

WORKING WITH STRAVINSKY

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WHEN we decided to ask Stravinsky to write for the American Ballet* there was no question of providing the composer with even the suggestion of a subject. And, as a matter of fact, we were ignorant of his choice for six months after the contract was signed.

He had, some time before, already commenced work upon an idea of his own. Since Ida Rubinstein's commissions for *Le Baiser de la Fée* in 1928, and *Perséphone* in 1933 he had written no ballets. Another company had more recently made offers for a new work; his *Fire-Bird*, *Petrouchka* and *Les Noces* were already in their repertory. But Stravinsky objected to the meagre orchestral presentation that a traveling company could afford him, and he wanted more favorable treatment for the new work.

The orchestration and piano score of *Jeu de Cartes* (The Card Party, Ballet in Three Deals) were finished simultaneously in November, 1936 and we received the score on December second. The title page also credits M. Malaieff, a friend of Stravinsky's painter son, Theodore, with aid in contriving the action. The scene is a card table at a gaming house, and the dancers are members of the pack. The choreography must closely follow indications of composer and librettist because the action, in numbered paragraphs, refers to equivalents in the score itself.

Three deals of straight poker are demonstrated, played literally according to Hoyle. Sudden apparitions of the Joker, to whom these rules do not apply, destroy the logical suits of the three hands. At the end of each deal giant fingers of otherwise invisible croupiers remove the rejected cards.

The musical opening of each deal is a short processional (march, polonaise or valse) which introduces the shuffling of the pack. For the card play—deals, passes, bets—there are group

*In June 1936 Stravinsky received a commission from Edward Warburg, director and co-founder with Mr. Kirstein of the American Ballet.

dances, solo variations and finales according to the familiar usage of classic ballet.

The music is dry, brilliant, melodic and extremely complex in its rhythmic pattern, a synthesis of purely creative yet evocative passages, balanced by fragments definitely reminiscent of Rossini, Delibes, Johann Strauss, Pugnani, Ravel, Stravinsky's *Capriccio*, and jazz in general. The score is so compact, so various, and so willful that either the choreography must be its exact parallel in quality or else it had better be presented as a concert piece, in which form it will of course, like all Stravinsky's music, be heard sooner or later.

Stravinsky, it seems, expended his utmost care on the skeletal choreographic plan and on his music. George Balanchine brought all his theatrical information and the resources of his knowledge of the classic dance into designing the dances, which were about half done when Stravinsky first saw them. (Stravinsky and Balanchine had worked together on previous occasions. In 1924 Balanchine, fresh from Russia, presented *Le Rossignol* as a ballet, and in 1928 he created the Diaghilev premiere of *Apollon Musagète*.)

When Stravinsky saw the first two acts of *Jeu de Cartes*, he expressed an enthusiasm, an interest and a criticism which was as courtly as it was terrifying. The ballet, as with so many Russians, is deep in his blood. It is not only a question of childhood memories of interminable performances at the Marinsky Theatre, or of the famous works he has himself composed or seen. Stravinsky completely understands the vocabulary of classic dancing. He has more than the capacity to criticize individual choreographic fragments, doubled *fouettés* here, a series of *brisés* accelerated or retarded, or points of style as in the elimination of pirouettes from a ballet which is primarily non-plastic but one-dimensional and card-like. His is the profound stage instinct of an "amateur" of the dance, the "amateur" whose attitude is so professional that it seems merely an accident that he is himself not a dancer.

The creation of *Jeu de Cartes* was a complete collaboration. Stravinsky would appear punctually at rehearsals and stay on for six hours. In the evenings he would take the pianist home

with him and work further on the tempi. He always came meticulously appressed in suede shoes, marvelous checked suits, beautiful ties—the small but perfect dandy, an elegant Parisian version of London tailoring. During successive run-throughs of the ballet he would slap his knee like a metronome for the dancers, then suddenly interrupt everything, rise and, gesticulating rapidly to emphasize his points, suggest a change. This was never offered tentatively but with the considered authority of complete information.

Thus at the end of the first deal, where Balanchine had worked out a display of the dancers in a fan-like pattern to simulate cards held in the hand, Stravinsky decided there was too great a prodigality of choreographic invention. Instead of so much variety in the pictures he preferred a repetition of the most effective groupings.

It is not that he is tyrannical or capricious. But when he writes dance music he literally sees its ultimate visual realization, and when his score is to be achieved in action he is in a position to instruct the choreographer not by suggesting a general atmosphere but with a detailed and exactly plotted plan. For all questions of interpretation within his indicated limits of personal style or private preference, he has a respectful generosity. He is helpful in a wholly practical sense. For example, realizing that when he conducts the performances he may have a tendency to accelerate the indicated metronomic tempi, he ordered the accompanist to play faster than heretofore for rehearsal, to take up a possible slack when the ballet is danced on the stage itself. On another occasion he composed some additional music to allow for a further development in the choreography.

As with the music and dancing, so with the costumes and scenery. Before his arrival we had been attracted by the idea of using a set of medieval playing cards and adapting them in all their subtle color and odd fancy to the stage. Forty costumes and the complete scenery were designed before he arrived in America. Upon seeing the sketches Stravinsky insisted they would place the work in a definite period and evoke a decorative quality not present in his music. He called for the banal colors of a deck of ordinary cards, forms and details so simple as to be immedi-

ately recognizable. Stravinsky's precise delimitation gave Irene Sharaff, the designer, a new orientation, and strangely enough a new freedom for clarity and originality.

Stravinsky has about him the slightly disconcerting concentration of a research professor or a newspaper editor, the serious pre-occupation of a man who has so many inter-related activities to keep straight and in smooth running order that he finds it necessary to employ a laconic, if fatherly and final politeness. The effect is all the more odd coming from a man who is at once so small in stature, and who, at least from his photographs, appears not to have changed a bit in twenty-five years. When he speaks it seems to be the paternal mouthpiece of a permanent organization or institution rather than a creative individual.

We had difficulties of course in choosing from all his repertory two other ballets to complete the evening on which *Jeu de Cartes* will receive its premiere. A possible re-studying of *Petrouchka*, *Fire-Bird* or the *Sacre* was rejected because of present or imminent productions by other companies. *Pulcinella* was obviously too close in spirit to the *Card Party*. But at length *Apollon* was selected, because both Balanchine and Stravinsky wished to present it in the choreography of its Paris presentation. In his *Chroniques de Ma Vie*, Stravinsky wrote that Balanchine "had arranged the dances exactly as I had wished—that is to say, in accordance with the classical school. From that point of view it was a complete success, and it was the first attempt to revive academic dancing in a work actually composed for the purpose."

The third ballet, *Le Baiser de la Fée*, first produced in 1928 for Ida Rubinstein by Nijinska, has never been seen in North America. At a single hearing in concert or on a piano it may seem thin and unrewarding. But as music for the traditional theatrical dance it is both graceful and original. It is less a salad of Tchaikovsky quotations, as is frequently assumed, than a projection of the method which Tchaikovsky created, of framing the classic dance as ritual drama. It is less a recapturing of the epoch of *Giselle* than it is another facet of the creative attitude of Stravinsky.

Stravinsky is a composer who meets each problem within the tradition of the theatre, a tradition which he has helped to create, in which he resides, and onto which he continually builds.