

Metrical Displacement in Stravinsky

by Pieter C. van den Toorn

Of all the distinguishing marks of Stravinsky's music, none is more compelling than the element of displacement. Stravinsky seems often to have begun here, in fact, not with a committed set of pitch relations, necessarily, or with techniques of juxtaposition and superimposition, but with a phrase turned rhythmically, a motive or chord displaced in relation to a steady metrical framework.

Traditional methods of thematic elaboration or, to follow Schoenberg, "developing variation" play little or no role in this process. Apart from the displacement itself, the repetition of the motive or chord is "straight". The sympathetic give-and-take of a traditional development is precluded as well, the idea – "humanistic", as it has been imagined – of a "dialogue" or exchange between parts or instrumental roles. Here, too, the repetition can seem static and narrowly focused, as it did to the composer's critics earlier in the century, including Theodor W. Adorno: "The repetition constantly presents the same thing as though it were 'something different'. Farcical and clownish, it has the effect of putting on airs; in fact, straining without anything really happening."¹

Yet it harbors this inner dynamic of its own; the metrical alignment of the repeated entity shifts. And this can happen almost immediately. As the motive is followed in quick succession by its displaced repeat, the two can form the basis of a thematic statement, one defined by displacement, an alignment introduced and then countered.

Shown in *Examples 1a, b, c, and d* are four barrings of the opening bell-like theme of the *Symphonies of Wind Instruments* (1920; rev. 1947). The irregular barrings of the first two examples are Stravinsky's, the steady ones of the remaining two are analytical. Each barring treats the underlying motive D-D-D-B and its shortened repeat D-D-B differently. According to the analytical re-barring of *Example 1c*, the shortened repeat is displaced in relation to the quarter-note beat (easily the tactus here with a marking of 72). Entering on the beat of the opening measure, the motive falls off the beat in the second measure, more specifically, on the fourth eighth-note beat of the barline or half-note pulse.

Musical score for Igor Stravinsky's *Symphonies of Wind Instruments*, beginning. The score is divided into four parts:

- a) 1920: Clarinet (cl.) line in 3/4 time, tempo $\text{♩} = 72$. A bracket labeled "A 7" spans the first seven measures.
- b) 1947: Piano (p.) and trumpet (tp.) lines in 2/4 time, and clarinet (cl.) line in 3/4 time. A bracket labeled "A 7" spans the first seven measures.
- c) re-barréd: Clarinet (cl.) line in 2/4 time. A bracket labeled "A 7" spans the first seven measures.
- d) recomposed: Clarinet (cl.) line in 2/4 time. A bracket labeled "A 8" spans the first eight measures.

Example 1: Igor Stravinsky, *Symphonies of Wind Instruments* (1920; rev. 1947), beginning.

The passage is recomposed in *Example 1d*, providing yet another foil for Stravinsky's invention; both the displacement and the shortening of the repeat are eliminated. From this perspective, the displaced repeat of *Examples 1a, b, and c* arrives an eighth-note beat "too soon". And its arrival leaves the initial motive with an irregular span of seven eighth-note beats. This, in turn, is the basis of the notation, Stravinsky's irregular meter.

Felt displacement presupposes a steady metrical framework. At the same time, it creates irregular spans which undermine that framework. These cross purposes lie at the heart of the invention. Displacement and the steady meter it implies stand in opposition to the idea of a single metrical alignment and the shifting meter it in turn implies. And although the listener may orient him/herself one way or the other with respect to these dual purposes (or opposing forces), the latter are by no means isolated from each other in actual experience. On the contrary, the relationship is reciprocal; a change in the metrical placement of a reiterating motive will disrupt the metrical bearings of the listener (if only for a split second), challenging precisely that which underlies his/her apprehension of the change in placement. If a sense of placement (or displacement) depends on a steady meter, in other words, then

the reverse is also true; meter is inferred from as well as imposed on placement. Hence the disruptive effect of the play, the resistance that an orientation is likely to encounter. So, too, the notation can acknowledge only on one side of the coin, one given response; it conceals as much as it reveals.

In opposition to Stravinsky's irregular barring in the *Symphonies*, then, a barring that preserves a single placement for the motive D-D-D-B and its shortened repeat, steady levels of metrical pulsation may be inferred, the level of the quarter-note beat at the very least, that of the half-note more ambitiously, in relation to which the shortened repeat may be felt as displaced. *Examples 2* and *3b* recreate these circumstances, although with notated steady rather than irregular meters. Here, the composer has opted for "conservative" rather than "radical" readings, leaving the displaced repeats exposed to the eye.²

The image shows a musical score for the beginning of the third movement of Igor Stravinsky's Symphony in C. It is in 4/8 time. The upper staff (treble clef) contains a sequence of chords and rests. The lower staff (bass clef) contains a sequence of eighth notes. Dynamics include *sf*, *p*, and *sf-p sub*. The notation includes accents and slurs.

Example 2: Igor Stravinsky, *Symphony in C* (1938–40), movement 3, beginning.

How might the origin of this technique be traced? The hypermetric structures of Western art music undoubtedly served Stravinsky as a precedent, displacements at levels of pulsation above the barline. And there are precedents in the singing of Russian popular verse, in the flexible stresses that accompany that singing. In a celebrated passage from one of his "conversation" books, Stravinsky recalled his "rejoicing discovery" of that tradition, tracing it to his stay in Switzerland during the early years of the First World War.³ Problematically here, however, his recollection places the "discovery" after the fact, so to speak, after pieces such as *Petrushka* (1911) and *The Rite of Spring* (1910–13), pieces in which from a strictly musical point of view, the element of displacement had already become an established part of the idiom.

The repeat structures in Debussy's music may also have played a role. Several in *Nocturnes* have been examined by Nicolas Ruwet,⁴ who, following André Schaeffner,⁵ identified the process as one "duplication". But rarely did Debussy (or Rimsky-Korsakov, for that matter) displace the repeat in these structures, so that this specifically "rhythmic" feature emerges as very nearly entirely Stravinsky's own.

How might the psychology of displacement be described? If meter, internalized, made physically a part of the listener, is a “mode of attending”, what of its disruption?⁶ And what of its aesthetic point? Why should the listener be drawn not just to displacement but, presumably, to its disruptive effect?

These questions can be addressed by turning in greater detail to passages such as those shown in *Examples 1, 2, and 3*. See, too, the two versions of the clarinet fragment at No 1 in *Renard* in *Examples 3a* and *b*: the first is an early sketch from Stravinsky’s sketchbook for *Renard*, the second is from the finished score. Notice that the circumstances are the reverse of those of the *Symphonies*. The early sketch is radical while the finished score is conservative. The shifting barlines of the early sketch (*Example 3a*) preserve a single downbeat metrical alignment for the clarinet’s initial motive G-E-(G-E-G)-A-G, while the steady 2/4 scheme of the finished score brings the underlying displacements to the fore (*Example 3b*).

Yet the rationale is identical; the invention’s cross-purposes are underscored here by the composer’s own rearrangements. The latter are not a matter of notation alone, then, but can shed light on the pulls and attractions that lie underneath, so to speak, those which are a part of experience.⁷

The image displays two musical staves for a clarinet part, labeled 'a) early sketch' and 'b) score'. Both are in 2/4 time. Staff 'a' shows a clarinet line with a sequence of notes: G4, E4, G4, E4, G4, A4, G4. Above the notes are fingerings: 5, 2, 5, 5. The bar lines are irregular, shifting to keep the initial G-E-G-A-G motive aligned with the downbeat. Staff 'b' shows the same clarinet line but with a steady 2/4 meter and regular bar lines. Fingerings are 5, 2, 3, 5, 5. Below the clarinet line is a piano accompaniment consisting of a steady eighth-note bass line. A third staff at the bottom shows a simplified version of the clarinet line with fingerings 3, 3, 3.

Example 3: Igor Stravinsky, *Renard* (1916), rehearsal number 1.

1 Theodore W. Adorno, *Quasi una Fantasia*, Frankfurt/Main 1963, p. 211.

2 The distinction between “conservative” and “radical” responses, between yielding to metrical disturbance and allowing the meter to be sustained, was made by Andrew Imbrie in: “‘Extra’ Measures and Metrical Ambiguity in Beethoven”, in: *Beethoven Studies*, edited by Alan Tyson, New York 1973, pp. 45–66. Imbrie stressed the “conservative force” of meter: “[Meter] is the principle that attempts to reduce to ‘law and order’ the rhythmic complexities on the musical surface ... the frame of reference by which

we try to measure and judge relative values ... Our desire for security prompts us to accept the simplest, most nearly regular interpretation ...” Since then, the distinction has been introduced in Fred Lerdahl and Ray Jackendoff, *A Generative Theory of Tonal Music*, Cambridge, Mass. 1983, pp. 23–25; and it has been applied to various analytical re-barrings in Pieter C. van den Toorn, *Stravinsky and The Rite of Spring. The Beginnings of a Musical Language*, Berkeley 1987, pp. 57–96.

- 3 See Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Expositions and Developments*, Berkeley 1981, p. 121. Stravinsky’s remarks are discussed in detail in Richard Taruskin, *Stravinsky and the Russian Traditions*, Berkeley 1996, pp. 1206–36.
- 4 Nicolas Ruwet, *Langage, Musique, Poésie*, Paris 1972, pp. 70–99.
- 5 André Schaeffner, “Debussy et ses rapports avec la musique russe”, in: Pierre Souvtchinsky, *Musique Russe*, Paris 1953, vol. 1, pp. 95–138.
- 6 Robert Gjerdingen, “Meter as a Mode of Attending: A Network Simulation of Attentional Rhythmicity in Music”, in: *Integral*, 3 (1989), pp. 67–92.
- 7 A somewhat different approach to metrical displacement and its analysis is taken in Pieter C. van den Toorn, *Music, Politics, and the Academy*, Berkeley 1995, pp. 198–206. In an immediate way, of course, the issue touches on a number of subjects, including notation, compositional intent, and cognitive process. It can be infinitely engaging.