

## André Boucourechliev: Igor Stravinsky (1982)

After devoting his first two books to essential figures of German Romanticism (Schumann and [Beethoven](#)), it was an icon of musical modernism that Boucourechliev chose as subject for his third monograph. Soberly entitled *Igor Stravinsky*, this work was released in 1982 by Fayard, a publisher to which Boucourechliev would remain faithful (a few exceptions notwithstanding) for the remainder of this career.

Whereas this self-styled “music writer” had shown a certain formal originality in his *Beethoven* of 1963 – in which discussion of the works comes first and greatly surpasses the biographical commentary in length – in *Igor Stravinsky* Boucourechliev reverted to a more classic structure: the Russian composer’s works and life are covered simultaneously, following a chronological perspective evoked in many of the chapter titles (“Apprenticeship”, “With the Ballets russes”, “Between the Wars I”, “Between the Wars II”, and so on). The book nevertheless remains deeply personal: Boucourechliev had no intention of giving up his beloved freedom of tone, and makes no attempt to conceal his likes and dislikes. A pair of examples will suffice to make this plain: whereas *Les Noces* is praised for the “absolute, unsurpassed originality” of its instrumentation (p. 139), *Perséphone* is likened to a “milky oyster with a bland summery taste” (pg. 250).

In the *Beethoven*, Boucourechliev had set himself to bring out the protagonist’s modernity, his constant contemporaneity. A similar but somewhat different ambition informs his *Stravinsky*: that of underscoring the coherence and unity of the composer’s oeuvre. A coherence and unity far from obvious, given the diversity of the styles essayed by the Russian master. The thesis advanced by Boucourechliev throughout his book is that Stravinsky’s work in no way suffers from this heterogeneity: under the veneer of technical and aesthetic metamorphoses, certain constants ensure cohesion throughout the oeuvre. Boucourechliev devotes his brilliant introduction, significantly entitled “Keys to Stravinsky”, to the exposition and analysis of these Stravinskian constants: a “Russianism” distinct from folklorism, a proclivity for ritual and the hieratic, a fascination with archetypes. The point for Boucourechliev is twofold: a matter of shining new light on Stravinsky’s work, of course, but also of distancing himself from certain of his contemporaries – Pierre Boulez comes to mind – who liked to exalt one version of Stravinsky, that of the *Rite* or *Les Noces*, the better to tear down another (the neoclassical Stravinsky).

The body of the book can be seen as a leisurely development of the ideas presented in this introduction. Boucourechliev displays a pretension to exhaustivity (there is no work of Stravinsky’s that does not receive at least a few lines) and a truly musicological erudition (wielding an impressive bibliography, he engages constantly with other eminent Stravinsky experts, including Boris de Schloezer, Robert Siohan, and Pyotr Suvchinsky). Certain works are treated to especially rich commentary –

see in particular the fine analysis of the *Rite*, which usefully complements [the one by Boulez](#), older and focused on rhythm. Also noteworthy, finally, is a preoccupation with ethics that appears openly here for the first time in Boucourechliev's writing. What takes shape in the course of the book is not merely a portrait of Stravinsky the creator of genius: the Russian composer is presented as an emancipatory figure as well. By referring to archetypes and the hieraticism of ritual, Stravinsky escaped from the subjective and totalitarian discourse of the German Romantic composers. And in so doing, he managed to "guarantee his liberty and ours, his levity and ours, a habitable space" (p. 29).

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