

Just Another Concert

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Thousands of concerts take place every day in towns and cities around the world. Musicians and singers, famous and not so famous, take the platform and perform thousands of works by young and little-known composers who have been inspired by the creations of their great predecessors. Each of these concerts is regarded as an ordinary occurrence, nothing especially remarkable. Only a handful are destined to go down in history and to be remembered for decades to come.

On 28 November 1909 a concert took place in the hall of the Noble Assembly in the Russian capital, St. Petersburg, to mark the 160th anniversary of Goethe's birth. It was entitled "Faust in Music." The idea of a "Faustian concert" had arisen two decades earlier. It had been actively discussed by Sergei Taneyev (1856-1915) and Alexander Ziloti (1863-1945), and warmly supported by Tchaikovsky (1840-93). For various reasons, the idea was not realized at the time and, of the works selected by Ziloti and Taneyev on the Faustian theme, only Liszt's (1811-86) *Faust Symphony* was performed on 11 November 1889.

The planned concert took place only twenty years later. It again featured Liszt's *Faust Symphony*, together with Henri Rabaud's (1873-1949) symphonic poem, *La Procession Nocturne*, inspired by the writer Nikolaus Lenau's (1802-50) *Faust, Mephistopheles' Serenade* and *The Song of the Flea* from Berlioz's (1803-69) *Death of Faust* (the name given in the concert program—and indeed in Russia generally—to Berlioz's *Damnation of Faust*), and two further *Songs of the Flea*—by Beethoven (1770-1827) and Mussorgsky (1839-81). Alongside the last two works was the comment: "Orchestration by I. Stravinsky." The program also stated that, for the first time, the orchestra of the Imperial Russian Opera, accompanied by Count Sheremetev's choir,¹ was performing both of these works in an

¹ . Count Alexander Dmitrievich Sheremetev (1859-1931) was a great patron of the arts who contributed immensely to Russia's musical culture. He was also a conductor and composer.

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orchestral version. Feodor Chaliapin (1873-1938)² was the soloist and Alexander Ziloti the conductor.

This concert fulfilled Chaliapin's long-held wish to sing Mussorgsky's *Song of the Flea* with an orchestra. He had approached Rimsky-Korsakov (1844-1908) long before with a request for such an arrangement to be written, but circumstances had prevented the composer from so doing and he had tried to pass the request on to Glazunov (1865-1936).

This notable concert in the life of the young Stravinsky (1882-1971) had a long prehistory with many interesting aspects. The consequences of this significant event, which touched upon many people active in twentieth-century arts, were also momentous, as very soon became obvious.

The concert went off with the resounding success that always accompanied Chaliapin's performances. To a large extent, the participation of the great singer and idol of the St. Petersburg public on this occasion also determined the triumphant success that became Stravinsky's lot: both *Songs of the Flea* that had been orchestrated by the young composer received encores. This encouraged Chaliapin to portray Stravinsky as a composer with a broad range of professional interests and abilities. It was after all Stravinsky — and not Rimsky-Korsakov or Glazunov — who did the work and, to all appearances, he made an excellent job of it!

Chaliapin's attitude to Stravinsky comes across quite clearly in a letter the soloist wrote to the Russian writer, Maxim Gorky (1868-1936). Aware of the writer's persistent efforts to attract the attention of composers to a plot about Vasily Buslayev, the dashing hero of an early Russian epic poem, Chaliapin reflects on possible candidates and, after mentioning a few of the leading names ("Glazunov is hardly likely to agree, Rachmaninov (1873-1943)—it seems to me he hasn't got the mettle for it—he won't suit Buslayev"), he mentions Stravinsky:

². Chaliapin was widely considered the greatest Russian singing actor of his day. See Harold Barnes/Alan Blyth, "Chaliapin, Feodor," *NGD* (2nd edition), 5: 428-29.

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There is one young composer—the son of the former singer Stravinsky. This young man has already written a thing or two and, incidentally, one ballet called *Petrushka*. That ballet was performed in Paris last year. I am thinking of dragging him along to your place—first, of course, I'll sound out the situation and try to find out how capable this young man is of tackling something like Buslayev. The lad's in Monte Carlo and I'll dash off a few lines to him, asking him to come here to Milan, if he can. In short, I'm full of enthusiasm!!!³

This letter was written in 1912. By that time, the premieres of Stravinsky's orchestral fantasy *Fireworks* (1910) and his ballets *The Firebird* and *Petrushka* (Paris, 1910 and 1911) had already been performed. Was Chaliapin aware of them? He mentions only *Petrushka* as *one* ballet. Whatever the case, Chaliapin undoubtedly knew and remembered Stravinsky from the *Songs of the Flea* that he had sung at the concert in November 1909. *The lad*— Chaliapin regarded Stravinsky in that way (and wanted to present him to Gorky as such)— the *young man* who had *already written a thing or two*: first and foremost it was Stravinsky's *instrumentations* that lay behind Chaliapin's words.

They were of course no more than a brief episode in the life of a composer who stood on the threshold of outstanding accomplishments—the trio of ballets that shook the world: *The Firebird*, *Petrushka*, and *The Rite of Spring*. These ballets and everything else that would subsequently be written by a man who would very soon become one of the central figures in the musical world of the twentieth century, cast a shadow over much of his early work, including the orchestrations now being published. Until recently they were mentioned only in lists of Stravinsky's compositions. Today, however, they have inevitably become objects of keen interest, and attract close attention—like everything that may provide information on the genesis of Stravinsky's creative personality, his roots, and sources.

³. Chaliapin to Gorky, 12/25 March 1912, *Fiodor Ivanovich Shaliapin : V 3 t.*, Vol. 1 (Moscow: Literaturnoe nasledstvo. Pis'ma, 1976), 346.

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The autographed originals of both of Stravinsky's orchestrations are kept in the Institute for the History of the Arts in St. Petersburg. For the first time they have been studied by myself and by other leading specialists from the Institute and from the St. Petersburg Conservatory, who have made a wide-ranging examination of Stravinsky's manuscripts, using methods that have proved their value in the composer's previous works.

One of Russia's academic publishing houses has now at last published my first book on Stravinsky's work.⁴ On the basis of the orchestrations that so impressed Chaliapin, this book traces the composer's creative process in the entirety of its psychological, biographical, and sociocultural contexts. A careful analysis of the interaction in the orchestrating process of works from the Russian and Western European musical cultures has made it possible to reveal mechanisms that shape the logic of the historical development of music as an ingredient of European culture.

Just another concert. It is interesting to examine a present-day concert program, and conjecture which of its aspects may come to be examined by scholars as events of world significance a hundred years hence.

⁴. *Igor Stravinsky's Orchestrations of Beethoven's and Mussorgsky's "Song of The Flea"* ("The School of Music" Publishing House, 2003, 420 pp., ISBN 5-9500057-1-6).