A Violent Luxury: Robert Craft and Igor Stravinsky

by John Broening (March 2018)

Orchestra Seat, Honoré Daumier, 1856-57

What are some of the ways we can be of use to an artist, particularly if that artist is a composer of note?

As a spouse, we can share his bed, make his meals, and manage his household in a manner that gives him the sense of well-being and tranquility he needs to do his work. When he's on the road, we can take care of his travel plans and book his hotel rooms. As a patron, we can give him a place to live or

money in the form of a stipend or occasional cash donation or we can commission works of art. As a first listener, we can act as a sounding board, offering educated suggestions or, better, unqualified approval (‘the ideal listener should applaud vigorously’—Virgil Thomson). As a copyist or musical secretary, we can copy out and correct his scores and deal with his music publishers. When the artist is blocked or beset by self-doubt, we can not only offer encouragement but suggest unexplored sources of inspiration and renewal. We can bring him works of literature to turn into operas or song settings and help him to unravel these literary works. We can disseminate his compositions in the musical world, rehearse them, conduct them, attend performances of the works and report back on their execution as well as their reception. We can write articles and give interviews and lectures on the composer’s behalf, explaining the work, its inevitability, both its deep cultural roots and its timeliness—its superiority to competing works of art. We can engage the composer in spontaneous-seeming dialogues, which allow a formidable and brilliant but also rounded and human portrait of him to emerge. After he dies, we can continue to promote his music, chronicle his life, edit his papers and do battle with the doubters who inevitably emerge after a great artist’s death.

Except for acting as his spouse or his patron, Robert Craft, who died in November of 2015, performed all of these tasks and functions for the composer Igor Stravinsky. I don’t think it’s much of an exaggeration to say that there has been no artistic partnership, in both its closeness and its comprehensiveness, quite like it in all Western culture.

Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft

To give an example of Craft's extraordinary service to Stravinsky, take that fascinating work from 1954, *In Memoriam Dylan Thomas*, a setting of Thomas's most famous poem, *Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night,* for string quartet, trombone quartet and tenor voice. After Thomas (a brief but intense acquaintance of the composer's) died, Craft, who had begun to share the composer's life several years earlier, suggested that Stravinsky set the poem to music. Craft read out loud *Do Not Go Gentle* with the composer (whose English was lively but unorthodox), no doubt emphasizing the poem's scansion, drawing attention to the plangent, quasi-musical echoes in its traditional villanelle form and elucidating its meaning. An enthusiast for pre-Bach music, Craft had introduced Stravinsky to the baroque composer Heinrich Schutz and his use of the trombone quartet as well as the musical forms of the dirge and the canon. A champion of the Second Viennese School and an acquaintance of Schoenberg as well, Craft explained to Stravinsky the Viennese composer's use of serialism, a systematic way of writing atonally that is loosely and idiosyncratically the basis for *In Memoriam*. Craft conducted

the premiere of the work and the first recording and wrote the liner notes for the record sleeve. And explicated the work elsewhere.

One of the things that made Stravinsky distinctively himself was his unorthodox approach to word-setting. Stravinsky often regarded words not primarily as conveyors of meaning but as abstract and malleable units of sound. In *Les Noces,* much of the soprano's part is deliberately written at the astringent, high end of her register where the words she sings are all but unintelligible. In the masterpiece of Stravinsky's neo-classical period, *Oedipus Rex*, the sung text is French translated into Latin, and word order and word emphasis are arbitrarily rearranged. The word 'Oedipus 'is variously pronounced with the stress on the first, second and third syllables. As Leonard Bernstein pointed out in *The Unanswered Question*, a characteristic of Stravinsky's work is a cultivation of incongruity that makes for an anti-expressive expressivity.

In Memoriam, however, is distinguished by impeccable, and what could even be called conventionally expressive, word setting. This is surely Craft's influence: he had an exceptionally keen literary intelligence and was an attentive critic and reader of poetry. But, *In Memoriam* doesn't sound like Craft or even Schoenberg. What it sounds like is Stravinsky.

In Memoriam recalls one of the astringent, austere works that the composer wrote during the First World War, the *Three Pieces for String Quartet*. It has a tripartite form as well, and also features the unsettling 5/4 meter the composer loved.

The musical language of both works is a new/old fusion of a dissonant highly chromatic, but still tonal, modern language with a cleaner older one. *Three Pieces* includes quotations from the *Dies Irae* and Russian folk music while using a modified version of serial technique. *In Memoriam* echoes the early German Baroque, especially in the trombone writing (though here the difference between Schutz and Stravinsky is, delightfully, the difference between milk and yoghurt: Stravinsky's writing for trombone is thicker and more acidulous than Schutz's). Most of all, both works exhibit Stravinsky's counterintuitive approach to instrumentation: *Three Pieces* is written for string quartet, but avoids the interweaving of musical lines between the four instruments that is found in traditional quartet writing. *In Memoriam* is written for both trombone quartet and string quartet but, atypically, both groups of instruments overlap for only the briefest moments.

Craft's central role in the composer's life, in other words, was to give Stravinsky the means to keep being Stravinsky.

Craft first met Stravinsky in 1948. The composer was a still a vigorous world-famous man in his mid-sixties while Craft was a respected, but little-known, Juilliard graduate in his twenties who made his living with the occasional gig conducting contemporary music.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that Craft had stalked the composer for years. He later wrote that, at the age of 12, he had made it his life's mission to meet the composer and he

had corresponded with him and observed him from afar.

In Stephen Walsh's two-volume biography of Stravinsky, a work that combines relentless hostility to Craft with a heavy reliance upon Craft's writings for both documentary evidence and musical analysis, the younger man's pursuit of the famous composer is described in this way:

> Nervous and un-self-assured, the young man behaved like a lover-from-afar, shadowing his idol from the stage door to his car, hanging around at rehearsal hoping for some miraculous introduction, but not daring to put himself forward or declare himself in any way.

Stravinsky saw that Craft, who showed in his correspondence with the composer a winning mixture of musical intelligence, valuable connections with the culturally powerful, along with both a bottomless enthusiasm and willingness to serve, could be of some use.

Their first meeting in Washington, D.C. was an auspicious one. The poet W. H. Auden was present as well, having brought his libretto for the forthcoming Stravinsky opera, *The Rake's Progress*, which was based on Hogarth's famous series of engravings.

In *Chronicle of a Friendship*, one of Craft's many Stravinsky-related books, he describes, with a bright specificity that recalls Nabokov, his impression of the composer:

> Mr S. is something of a throwback. He is physically so extraordinary, in any case, that nothing less than a lifesize statue (not merely a head or bust) or scaled-to-lifesize drawing (the seated Picasso portrait is misleading) could convey his uniqueness: the pygmy height, short legs, fleshlessness, football player's shoulders, large hands and wide knuckles, tiny head and recessive frontal lobes, sandy hair (black in photographs), smooth red neck and high hairline. He is so absorbing to look at, in fact, that an effort is required to concentrate on what he says.

Craft immediately began to demonstrate his usefulness, conducting and championing obscure works by the composer, pointing out tiny mistakes in published scores and larger mistakes in performances by other conductors, moving in with the Stravinskys and acting as a factotum and, while looking over Auden's idiosyncratic and complex libretto, instructing the uncertain Stravinsky in the peculiarities of English prosody.

Yet it was only after the first performances of the opera in 1952 that Craft displayed his true indispensability. *The Rake's Progress*, Stravinsky's longest work and the work on which he spent by far the most time and energy, was almost universally received with a kind of respectful disappointment. It's not hard to see why: the opera is campy and inert, bogged down by countless passages of spiky wrong-note *secco recitativo* and arias that refused to take flight. In his neo-classical phase, Stravinsky usually employed 18th or 19th century composers as models and, in *The Rake*, his model was Mozart—especially Mozart the matchless writer of lyrical

arias. There couldn’t have been a less flattering choice to make, one that exposed Stravinsky’s greatest weakness as a composer, his lack of a gift for writing sustained cantabile melodies.

The usually indomitable composer was devastated by the opera’s reception, perhaps because it corresponded to some rare inner doubt. In his essay *Influence or Assistance?,* one of Craft’s many epic-length Stravinsky-related essays that combine a documentary impulse with extended passages of self-justification, he describes the composer’s personal Gethsemane, on an excursion to the Mojave:

> On the way home, he startled us, saying that he was afraid he could no longer composer and did not know what to do. For a moment he broke down and wept, whereupon Mrs. Stravinsky convinced him that these feelings and the musical problems, whatever they were, would pass. He referred obliquely to the powerful impression that the Schoenberg piece had made on him, and when he said that he wanted to learn more, I knew that the crisis was over; so far from being defeated, Stravinsky would emerge a new composer.
>
> To divert him, I suggested that he undertake an orchestration of one of his pieces . . .

Of course, something else had happened in the interim: Stravinsky’s great rival Schoenberg, the inventor and tireless champion of serialism and a close neighbor of the composer’s in Los Angeles, had died.

In his memoir *Parallel Play*, Tim Page, the music critic, writes with only slight exaggeration that twentieth-century music was ". . . some sort of gladiatorial death bout between the followers of Arnold Schoenberg and Igor Stravinsky."

The two composers couldn't have been more diametrically opposed: Stravinsky's music was rhythmic above all else; Schoenberg's was contrapuntal; Stravinsky was Russian and French; Schoenberg was thoroughly German; Stravinsky was playful/ironic/ imitative/ tirelessly eclectic; Schoenberg was messianic, Teutonically humorless, single-minded and obsessed with orthodoxy and system-building (Schoenberg insisted that his system would insure the supremacy of German music for the next thousand years). Schoenberg's music came out of Wagner's; Wagner was Stravinsky's *bête noire*. Schoenberg, in both his music and painting, was hyper-expressive; Stravinsky famously said that music was incapable of expressing anything.

After Stravinsky had begun to write neo-classical music in the early 1920s, Schoenberg composed a series of songs called *Three Satires* for string trio and mixed chorus. The last of these, 'Der Neue Klassizismus'—the New Classicism—mocks a figure called 'kleine Modernsky'—little Modernsky—who wears a periwig just like Father Bach. Ironically, or perhaps fittingly (if you believe Schoenberg to be a composer of impenetrably obscure music), the composer's setting of his own sardonic text is so angular, dense and contrapuntal that the words are all but drowned out.

Since then, each composer had rarely attacked the other directly, rather allowing their disciples do the dirty work.

In *Chronicles of a Friendship*, Craft gives a vivid account of a visit he makes to Schoenberg in the last year of his life:

> The composer enters, walking slowly and with the help of his wife. Stooped and wizened, but as suntanned as an athlete, he seems thinner than last time-that pained, sensitive face, difficult to look into and impossible not to look into- and the bulging veins in his right temple are even more prominent. Probably from the same cause his ears appear to have grown larger; they are larger(the concha and outward antitragus) than I.S.'s, which I remark because the oversized hearing apparatus of both composers is their outstanding sculptural feature . . .

Arnold Schoenberg

The two men listen to a record of Schoenberg's Suite, opus 29, which Craft is planning to perform:

> [Schoenberg] listens to the music (what can be heard of it beneath distractingly crepitant surface noise) as though he had forgotten having written it, and the rediscovery leaves him radiant.

Leaving Schoenberg's house, Craft gives his final impression of Schoenberg, describing what is essentially a religious temperament:

> My feeling of lightness outdoors is a measure of the almost unbearable intensity of the man, as well as the strain created by the danger of crossing the circle of his pride, for though his humility is fathomless, it is plated all the way down hubris of stainless steel.

The relationship was symbiotic and filial and in no way mercenary, Craft writes about his time with Stravinsky. Fair enough.

It's clear what Craft did for Stravinsky. But what did Stravinsky do for Craft? Craft's little-known autobiography, *An Improbable Life,* published when the writer was an old man, gives a few perhaps unintentional clues. At its core is a trauma, one which had never been publicly acknowledged by the author.

Craft was a brittle cerebrotonic young man, devoted to music, when he was drafted into the U.S. Army in 1943. He found himself completely unsuited to army life, and in quick succession, he declared himself a conscientious objector,

attempted to commit suicide by swallowing a bottle of aspirin, was hospitalized, released back to his barracks, and then went AWOL. After he turned himself in to the military police, he was consigned to a ward for the criminally insane, where he was straitjacketed. He was given a sentence of twenty-five days in a stockade, where he was forced at gunpoint to carry full latrines and empty them into a cesspool. After he completed this sentence, Craft was able, with the help of an influential family friend, to obtain an honorable discharge.

Like many traumatic events, Craft's experience in the army was so extreme that it is hard to reconcile with what happened before and after in his life. In fact, the chain of events he describes almost sounds like something from an Expressionist drama. (Craft greatly admired both Buchner's play *Wozzeck* and Berg's setting of it, amplified by his own humiliating experience with army life, in which the soldier protagonist is cuckolded and then beaten by a superior officer.) What is clear, though, from Craft's subsequent life, is that the trauma set him on a path he was already disposed to pursue.

Thereafter, Craft fully dedicated himself to remaining within the sanctuary of high art. Modernism was, at the time Craft met Stravinsky, a kind of hieratic calling.

In *Conversations with Stravinsky*, there is a remarkably illuminating passage, one in an art-obsessed book with an eerie, extra-artistic reverberation:

> Walking in the Rue St. Honore this morning, I am accosted by a display of Schoenberg recordings in a shop window.

> Then in the next instant I recognize them as my recordings, and in the same instant feel ill. Why does the sight of my name in print, or of a photograph of myself, or any kind of publicity concerning myself, or even the sound of my voice on a playback or in an echo chamber during a long-distance telephone call, upset me so much?

The passage, whose tone recalls the ritual self-abnegation of the penitent monk, is a vital clue not just to Craft's character but to the nature of his servitude.

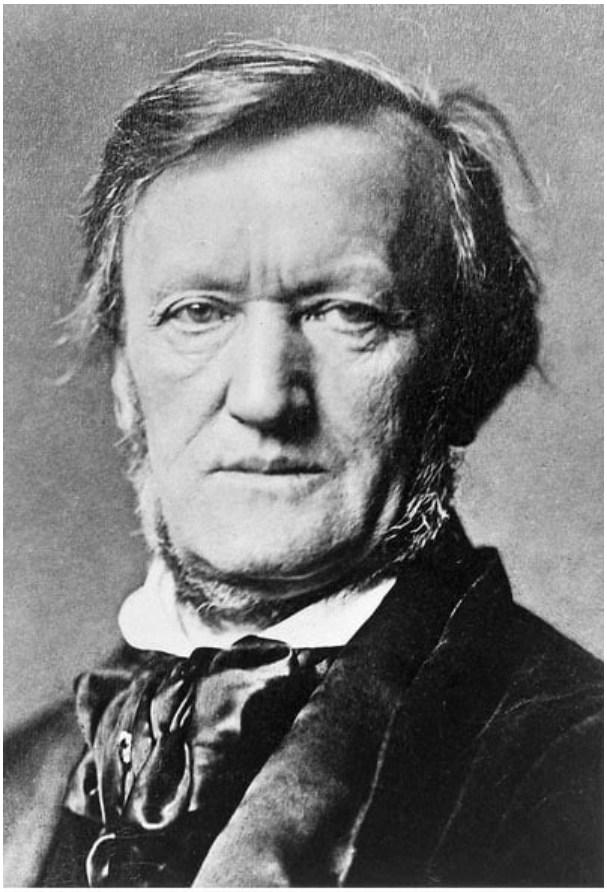
Like the life of a priest, part of what attracted its adherents to modernism was its difficulty: its lack of surface charm, its complexity, whose comprehension was often dependent upon the mastery of recondite systems of organization.

Wagner may have been Stravinsky's *bete noire* but, like all great artists who came after Wagner, Stravinsky benefitted from Wagner's model, even if he rejected his aesthetic. (Though Stravinsky wasn't above borrowing from the *Ride of the Valkyries* for the conclusion of *Oedipus Rex.)*

Wagner was the supreme exemplar of art as a religion, in which the artist is both priest and God.

A sense of entitlement is an impossibly feeble term to describe the world-historical dimensions of Wagner's ego. Wagner helped himself to the wife of his greatest champion,

the conductor Hans Von Bulow. He demanded his followers build him an opera house according to his specifications. He lived like a pasha, dodging creditors his whole life and conniving like a Borgia while he preached a humble Christianity. Whereas a hundred years previously composers had been servants to the aristocracy, Wagner manipulated and controlled his royal patron, Ludwig II. Wagner wrote vile tracts that promoted eliminationist anti-Semitism while he allowed the Jewish conductor Hermann Levi to conduct his last opera, *Parsifal*.



Richard Wagner

With Wagner, we see for the first time the building of a cultural apparatus that prefigured modernism. Exegetes both inside and outside of the academy elucidated the composer's complex, self-generated systems, musicians learned the composer's knotty and arduous works, partisans did battle with composers and critics who opposed the music. Biographers gave

accounts of the Olympian composer's fascinatingly unattractive personality and single-minded dedication to his art. Popularizers gave the public both a simplified version of the music or mocked its pretensions. (Yes, I'm thinking of the immortal *What's Opera, Doc?*)

What this meant on a cultural level was that it was impossible for any educated person not to have an opinion about Wagner. What it meant, in the next century in practical and pecuniary terms, was that a composer of 'difficult' music (like Stravinsky and the people around him) could have, what seems from Craft's accounts, to be a very nice life: the composer could afford a suite at The Pierre with room for his piano, could travel first class on planes and boats, could support not just himself but his whole family, could have secret accounts in Swiss banks and orange groves in Florida as investments.

Craft's diaries describe something inconceivable now: a composer of modern music who is at the very center of the culture, who is on familiar terms with T.S. Eliot, Evelyn Waugh, Isaiah Berlin, Aldous Huxley, who makes small talk with Kennedy at the White House, whose atonal oratorio is broadcast on primetime network television.

Ned Rorem, a composer and writer who has lived long enough to see this whole culture edifice—and the composer's place within it—flourish and then collapse, understood both Stravinsky's canny exploitation of his own status as a cultural icon and Craft's crucial place in maintaining it:

> Stravinsky is what the French all a *monster sacré*—one whose greatness depend on chronological place. The sacred monster is a personage who through public exploitation of his personal accomplishment—an accomplishment always first rate—grows so much larger than life as to seem as no longer human. Generally he is a creative artist, though some performers and politicians fit the bill; he is so to speak, a violent luxury, which, because it is not really needed to make the world go round, is concentrated no less on his product than on his person . . .

If there's a single criterion underlying Robert Craft's remarkable body of music criticism, it's a dedication to precision as a moral principle: precision in the use of language, precision in executing a musical score, in historical research, in the admittedly impossible business of describing sounds—or the effects of sounds—in words.

Like Virgil Thomson, a music critic whom he esteemed above all others, Craft's great enemy in music writing was Music Appreciation, that vague, genteel, Euphuistic school whose influence was so pronounced in the first half of the Twentieth Century. Thomson, as music critic for the widely read *New York Herald Tribune*, wrote in a plain-spoken commonsensical style that was nevertheless the product of considerable sophistication. Craft, writing for the more elite *New York Review of Books*, was able to take a more technical and scholarly approach to music.

Reviewing a production of Wagner's *Parsifal*, Craft has the

expertise and the diligence to compare the holograph (the original manuscript written in the composer's own hand) with the first edition, to note the changes in orchestration and to conclude that "experience (i.e., hearing the score performed for the first time) could induce the composer to revise his conception of color and balance."

Perhaps more than any other art form, classical music is subject to the tyranny of received opinion. The assumed greatness of the standard repertoire weighs oppressively on the music critic, who usually resorts to empty hyperbole or to a dramatic biographical approach (especially useful when dealing with tormented geniuses like Beethoven or Tchaikovsky).

One of Craft's great achievements as a music critic is to take a fresh dispassionate look at the classics and to describe what he hears in a language that is technically precise but still clear to the musical layman. For example, he observes about Schubert:

> Great composers are not necessarily consistent, but Schubert's unevenness—between one piece and another, one movement and another, and within movements—is altogether exceptional. He sometimes seems to have divided himself between Mount Olympus and the beer hall, wasting a regrettable amount of creative energy en route in attempts to gain both a church market and recognition in the theater . . . The music that he wrote to other people's specifications is greatly inferior, on the whole to that which he wrote for himself, in its sense of directness and intimacy of feeling, and of thought and feeling being one.

Even while writing about a composer he has no affinity for, Craft still performs one of the critic's primary tasks: he disapproves of without distorting, and the Shostakovich he describes here is recognizably the same one lovers of the composer enjoy:

> The music that Shostakovich wrote does not exhibit a wide range of emotions. It depends on simple contrasts of the lyrical and the dramatic, the elegiac and the grotesque, the solemn and the "impudent". In some of the early postwar works, such as the *Eight Quartet* and the A*dagio of the Ninth*, an intensity of feeling and concentration are evident, but not a strong shaping hand. The ideas are worked to death, the forms, with their clichés of crescendo and climax, tend to sprawl, and the substance is thin, maddeningly so, for instance in the dialogue between bassoon and bass voice in the fourth movement of *Babi Yar*. Finally, the music lacks rhythmic invention—the repetition of snare-drum patterns is excruciating-and the harmonic palette, though not closed to experiment, is conventional.

Like Virgil Thomson, Craft elevates the composer over the performer. Craft, who as a conductor was precise and unflashy, loathed balletic popinjays like Von Karajan and writes approvingly about the manic-depressive great Otto Klemperer who,

> barely gestured at all in his later years, and, except through his eyes, was physically unable to register sentiments histrionically. Yet he communicated his musical meanings and drew performances from players and singers

> surpassing what they had thought of as the limits of their abilities.

Craft notes acidly about the composer/pianist Liszt:

> Distraction of the audience away from the content of the music and toward the countenance of the performer and reading this as a guide to the meaning of the music, seems to have started with Liszt.

A great critic is a great enthusiast and Craft loved Mozart above all other composers. Reading Craft's description of the penultimate scene in *Don Giovanni*, widely regarded as the greatest scene in all opera, is almost as exciting as hearing the music itself:

> Mozart's evocation of the supernatural is miraculous. [Musicologist E.J.] Dent ascribes the 'awesomeness' of this apocalypse merely to the use of trombones, but in fact every aspect of the music is extraordinary: the harmony (with its emphasis on the 'diabolic' interval of the tritone); the chromaticism; the eerie scales, particularly in the lower strings, presaging Don Giovanni's death and corresponding to those at the beginning of the opera before the death of the Commendatore; the syncopations, dotted rhythms, and explosive accents; the sepulchral octaves; the brooding bass line which finally dissolves into tremolos; and the sheer sound, for the volume of the orchestra is almost Wagnerian. Since this music can still terrify, its impact on Mozart's audience, many of whom believed that Hell had a specific geographic reality, can scarcely be

imagined.

Of course the other side of precision is pedanticism. Pedanticism is an often-sadistic precision that is blind to context and proportion and Craft's writing (and not just his music criticism) is hardly free of this failing.

And what of the music Stravinsky wrote with Craft's support—the music that was the end product of their inspiring story of creative renewal? The music for which Craft was a one-man cultural apparatus?

There is no question that for Stravinsky it was some of the most deeply felt music of his career. As he approached death, the composer, a pious man, turned often to both religious subjects and to pieces that, like *In Memoriam Dylan Thomas,* were elegiac in nature. For Stravinsky, though, the path always led forward. Unlike, for example, Richard Strauss, who in his eighties produced a series of popular masterpieces that employed the musical idiom of his youth, Stravinsky drew closer to writing purely atonal music.

As there had been when Stravinsky began his neoclassic phase, there was a kind of counterintuitive gambit in the composer's approach. In the early 1920s, Stravinsky believed he could go forward by drawing on the works of the past, by intermixing historical styles in a kind of combination of both pastiche and collage, electrifying the stately music of the past by jump-starting its foursquare rhythms and by reversing the structural and the ornamental.

When he began to write in a style closer to Webern and Schoenberg, Stravinsky believed, with Craft's strong encouragement, that he could extend the expressive domain of atonal music towards the religious and even into the realm of the comical and whimsical.

Atonal music began, with Schoenberg and his disciples, as music that was both expressive and local, as a means not just to move music forward, but to convey the emotional weather of Vienna at the end of the nineteenth-century. Atonal (or near-atonal) music is well-suited to express the emotions often found in literary work and paintings of that time and milieu: hysteria, paranoia, terror, despair, fear of the Eternal Feminine and the general feeling of mental unravelling.

Stravinsky believed that he could harness this musical language for the glory of God, as he attempted in *Threni, the Flood, The Requiem Canticles* and other atonal works.

Like Webern, who was convinced that one day mailmen would be whistling his twelve-tone melodies, Stravinsky even thought that he could write music that was both playful and atonal.

Some years ago, I attended a recital by Jan DeGaetani, then the most respected interpreter of avant-garde art song. As an encore to her to thorny program of Schoenberg and Crumb, the singer performed a very late bagatelle by Stravinsky, an atonal setting of Edward Lear's famous piece of Victorian whimsy, *The Owl and the Pussycat.* The singer, an ample woman in a spangly electric-blue dress, vigorously tried to 'sell'

the song, mugging and cooing as if she were trying to amuse a small child. I remember thinking then, as I do now, that there was a fatal disconnect between the subject matter of Stravinsky's late works and the musical language he used to communicate it.

The concert-going public appears to feel the same way: a glance at the Orchestra Repertoire Report by the League of American Orchestras shows that while Stravinsky is one of the most frequently programmed 20th century composers, his atonal works are being performed very rarely if it all and seemed destined for the fate that has befallen Schubert's operas—to be regarded as the minor works of a major composer.

Is it possible to say now what might have once seemed unthinkable? That out of the monumental collaboration between the world-famous Russian expatriate composer and the high-strung American conductor and polymath, the lesser-known man has produced the work that deserves to endure?

Craft's real achievement, bound up as it is in so many ways with his more famous collaborator, is difficult to see clearly. Furthermore, Craft came to be regarded by many of Stravinsky's inner circle, by the composer's children and by his most distinguished biographer, as a sinister interloper who manipulated his powerful patron, took credit for his achievements, distorted the documentary record in order to flatter himself and drove a wedge between Stravinsky and his children.

Craft didn’t help himself by responding to each attack by producing high-handed, epic length rebuttals that are full of a kind of emotional tone-deafness. One of the saddest parts of the story of Stravinsky’s last years and of the period after his death has to do with the relationship of the composer to his children, several of whom were artists and musicians who, before Craft arrived, had gained some of their livelihood and professional identity by working with their father. Stravinsky, though he was not a monster of Wagnerian dimensions, put his music first, and Craft became not just an invaluable collaborator, but a surrogate son, closer and more useful—in every way—to the composer than his own children. His son Soulima, a pianist of middling talent who had played a minor role in performing and disseminating his father’s music, was tainted by collaboration of another kind—the Nazi variety—and was put aside in favor of Craft, as was his set-designer brother, Theodore.

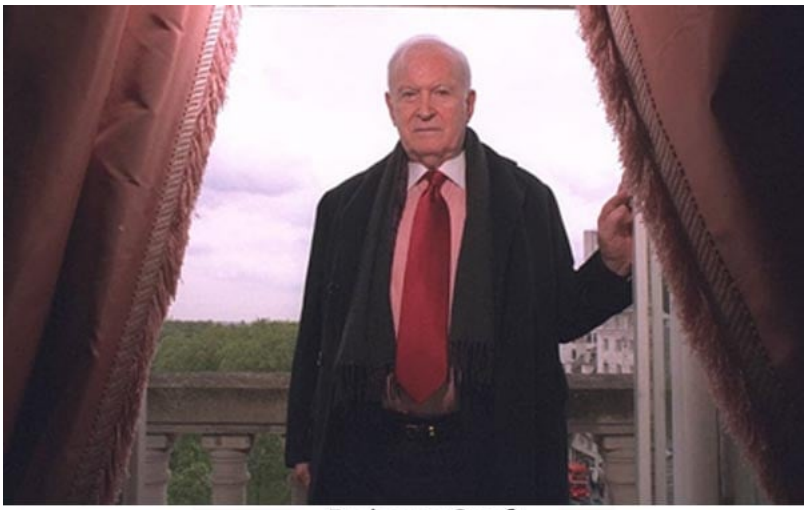
Craft’s own complicity in this would seem to demand a restrained silence, but Craft couldn’t restrain himself from pointing out, for example, that he was present when the composer attempted to hide from a visit by his Theodore, an admission that diminishes everyone involved.

As is often the case in families that are prosperous and emotionally distant, a fight over money becomes a kind of surrogate for the absence of unconditional love, and the story of Stravinsky’s last years and of his widow’ s remaining decade is a sad and degrading tale full of fraud, theft and protracted litigation.

In an essay on T.S. Eliot’s criticism of prose fiction, Craft quotes the poet ‘s dismissal of André Gide’s writings as

belonging to a class of literature.in which the author is moved partly by the desire to justify himself. The greatest authors have never written for this reason. The generalization seems to describe exactly the disfiguring flaw present in a great deal of Craft's own Stravinsky-related writing.

Much of Craft's most enduring achievement seems to lie elsewhere: As an interpreter, promoter and critic of Early Music. As an interpreter, promoter and critic of modern music. As a Nabokov-quality diarist and intimate chronicler of midcentury artistic culture. As a literary critic. As a music critic with a handful of equals and no clear superiors.



Robert Craft

To read Craft's writings chronologically is of course to learn a lot about their author, but it is also to realize something about the drift of our own culture. The books of conversations and diaries and early critical writings appear under such redoubtable imprints such as Knopf and Random House and the *New York Review of Books*. The last collections, reminiscences, rebuttals and interviews appear in much lesser-known imprints such as Vanderbilt University Press, or *Naxos* or *Arete*,

obscure online magazines.

In his last years, Craft made a series of bizarre pronouncements that seemed to show what Walsh saw in him, a hidden rage towards his benefactor and a constant impulse for self -promotion. In Craft's final Stravinsky-related book, published two years before his own death, Craft claimed, based on the shakiest evidence, that Stravinsky and the composer Ravel had been lovers. He admitted in one of his final interviews that he had always preferred Schoenberg's music to Stravinsky's. In an online post, he held Stravinsky responsible for the chronic alcoholism and eventual death of rock singer Warren Zevon, who had been a 13-year old student of Craft's and whom Stravinsky had, weirdly, given a tumbler of scotch.

It's possible that Craft exhausted his store of plausible Stravinsky anecdotes and that the educated public tired of reading of his fights with other critics and biographers. But something also has changed in the culture at large.

The modernist idea that difficulty was a selling point for art has disappeared and along with it, the era of great explainers and popularizers like Leonard Bernstein and Robert Hughes. Orchestral music began to be paired with breakdancers. Or musicians were made up as zombies to play horror movie music. Or they were marketed like Victoria's Secret models ('Classical Barbie,' groaned the critic Terry Teachout). The last classical music figure to appear on *Time Magazine* was Vladimir Horowitz in 1986. Forget finding a piece of modern music on network tv. You couldn't even find Mozart on PBS.

The most shocking admission in Ned Rorem's recent *Facing the Night* was not the esteemed composer's confessions of gerontological sex but his itemizing of his yearly income from royalties, performance, teaching and commissions. The amount he named would have barely covered Stravinsky's bill for two weeks at the Pierre.

The public appetite for violent luxury has disappeared. You can find *monstres sacrés* like Frank Gehry and Damien Hirst in architecture and conceptual art but it's impossible to separate their achievement from the aura of money that still surrounds their fields.

It's hard to imagine there will be another prosperous, glamorous, difficult (in all senses of the world) composer like Stravinsky again. This is sad to contemplate, because it also means there will not be another Robert Craft.

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