

Stravinsky on Film

There is little question that Igor Stravinsky was the most filmed composer of his generation. His notoriety made him a marketable commodity for television producers in both Europe and America. Eager to capitalize upon the composer's visibility as "the world's greatest living composer" (a label which Stravinsky himself did nothing to dispel), the composer, particularly by the 1960s, became the subject of numerous film documentaries, many of which have been destroyed or simply forgotten.¹⁾ A complete catalogue of Stravinsky's filmed appearances has not yet been compiled, and the task of doing so will be compounded by the fact that many admirers made private films of Stravinsky which have never been released.²⁾

Filed testimony of Stravinsky is a dimension of the composer's study which has generally been ignored. Such neglect might at first seem justifiable, particularly given the composer's chameleon ability to shift quickly to his "television actor mode", in which he chose to charm rather than to inform the public. Moreover some of the documentaries were entirely scripted, with the composer being asked simply to recite "canned" speeches, or to follow a regiment which forced the composer into a rigidity completely alien to his natural spontaneity in such situations. For example in a 1957 film by the American television network, NBC, entitled *A Conversation with Igor Stravinsky*, the following scenario was provided for the composer:

"We find Maestro Stravinsky at the piano in the small room adjacent to the living room. He is busy reworking a musical phrase or working on a composition in some stage of completion. He strikes notes on the piano. He proceeds normally. Shortly he resolves the musical problem and decides to ask Mr. Craft's opinion. He calls Mr. Craft who enters from the door by the bathroom. The two men sit side by side on the piano bench or Mr. Craft stands by Maestro Stravinsky who is seated, or whatever arrangement is natural. Mr. Craft asks how the composing goes (or a remark pertinent to the situation). Maestro Stravinsky answers and the conversation is under way."³⁾

If Stravinsky had sensed from the start the commercial gains to be realized by submitting himself to the vagaries such productions engendered, nevertheless by the 1960s he was becoming increasingly involved in such projects. Thankfully the 1957 NBC documentary was an early ebb; thereafter the quality of such t. v. interviews and documentaries improved considerably. Excellent films were made by the CBC in

Toronto in the early 1960s, by CBS in New York in 1965, and by Richard Leacock and Rolf Liebermann for the Norddeutscher Rundfunk (Hamburg) in 1966. And while much can be learned from viewing these glimpses of Stravinsky conducting, working with students, being interviewed by such figures as Aldous Huxley, chatting freely with Boulez, collaborating with George Balanchine, and generally “performing” for the camera, the actual broadcast versions of these documentaries tell only a half-truth. In many of these instances, the actual outtakes from these documentaries have been preserved. These trims frequently prove to be especially instructive, and in some cases were surely edited out of the prints either because they were too provocative to release, or too limited for public appeal because of their narrow musical focus and jargon-like language. Ironically, these outtakes are perhaps the very portions of greatest value in structuring a complete, unfiltered profile of the composer.

When the Paul Sacher Stiftung acquired the film archives of British film-maker Tony Palmer, not only were the outtakes of Mr. Palmer’s monumental 1982 film of Stravinsky, entitled *Once at a border ...*, included, but also numerous cans of trims from such earlier documentaries as the 1965 CBS film produced by David Oppenheim. Palmer’s own film often incorporates portions of many of the early Stravinsky documentaries.⁴⁾ But the Palmer film is not only valuable because of its strategic insertions of these rare film clips, but also because of the cornerstone interviews with many of Stravinsky’s closest associates spread throughout the nearly three-hour production. The film was commissioned by London Weekend Television and first aired in the spring of 1982.⁵⁾ Palmer agreed to make the film on the expressed condition that both Stravinsky’s children and Stravinsky’s associate, Robert Craft, would appear.⁶⁾

The film not only gains in significance because of these appearances, but also since other interviews included with Lifar, Rambert, Theodore Stravinsky, Danilova, Balanchine and others, were among the last given before their deaths.

Among the clips which ended on the cutting room floors are segments of nearly every interview conducted by Mr. Palmer. Some interviews were excluded entirely.⁷⁾ For example an interview with Louise Dushkin, wife of Stravinsky’s violin collaborator Sam Dushkin, is not to be found. But the excluded interview provides Mrs. Dushkin’s otherwise unrecorded account of the composer’s thoughts on the Violin Concerto and Stravinsky’s complex interpersonal feeling about that time. Only a small part of the interview with Stravinsky’s younger son Soulima, for instance, was incorporated into the final print. The outtakes here provide much more detail on the son’s relationship with both his mother and

father than the 1982 print furnish. But the comments made were perhaps too direct, too revealing to include. The same holds for the edited interview of Milene Stravinsky, the composer's younger daughter, who in the outtakes speaks of her father's relationships and the consequences on the family. There are literally cans of outtakes in which Mr. Craft displays many of Stravinsky's original manuscripts, offering illuminating commentary upon each work's evolution – commentary not recorded in any of Mr. Craft's voluminous writings.⁸⁾ But the descriptions offered are technical in nature and ultimately were deleted, no doubt because of their limited appeal to a non-professional audience.

The trims from the CBS 1965 film remained unearthed until Palmer acquired them in 1980. The making of the CBS documentary, *Stravinsky*, was, as evinced by the sheer volume of outtakes, an enormous undertaking. Cans of unreleased footage were shot, tracking Stravinsky, his wife Vera, and Mr. Craft, through their travels over the better part of a year. Cameras record their conversations in restaurants, hotels, in Stravinsky's cabin aboard a transatlantic crossing, even in cars, where the trio is filmed conversing in the back seat as they travel the streets of Manhattan. Much of what was edited out was understandable, that is, the camera often records unimportant conversation bearing no relevance to the composer. Clearly, the cameras were instructed simply "to roll" and so often nothing of consequence results. Yet at other times, the camera captures opinions, discussions and explanations that while informative, are, without viewing these rare trims, virtually lost. Among these clips, Stravinsky discusses his views of choreography, especially the work of Jerome Robbins (though nowhere else in the Stravinsky literature are these views aired); his relationship with his father, and with his teacher Rimsky. In one segment – again doubtlessly too technically oriented to be of interest to a general audience and therefore cut from the final print – Stravinsky explains the construction of the serial underpinnings for his orchestral Variations, as he turns the pages of his manuscript sketchbook, addressing each sketch as it unfolds.

Certainly such trims enlighten us about Stravinsky's own explication of his compositional process, but beyond that, these outtakes address some of the many other roles that Stravinsky played. As a conductor, for instance, there is at least two hours of unreleased film which document Stravinsky recording his *Ebony Concerto* in a New York studio with Benny Goodman. A brief portion of the recording session was actually included in the 1965 CBS documentary (and later also employed by Tony Palmer in his production), but the released clip is only the quickest of glimpses into a working session in which Stravinsky, obviously oblivious to the camera recording him, works with a deliberate, professional purpose that one might not have anticipated. This is

the “off-camera” Stravinsky here, that is, one not consciously performing for the sake of filmed posterity, but rather because a job must be accomplished in a limited time. Moreover in another clip, Mr. Craft can be seen standing just behind Stravinsky who ostensibly is leading the ensemble. But the orchestra looks to Craft who is also conducting, thus confirming what some had already known. Many expunged sections confirm the importance and influence of Mr. Craft. As they return from a rehearsal of the earlier mentioned Variations, Craft openly offers suggestions on the orchestration of the work to Stravinsky, and after a moment’s pause, Stravinsky signals his agreement with Craft that the orchestration now needs to be revised.

Both the 1965 CBS film and the later Palmer documentary include footage from Stravinsky’s visit to the University of Texas where he answered questions posed by students. But neither film elected to use filmed portions of this campus visit in which Stravinsky leads a master class on several of his works. In one clip, for example, Stravinsky is seen listening to a student perform his *Three Pieces for Clarinet*, and offering remarks about the performance. Where else in the Stravinsky literature can one find such directly observable criticisms between the composer and an interpreter?

All of these documentaries were originally made for television and necessarily were constructed primarily upon a commercial rather than educational agenda. One quickly gets the impression that documentary films about Stravinsky were as carefully orchestrated and choreographed as any of the composer’s ballets. The importance of such films lies principally in what was left on the cutting room floor. It is the ability of such trims to show us, without intercession, interpretation, or even censure what Stravinsky and his associates really said. In this sense the unedited segments of these films should rightfully take their place alongside Stravinsky’s unedited and unpublished correspondence, as well as other primary source materials which now, some twenty years after Stravinsky’s death, are just coming to light. Through such sources, the Stravinsky that we will see in another twenty years is indeed likely to be somewhat different than the current image we have been bequeathed.

1) In a letter to this writer, September 8, 1992, Stravinsky’s associate Robert Craft states that Stravinsky “was filmed at every arrival at every airport in the 1960s. The BBC destroyed the most interesting interview in 1965 . . .”

2) For a partial listing of these films and critical commentary, see Robert Craft and Vera Stravinsky, *Stravinsky in Pictures and Documents*, New York 1978, p. 15, footnote 1. Leonard Bernstein, for example, is known to have filmed Stravinsky upon at least five occasions, but the films have not yet been made available.

3) The action was drafted by Robert Graff, who years later produced the ill-fated 1962 television production of Stravinsky's *The Flood*. Stravinsky retained a file marked "NBC Television, 1957" (now held by the Paul Sacher Stiftung) which contains documents on Stravinsky's responses to proposed questions, the lengthy negotiation process with NBC that Stravinsky engaged in, and correspondence between Stravinsky, Robert Craft, and Arnold Weissberger, the composer's attorney.

4) The Paul Sacher Stiftung possesses prints of all of the documentaries cited above (CBC, NBC, CBS and NRF). Approximately 60 hours of film compiled in over 80 cans are available for study.

5) It was later viewed at the International Stravinsky Conference held in San Diego, Fall, 1982. A video tape of the original film is now commercially marketed by Kultur Films in the United States.

6) I wish to thank Mr. Palmer for meeting with me in Zurich, December 1991, to discuss the intricate history which led to the making of his documentary. For a review of the film, see Robert Craft, *Present Perspectives*, New York 1984, pp. 410–415.

7) While Mr. Palmer made final decisions regarding what was to be included generally, both Mr. Craft and the Stravinsky children were allowed to review all interview statements and to exercise cutting rights as well.

8) In addition to the actual filmed outtakes, the Paul Sacher Stiftung retains written transcriptions of most, but not all, of these interviews. Conversely some written transcripts survive for films which have not yet been transferred to video tape. Those pursuing a study of these materials should be advised that only an examination of both the actual films and the transcripts will provide an accurate and complete account of Stravinsky's film history.