

Stravinsky, Igor: Poétique musicale (1939)

Poétique musicale was written in 1939, following an invitation to lecture at Harvard University during the 1939–1940 academic year as the first musician to hold the Charles Eliot Norton Professorship. The request came during a painful period when Stravinsky was mourning the deaths of his daughter, his wife, and his mother while he himself was in treatment at the Sancellemoz Sanatorium. His engagement at Harvard marked the beginning of his definitive exile in the United States.

Faced with the literary task before him, Stravinsky began by asking his friend Pierre Souvtchinsky (1892–1985) to sketch an outline. Apart from a few details, the definitive framework of the whole was quickly established: it would comprise six lessons, the first called “Getting Acquainted”, and the five others (in order): “The Phenomenon of Music”, “The Composition of Music”, “Musical Typology”, “The Avatars of Russian music”, and “The Performance of Music”, concluding with an “Epilogue”. After working together to define the outline and content of the lectures in April 1939, Souvtchinsky suggested that Stravinsky pursue the project with Roland-Manuel (Roland Alexis Manuel Lévy, 1891–1966), who took over writing the French version of the text in May and June 1939.

It is well known that Stravinsky often turned to others to help him write his texts, though it is not always possible to define each person’s exact role. In Craft’s article “Roland-Manuel and *La Poétique musicale*” from the early 1980s, the author summarily diminished Stravinsky’s role in writing the lectures. Then, in the early 2000s, new documents came to light that allowed for a reappraisal of the role of each participant, making *Poétique musicale* the best-documented example for understanding the composer’s collaboration with other writers. Many drafts of the text survive and three sets of documents in particular help reconstruct *Poétique*’s genesis: a three-page manuscript outline in the hand of Pierre Souvtchinsky written in French with a few words in Russian (Collection of E. Humbertclaude), a nineteen-page development of this plan in Stravinsky’s hand in French and Russian, conserved at the Sacher Foundation in Basel, and a set of six dossiers of drafts for the six lessons of the *Poétique* in French in the hand of Roland-Manuel, also held in Basel. Together, these documents show the process through which the text was written. Moving beyond the imposture implied by the term “ghostwriters”, it seems more appropriate to consider these exchanges as a subtle form of collective writing. From a genetic point of view there is a permanent form of triangulation in the writing: Souvtchinsky offers the structure and lays out the main ideas; Stravinsky—an oral influence—is at the heart of the process, developing the content and passing it on to Roland-Manuel who writes it out, sharpening its ideological and aesthetic positions. Correspondence shows that final approval came from all three participants, each of whom re-read, corrected, and signed off on the work.

In terms of content, it should be said that some ideas are more closely tied to the personality of one author or another. The question of time in music had long interested Souvtchinsky and in *Poétique* one finds the expressions “psychological time” and “ontological time” that Souvtchinsky used in his article “La notion du temps et la musique” which appeared in the May-June 1939 issue of the *Revue musicale*. Generally speaking, the abstract questions regarding music as “speculation”, “the pursuit of the One out of the Many”, and creative monism can all be traced back to Souvtchinsky. Other ideas are more typical of Stravinsky or are already brought up in his earlier texts, such as the subjects of listening, music criticism, the avant-garde, and “the higher mathematics of music”, speculation, technique, craft, art, inspiration, personality, individuality, and taste. Certain ideas regarding the order in music, style, the description of compositional processes, “modernism”, the autonomy of music, and opposition between interpreters and executors, had been Stravinsky’s leitmotifs since the 1920s. Other topics were born out the composer’s regular exchanges with friends like Charles-Albert Cingria, from whom he borrowed the notion of “*pompiérisme*”. It should also be said that Souvtchinsky was entirely responsible for the first draft of the fifth lesson which was then translated to French by the composer’s youngest son, Soulima, before revisions were made by Roland-Manuel. This fifth lesson is a virulent attack on the musical policies of the Soviet Union.

The first edition of the *Poétique* was published by Harvard, in French, in 1942. A second French edition was published in 1945 without the fifth lesson on Russian music, surely out of fear of censorship in a very different political context from that of the winter of 1940, as the USSR had since joined forces with the Allies. An English edition was published by Harvard in 1947, with a preface by Darius Milhaud. The book was progressively published in many other languages.

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Further reading

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- Igor Stravinsky, *Poetics of Music*, préface de Darius Milhaud, Harvard, Harvard University Press, 1947.
- Robert Craft, « Roland-Manuel and the *Poetics of Music* », *Perspectives of New Music*, XXI (1-2), 1982-83, p. 487-505, revu sous le titre « Roland-Manuel and *La Poétique musicale* » in *Stravinsky : Selected Correspondence*, éd. Robert Craft, vol. 2, New York, A. Knopf, 1984, p. 503-517.
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- Maureen Carr, *Multiple Masks. Neoclassicism in Stravinsky’s Works on Greek*

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- Valérie Dufour, « La *Poétique musicale* de Stravinsky : un manuscrit inédit de Pierre Souvtchinsky », *Revue de musicologie* (France), tome 89/2 (2003), p. 373-392.
- Svetlana Savenko, « Muzikalnaia poetika Stravinskogo : k istorii sozdanii » in *Stravinskii v kontekste vremeni i mesta*, Moscou, Publications du conservatoire Tchaïkovski, volume 57, 2006, p. 186-203.
- Valérie Dufour, « Stravinsky vers Souvtchinsky : Thèmes et variations sur la *Poétique musicale* », *Mitteilungen der Paul Sacher Stiftung* (Suisse), n°17, mars 2004, p. 17-23.
- Valérie Dufour, « The *Poétique musicale* : A Counterpoint in Three Voices » (traduit par T. Levitz et B. Behrmann), in Tamara Levitz (dir. sc.), *Stravinsky and His World*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2013, p. 225-254.
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- Richard Taruskin, « Stravinsky's *Poetics* and Russian Music », in *Russian Music at Home and Abroad*, Oakland, University of California Press, 2016.
- Valérie Dufour, art. « *Poétique musicale* », dans Peter O'Hagan et Edward Campbell (eds), *The Stravinsky Encyclopedia*, Cambridge University Press, 2020.

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