

8 Formalizing a “Purely Acoustic” Musical Objectivity: Another Look at a 1915 Interview with Stravinsky

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“Music is, by its very nature, essentially powerless to express anything at all,” Stravinsky famously declared in 1934. “Expression has never been an inherent property of music.”¹ Scholars have addressed the composer’s statement as an aesthetic philosophy of formalism that he conceived in the 1920s and propagated throughout the 1930s.² In this essay, however, I argue that the origins of Stravinsky’s 1930s rhetoric of musical expression most likely dates back to his Swiss period in 1914–15 just after, and in part as a consequence of, the disastrous premiere of *The Rite of Spring*.³

In late 1915 Stravinsky gave an interview to C. Stanley Wise, an American organist, conductor, and regular visitor to the composer’s homes in Morges and Clarens, Switzerland. Wise’s visits resulted in a well-known profile of the composer in the *Musical Quarterly* (henceforth *MQ*).⁴ Excerpts from Wise’s interview that did not appear in *MQ* were published in the 16 December 1915 edition of the *New-York Tribune*.⁵ In advance of the 1916 U.S. tour by the Ballets Russes, Wise published a full profile of the composer in the *Tribune*’s 15 January 1916 issue.⁶ The *MQ* profile had featured mostly secondhand anecdotes and Wise’s own observations, whereas the *Tribune* article consisted almost entirely of direct quotations from the composer.⁷ Scholars have previously valued this interview as a repository for Stravinsky’s early knowledge of American jazz but overlooked the rest of its content.⁸

“La musique est trop bête pour exprimer autre chose que la musique” (Music is too stupid to express anything other than music itself), Stravinsky told his 1915 interviewer. “The future development of music . . . probably will be along lines which will tend to preserve it as an art purely acoustic, but which, not taking extraneous matters into account, will embrace all our deepest and most dominant feelings, even those purely practical or normal.”⁹ Throughout the interview, Stravinsky emphasizes this line of thinking. He similarly criticizes the relation-

ship between music and dramaturgy in Wagner and castigates program music as a relic of the past: “Programme music, for instance . . . has been obviously discontinued as being distinctly an uncouth form which already has had its day; but music, nevertheless, still drags out its life in accordance with these false notions and conceptions. Without absolutely defying the programme, musicians still draw upon sources foreign to their art. As a consequence, inspiration is not found in matter purely musical, but in subjects which have nothing to do with music.”¹⁰

Stravinsky’s proclamation about “matter purely musical” and “purely acoustic” music—or “pure tone,” as Carl Van Vechten referred to it in 1916—could be an early manifestation of his musical objectivity, pointing toward later statements in *An Autobiography*.¹¹ These 1915 claims represent the composer’s attempt to establish a rhetoric of formalism pointing toward his turn to Neoclassicism in the 1920s. Twentieth-century aesthetic objectivity is often associated with post-World War I *Neue Sachlichkeit*, an era when composers centered on ideas of purity and emotional detachment in music, distancing themselves from prewar late Romanticism and Expressionism.¹² Richard Taruskin, however, has traced Stravinsky’s objectivity back to a 1914 interview with Michel-Dmitri Calvocoressi (see below).¹³ The Wise interview further supports Taruskin and Scott Messing’s history of Stravinsky’s Neoclassical views and provides a more concrete link with the technical language employed by Stravinsky in 1920s essays such as “Some Ideas about My Octuor.”¹⁴ For Stravinsky, so-called architectonic, or objective, music was detached from both outward emotional expression and extramusical or illustrative elements, emphasizing instead a sensory immediacy; in its aesthetic purity, it ran contra the Wagnerian aesthetic.

After *The Rite*

In the wake of the calamitous premiere of *The Rite of Spring*, Stravinsky not only sought a new musical path but also subtly began to revise his previous one. A week after *The Rite*’s first performance, Stravinsky disavowed an essay published under his name in the journal *Montjoie!* that outlined an occult, ritualistic scenario for *The Rite*, described as “the whole pantheistic uprising of the universal harvest.”¹⁵ For Stravinsky, the successful premiere of the ballet in concert form in early 1914 pointed toward a canonic role for *The Rite* as abstract music rather than dance accompaniment. For the rest of his life, Stravinsky emphasized *The Rite*’s status as a purely musical work, one “architectonic, not anecdotal.”¹⁶ Thus this reconception of the ballet—what Richard Taruskin refers to in this volume as a “resistance” to the original scenario of *The Rite*—stood for the composer’s broader renunciation of illustrative, programmatic music.¹⁷

Criticism of Stravinsky’s own music helped point him in that direction. Jacques Rivière, editor of *La nouvelle revue française*, sought to introduce a classicist, aesthetic objectivity to French literature and found its musical counterpart in Stravinsky’s early ballets. In a lengthy review of *The Rite*’s premiere, Rivière

wrote, “The greatest novelty of *Le Sacre du Printemps* is its renunciation of ‘sauce.’ Here is a work that is absolutely pure.”¹⁸ The “sauce” that Rivière saw Stravinsky renouncing consisted of the “shadows,” “veils,” and “poetic sweeteners” of Debussy’s music, which the Russian composer replaced with a rawness that was “crisp, intact, clear and crude.”¹⁹ Taruskin has demonstrated that by May 1914 Stravinsky had publicly accepted Rivière’s insights. In an interview, the composer told music critic Michel-Dmitri Calvocoressi: “I want neither to suggest situations or emotions, but simply to manifest, to express them. I think there is in what are called ‘impressionist’ methods a certain amount of hypocrisy, or at least a tendency towards vagueness and ambiguity. . . . I have no use for working-out in dramatic or lyric music. The one essential thing is to feel and to convey one’s feelings.”²⁰ Stravinsky’s denunciation of vagueness—and his definition of his own music as a simple manifestation rather than an ambiguous suggestion—is consistent with the opinions he articulated to Wise. The composer now favors a directness that is anti-Impressionist, as well as anti-Expressionist—a nascent conception of music as detached from conventionally programmatic techniques of representing emotion, which he disparaged to Wise as “uncouth” in its concern with “subjects which have nothing to do with music.”

Stravinsky’s contemporaries were soon aware of his musical advances. In a 1971 memorial, Otto Luening wrote of Stravinsky’s Swiss era: “Rumor had it that this mysterious Russian who lived in Morges had turned his back on all previous music and had . . . reduced his musical statement to an economical, essential style just sufficient to say what he meant.”²¹ Works such as the *Three Pieces for String Quartet* (1914), *Pribaoutki* (1914), *Renard* (1915–16), and *Les noces* (1914–23) exhibit the composer’s immersion in Russian folk materials, as well as the emerging notion of Neoclassicism that would define his 1920s output. Taruskin has demonstrated that Stravinsky’s engagement in what he calls Turanianism—a new confrontation with folk sources and unusual musical forms that developed from the neonationalism of *Mir iskusstva* (The world of art) amid the upheavals of World War I—forged a clear path to the abstract objectivity of works such as the *Octet*.²² As Stravinsky engaged with Russian folk texts and experimented with musical forms, he also discussed new conceptions of his art with figures such as Ernest Ansermet and Charles-Albert Cingria.

The relationship between Cingria and Stravinsky is well documented. Their first meeting took place in May 1914 in Paris, and they remained close friends until the poet’s death in 1954.²³ Cingria’s influence on Stravinsky’s music and writings is clearest—and most frequently discussed in the scholarly literature—in the 1930s, when the writer had input into Stravinsky’s 1934 article on *Perséphone* for the journal *Excelsior*, as well as a cosigned 1936 interview for *Radio-Paris*.²⁴ Cingria gave the composer an inscribed copy of his book *Pétrarque* in 1934; Stravinsky copied out Cingria’s translation of Petrarch’s *Dialogue between Joy and Reason* for a composition he sketched but did not complete. Maureen

Carr has pointed out that Cingria influenced Stravinsky's *Poetics of Music* as well, which the poet reviewed (she has located a particular "Cingria-ism," the use of the word *pompier*, in the *Poetics* itself).²⁵

One of the theories on which the two artists agreed was that of the objectivity and self-sufficiency of music. The transcript of the Radio-Paris interview includes the statement "Music needs nothing added. It is sufficient in itself. So, let's not search for anything beyond what it contains."²⁶ But Cingria appears to have developed the notion first, and it is one that might have informed Stravinsky by the time of the Wise interview, rather than the period of *Perséphone*. In 1910 Cingria wrote "Essay on the Definition of Music Freed from [the Methods of] Discursive Reasoning," in which he questioned the expressive content of music and text. After pointing out the similarities among a passage from Gluck's *Orphée et Eurydice*, a plainchant antiphonal from St. Gall, and another chant from the Armenian liturgy, Cingria wrote, "Here the song develops independently of the lyrics. The latter serve only as a support for its unfolding. So, in that case, what can this music express, deprived of the vigilance of text? Values?"²⁷ In interrogating the expressive possibilities of music, Cingria outlined a philosophical program with which Stravinsky concurred in his similar remarks in *An Autobiography*. And if Stravinsky had not actually read this particular essay before 1915, Wise's interview makes clear that he understood its argument; Cingria's ideas may have emerged in conversations between the two in Paris and Switzerland in 1914–15.

These philosophical developments, as Carr outlines, also had notable precedents.²⁸ Cingria's understanding of the relationship between music, imagery, and text was guided by Friedrich Nietzsche, who had written in *The Birth of Tragedy*: "Music in its absolute sovereignty does not *need* the image and the concept, but merely *endures* them as accompaniments."²⁹ In "On Music and Words," Nietzsche added: "To place music in the service of a series of images and concepts . . . reminds me of the ridiculous person who tries to raise himself into the air by his own bootstraps."³⁰ These ideas reemerged in Cingria's 1910 essay and in Stravinsky's own statements on the limits of musical expression.³¹

Tracing Objectivity

As Stephen Walsh has pointed out, the path that Stravinsky pursued following the premiere of *The Rite* was laid out as early as the morning of 29 May 1913.³² Within its Nietzschean synopsis of the new ballet, Stravinsky's contested *Montjoie!* article also alluded to a freshly modern style: "From this melody I have consequently excluded the *strings*, with their crescendos and diminuendos—much too evocative and representative of the human voice—and I have placed in the foreground the *woodwind*, drier, cleaner, less prone to facile expressiveness, and by that very token still more moving to my taste."³³ Dryness, cleanliness, and a slant against Romantic expressivity—early evidence of the qualities

associated with 1920s Neoclassicism—were not present in the initial idea behind *The Rite* but instead were attributes that Stravinsky began to value while he composed the work.³⁴

Although Messing traced Stravinsky's developing Neoclassical rhetoric to the aforementioned August 1915 interview with Van Vechten, a slightly earlier document further clarifies Stravinsky's objectivity and also introduces the "purely acoustic" notion that he asserted in the Wise interview. When traveling with Stravinsky and the Ballets Russes in early 1915, Sergei Prokofiev heard early excerpts from *Svadebka* (*Les noces*, or *The Wedding*) and wrote to Vladimir Derzhanovskii describing it.³⁵ Without Stravinsky's permission, Derzhanovskii published an elaboration on Prokofiev's account in the 18 April 1915 issue of the journal *Muzyka*. The article "New Works by Igor Stravinsky" provides a rough sketch of the *Svadebka* scenario, briefly discusses Stravinsky's *Three Japanese Lyrics*, and addresses the musical qualities of *Svadebka*:

This orchestra will consist exclusively of *individualized* voices. . . . This, naturally, will lead to an attention of the scoring, its dematerialization. It goes without saying that from the purely practical point of view this amounts to a refinement in the purely artistic and material (acoustical) sense. But new colors will be introduced into this orchestra by including in its instrumental roster (which will number as many as forty) an extremely substantial part for a chorus, which will have a purely instrumental, coloristic role, and which will take part from the beginning of the score to the end (at times singing little *pribautki*, at times only separate words, and in a few instances wordlessly).³⁶

Here we see the equation of the material and the acoustic, similar to the "manifestation" that Stravinsky described to Van Vechten. Consistent from the *Montjoie!* article through the *Muzyka* and Wise comments is a notion of working with objective musical materials and investigating the acoustic properties of sound; though Stravinsky's compositional process was not in itself scientific, it is clear from these statements that he had already developed a formalized language with which to discuss it. This language reappears throughout the Wise interview, in which Stravinsky tells his interlocutor: "The general trend is toward the separation of the difficult arts in the sense that each one must aim at the satisfaction in the fullest measure of the emotions peculiar to itself. Thus, the true inwardness of music being purely acoustic, the art so expresses itself without being concerned with feelings alien to its nature." As quoted above, Stravinsky goes on to declare that the future of music resides in its development as a self-contained art, expressing its relations among the practical, the material, and the "purely acoustic." Rather than dismissing the idea that an autonomous, objective music is devoid of emotion, though, Stravinsky stresses that this pure form of acoustic content conveys a deeper set of feelings that seem to transcend Romantic notions of the spirit or Impressionist suggestions of the exterior world.

By the 1920s, Stravinsky had fully developed the rhetoric of objectivity that he presented to Wise in 1915, reworking the idea of the “purely acoustic” into one that stressed the musical work as aesthetic entity. “My Octuor is a musical object,” Stravinsky proclaimed in his famous 1924 essay. “This object has a form, and that form is influenced by the musical matter with which it is composed.”³⁷ In his short 1927 statement on Neoclassicism, “A Warning,” Stravinsky wrote that great works of art carried “a quality of interrelation between constituent parts, interrelation of the building material” that constituted “the one stable element,” which he called “an ultra-musical element.”³⁸ The language that informed—or perhaps advertised for—Stravinsky’s Neoclassical works dates back to this fruitful World War I period, and the Wise interview further contextualizes this rich period in the composer’s development.

Notes

1. Stravinsky, *An Autobiography*, 1998 ed., 53.
2. See, for example, Straus, *Stravinsky’s Late Music*, 183–84; Andriessen and Cross, “Composing with Stravinsky,” 255; Taruskin, “A Myth of the Twentieth Century”; Holloway, “Stravinsky’s Self-Concealment”; and Stenzl, *Auf der Suche nach Geschichte(n)*.
3. Stravinsky, *An Autobiography*, 1.
4. Among other observations, the MQ profile offered one of the earliest comparisons between Stravinsky and Bach. Wise wrote that Stravinsky “seemed to me to bear a considerable resemblance to . . . old Johann Sebastian Bach with his marvelous grasp of counterpoint and delight in setting himself to solve musical puzzles, his never-ceasing experiments in harmony, his domesticity and personal simplicity” (Wise, “Impressions of Igor Stravinsky,” 250).
5. “Russian Ballet Enlists Futurist.”
6. Wise, “American Music Is True Art.”
7. Within the lengthy MQ article, Wise quotes Stravinsky in only a single paragraph, consisting of remarks Stravinsky made about *The Rite* (they differ from those printed in the *Tribune* articles). See Wise, “Impressions of Igor Stravinsky,” 251.
8. For connections between the Wise article and jazz, see Heyman, “Stravinsky and Ragtime,” 546; Walsh, *A Creative Spring*, 284; and Berlin, *Ragtime*, 45. Only Valérie Dufour has briefly pointed out the connections between the Wise interview and Stravinsky’s later statements about expression. See Stravinsky, *Confidences sur la musique*, 354.
9. Wise, “American Music Is True Art.” This first sentence is the only line in Wise’s *Tribune* profile printed in the original French. The declaration that music is “too stupid” for expressive purposes seems an unlikely explication for a composer to make, and it is possible that Stravinsky’s comment originated with a philosopher such as Charles-Albert Cingria (discussed later in this essay). The Wise interview’s “trop bête” statement—though overlooked in scholarly sources—was drawn on in multiple writings by Carl Van Vechten, who utilized it to demonstrate Stravinsky’s changing attitude over the course of

the 1910s. Van Vechten writes that it is “his [Stravinsky’s] pregnant phrase, which I cannot quote often enough.” See Van Vechten, *Music and Bad Manners*, 185; and Van Vechten, “A New Principle in Music,” 161.

10. Wise, “American Music Is True Art.”

11. Van Vechten describes *Petrushka* as marking the phase in Stravinsky’s career in which he established a “new principle in music” based on “proving to his own satisfaction the value of ‘pure tone’ in the same sense that the painter speaks of pure color” (“A New Principle in Music,” 160).

12. See Messing, *Neoclassicism in Music*; Taruskin, “Back to Whom?”; Grosch, *Die Musik der Neuen Sachlichkeit*; and Grüttemeier, Beekman, and Rebel, *Neue Sachlichkeit and Avant-Garde*.

13. Taruskin, *Stravinsky and the Russian Traditions*, 2:1101; see also Messing, *Neoclassicism in Music*, 89.

14. See Stravinsky, “Some Ideas about My Octuor.”

15. Stravinsky, “Ce que j’ai voulu exprimer,” in Stravinsky and Craft, *Stravinsky in Pictures and Documents*, 524.

16. In 1920 Stravinsky first told an interviewer that *The Rite* was “une œuvre architectonique et non anecdotique.” See Georges-Michel, “Les deux *Sacre du printemps*.”

17. See Richard Taruskin, “Resisting the Rite,” in this volume. For a discussion of ways in which Stravinsky’s reconceptions of *The Rite* interacted with developments in twentieth-century formalism, see Taruskin, “A Myth of the Twentieth Century.”

18. Rivière, “*Le sacre du printemps*,” translated in Bullard, “The First Performance,” 2:269.

19. *Ibid.*, 2:270.

20. Cited in Taruskin, *Stravinsky and the Russian Traditions*, 2:1107. See Calvocoressi, “M. Igor Stravinsky’s Opera,” 374. Messing also discusses this passage in conjunction with Stravinsky’s early turn toward musical objectivity but misattributes it to an interview with Van Vechten (who in fact reprinted passages from Calvocoressi’s interview). See Messing, *Neoclassicism in Music*, 89; and Van Vechten, *Music after the Great War*, 92–93.

21. Luening, contribution to “Stravinsky (1882–1971),” 131.

22. See Taruskin, *Stravinsky and the Russian Traditions*, 2:1119–442. Taruskin writes: “The *Octuor*, first performed four months after the *Svadebka* première, hooked up directly with *Mavra*” (2:1606).

23. In a letter of 22 June 1914 to Stravinsky, Ansermet mentions a recent meeting between the composer and Cingria in Paris. See Tappolet, *Correspondance*, 13.

24. For a description of the Cingria-Stravinsky relationship, see Dufour, *Stravinski et ses exécutés*, 177–90; and Carr, “Igor Stravinsky et Charles Albert-Cingria.” For a discussion of Cingria’s influence on *Perséphone*, see Levitz, *Modernist Mysteries*, 124–34.

25. See Carr, *Multiple Masks*, 199.

26. Quoted and translated in *ibid.*, 197.

27. Cingria, “Essai de définition,” in *Œuvres complètes*, 1:195, quoted, in translation, in Carr, *Multiple Masks*, 197–98.

28. See *ibid.*

29. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 55, emphasis in the original. See also Carr, *Multiple Masks*, 197–98.

30. Nietzsche, “On Music and Words,” 115–16.

31. This perspective was also not unique to Stravinsky. In October 1915 Debussy wrote to Stravinsky: “Moreover, I have written only pure music, 12 Etudes for piano, and two sonatas for various instruments—in our old form, which, mercifully, did not impose tetralogical auditory efforts.” This emphasis on the pure and auditory is consistent with Stravinsky’s own emerging objectivity. See the complete letter from Debussy to Stravinsky, 24 October 1915, translated by Robert Craft, Eva Resnikova, and Kristin Crawford, in Craft, *Stravinsky*, 3:9; Debussy’s remarks on “pure music” flow directly from his statement that “the state of war . . . is contrary to thought.” For a discussion of Schoenberg’s, Stravinsky’s, and Debussy’s individual turns toward an aesthetic of absolute music, see Bonds, *Absolute Music*, 250–60.

32. Walsh, *A Creative Spring*, 208–10.

33. Stravinsky as cited in *ibid.*, 208.

34. Walsh writes, “But the way the music [of *The Rite*] was written—its internal mechanisms—intrigued him more and more” (*ibid.*, 209). He calls this antiexpressive (and also anti-interpretive, in the sense of forbidding overt interpretations by performers) ideal “the real modernism—revolutionary or otherwise—of *The Rite of Spring*” (*ibid.*, 210). For a discussion of the relationship between the aesthetics of Stravinsky’s post-*Rite* works and the composer’s philosophy regarding mechanical performance practice, see van den Toorn and McGinness, *Stravinsky and the Russian Period*, 252–66; and McDonald, “*Jeux de Nombres*.”

35. Prokofiev heard selections from *Svadebka* in Rome (February 1915) and in Milan (1 April 1915). See Taruskin, *Stravinsky and the Russian Traditions*, 2:1319–21.

36. Parenthetical insertions are by Derzhanovskii. See D. de R., “Za rubezhom.”

37. Stravinsky, “Some Ideas about My Octuor.” See also Stenzl, *Auf der Suche nach Geschichte(n)*.

38. Stravinsky, “Avertissement” / “A Warning.”