

Robert Craft : Boswell or Svengali?

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With the death of Robert Craft we have lost not only a man whose closeness to Igor Stravinsky for nearly 25 years led to unparalleled insights into the composer's life and work; but, less obviously, one of the last musicians to have known Arnold Schoenberg; and almost certainly the last musician to have known them both. The lives of those two great composers of the twentieth century were intertwined in many ways, not least through antagonism towards each other : Craft was perhaps the one person who might have brought them together, but his association with Schoenberg was too brief, and a rapprochement between the two was only achieved retrospectively after Schoenberg's death in 1951.

Born 8 years apart, Schoenberg in 1874 and Stravinsky in 1882, the two composers were pivotal figures in the development of musical language : Schoenberg was part of the mainstream European tradition (Brahms and Wagner were his antecedents), taking tonality to its extreme and beyond; Stravinsky was more of an outsider whose influences, outside of Russian folk music and Debussy, are not easy to point to, one who extended the language more through rhythm than through harmony. Up until 1914 they were both perceived as iconoclasts; but their development during the 1920s followed quite different directions : Schoenberg advanced by codifying, through what became known as serialism, the freedom from tonality that he had achieved; Stravinsky took the opposite path and turned to a language that might now be classified as post-modernist but was then called neo-classicism.

Relations between the two had never been easy, but remained relatively friendly, until, in an interview in 1925 in New York Stravinsky referred to "gentlemen who work with formulas instead of ideas. They have done that so much that they have compromised that word 'modern' ". Schoenberg took immediate offence and satirised his fellow composer in a work for chorus as 'der kleine Modernsky' : "Who's that playing the drum? It's little Modernsky! He's had an old-fashioned haircut . . . just like (or so little Modernsky thinks) Papa Bach". They never spoke again, even when both were exiles in Los Angeles in the 1940s : on several occasions they were in the same room, but carefully avoided meeting.

Yet both remained curious about each other. Craft had made contact with Schoenberg not long after his first encounter with Stravinsky in 1948, but he did not actually meet him until 1950. Schoenberg was by then very frail; although he knew of Craft's involvement with Stravinsky he saw him as someone who could be a protagonist for his music. In a letter to the conductor Fritz Stiedry early in 1951 he wrote "My young friend, Mr Craft . . . is slowly working his way into my music . . . And finally he will succeed". Schoenberg's death in July of that year precluded any further collaboration; but it broke down the barriers that had been erected by 'people in between' (the words of Schoenberg's widow) . Craft continued to be involved with Schoenberg's music, and Stravinsky was caught up in the exploration of a world that had previously been alien to him, gradually developing his own model of serialism.

Where had Robert Craft come from to have been involved with these towering figures of music at such a young age? He was only 24 when he first met Stravinsky, whose music had enthused him since he was a schoolboy. He came from a no more than moderately musical family, but won a scholarship to the Juilliard School in 1941, interrupted by a period of military service. He was disappointed by Juilliard's conservatism and consequent lack of interest in contemporary music, and after his graduation his response to such negativity was to organise student concerts, mostly featuring Stravinsky, meeting with some success in these ventures; however at this stage of his life he barely conducted anything himself. Towards the end of 1947 he took the bold step of writing to Stravinsky, ostensibly to ask about his new version of the 1919 *Symphonies of Wind Instruments*, but also in the

faint hope that he might agree to conduct part of a concert in New York in April 1948. To Craft's surprise, he agreed; and this marked the beginning of a relationship that lasted until Stravinsky's death in 1971. Within a short time he had become a member of the Stravinsky household, almost as if he were an adopted son.

From the very beginning, the fact of Craft's joining Stravinsky's entourage was regarded with an element of hostility, not so much initially from Stravinsky's extended family - that was to come considerably later - as from friends and musicians who regarded Stravinsky as their private property. The antipathy towards him and his role in the composer's life was a constant irritant, preoccupying him both at the time and throughout the 45 years that he survived Stravinsky. It was not a role that he had anticipated : it is likely that he was as surprised as anyone at the speed with which he became an essential part of the lives of both Stravinsky and his (second) wife Vera. It gave Craft an influence which some thought of as Svengali-like, but which to anyone looking on impartially can see was something that Stravinsky needed - in particular to help draw him out of the stylistic impasse that followed the composition of the opera *The Rake's Progress* (1948-51). Craft drew him, perhaps even pushed him, towards different modes of composition - not only Schoenberg and Webern, but also masters of early polyphony such as Machaut, Lassus and Gesualdo. He suggested projects to him; he was increasingly involved in preparing and conducting both new and existing works : in short he became indispensable.

Stravinsky went to considerable lengths to promote Craft's conducting career, not least because he himself could ill afford the time - and in later years, the energy - that had to be taken from composing and given to performance. Conducting tours were a major part of the composer's life, particularly in the early 1960s, and a much needed source of income : it needed diplomacy to make sure that audiences were not left feeling fobbed off by Craft's assumption of the major role, from around 1956 onwards, in concerts in which Stravinsky was the draw. Craft clearly benefited from this, but it would be grossly unfair to suggest that he was taking advantage of Stravinsky : for many years he was paid no salary, merely expenses; to put it simply, he was doing what he was asked to do.

In an interview for Radio Frankfurt in 2000 Craft gave a clear account of the many aspects of what he called his 'affiliation' with Stravinsky. It was, he said, 'love at first sight', noting that they had many characteristics in common: 'Stravinsky was fast-moving, impatient, hyper-tense. So was I'. He went on to describe qualities that they did not share: 'He was moody, critical of everything and everybody, a non-stop worrier and an alarmist'. Craft admitted that if it had not been for the calming influence of Mrs Stravinsky, he could not have worked with him. He detailed his role as conductor in rehearsals, performances and recordings ('passages from my rehearsal sessions were routinely incorporated in the master copies of the recordings, but I doubt they could be identified now').

Such intermingling of roles inevitably leads to the question of how much is Stravinsky, how much Craft. It has long been a contentious issue with regard to the 'conversation books' which they published jointly, beginning in 1959 with *Conversations with Igor Stravinsky*, and followed by *Memories and Commentaries* (1960), *Expositions and Developments* (1962), *Dialogues and a Diary* (1963), *Themes and Episodes* (1967) and *Retrospectives and Conclusions* (1969). The last two were published posthumously in the UK, under Stravinsky's name alone, as *Themes and Conclusions*, and with a foreword attributed to the composer only just over a month before his death.

In his Frankfurt interview, in the course of making it clear that he never acted as Stravinsky's 'secretary' (that role being taken by his son-in-law Andre Marion when it was not the composer himself who acted as his own secretary), Craft pointed out that Stravinsky enjoyed typing, and he went on to say that 'in fact he typed all of our so-called 'conversations books', deleting what he did not like, and amplifying what he did'. Whether this applies to 'all' of the conversation books is more than questionable, and as early as the second book, *Memories and Commentaries*, the distinction had already become blurred. At the beginning of *Themes and Conclusions* a typewritten page from the

earlier book is reproduced 'with Stravinsky's deletions and one of his corrections'. While there is no reason to doubt that this is indeed Stravinsky's somewhat clumsy typing (Craft is unlikely to have typed 'kept my piece' before x-ing it out and typing 'peace'), what is not said is that, alongside the deletions - not all of which appear to be Stravinsky's - the page contains around twelve handwritten corrections in Craft's hand, some of them extensive, to set against the 'one' by Stravinsky. If this page was chosen - as seems likely - as the best example of Stravinsky's role in the collaboration, and as an implicit rebuttal of the charge that it was Craft who was in fact the principal author, one can only wonder what other pages might have shown.

For it becomes increasingly clear as the conversation books progress that Craft is no longer just a collaborator, but developing into Stravinsky's mouthpiece. In his extensive interview in *Areté* Twenty Four (Winter 2007) - to which I will return later - he admitted that he 'did put some [words into Stravinsky's mouth] - but honestly, fully aware I would be accused of ghostwriting - because I realised that an uncompounded Stravinsky was an impossibility, and an alloyed Stravinsky would be better than nothing. What matters to me is that Stravinsky liked the books himself...'

This is surely an understatement, for Craft's persona gradually took over : although what he wrote down may well have reflected Stravinsky's views, it is evident that Craft's (considerable) literary ability initially modified and eventually almost appropriated Stravinsky's voice. In a very late (March 1971) interview (in fact a written exchange) reproduced in *Themes and Conclusions* we find Stravinsky's reflections on his recent medical history: 'recalling what my Danish nurse had said about Følling's detection of a metabolic disorder in babies from an odour in their urine; and remembering that the perspiration of schizophrenics is distinguished by an odour (trans-3-methyl-2-hexenoic-acid), I began to wonder whether other biochemical disturbances might identify vocational aptitudes and inaptitudes'. One can hardly imagine the composer even at the height of his powers, let alone at death's door, formulating such a construct or writing it down, in spite of his obsessive interest in his own health. More alarmingly in an Appendix to the same book, two letters of Vera Stravinsky are reproduced, some of which bear little relation to anything that we know about her. Writing about Stravinsky's eating habits, she is allowed to describe 'the rich fricatives accompanying the intake of *potages*, rich enough to increase an *avant-garde* writer's store of siphonic onomatopoeia - though the ultimate stage, in which the bowl is hoisted in the manner of a wassailing Viking draining his meads, seems more Scandinavian than Slavic'. Few passages could be more characteristic of Craft's distinctive prose style, or less characteristic of the 'calm, forgiving, idealistic . . . a little naïve' (Craft's words) Mrs Stravinsky.

Yet it cannot be denied that Craft was a formidable writer, and thinker, and that we are hugely in his debt both for his role (however ambiguous) in the conversation books, and for the flow of books and essays that he produced from 1972 until 2013. *Stravinsky: Chronicle of a Friendship*, first published in 1972 and revised and expanded in 1994, is an insightful, sympathetic, at times disturbing distillation of the diaries that he kept throughout his time with the composer. It is a little disconcerting, though, to find changes made in the second edition that seem aimed at enhancing, if not excusing, its author's role, together with extra illustrations of manuscripts and messages emphasising Stravinsky's reliance on and affection for Craft.*

* One of these, a sketch for the 1952 *Cantata*, is, Craft says, inscribed 'To Bob, whom I love'. One of Craft's many aspersions against Stravinsky's biographer Stephen Walsh is that Walsh reads this as 'To Bob whom I Lob' (the German for 'praise'). Never having looked in close detail at the manuscript before now I have to say that Walsh's reading looks as if it could be correct.

Such self-protection is perhaps understandable, but it is a weakness that becomes increasingly evident in the many books and essays that he published - his editing of the Selected Letters in 3 volumes apart

(although few will have reached the end of volume 3 after wading through so many letters concerned exclusively with money). The hugely rewarding *Stravinsky in Pictures and Documents*, written in collaboration with Vera and published in 1979, is marred by the inclusion of a 25 page diatribe against *And Music at the Close*, an account of Stravinsky's last years by his occasional assistant-cum-agent Lillian Libman. Craft's charges of inaccuracy are for the most part justified, but his obsessive dismantling of an insignificant and self-serving book is a protest too far.

Yet Miss Libman gets off lightly compared with Stephen Walsh, whose two major volumes of biography, published in 1999 and 2006, preoccupied Craft to an unhealthy extent. Craft initially helped and encouraged Walsh, whose 1987 study *The Music of Stravinsky* he had admired. Although he reserved his major offensive for the second volume - in which naturally he figures extensively - he detected immediately in the introduction to the first volume an antipathy towards himself: 'I was naturally disturbed to find that Walsh's principal purpose was to discredit me' (from the *Areté* interview). While some elements of the second volume might well be so described with some justification (a glance at the index under Robert Craft reveals a great deal of negativity), Walsh is at pains, in the first volume at least, to show that he is trying to take an objective stand where Craft is concerned. He notes that 'Nobody acquainted with Craft or his writings will doubt that the questions [which Craft puts forward in expressing the need for a comprehensive biography] express, among other things, a certain anxiety about his own place in the biographical process'. There is nothing explicitly unsympathetic in this introduction; indeed Walsh goes on to say that he has begun to understand 'the complexity of the relationship between the two men and the extent of the personal sacrifice Craft had made . . . to the composer's muse, often in the face of relentless hostility'.

Craft's view that a true biography of Stravinsky was near impossible (and that he was not the person to write it) unsurprisingly left him unable to see much in Walsh's biography beyond inaccuracy and hostility to himself. His *Areté* interview certainly packs a punch, but there is something a little demeaning in his inability to see beyond the mistakes and misrepresentations of which he accuses Walsh, often making very valid points but sometimes descending into trivialities which, however annoying to him, are of no great consequence. Yes, Walsh's mistakes over the handing over in 1968 of the manuscript of *The Rite of Spring* (one of the centre-pieces of the protracted litigation against Vera Stravinsky which Stravinsky's children undertook - with little success - between 1974 and 1979) are significant; but should we really be concerned about a minor confusion over the provenance of Stravinsky's arrangement for two recorders of the 'Lullaby' from *The Rake's Progress*?

One particular diatribe has been overtaken by history. Concerning Stravinsky's lost memorial work for Rimsky-Korsakov, the *Chant Funèbre* of 1908, Craft quotes Walsh as saying there is 'a still prevalent belief [he misquotes - actually 'informed opinion'] in Russia that the orchestral parts probably survive in the archives of the St Petersburg Philharmonie', commenting, 'Then what inanition prevented the biographer and his less than perseverant Russian auxiliaries from undertaking a thorough search?' The accusation might just as well have been turned against himself, since he obviously knew for many years of Stravinsky's regret for the lost work, described by the composer in his 1936 autobiography. In 2015 the parts were indeed discovered in the archives, but only after the entire building was being emptied and piles of previously hidden manuscripts emerged from behind innumerable rows of stacked piano and orchestral scores. Walsh is hardly guilty here.

Craft summed up his antipathy towards Walsh's work in the essay 'A Modest Confutation' from one of his late books, *Down a Path of Wonder*, published in 2006. '“Everything” known about the subject is gathered into a gallimaufry of “oral history” (gossip), apocrypha, clippings from unedifying reviews, scraps of correspondence, unqualified opinions, guesses and suppositions, with the result that nothing new of significance is offered either about the music or the man, who in Walsh's book is all but unrecognizable from the one I knew'.

How fair is this? Even from my own standpoint of one who greatly admires and respects Craft it

seems highly unjust. Of course Craft cannot avoid being the arbiter of and expert on so many aspects of Stravinsky's life, but his very closeness inevitably means that it is impossible for him to maintain any kind of objectivity, to recognise that in spite of the faults that are bound to be found in almost any biography, a dispassionate reader will learn as much, and far more easily, from Walsh's book as from the alternative - attempting to piece together Stravinsky's life from the (approximately) 20 volumes with which Craft was associated as author or editor - essential reading though they are.

What of Craft the conductor? Stravinsky's trust in him was not universally shared, yet he himself had limitations as a conductor, achieving more through charisma than technique. Craft could certainly not rely on charisma, but his technical command was never in doubt. Accusations of 'bloodless' performances reflect more the misunderstanding of critics of Craft's fidelity to the score, perhaps at times over-fidelity. His recordings of Stravinsky have, of course, to stand against Stravinsky's own (some, as we have seen, partly Craft's in any case), but they hold their own, not only because of their inevitably superior sound quality and his choice of performers, but as performances in their own right. And his recordings of Schoenberg are a testament to his love of the music of Stravinsky's sometime adversary. Most of all he is owed a debt for his remarkable achievement in recording the complete works of Webern in 1957 (a project underwritten by Stravinsky), an undertaking which he was to repeat with great success more than 50 years later.

And his role as Stravinsky's alter ego, as it has been widely described, and which he roundly rejected? He spent much of his later life refuting such allegations; but in an interview in the New York Times as early as 1972 he said 'Was I an influence on him? Of course I was. I introduced him to certain music he otherwise might not have heard. But if he didn't want me, he would have thrown me out.' It was, of course, much more complicated than that; but in the words attributed by Craft to Pierre Souvtchinsky, one of Stravinsky's closest colleagues over many years, 'no one could lead *that* horse to water if it didn't want to go, let alone make it drink'.

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