

Stravinsky, Igor: *Chroniques de ma vie* (1835)

In March 1935 at the age of 53, Stravinsky published the first volume of his autobiography, *Chroniques de ma vie* with Denoël and Steel; the second volume appeared in December of the same year. In publishing his memoirs, Stravinsky was taking part in a long-established tradition of composer autobiographies, following the model of his professor Rimsky-Korsakov, himself the author of a *Chronique de ma vie musicale* (1909). Stravinsky's book is written in a sober, accessible style. His reasons for writing are clearly laid out in the preface: his purpose is to "dispel misunderstandings" and present his "true image" after his words had been so often "distorted" in interviews. Although he had already granted many interviews, Stravinsky also published some fifteen articles in the press and specialist publications in which his desire to speak out, often in the form of "clarifications" was already present.

When writing, Stravinsky often called upon others to help him formulate his ideas. In the case of *Chroniques de ma vie*, he turned to Walter Nouvel (1871–1949), a friend of Diaghilev's who had published the latter's biography the same year. Nouvel wrote the text, or at the very least, transcribed it from exchanges with the composer. A few letters from Nouvel to Stravinsky attest to his stay at Voreppe in the summer of 1934 for the purpose of writing the autobiography. In this sense, the book is an example of a genre that the literary theorist Philippe Lejeune has called "autobiographies of those who don't write": an autobiographical text produced by two people, in which the "hero" of the book doesn't write and the other person's role is not to write, but to transcribe. Whereas the drafts of Stravinsky's *Poétique musicale* (1939) reveal the specific roles played by his coauthors, the archives and preparatory texts for *Chroniques* are too limited to allow for an understanding of its conception. The archives of the Stravinsky Collection at the Sacher Foundation in Basel only contains a corrected typescript of the first part and the corrected proofs of the second part. In 1984, Robert Craft brought to light several points relative to Walter Nouvel's role, the origins of the book, negotiations with the publisher, financial agreements with Nouvel and early reviews.

Despite Stravinsky's concern with exactitude, the texts of the *Chroniques* contain many approximations and errors. Dates are often absent, and when indicated, wrong. Generally speaking, the composer is not concerned with anchoring his story to a historical framework. The fifty-some years that the narrative covers saw the Russian Revolution, the First World War, the rise of Communism, but Stravinsky rarely refers to these upheavals in his political, intellectual, and artistic life, remaining focused on his personal trajectory. The first volume is divided in three chapters: "First Impressions", "Adolescence", and "In the time of the Ballets russes" which takes the reader to the 1920 premiere of *Pulcinella*. The second volume is also divided in three: "Post-War Years", "From *Œdipus Rex* to *Baiser de la fée*", and "After the Death of Diaghilev".

In terms of content, the ideas Stravinsky mentions are later further developed in his *Poétique musicale*. The portraits he paints of his collaborators, and especially those who are still active, are rather tenuous but kind. The pages devoted to the people who marked him offer sharp opinions, as much regarding his tastes as his distastes: musicians, the record, Wagnerism, Tchaikovsky, Beethoven, and musical expression. Stravinsky's obsession with setting limits on the interpretation of music, whether critical or musical, is particularly present, although he never formulates any sort of aesthetic doctrine or system.

Chroniques de ma vie was soon internationally distributed through numerous translations, starting with two English editions in 1936 (*An Autobiography* in New York, and *Chronicle of my life* in London), a German edition in 1937 (*Erinnerungen*),

which was partly modified to allow for a rehabilitation of Stravinsky's music in Germany (see Evans, 1996). The first Russian edition appeared in 1963.

Valérie DUFOUR

18/02/2020

Trans. Chris Murray

Further reading

- Igor Stravinski, *Chroniques de ma vie*, Paris, Denoël et Steele, 2 vols, 1935.
- Robert Craft, « Appendix K : Walter Nouvel and *Chroniques de ma vie* », *Stravinsky : Selected Correspondence*, London, Faber and Faber, vol. 2, 1984, p. 487-502.
- Antoni Piza, « Stravinsky's *Autobiography* and Stravinsky's Authority » in Id., *The Tradition of Autobiography in Music*, PhD, City University of New York, 1994, p. 175-239.
- Joan Evans, « Some remarks on the publication and reception of Stravinsky's *Erinnerungen* », *Mitteilungen der Paul Sacher Stiftung*, 9 (March 1996), p.17-23.
- Irina A. Veršinina, « Perečityvâ knigu Igorâ Stravinskogo Hronika moej žizni [Re-reading Stravinsky's book *Chroniques de ma vie*] », Стравинский в контексте времени и места: Материалы научной конференции. Series: Naučnye trudy Moskovskoj Gosudarstvennoj Konservatorii im. P.I. Čajkovskogo, No. 57, Moskva, Gosudarstvennââ Konservatoriâ imeni P.I. Čajkovskogo (Kafedra Istorii Zarubežnoj Muzyki), 2006, p.173-185.
- Stephen Walsh, *Stravinsky. The Second Exile. France and America, 1934-1971*, Londres, J. Cape, 2006.
- Valérie Dufour, art. « *Chroniques de ma vie* », dans Peter O'Hagan et Edward Campbell (eds), *The Stravinsky Encyclopedia*, Cambridge University Press, 2020, sous presse.

To quote this article: Valérie Dufour, "Stravinsky, Igor: *Chroniques de ma vie* (1835)", Dictionary of Composer's Writings, Dictéco [online], ed. E. Reibel, last edited: 16/12/2023, <https://preprod.dicteco2.ihrim.fr/book/12233>.