NEOCLASSICISM: The Rake’s Progress

NEOCLASSICISM: AN EXPLORATION OF THESE ELEMENTS IN STRAVINSKY’S “THE RAKE’S PROGRESS”

The neoclassical movement can be attributed partly to the work of Igor Stravinsky and Bella Bartok (Scholes, 1964, p. 491), as a direct response to the increasing trends towards romanticism in western classical music. The term neoclassical has been given a number of meanings over the years, but in the words of Burkholder (2006, p. 826) “...has come to represent a broad movement from the 1910s to the 1950s in which composers revived, imitated, or evoked the styles, genres and forms of pre-Romantic music, especially that of the eighteenth century.”

As a composer, Stravinsky’s works can be categorised into three periods, the neoclassical period central to the three (c. 1920-1954). It was around 1919, when Diaghilev asked Stravinsky to orchestrate pieces by an eighteenth century operatic composer Pergolesi (Scholes, 1964, p. 439). Stravinsky was able to rework the pieces retaining the original music, but subsequently giving it a distinctive sound more like his own work than Pergolesi’s.

He later spoke of the experience as a “discovery of the past, the epiphany through which [...]his later work[s] became possible.” (Burkholder et al, 2006, p. 826), implying the stimulus for his neoclassical period. It was the next year (1920) that Stravinsky completed the *Symphonies of Wind Instruments*, to which he applied compositional methods and techniques similar to that used in *The Rite of Spring*. This can be considered as the work that launched his neoclassical period (Burkholder, 2006, p.826).

*The Rakes Progress*, composed 1951, is Stravinsky’s last work in the neoclassical idiom. It cannot be classed as a transitional piece, as his final ‘serial’ period began a year later with his experimental *Cantata*, using none-twelve-tone serial techniques (Siohan, 1965, p. 174) not featured in the opera.

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The harmony of the opera is generally chromatic, using a vast array of keys, modulating frequently. By the arrival of the first aria at figure ‘31’, there has already been four modulations from the home key of E major to A major, A minor and finally F major at figure ‘31’. Though these are the sectional key changes, in each change of key, there are chromaticisms, like that seen in the bar before ‘C’ in the prelude where the chord used has clear dissonance.

Figure ‘5’ beat 1, has use of an A major chord with C-naturals creating clashes. This exploitation of dissonance can also be found in the recitative, which by tradition is usually diatonic to the chords used in the accompaniment. In this case the vocalists are requested to sing almost chromatically against the accompaniment, with the focus more on the content of the words that have been set, than creating a tonal melody.

In classical writing the height of dissonance is created by using dimished sevenths, and augmented fifths. These chords sound fairly consonant when compared with the before mentioned points of interest in The Rake’s Progress. This further highlights Stravinsky’s neo classical writing, as it expands on the harmonies explored by previous composers.

At figure ‘29’, there is a quote from Movement II of Beethoven’s Symphony No. 5. The text could be viewed as a subtle homage to Beethoven, stating “Have not grave doctors assured us that good works are of no avail for Heaven predestines all?” The subject matter relates to man’s relationship with God and fate making one believe that the quotation from Beethoven’s 5th Symphony was not coincidence. Moving away from the large scale orchestras featured in nineteenth century operas such as Wagner’s Die Walkure, Stravinsky takes a more modest approach using what can be considered as a ‘traditional’ classical orchestra. He omits the use of a large brass section, instead requesting only two horns, and two trumpets in B-flat.
The instrumentation of *The Rake’s Progress*, also bares similarities to Beethoven’s *Fidelio* which specifies an almost identical line-up (2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets in B-flat, 2 basoons, 2 horns in F, 2 trumpets in B-flat, full strings, timpani and harpsichord), the exceptions of which are that the *Fidelio* specifies 4 horns and the inclusion of 2 trombones, and *The Rake’s Progress* specifies Oboe II to use Cor Anglais; both operas request Flute II to use piccolo when required.

When compared to the instrumentation of Wagner’s *Die Walkure*, which is orchestration for full brass section, specifying 8 Horns, it becomes more evident that Stravinsky, who is the later composer, is rejecting the emerging trends of larger romantic orchestras, in favour of the earlier ‘classical line-up’. This is further highlighted when compared to the instrumentation of his earlier opera, *The Rite of Spring*, which has a comparatively similar line-up to the Wagnerian Romantic/Indo-Russian orchestra, with not only the ‘full’ brass section, but also an extensive percussion section, with the inclusion of bass clarinets, and contrabassoon.

In the original orchestration he specifies the use of harpsichord, though the practicalities of such an instrument resounding over the orchestra, its availability, and tuning issues have all lead to present day productions opting for the use of piano. Stravinsky uses the harpsichord sparingly, limiting its use to the recitative only, in a way similar to that seen in eighteenth century operas (*Recitative Secco* (Scholes, 1941, p. 783)), with little more than accompanying chords on the keyboard instrument, while the vocalist performs in a spoken-sung manner. Though this is true, the Duet featured in Act 3, Scene 2, between Nick Shadow and Tom Rakewell, features the Harpsichord almost exclusively.

This use of harpsichord is reminiscent of recitative from earlier operas, such as *Comfort ye, my people* from Handel’s oratorio, *Messiah*. Stravinsky’s use however, bares similarities to operas that predate Handel’s *Messiah*, such as Jacopo Peri’s *Euridice* from the early seventeenth century.
Tom’s Cavatina in Act I, Scene 2, demonstrates Stravinsky’s adaptation of Arietta form, and use of classical writing in a modern setting. The intensely chromatic opening using minor 2\textsuperscript{nd} suspensions is then followed by a tension building section on an E minor pedal under a shifting E major key system at figure ‘152’. The pedal on its own is not what builds the tension (though adding to it), but the clarinet part which features a quintuplet flourish of notes, exploiting F-double-sharps against G-sharps, creating dissonance. This coupled with the shifting minor chords, creates a looming sense of dread accomplishing the sombre atmosphere the composer desires to create.

Very short, the Cavatina is constructed in a single movement in ternary form, with contrasting material at figure ‘154’, and a coda at figure ‘159’. Though a classical form has been used (Cavatina), the movement in itself does not feature any of the traditionally classical cadential sequences. The preceding recitative does exploit a feature from its classical counter-parts, that being the perfect cadence signifying the end to the audience and performers (bar before figure ‘151’).

Though The Rake’s Progress does feature heavy influences from classical forms and structures, the opening prelude bares more similarities to the operas of the era and surrounding period (modern/20\textsuperscript{th} Century), which sometimes drop the overture all together, like in Ravel’s L’enfant et les sortilèges. Though in Ravel’s piece the opening movement is not given the exact title prelude, The Consise Oxford Dictionary of Music (1964, p.458) states that a prelude is “[a] piece of music composed to be played before any other...”, which in these situations it does.

The use of this medium is correct, but not traditional of music of the classical idiom when compared to the extensive overture in Beethoven’s Fidelio, which is approximately 100 bars in length, or Wagner’s Die Walkure, which is approximately 80 bars. They both explore the themes extensively giving an insight to the material featured in the opera. Stravinsky does not do this; instead he uses entirely new material, which is only vaguely related to the content heard in the opera.
The orchestral accompaniment is programmatic, complimenting the vocal material, while creating atmospheres, like that seen at figure ‘47’ in the recitative between Tom Rakewell and Nick Shadow. On Shadows entry, there is a flourish of notes in the harpsichord part, creating a mysterious atmosphere. The bar before figure ‘188’ in Act 3 uses a bell offstage to simulate a clock strike with a similar effect occurring again 4 bars after figure ‘200’. A spade toppling over is simulated by improvised percussion 4 bars after figure ‘191’.

The use of musical instruments imitating unanimated objects, effects and other none-tonal sounds, was something not explored during the classical period, thus further illustrating classical forms used with neoclassical techniques. The final moments of the opera break away from the traditions of operatic style. Stravinsky has written an epilogue that takes the main characters from the performance, and gathers them into a public service announcement (‘PSA’), reminding the audience of lessons and morals that could be learnt from the events in the opera. Though the writing can still be classed as neoclassical, this comedic act, using subtle humour can be considered a new convention in its time.

By analysing the selected points of interest in The Rake’s Progress, and reviewing the opera as a whole, it is evident that Stravinsky uses elements of neoclassical writing, while incorporating techniques learnt through previous composition. When compared to his earlier more Russian influenced works that have been produced on a grander scale, you can hear the differences that have evolved in the orchestration of the music, but also the similarities that make his style evident. His use of rhythm to create tension, development of melody and harmony shifting through keys are all points that make the music markedly recognisable as Stravinsky.

As with other composers, maturity in musicality allows them to incorporate the same sense of grandness in the music, with fewer instruments demonstrating developments in technical ability.


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Stravinsky is no exception to this, a clear example is in the final act of *The Rake’s Progress* where he uses almost minimal scoring at points, but creates a sense of unease, and suspense.

To conclude, *The Rake’s Progress* can be considered a work that is definitive of Stravinsky’s neoclassical period, coming at the end, when he theoretically would have mastered the form and the implementation of stylistic tendencies. As previously mentioned, the compositions written after this opera can be described as the beginnings of his ‘serial’ period, evident when listening to his *Cantata* (1952). As with the pieces in his neoclassical period, it is clear that they are written by Stravinsky, not by harmonic traits, or recognizable progressions, but the way he uses the instruments chosen for the piece.

The neoclassical elements in *The Rake’s Progress* are limited to form and instrumentation only, as the harmonies used coupled with the intended dissonance, extend beyond what can be considered ‘classical’. Even the discussed use of a prelude, opposed to an overture, show modifications to what we know as classical form for an opera, showing that Stravinsky was influence, but not bound by the constraints of classical writing.
Sources


Audio Materials