



"It takes time, aging, to make a classic." A musical dynamo at rest: Lou Ouzer photographed Igor Stravinsky at Hutchison House.



LOUIS OUZER

Meeting *a* modern master

In 1966, Igor Stravinsky and Eastman met for the first time

BY DAVID RAYMOND

IF, IN 1966, you circulated a poll among American musicians asking them to name The Greatest Living Composer, the winner, no contest, would have been Igor Stravinsky. So it was a tremendous surprise when Eastman School Director Walter Hendl announced in January 1966 that Stravinsky would visit the School for a “Stravinsky Week” from March 7–12.

At that time, Stravinsky was 83, and at the end of a long career as pianist, conductor, writer – and composer of *Petrushka*, *Le Sacre du Printemps*, *Les Noces*, *The Rake’s Progress*, and other revolutionary masterpieces, making him one of the few living classical composers who was a household name. The octogenarian Stravinsky was also the virtual incarnation of 20th-century music, composing flinty, uncompromising 12-tone pieces that sounded like the work of a much younger composer.

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"If you played what was on the page, he was happy," says percussionist Ruth Cahn (pictured in the rear) of performing under Stravinsky in 1966.

His age notwithstanding, 1966 was a busy year for the composer. CBS-TV broadcast a special about him. In June and July, a Stravinsky Festival in New York's Philharmonic Hall included Leonard Bernstein conducting *Le Sacre du Printemps*, among much else. And Stravinsky completed his last important work, *Requiem Canticles*, first performed in October 1966 at Princeton University.

This was Stravinsky's first visit to Rochester (and his next-to-last – he guest-conducted the Rochester Philharmonic in 1967).

Director Hendl and Stravinsky had been close friends since Hendl played the piano in the 1946 New York Philharmonic premiere of Stravinsky's *Symphony in Three Movements*. Soon after, Hendl conducted Stravinsky's *Ebony Concerto* at the composer's request.

On arriving in Rochester, the composer, accompanied as always by his wife Vera and his assistant Robert Craft, gave a press conference. The *Times-Union* summed it up: "He refused to comment on the work of fellow contemporary composers, declined to guess the direction music will take in the last half of the 20th century, and said electronic music 'doesn't exist for me.'"

"It takes time, aging, to make a classic," Stravinsky was quoted. "Wine ages in six years, not so with music."

In March 1966, current Eastman School Director and Dean James Undercoffer was a junior, and associate principal horn in the Philharmonia (he played the solo horn part in *The Flood*).

"Walter Hendl wanted to burnish the School's reputation," says Undercoffer, "and one of the first things he did was to invite Stravinsky. It was a prime experience, a major, major thing.

"Stravinsky was truly larger-than-life; there really is not a comparable world figure in music today."

"We were out of our skulls with excitement," recalls Ruth Cahn – now CED faculty member and Summer Session director, then a percussionist in the Philharmonia. "The giant of 20th-century music was coming to our school!

"We all gathered on the Eastman Theatre stage for the rehearsal with Stravinsky – I think we were there an hour early, practicing – and the excitement was mounting. Finally, the stage door opened, we all stood up, and the giant of 20th-century music entered – and I couldn't see him, as he was only about four feet high! Then he got on the podium, and I *still* couldn't see him."

"The clarity of Stravinsky's compositions was not matched by the clarity of his conducting," says Cahn, adding that this was also her experience when performing Aaron Copland's music under the composer's baton.

"There was no sense of interpretation in Stravinsky's conducting. We learned quickly that if you simply played what was on the page, he was happy."

Most of the musical preparation – and the conducting of everything on the Philharmonia concert except *Fireworks* and *Firebird* – was done by Stravinsky's assistant Robert Craft, whom both Cahn and Undercoffer recall as a brilliant musician with an infallible ear and technique.

"A circle of people accompanied Stravinsky everywhere – you couldn't get near him," recalls Undercoffer. "Every day the students had a Stravinsky Watch: 'Where is he now?' Now that I'm one of the people who creates the circle around celebrities who visit the School, I understand that you *have* to surround them."

Cahn recalls Stravinsky as being "very distant with the students," communicating exclusively with Hendl and Craft in French. "Not one word of English did I hear from him. Of course, if he *had*

singled any of us out, we'd have curled up and died!

"We were in obvious awe of him, and he obviously enjoyed it. He acted like a prima donna – but if anybody had a right to do it, it was Stravinsky."

The week at Eastman was a celebration of Stravinsky's music, classic and otherwise. The composer's "Official Welcome to Eastman" concert, on March 7, 1966, was a challenging combination of new and old Stravinsky performed by students. The program included the *Shakespearian Songs* and *Elegy for JFK*, both difficult late works, sung by mezzo-soprano Joyce Castle.

"Stravinsky was there, Vera was there, Robert Craft was there," Castle recalls. "I wasn't nervous; I remember being excited and extremely focused, because the songs were very, very intricate. But what an amazing opportunity! I also recall a Q-and-A session with Stravinsky in Kilbourn Hall, and hanging on every word he said."

Castle later performed two roles, Baba the Turk and Mother Goose, in Stravinsky's opera *The Rake's Progress*. And, she recalls, "Strangely enough, I sang the *Shakespeare Songs* for the second time just last December, at the University of Kansas" (where she is an artist in residence).

A Philharmonia program on Friday, the culmination of Stravinsky Week, similarly demonstrated Stravinsky's long and remarkable career, from the late-Romantic *Symphony in E-flat* (written in 1908) to *Variations* and *The Flood*, atonal works from the '50s and '60s. It ended with Stravinsky conducting his most popular work, then and now, *The Firebird*.

The *Times-Union's* George Kimball, noting that the 3,000 audience members gave the composer three separate ovations, called it a "once-in-a-lifetime" event, and the *Democrat and Chronicle's* Harvey Southgate wrote: "The 83-year-old composer, walking with a limp but seemingly inspired by the young orchestra before him, conducted [*The Firebird*] with vigor and enthusiasm, placing every detail of the brilliant score in precisely the place he wished it."

Southgate concluded, unarguably, "This was indeed one of the special nights in Rochester music."

Soon after his visit, the seldom-pleased Stravinsky was quoted in the *New York Review of Books* (May 11, 1966): "Only a few weeks ago I heard the Eastman School orchestra [the Philharmonia] play to perfection, on a minimum of rehearsal, some of my most



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"I can still see in my mind's eye ... Stravinsky on the podium," says Director and Dean James Undercofler, then a hornist in the Philharmonia.

difficult later music, including parts of *The Flood*, which at least one renowned professional orchestra could not manage after a week of rehearsals and a dozen performances. The flexibility of the young versus the rigidity of the *routiniers* is an old theme, of course, but you can hardly imagine the pleasure this student orchestra gave me."

His friend returned the compliment. In the concert program, Walter Hendl called Stravinsky "the most illustrious example of an individual who exemplifies both the knower and the doer." And in the very first

issue of *Eastman Notes*, in September 1966, Hendl noted: "I have always felt there is real value in any encounter with a creative force. The phenomenon that is Stravinsky of course, is entirely unique, and this was quite an encounter."

"When great things happen to you, you don't always know that they're happening," says Undercofler. "But I can still see in my mind's eye, as clear as day, Stravinsky on the podium. I remember thinking to myself as I sat in the orchestra, 'You must remember this. This won't happen again.'" ♣