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Stravinsky’s ice

by *Molly McQuade*

A review of *Stravinsky's Ballets* by Charles M. Joseph

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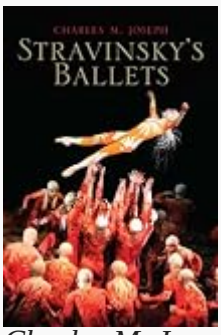

Charles M. Joseph
Stravinsky's Ballets

Yale University Press, 320 pages, $45.00

By his own account, Igor Stravinsky’s earliest childhood memory was the sound of winter ice cracking on the River Neva. Stravinsky’s music—mercurially pent, formally explosive—sounded a similarly violent and resonant note in the twentieth century. Known for his wide-ranging works, by turns classical and revolutionary, he first made his mark with three dances written for Serge Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes: *The Firebird* (1910), *Petrushka* (1911/1947), and *The Rite of Spring* (1913).

As Charles M. Joseph observes, ninety percent of Stravinsky’s music has been put to work and play in ballets. His *The Rite of Spring* alone has so far led to more than two hundred dances since the first, Vaslav Nijinsky’s. “I have always had a horror of listening to music with my eyes shut, with nothing for them to do,” Stravinsky wrote. “The sight of gestures and movements of the various parts of the body producing the music is fundamentally necessary if it is to be grasped in all its fullness.”

In this firmly argued study of ballets with music by Stravinsky, Joseph strikes a balance between a close inspection of the scores and an anecdotal summoning of the conditions under which they came to be. (Admittedly, there could have been more of such anecdotes. One misses, for example, the image of the composer working away on the tumultuous *The Rite of Spring* in the remarkably confining garret-like space above a tidy Swiss village, as seen in Tony Palmer's 1982 documentary, "Stravinsky: Once at the Border.") Joseph retrieves useful details of Stravinsky's lifelong collaborative efforts with Diaghilev, Nijinsky, Bronislava Nijinska, George Balanchine, and more. Of Balanchine and Stravinsky, he notes, persuasively, "[T]hese two artists had achieved a counterpoint of minds."

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Stravinsky's collaborations occasionally produced controversy as well as dance. Joseph recounts these bouts without taking sides unduly. Despite Stravinsky's known penchant for ballet, he was wont to fall in—and out—of love with it. He was also likely to contradict himself. Even after the *succès de scandale* of *Rite*, he complained bitterly about Nijinsky's lack of formal musical training as an impediment both to himself and to the dancers. In 1921, a few years later, he "pronounced ballet bankrupt as an expressive art form," Joseph reports. Of *L'Histoire du soldat* (1918), Stravinsky declared, as Joseph puts it, "that the dancing had been inserted simply to prevent monotony." Moreover, Stravinsky believed "that there had in fact been too much of it."

Regardless of his subject's paradoxes, Joseph offers an orderly analysis of the ideas guiding Stravinsky. When appraising the composer's visions and revisions, Joseph takes care to emphasize structural preoccupations and their demands. His chapter about *Agon*, the 1957 Stravinsky-Balanchine collaboration, offers a case in point. Like others including Robert Craft, Joseph credits the influence of T. S. Eliot and *Sweeney Agonistes* on this piece, as well as classical literary sources: "A devoted student of linguistic morphology, the composer once again heeded the flow of language, syllabification, accent, meter, and inflection." Beyond this, as Joseph recounts, Lincoln Kirstein's recommendation to Stravinsky of François de Lauze's *Apologie de la danse* (1623) "provided a lexicon of protocol" in courtly classicism that was to guide *Agon*'s composition. Joseph's compact writing does not sacrifice nuance: His reckoning of the oft-told reception of *Rite* is superior to most.

Joseph lets his metaphors run away with him at times, as when he describes an audience of French artists as "among the first to hear the embryo of a [Stravinsky] masterpiece." He also succumbs to certain clichés about the cultural scene of the day: "Buoyed by the artistic vigor of Paris, his beliefs resonated with the passionate conviction of other young modernists seeking to refashion the thinking of a new generation." Curiously, too, the author and his editor consistently prefer the

stilted word “embracement” to “embrace.”

Joseph has, however, created a graphically vivid portrait of the artist; during a rehearsal, Stravinsky can be seen “leaping on the piano as if it were a dangerous force.” Stravinsky offered profusely intelligent suggestions to choreographers, impresarios, costumers, and set designers alike. His dances were certainly not his alone, yet they were very often co-owned. Indeed, for *L’Histoire du soldat* Stravinsky “perhaps jokingly considered dancing the role of the Devil himself.”

Molly McQuade has served as managing editor of *Studies in Dance History* and as vice president of the Dance Critics Association. Her dance criticism has appeared widely.

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