

## **"On The Trail of Stravinsky, Primitivism and the Creative Mind"** **by Toni Lester (January 1, 2017)**

### **Introduction**

How does the creative mind create? What seeds take root in such a mind and bear fruit? Online content identification programs can now recognize content uploaded by one person that was created by another, making it theoretically possible to trace the antecedents a piece of music back to its original sources. But being able to do this is not the same as placing it in its cultural context or gaining insight into the mind of the person who chose to use the prior work and why. At least for now, access to this more nuanced level of insight into the nature of creativity is beyond our technological reach.

Certainly this is true for one of the greatest pieces of music ever written – "The Rite of Spring" or "Le Sacre du Printemps" ("*Le Sacre*") by Igor Stravinsky. When *Le Sacre* received its 1913 Paris premier, the audience disrupted into a cacophony of protestations and cheers. (White, 44-45, 214) To the average European concert-going listener, the music – characterized as "atavistic primitivism" (Benjamin) or in the words of French composer, Claude Debussy: "une musique negre" (*Expositions*, 142, note 1) - represented a revolution in western classical harmony and rhythm. With his driving ostinatos, pounding discordances, and continuously shifting rhythms, Stravinsky became the cause *celebré* of those searching for something fresh and innovative.

What influences bore down on Stravinsky as he created *Le Sacre*? The composer maintained that he was "guided by no system whatever." (*Expositions*, 147) Years later, summing up how he created his masterpiece, he pronounced: "I am the vessel through which *Le Sacre* passed." (Id.) Despite these assertions, striking similarities can be found between *Le Sacre* and the so-called "world music" of non-western cultures such as Africa. Was Stravinsky exposed to African music before he composed *Le Sacre*? Did he consciously or unconsciously absorb certain of its attributes, particularly its rhythmic structures, into his work? These are enticing questions to consider, especially for people interested in how creativity happens and the extent to which outside cultural influences play a part in that process.

### **Le Sacre and Tribal African Music – Is There A Direct Connection?**

Picasso, often described as Stravinsky's stylistic counterpart in the visual arts, (White, 62) avoided attributing African influences on works painted during his so-called "primitive" period.<sup>1</sup> It wasn't until the 1930's that it became widely known that he purchased African sculptures some time before he painted in this style. (Goldwater, 145-146) Picasso first learned about African sculpture from his friend and rival Henri Matisse around 1905. Matisse once bought a "wooden [Congolese] statuette ...with a disproportionately large, masklike head" from a local shop and took it to show Gertrude Stein, whereupon Picasso walked in and saw the statuette. (Smee, 233) A few months later, Picasso visited the Trocadero, the French archeological museum, where he saw more African sculptures. (Id., 235) He created his most famous painting in this genre, "Les Demoiselles

d'Avignon", soon after in 1907. (Id., Plate 12, and 238-239).

Like his friend Picasso, Stravinsky could be a bit of a trickster when it came to recalling the building blocks for some of his work. Sometimes he would only superficially allude to the extent to which Slavic folk music figured into his creative process, (Bartok, 75) yet he clearly borrowed the famous opening line for the *Le Sacre's* bassoon part from a Lithuanian folk song book published at the time. (White, 210) On other occasions, he was very transparent about his sources. Of one of the themes for his theatrical piece, *Histoire du Soldat* ("Histoire"), he said: "[it] is very close to the *Dies Irae*, ... but this resemblance did not occur to me at all during the composition (which is not to deny that the lugubrious little tune may have been festering in my 'unconscious')." (*Expositions*, 92) Unfortunately, this kind of musical "borrowing" also once led to Stravinsky being successfully sued for copyright theft for using another composer's song without permission in the ballet, *Petrouska*. (White, 200, n. 6)

This is not to diminish the ingenious and inventive ways in which Stravinsky transformed the prior work he utilized. But one still can't help but ask: is there any evidence to show he was influenced by African music at the time he composed *Le Sacre*, just as Picasso had been by African art? One relevant clue is that Stravinsky was an ardent lover of all things French, and greatly admired the work of Ravel and Debussy as a young man – the latter whom he met in 1910. (Id., 35) No doubt Stravinsky knew that France was a major colonial power with ties to the slave trade dating back to the 1600s (Miguel, 125-145). Records show that African slaves were present in France in the early 1700s (Slavenorth.com). France didn't depart from its last colonial outpost until the 1960s.

Just as was true for slaves brought to North America by the British, French-owned slaves preserved many of their musical traditions when they were brought to the land of their captors. The first book recounting indigenous African music heard by French slave holders was published in 1667 by a French monk who reported seeing African slaves in the West Indies playing "drums made from hollowed tree trunks covered with skin ... [and alternating] between solo performer and a chorus, and dancing continued for an extended period." (Epstein, 64-54)

Debussy's description of *Le Sacre* as *une musique negre* was thus made within this historical context. Like many of his fellow creative artists, he was fascinated with non-Caucasian colonial sources,<sup>2</sup> including black American music. Witness his 1908 *Golliwogg's Cakewalk*, a ragtime styled piano piece inspired by the racially derogatory "Golliwog" doll and the popular American cakewalk dance originated by slaves, and his 1910 *Minstrels*. (Kautsy, 17, 19) As Catherine Kautsy explains, the "Otherness [of these cultures] proved enormously alluring." (Id., 19) Debussy made the above remark to Stravinsky right after attending *Le Sacre's* 1913 Paris premier (*Expositions*, 142, note 1). The term can be translated as meaning "negro", a common French word used to describe their African colonial subjects.<sup>3</sup> Debussy's comment therefore reveals that he knew enough about *une musique negre* to recognize it when he heard it, and in turn that Stravinsky would understand what he meant.

It's also possible that Stravinsky was familiar with American jazz, African tribal music's

distant cousin, at the time he wrote *Le Sacre*. He wrote *Le Sacre* somewhere between late in 1910 and 1913.<sup>4</sup> (White, 207-209) Explaining what influenced the creation of his 1918 theatrical work, *Histoire*, the composer said: "My choice of instruments was influenced by ... the discovery of American Jazz." (Id., 91) He further noted:

my knowledge of jazz [at that time] was derived exclusively from copies of sheet music, and as I had never actually heard any of the music performed, I borrowed its rhythmic style not as played, but as written. I *could* imagine jazz sound, however, or so I liked to think. (Id., 92)

As Barbara Heyman observes, however, "to some it may seem inconceivable that an artist as cosmopolitan as Stravinsky would not have *heard* [my emphasis] the sounds of early jazz ... long before 1918. Between 1910 and 1916 ... he lived on the Riviera, in Paris, Genoa, Rome, London, Bayreuth, Berlin, Vienna and Madrid, among other cities." (Id., p. 544). Stravinsky began working on *Histoire* around 1915 (Id., 264), several years after Debussy composed *Golliwog's Cakewalk*. By the time *Golliwog* was published, ragtime was well established for many years as a popular dance form and musical genre throughout Europe. (Heyman, p. 544-545).<sup>5</sup>

Still, there is no smoking gun that *definitively* proves that Stravinsky heard African tribal music or grasped the connection between it and American jazz at the time of *Le Sacre's* inception. Thus, tempting as it is to speculate about this possibility, absent a newly uncovered written confession from Stravinsky, the scent on the trail that directly connects *Le Sacre* to African music must end here.

It is, however, possible to compare meaningful similarities found in *Le Sacre* with the traditional music of Africa. The discussion next will show that while *Le Sacre* may not have conscious connection to Africa's musical lineage, certain of its important characteristics, especially its rhythmic devices, do have parallels to this tradition. In the end, perhaps all we can say is that *Le Sacre* epitomizes what Carl Jung called, "synchronicity" – the coincidence in time of two or more causally unrelated events which have ... similar meaning." (Mark)

### **Le Sacre and African Music – The Synchronistic Connections**

Aside from *Le Sacre's* unique harmonic vision, it is its unusual rhythmic approach that it is most known for. At the time of its performance, it was clear that Stravinsky had done away "with the regular pulse which had governed almost all *western* (my emphasis) music since the Renaissance ..." (Dennis, 1758) Eric Walter White, explains how Stravinsky:

develops [melodic motifs] ... by repeating and rearranging the notes and altering their time values so as to avoid the minimum literal repetition ... the patterns are irregular; they are continually shifting, changing and being renewed. This ... is calculated to exasperate listeners who had been nurtured on the regular formal music of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. (White, 210)

Thus, a typical rhythmic phrase from *Le Sacre* would look like this:  $3/16 + 2/16 + 3/16 + 3/16 + 2/8 + 2/16 + 3/16$ . (Rite, 129) In other words, a rhythmic pattern of  $3+2+3+3+2+2+2+3$  is revealed. One of the effects of these shifting patterns is to have it sound as if the main accents have been shifted away from the downbeat. This technique is called "additive rhythm".

These specific rhythmic characteristics are also the *modus operandi* of a great deal of traditional African music. "African rhythms are often additive (unequal sections). For example, a time span of 12 beats in Western music would be normally divided  $4+4+4$  or  $3+3+3+3$ , whereas in African music it might be divided into a  $5+7$  pattern, or  $3+4+5+$ ." (Oxford, 1758) In addition, many African rhythms are also syncopated, in the sense that there are "stress points other than the main beat." (Id.) Many of these traits were carried over to American jazz music because of the significant contribution to its development made by African-American musicians.

Gunther Schuller, in his book, *Early Jazz*, concurs with this assessment. In describing a Ghanaian funeral dance, he explains how two of the lines constantly shift meter, first in  $3/4$ , then  $3/8$ , then  $2/4$  then  $3/8$ . He also comments that, "when one remembers that this example of African music is improvised within a highly disciplined framework, one can only wonder at the connotation of 'primitive' usually given to African music." (Schuller, 13) Note too, that Schuller derides the use of the term "primitive", while recognizing that it is a term commonly used to describe African music. Readers should take the time to listen to recordings of traditional African music described by Schuller. By listening to its rich and complex soundscapes, the rewards will be many.

The term "primitive" has often been used to characterize Stravinsky's rhythmic approach as well. In a scathing critique, noted Schoenberg disciple, Alban Berg describes *Le Sacre* as "deliberately primitive" music in which: "mechanical repetitions and the most primitive sequences ... reach the very limit of monotony, often only simulating a richness of form, through changing time signatures and rhythmic displacement, where everything else is poverty." (Berg, 2) As the quote indicates, the only thing of value in *Le Sacre* that Berg begrudgingly recognizes is the rhythmic inventiveness of Stravinsky's so-called primitivism.

The Berg-Debussy view of "primitivism", still held today in many circles, is summarized by Judith Becker in her seminal article "Is Western Art Music Superior?" The traditional European musicological view about nonwestern music has been, as she puts it, characterized by the belief that the music is neither "complex, natural or meaningful". In response to these negative stereotypes, she argues: "basically iterative music (motivically repetitive music characterized by the use of additive rhythms - my explanation) sometimes exhibits an astonishing temporal architecture." (Becker, 350) Later Becker chastises judgmental listeners for not being open to:

hearing the subtly and complexity of a different music. We listen for harmonic richness where the simultaneity of variations is the interesting part... Not hearing what we expect, we only hear noise ... repeated patterns which are 'out of sync' so that the relationship between the parts is constantly shifting ... (Id.)

This eloquent defense of African music could just as easily have been a response to Berg's criticism of Stravinsky. For as has been previously shown, those "constantly shifting" patterns in *Le Sacre* also reveal an "astonishing temporal architecture", the likes of which have attracted listeners and composers from the start.

In view of the above, it is clear that at the very least there are some fascinating comparisons to be made between *Le Sacre* and African music. Commenting about the possible Russian folk music influences in Stravinsky, noted Hungarian composer and musicologist, Bela Bartok, said that "Stravinsky never mentions his sources or his themes ... Stravinsky apparently takes this course deliberately." (Bartok, 75) Recognizing that one of the marks of a great composer is the extent to which outside influences are creatively utilized, Bartok goes on to praise Stravinsky's inventive treatment of Russian folk themes. He rightly concludes: "in the hands of incompetent composers neither folk-music nor any other musical material will ever attain significance." (Id., 78) Since Stravinsky was both a competent *and* brilliant composer, his transformative use of melodic themes and rhythmic ideas shaped an artistic vision that still excites and inspires us today.

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### End Notes

<sup>1</sup> At its most basic level, when used to describe African music, the word, "primitive" is derogatory, since it reduces an entire tradition going back to ancient times to something less than and not as good or sophisticated as the tradition of western classical music (Becker, 350) to which Stravinsky belonged.

<sup>2</sup> Further, Debussy's *Voiles* and *Cloches* have associations with music from the then Dutch colony, Java, whose gamelan harmonies he probably heard at the 1889 and 1899 Paris World's fairs. (Kautsky, 19) Debussy once said that the sounds in Javanese music were like "rhapsodies, which instead of confining themselves in a traditional form, develop according to the fantasy of countless arabesques." (Hugh) Ironically, however, what "attracted Debussy and his compatriots [to this kind of music also] entailed an unmistakable safety net: Gallic [colonial] Power." (Id.)

<sup>3</sup> Debussy actually composed a companion piece to *Golliwog* in 1909, which was initially called "The Little Nigar," Later editions changed the title to "Le Petit Negre" or "The Little Negro" to make it less offensive. (McKinley, 250)

<sup>4</sup> The connection between African tribal music and early jazz will be explained in the next section below.

<sup>5</sup> Stravinsky continued his admiration for American jazz by later composing his 1918 *Ragtime* (White, 275) and the 1945 *Ebony Concerto*. (Id., 436).