author of the libretto is very evident, that the protagonist should end his life in a madhouse. This also explains why he introduced into “The Rake” the motifs of the dishonest enrichment of the protagonist and the marriage with the “bearded woman”. It is to this “Venera barbaris” that the epigraph of the “Little House in Kolomna”, taken from Ovid - “now man, now woman” - hints, summarizing the qualities of the tempting devil [20]. The affinity between the motifs of the libretto and Pushkin’s proto-text is completed by the motif of the game of cards ending with the central character losing his mind. These final considerations should have sufficiently highlighted how deeply rooted in Russian culture this opera of Stravinsky’s is.

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