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BUT WHAT IS IT SAYING? TRANSLATING  
THE MUSICAL LANGUAGE OF  
STRAVINSKY'S *THREE PIECES FOR  
CLARINET SOLO*

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BUT WHAT IS IT SAYING? TRANSLATING THE MUSICAL LANGUAGE OF  
STRAVINSKY'S *THREE PIECES FOR CLARINET SOLO*

by

Derek Emch

A Research Paper  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the  
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## AN ABSTRACT OF THE RESEARCH PAPER OF

Derek Emch, for the Music Bibliography and Research class in MUSIC, presented on 20 October, 2011, at Southern Illinois University Carbondale.

TITLE: But What is it Saying? Translating the Musical Language of Stravinsky's *Three Pieces for Clarinet Solo*

CLASS PROFESSOR: Dr. Douglas Worthen

In response to questions of interpretation of his music, Igor Stravinsky has said simply to let the notes speak for themselves. In this paper I will translate the language of Stravinsky's music in his *Three Pieces for Clarinet Solo*. I will demonstrate the following: how Stravinsky was able to derive a harmonic structure out of melodic content, thereby creating a two-dimensional space; the formal structure of each of the three *Pieces*; and relationships between *Three Pieces* and another of Stravinsky's works, *L'Histoire du Soldat*. This analysis will serve as my translation of Stravinsky's musical language, which will then be compared to scholarly research conducted regarding the *Three Pieces*.

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The collection of instrumental compositions from the Swiss period in Igor Stravinsky's life has been described as being influenced by "German, Irish, French (Breton), Italian, Spanish, and even Brazilian sources, in addition to various mongrel types of North American popular music."<sup>1</sup> It is against this backdrop that the *Three Pieces for Clarinet Solo* was composed in 1918.

Despite the vast amount of research on Stravinsky, there is not a strong consensus on the origin and composition of the *Three Pieces*. Attempts to answer these questions have been mired by several contradictory statements by Stravinsky himself and by others associated with him. Much evidence today has been gathered through second- and third-hand accounts, retold after several decades. The best source of information, however, is the work itself. Rosario Mazzeo, former clarinetist with the Boston Symphony, related in his column in *The Clarinet* magazine that Stravinsky himself reportedly said to him, "whatever [Stravinsky] had been influenced by while writing for the clarinet was clearly set forth by his music symbols and words."<sup>2</sup> If the answers are in the musical language Stravinsky created, then they only need to be translated from what is heard in performance and what is written on the page. Translation of this musical language, then, is the ambition of the analysis set forth below. With such a translation available, several questions can be more affirmatively answered. What influenced Stravinsky in his composition of the *Three Pieces*? What connections are there between each individual piece?

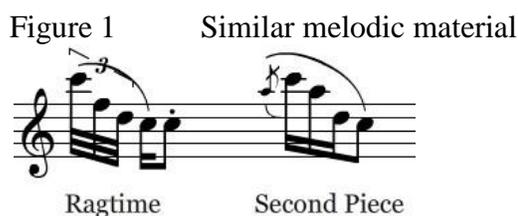
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1. Richard Taruskin, *Stravinsky and the Russian Traditions: A Biography of the Works Through Mavra*, Vol. 2 (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 1443.

2. Rosario Mazzeo, *Mazzeo Musings*, *The Clarinet* 18, no. 3 (May/June 1991): 8.

The work was composed for Werner Reinhart, a Swiss philanthropist from Winterthur, also an amateur clarinetist,<sup>3</sup> who financed *L'Histoire du Soldat*. The origins of the *Three Pieces* and *L'Histoire* are closely linked. The conductor of the premiere of *L'Histoire*, Ernest Ansermet, himself enamored with American jazz and in particular the jazz clarinetist Sidney Bechet,<sup>4</sup> gave Stravinsky a “bundle of ragtime music in the form of piano reductions and instrumental parts, which [he] copied out in score. With these pieces before [him] he composed the *Ragtime* in *Histoire du Soldat*.”<sup>5</sup> Richard Taruskin calls *Three Pieces* “that charming appendage to *Histoire du Soldat*,”<sup>6</sup> and rightly so. The *Ragtime* from *L'Histoire* and the *Three Pieces* share many similarities.

The clarinet’s role in the *Ragtime* is as an elaborator, making motivic interjections to the violin’s melodic lines. One recurring motive in particular is similar to a motive found in the second of the *Three Pieces* (Figure 1). Stravinsky also utilizes several of the same rhythms in the *Ragtime* as in the third piece, highlighting their similar source material (Figure 2).




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3. Vera Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Stravinsky in Pictures and Documents* (New York: Simon and Schuster), 624. “In a letter... Ansermet says that in a performance of the *Firebird* Suite that he conducted in Winterthur, Reinhart played the bass clarinet.”

4. Ernest Ansermet, “A ‘Serious’ Musician Takes Jazz Seriously,” in *Keeping Time: Readings in Jazz History*, ed. Robert Walser (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 9–11.

5. Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Dialogues and A Diary* (London: Faber and Faber, 1968), 54.

6. Taruskin, *Stravinsky and the Russian Traditions*, Vol. 2, 1483.,

Figure 2 Similar rhythmic material



The first piece, written for clarinet in A, is marked “*Molto tranquillo.*” Much of the performer’s work in portraying this affective marking has already been completed by Stravinsky through his use of register and dynamic markings. The piece does not reach higher than second space A. By coupling the A clarinet’s distinctive chalumeau register with a *sempre piano* dynamic throughout, the affective character has been appropriately set.

The overall form of the first piece is best described as ABA’ with a short coda, the first section ending m. 9; the second in m. 21; and the third lasting until measure 28. The principal motive,  $a_m$ , can be described as a tetrachord—made of the pitches A–G#–F#–E. Interestingly, Stravinsky does not initially reveal  $a_m$  in its entirety. Instead, he slowly develops it throughout the first section of the piece.

Figure 3 First Piece, mm. 1–9



As shown in Figure 3, Stravinsky traces the melody downward, from the A acciacatura down to the F#. Missing is the bottom E. The melody is repeated to no avail, and then developed further, this time reaching F#. Finally, at the last cadence of the section, in m. 8, the E

is attained. Only in the B section is  $a_m$  revealed in its entirety. A' has a decorated version of the opening line, this time completing  $a_m$  within the first phrase. The rest of A' follows in what can almost be considered an abridged version. What Stravinsky accomplished in nine measures previously, he now contains within four and a half.

Because the clarinet is (for the most part) a melodic instrument, compound melodies and arpeggiations become very important when writing unaccompanied works for it. Stravinsky utilizes this technique brilliantly. Here is Figure 3 again, this time with lines drawn to indicate the separate melodic ideas.

Figure 3a First Piece compound melodies in mm. 1–9

Note in the first two measures the clear wedge shape emanating from the A. The repetition of the phrase in mm. 4–5 shows the wedge shape even more clearly. Lines have been drawn to indicate the two separate melodic lines created by the wedge. Other implied melodic lines are also labeled. An arpeggiation occurs in mm. 9–10. By separating other possible melodies from the work, further important pitches come to be revealed. Return to Figure 3a. The first two pitches to which Stravinsky assigns legato markings are  $C\sharp$  and  $D\sharp$  in m. 6. Following line 4 after the breath mark,  $C\sharp$  and  $D\sharp$  are, excepting the  $F\sharp$ , the only pitches

contained within that line. Some other instances of these pitches occurring in the same compound line are given in Figures 4a–c.

Figure 4a First Piece C#/D# moments



Figure 4b First Piece C#/D# moments



Figure 4c First Piece Further C#/D# moments



Of the three pieces, the first is surrounded by the most controversy concerning its origins. Conflicting firsthand accounts, anecdotal evidence, and historical research all reveal different conclusions. Robert Craft, in an appendix to volume one of his *Stravinsky: Selected Correspondence*,<sup>7</sup> describes the bassoon duet *Lied ohne Name*. When *Three Pieces* was composed in 1918, it was just a sketch, and Stravinsky “expanded this music in a song that apparently became the source of the first of the *Three Pieces for Clarinet Solo*.”<sup>8</sup> Crystal Hearne Reinoso, professor of music at Buffalo State University of New York, addressed Craft’s assertion in a two part analytical article, “Sources and Inspirations for Stravinsky’s *Three Pieces for Clarinet Solo*,” written for *The Clarinet* magazine in 1996.<sup>9</sup> She proposes that Craft’s theory

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7. Robert Craft ed., *Stravinsky: Selected Correspondence*, vol. 1 (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), 409–410.

8. *Ibid.*

9. Crystal Hearne Reinoso, “Sources and Inspirations for Stravinsky’s *Three Pieces for Clarinet Solo*: Part 2,” *The Clarinet* 23, no. 4 (1996):26–29.

is not supported by the evidence he gives, or by much else, and concludes that while he is most likely wrong, his theory does “reinforce the notion that the first movement . . . is less influenced by jazz.”<sup>10</sup> There are, however, some relationships which Reinoso neglected to mention in her treatment. One area in *Three Pieces* cited by Craft as being inspired by *Lied* is mm. 2–3 and 7–9. Reinoso claims it is difficult to make the connection, but Figure 5 should show otherwise, in which the melody, a descending major second followed by ascending major second, is compared with a possible corresponding location in *Lied*. In mm. 2–3, the first appearance of the melodic fragment from *Lied* maintains nearly the same rhythmic proportions. The second appearance is found in the upper line of the compound melody.

Figure 5 First piece, mm. 2–3



First Piece mm. 7–9



*Lied* mm. 5–7



There is another possibility suggested by Reinoso. Known only through secondhand accounts is the theory that Stravinsky was listening to a touring jazz band and “between sets, the group’s clarinetist remained onstage alone, playing a ‘blues lament’ or the ‘bluest clarinet

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10. Ibid, 28.

recitative.”<sup>11</sup> This clarinetist either played what would become the first piece, or inspired Stravinsky to write it. This is an attractive possibility, because of the affective qualities created in the first piece. Returning to Figure 3, note the generally downward motion of the phrases. Much of the piece continues in this fashion. Downward trending phrases have been commonly used to impart negative emotions. This theory is discredited, however, by the fact that Stravinsky has made no mention in writing of having heard a jazz band before 1919.

The second piece is described by a contemporary of Stravinsky’s, Boris Asaf’yev, as beginning with a “thematic ribbon.”<sup>12</sup> This ribbon motive spans three octaves of D, and cadences on a G (see Figure 6).

Figure 6 Ribbon motive



Note also in the ribbon motive Stravinsky’s alternating use of  $A \flat / A \natural$  and  $B \flat / B \natural$ . The “simultaneous” sounding of two chromatic inflections of the same pitch will become important in the analysis of the third movement. They are related to Stravinsky’s use of the octatonic scale and the bimodality that can result.<sup>13</sup>

The elasticity of the ribbon motive is possible only because of the meterlessness of the second piece. In the second statement of the ribbon motive, Stravinsky shifts the beam

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11. Ibid, 26.

12. Boris Asaf’yev, *A Book about Stravinsky*, trans. Richard F. French (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1982), 251.

13. For a full treatment of Stravinsky and his use of the octatonic scale, see Pieter van den Toorn, *The Music of Igor Stravinsky* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).

configuration of the triplets to the left by one sixteenth note. While visually the implication is that different pitches will be accented, aurally the result is exactly the same as the first statement. Taruskin describes this phenomenon best by stating that “in the absence of even an irregularly felt pulsation, the only unit of ‘grouping’ available to the listener is the total phrase.”<sup>14</sup> Indeed, upon listening, the only indication of any rhythmic grouping is the presence of articulation, which appears in nearly all cases only at the beginning of a phrase.

The second half of the second piece introduces a drastic character change characterized by short “hoppy” bursts (Figure 7a). This section has several motives similar to those found in the first piece, suggesting a compositional relationship. The first motive, E–D ♭–E ♭, can be respelled enharmonically as E–C♯–D♯. These pitches appear together (often disguised) several times in the first piece: at mm. 8–9; in m. 25, the last time E appears it is surrounded by C♯ and D♯.

Figure 7a Second Piece hoppy motive



Figure 7b Second Piece a<sub>m</sub> tetrachords



Figure 7c Second Piece a<sub>m</sub> tetrachords



14. Taruskin, *Stravinsky and the Russian Traditions*, Vol. 2, 1483.

Recall the motive  $a_m$  from the first movement with pitch members A–G#–F#–E. This tetrachord is reintroduced inverted and transposed in the second piece. Figure 7b shows the first iteration, 7c the second and third. In each figure the tetrachords overlap as illustrated.

Out of the second section rises the ribbon motive again, with all its meterless ambiguity. After a final cadence on G at the end of the ribbon, the second piece ends with a coda. Tellingly, the third piece does not have a coda like the first two, nor does it contain intimate compositional relations to the first two pieces (as will be apparent in the coming analysis).

This evidence points to the theory that the first two pieces share a similar genesis. Reinoso adds to this theory, citing a third-hand account that states that “Stravinsky is said to have described the first two movements not as portraits of jazz, but as depictions of personal feelings or imaginative scenes.”<sup>15</sup> The ribbon motive becomes representative of birds and the contrasting section representative of a cat stalking the birds. The birds, unconcerned, fly away in the end. Such a theory is further supported by a story from Mazzeo.<sup>16</sup> In his story of the time he and Stravinsky spoke at length about the *Three Pieces*, Stravinsky mentioned that the first piece is a “personal and private reflective set of sounds.”<sup>17</sup>

This theory is not completely unyielding, however, when it is compared to writings attributed to Stravinsky. In his *Poetics of Music*, for example, Stravinsky asks “do we not, in truth, ask the impossible of music when we expect it to express feelings, to translate dramatic

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15. Reinoso, *Sources and Inspirations for Stravinsky's Three Pieces for Clarinet Solo*, 26.

16. Mazzeo, *Mazzeo Musings*, *The Clarinet* 18, no. 3 (May/June 1991): 8.

17. *Ibid.*

situations, even to imitate nature?”<sup>18</sup> To ascribe the image of birds and cats to a work of Stravinsky’s, even to suggest they were inspirations goes contrary to his writings. Unfortunately, this would not be the first time there have been conflicting accounts.<sup>19</sup> It remains a possibility, then, that such imagery can be associated with the second of the *Three Pieces*, though nothing can be substantiated. What can be substantiated is that the first and second of the *Three Pieces* have both a strong compositional relationship and a strong oppositional relationship. The first piece is slow and introspective while the second piece is quick and extroverted.

The third of the *Three Pieces* makes a departure from the first two pieces. While the first two pieces, played on A clarinet, are opposites of each other, introverted and extroverted, the third piece, played on B  $\flat$  clarinet is constant and driving. Stravinsky writes at the beginning of the piece “Forte d’un bout à l’autre (forte from beginning to end). Stravinsky’s interests in ragtime also distinguish the third piece from the first two. Motives specific to ragtime can be found throughout. Figure 2 illustrates a common ragtime rhythm used in the third piece.

The piece begins with the insistent repetition and oscillation of two pitches, A  $\flat$ /B  $\flat$ . In mm. 2–3, he shifts the pitches up by half-step to A $\natural$ /B $\natural$ , and continues the oscillation. Measures 6–9 see the pitches shift up yet again to A $\sharp$ /B $\sharp$ . The phrase then descends by outlining chords.

These outlined chords, shown in Figure 8a, illustrate a bimodality found in Stravinsky’s other music. The first chord is D major. The next chords are a minor/A major and g minor/G major. Such an event occurs later (Figure 8b), again at a similar structural point in the music

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18. Igor Stravinsky, *Poetics of Music in the Form of Six Lessons*, trans. Arthur Knodel and Ingolf Dahl (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1970), 99–101.

19. For further treatment of these discrepancies, see Barbara Heyman, “Stravinsky and Ragtime” *The Musical Quarterly* 68, no. 4 (Oct. 1982), 543–562.

(that structural point being transitional material between phrases), at mm. 25–29, and still later at mm. 50–51 (Figure 8c).

Figure 8a Third Piece mm. 11–13



Figure 8b Third piece mm. 25–29



Figure 8c Third piece mm. 50–51



At m. 14, Stravinsky begins again at  $A \flat / B \flat$ . This time, where he first wrote  $C \sharp$ , he writes  $C \natural$ . This keeps the line from rising again past the  $A \natural / B \natural$  mark, as it did before. In measure 23,  $C \sharp$  finally makes an appearance, but it is too late for the chromatic progression. The phrase comes to an end a measure and a half later.

This brings the piece to a development section in which Stravinsky expounds upon the half step highlighted earlier, first between  $D \flat / C$  (mm. 30–31), then between  $A \sharp / B$  (mm. 33–34), and later between  $F \natural / F \sharp$  (mm. 49–50). He also includes a four measure phrase in which he takes advantage of the ragtime rhythm of three superimposed on to four (mm. 37–40).

At m. 53, the principal theme returns, transposed to an oscillation between  $E \flat / F$  and  $E \natural / F \sharp$ . This time the theme is abbreviated, lasting only four measures, whereas before Stravinsky spent as many as eleven measures developing it. Additionally, the phrase does not end on any meaningful cadence. Instead, Stravinsky builds until the end of measure 56,

repeating the motive D–E ♭ –F♯ three times. The next phrase, therefore, even though it is new material, should not be considered a coda. The final phrase cadences on a B ♭ .

*Three Pieces* and the scholarship that surrounds it present an interesting case study that addresses a larger issue than the work itself—the relationship between a composer and the words attributed to him. Stravinsky has contradicted himself more than once, due to the fault of others or his own. The contradiction most important to the current argument exists between his conversational speech and his polemical writings. An example of such a contradiction was discussed earlier. In his *Poetics*, Stravinsky questioned the legitimacy of diatonic music, though in conversation has said that the first two pieces are personal and private reflections. When left with such contradictory language, it must inevitably be the music that validates or invalidates a statement. Put another way, musical language is king.

What the musical language suggests is that the first piece is a private (read: introspective) reflection. The strong compositional relationship between the first and second piece, and a lack of any direct compositional relationship between either and the third piece, is demonstrative of a deeper connection. If the first piece is personal, then the second is also personal. The second and third *are* related, however, through *L'Histoire*. As demonstrated earlier, Stravinsky borrowed from similar source material to compose the ragtime in *L'Histoire* and the third *Piece*. Also illustrated was the similar motivic material within the second *Piece* and *L'Histoire*'s ragtime. Therefore, though it is faint, jazz influences are evident in the second *Piece*. Such a line of reasoning becomes possible only when allowing the musical language to speak for itself, as Stravinsky suggested to Mazzeo. The answers are always plainly given by composers. It is only a matter of knowing what to listen for.

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