

Nicholas Latimer  
Vice President, Director of Publicity  
(212) 572-2106

For author interview, contact:  
Christine Casaccio (212) 572-2195  
ccasaccio@randomhouse.com

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Alfred A.  
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Publisher

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New York City 10019  
phone: (212) 572-2104  
fax: (212) 940-7307  
knopfpublicity@randomhouse.com

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The second and final volume of the author's magisterial biography

# STRAVINSKY

THE SECOND EXILE: FRANCE AND AMERICA, 1934-1971

by **STEPHEN WALSH**

IN 1934, IGOR STRAVINSKY WAS 52, A RUSSIAN EXPATRIATE LIVING IN PARIS, and already regarded by many as the most important composer of his generation. *Stravinsky: The Second Exile* follows him through the remainder of his long life, which he would spend largely in the United States. These were the years during which he composed such masterworks as *The Rake's Progress* and *Symphony in C* and achieved a new level of fame as a conductor and concert pianist in his own right. Walsh traces and illuminates Stravinsky's complex and often agonized family life as well as his crucially important relationship with his associate Robert Craft. As a musicologist and critic, Walsh speaks with authority and understanding not only about Stravinsky's life but also about his work, expertly following the composer's musical journey from neoclassicism to his late ventures into serialism.

Based on exhaustive research and written with extraordinary range and assurance, this biography casts new light on one of the greatest artists of our time.

## STRAVINSKY'S DIVIDED LIFE

*From the Introduction*

As so often with exiles, Igor Stravinsky's personality seemed to mold itself to its environment. The insecurities of his childhood he had learnt to conceal behind a severe expression and a courtly manner. But the severity could at any moment dissolve into a huge grin like a burst of sunshine on a darkened hillside, and the courtliness was no more than a veil for a sharp wit and a vivid sense of the absurd.

In Paris, he was much cultivated in those circles on the fringes of high society for whom modern art was a chic and preferably not too gloomy accessory of the life of leisure. His mistress, Vera Sudeykina, a charming Russian former actress and occasional theatre costumière, moved effortlessly in this artistic-cum-intellectual milieu, even though she was entirely without means of her own and often had scarcely enough ready cash to feed the electricity meter at her flat in the sixteenth arrondissement. Igor and Vera were, in the vulgar parlance of a later age, an item, but they were also an adornment, a pair who graced the social and artistic stage on which they walked and whose

frequently protracted absences from it were regretted.

The other half of Stravinsky's life was very different in tone. His wife, Catherine (a first cousin whom he had known since he was eight), consciously preserved a family hearth of a specifically Russian character, a household that included her mother-in-law, her two daughters, now in their early twenties, and two sons (when not otherwise occupied in Paris), together with the children's old nyanya Madubo Svitalski, and assorted day servants. Here Stravinsky could find the peace and stability he needed in order to compose. Katya understood this need and dedicated her entire effort to satisfying it, notwithstanding her husband's open infidelity and his despotic insistence that she accept it and even, in certain respects, connive at it. Illness and sorrow gradually induced in her a spirit of intense piety,

*Continued...*



which found expression in a constant study of the Orthodox holy book, the *Dobrotolyubiye*, the frequent invocation of saints, and a growing fondness for sacred relics and images about the house. You could not be in the house for ten minutes without being aware of the faint odor of sanctity, a whiff of candles and incense, some hint of spirituality in the air.

Stravinsky relished this atmosphere and found it conducive to work, though his own piety was selective and, like his behavior, somewhat irregular. Religious observance was a personal matter. But he talked much about the life of the spirit and read widely in devotional literature. His art, he considered, was a divine grace. His lifestyle, on the other hand, was his own concern. Each of these different things belonged in a channel of its own, but at the end of each of them was the single thing that mattered most to him: his music.

Stravinsky's divided life had settled into a routine. When he was composing, he would go home, shut himself in his studio all morning, appear promptly for meals, spend part of the afternoon with his family, then work on until dinnertime. Work would be interrupted for long conducting tours abroad or necessary trips to the capital, for concerts, recordings, meetings with publishers, or on some less compelling pretext simply to enable him to be with Vera. Then he would become a rich Parisian, live expensively, keep late hours in intellectually or artistically amusing company, and compose only spasmodically. When he toured, Vera would go as his companion; they would travel first class and stay at the best hotels. As a conductor or pianist he could command high fees because his music had made him not liked but notorious, and audiences came to peer at this unexpectedly diminutive, surprisingly normal-looking creator of musical earthquakes. Unfortunately a different kind of earthquake threatened to disrupt these smooth, lucrative progresses. The political mood in Germany, hitherto the most reliable platform for the newest music, had turned against everything that was modern and foreign; economic conditions to the east had become unstable. Even in France and Italy, where politics and art were still officially on good terms, enthusiasm for the new was tempered by anxiety and the fear of risk. Financial insecurity, the terror of the exile and the torment of the artist, once again roamed the countryside like an immigration officer, demanding to see your passport and your work permit.

Stravinsky's own music had never openly involved itself in the worries of its creator's daily life, and certainly never in the politics of the world beyond. In 1916, while the opposing

armies were slaughtering tens of thousands of young men on the Somme, Stravinsky sat in a turret room in a small town on the shores of Lake Geneva and wrote a song-and-dance piece about farmyard animals. After the war, settled in France, he perfected a cool, objective, formalist language that seemed studiously to deny any possible emotional engagement or nervous instability. But when Stravinsky fell passionately in love with Vera in 1921, he celebrated with a mild comedy based on a style parody by Pushkin about the servant problem in early nineteenth-century St. Petersburg. He then followed this with a series of neoclassical instrumental works, an opera-oratorio about Oedipus in which the characters were masked and inert throughout, and a ballet blanc for string orchestra on the birth and apotheosis of Apollo. While Communists and Royalists fought pitched battles in the Place de la Concorde in early 1934, Stravinsky was putting the

finishing touches on one of his most serene masterpieces, a large-scale dance drama about Persephone, the pomegranate, and the origin of the seasons. If these great works had any single message for the sublunary world, it could only be that disorder—whether political or psychic—must be neutralized through stern formal control and a refusal of facile emotion.

The Stravinskys decided to move to Paris. Their children were grown up, and increasingly frustrated by the boredom and emptiness of genteel rural life. Katya was constantly ill, and Anna Stravinsky, her mother-in-law, though outwardly in good enough health, was growing frail. As for Anna's son, he must have felt some pull toward the focus of things, some desire to be fully in contact with the heart of the country of which he and Katya were now citizens. Paris would not solve the central problem of his existence; it would aggravate it, pulling the two halves uncomfortably close, like opposite magnetic poles forced reluctantly together. It would not help his bookings, either, and it would if anything hinder his composing. Perhaps he was himself simply weary of the interminable travel, the incessant journeys like this nine-hour trip to Grenoble. Perhaps he had made up his mind to challenge the division in his life, to negate it by sheer force of will. Or perhaps, in his inmost heart, he sensed that Paris was no more than a staging post on some longer, as yet unmapped journey.

**His art,  
he considered,  
was a divine  
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lifestyle,  
on the other  
hand, was his  
own concern.**



STEPHEN WALSH is a critic and musicologist. He is the author of a number of books on composers ranging from Schumann to Bartók. The first volume of the biography, *Stravinsky: A Creative Spring: Russia and France 1882-1934*, was published in 1999. He teaches at Cardiff University.

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