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STRAVINSKY, by Francis Routh
(MASTER MUSICIANS series)
Dent, 1975 (£4.50)

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY, by Igor Stravinsky, reprinted with an introduction by Eric Walter White
Calder and Boyars, 1975, hardback (£5.95) and paperback (£2.50)

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In its 75th year of existence, Dent's Master Musicians series shows every sign of continuing life, with updating of older volumes and at least some attempt to deal with major 20th century figures. The

usefulness of the series is also, however, a danger, for it is widely used in schools and colleges, and one quails to think of some of Francis Routh's sentences turning up for decades in exam scripts.

I expected this latest volume to be a careful synthesis of all the available Stravinskyana, although to have swallowed all that and regurgitated it compactly, clearly and stylishly would have been no mean feat. Routh, unfortunately, has failed either to do enough swallowing or to make a neat job of the regurgitation. It would appear from his attempt that as yet critical biographers of such a major figure of the 20th century stand too close to see him in focus.

The most disappointing aspect of Routh's imperfect digestion is the biographical section. He explains in the introduction that the actual words of Stravinsky which he uses are placed in quotation marks. The exact sources of these are never given: annoying, as it can easily be done as Eric Walter White has in his *Stravinsky: the Composer and his Works*¹ with abbreviated titles of main sources inserted into the text itself. But I did not expect that almost the only source of Stravinsky's life up to 1934 would be the composer's own *Chronicle of My Life* (1936), now reissued as it happens in a new edition by Calder and Boyars under its American title *An Autobiography*. Routh has not just a few echoes of Stravinsky's words (almost unavoidable): the whole movement of the prose and ordering of the survey is taken direct, if summarised, from Stravinsky's 1936 account. This means that Routh presents as 'objective' fact views which *An Autobiography* presents as Stravinsky's own in 1935 when the book was written, and the danger is that in such a standard text they will become folklore.

For instance, of the first production of *Mavra* Stravinsky says: "*Mavra* was regarded . . . as a downright failure. Such was also the attitude of all the critics, notably those of the pre-war left. The condemned the whole thing then and there, attaching no importance to it, and regarding it as unworthy of closer examination. Only a few musicians of the younger generation appreciated *Mavra*, and realised that it marked a turning point in the evolution of my musical thought" (p.103).

Routh condenses this to:

"It was dismissed by critics of every shade as unworthy of closer examination . . . Very few realised that it marked a positive turning point in the evolution of Stravinsky's musical thought" (p.27). There is no evidence that Routh has done more than take Stravinsky on trust concerning either the attitude of the critics or the place of *Mavra* amongst Stravinsky's works. Another example, rather too long to give here, concerns the composition of the ballet *The Fairy's Kiss*, in which Routh's reliance on Stravinsky's 1936 account alone leads him apparently to infer that *all* the music in the ballet is by Tchaikovsky, ignoring Stravinsky's original pieces.

Although Routh seems to have been chary of appearing to lean on Eric Walter White's excellent survey, to the point of ignoring useful material on the life, phrases and ideas creep in, also unacknowledged. For example, it is White's idea that the *Dances Concertantes* were "overshadowed" by the *Symphony in C* (White p.372, Routh p.94), and Roman Vlad's, quoted by White (p.459) that the coda of *Threni* brings the music to "tonal polarization" (Routh p.125).

The most amusing example of Routh's inability to get away from his main source comes on page 17, where within one paragraph there are ten 'hes' and 'hims' referring to three different people; the most glaring, the account of the composition of *Apollo Musagetes*, which in its attempt to reduce several pages of the autobiography (pp.133-137 and pp.141-144) to two paragraphs becomes almost incomprehensible. Eric Walter White's own account of this is a model of how one can mix fact, comment and acknowledged quotation into a readable narrative.

Routh's approach thus means that there is little new to be learned from the 'Life' section. For British readers, for instance, he could have paid attention to the critical reaction to Stravinsky in this country (of which Stravinsky says little in *An Autobiography*). Routh has discovered nothing on the furore after the concert performance of *The Rite of Spring* in London in 1921, and could have enlarged on the aftermath of the premiere of *Symphonies of Wind Instruments*: Stravinsky's attention did not just "soon go elsewhere" as Routh says.

Of wider implication is the failure to discuss important questions about Stravinsky's life and thought relevant to his music which Stravinsky deliberately and interestingly omitted from *An Autobiography*. One is the real importance of Stravinsky's religious thinking, especially in the 1930s. According to White, letters and comments of friends show that Stravinsky did go through a spiritual crisis at this time, and the composer gives some clues in his conversation volumes with Robert Craft. To my mind, Routh's one comment, on page 71, is not searching enough. Other questions concern the relationship of Stravinsky with his first wife, which the

composer himself says in *Expositions and Developments*² he will never discuss lest he "might betray something sacred" (p.43), the effect on him of the deaths in his family in the 1930s and the long and rather mysterious relationship with Vera de Bosset from at least 1932. There is also the question of the effect of critical opprobrium in the 1930s and the need to make a living with concert tours and transcriptions. Stravinsky, in the autobiography, is reticent on this; Routh could have found out more. No doubt there is still (as Routh says in the introduction) much Russian and American material to be released, but he has not managed to sift through a large amount of what has already been revealed, in the conversation books and in critical writings. This makes the Master Musicians book only an interim synthesis: a real pity, as so many use this series as a complete source.

The 'Works' section at least mentions all Stravinsky's known published compositions, and within the limitations of the series itself - little formal analysis is ever allowed - is more satisfactory. But here again, Routh has trouble just writing clearly about the works and Stravinsky's style and in deciding how to discuss the corpus at all. Again one feels that he has been unable to stand back from the works and see them clearly. A curious little section called 'Interlude' is a ragbag of points which apparently didn't fit elsewhere. A final chapter on 'Stravinsky's Aesthetic' is an incredible attempt to summarise ideas from *Poetics of Music* and a few other statements. Somehow this all needs recasting, perhaps integrated into the chapter on Stravinsky's style.

At times in the chapters on the works one wants more explanation then and there. Routh points out that the ending of *Petrushka* is a "final apotheosis, which is a marked feature of many later works" (p.73). This term and its implications for Stravinsky is not explained here or, for that matter, in later examples. For the general reader I think it needs to be. Of *Orpheus* Routh says "much . . . is mimed song" (p.87): I would also have liked more on this. Some fairly important works could have been dealt with in more detail, notably the *Octet*, the *Symphony of Psalms* and the *Mass*, while with others there is a surfeit of material from *An Autobiography* (as on *Les Noces*).

Three small points, On page 54 of *Stravinsky in Conversation with Robert Craft*³, the composer himself has surely exposed as false the view promulgated by Routh on page 92 that the *Scherzo Fantastique* "depicts the life style of bees in a hive" (my italics). There is something wrong with the first paragraph on the *Symphony in Three Movements* (p.97) where an 'it' makes his comments appear to refer to the whole work instead of to the first movement only. On page 116 the sentences on *In Memoriam, Dylan Thomas and Elegy for JFK* seem to have got muddled.

The chapter on Stravinsky's musical style makes useful points as far as it goes, with good musical examples. It does not help the general reader much on the secrets of Stravinsky's individual rhythmic sense, on his eccentric accentuation of words or on his use of counterpoint. A table of the twelve-note sets of the later works is given virtually without comment (and contains one or two interesting differences from White's listings). In the end, we don't learn from Routh why Stravinsky has so individual a voice whether he says he is being influenced by Bach, Beethoven, Gesualdo, Tchaikovsky or whoever. Am I asking too much from a book which must conform to a series with an already defined shape? I think not. Routh has just not been able to step far enough away from his sources to give us the kind of clearly thought out insights which some of the books in the Master Musicians series have certainly done.

It is good to have *An Autobiography* readily available again. There is still much to be learned from Stravinsky's views on his life and times, and there are illuminating comments on such composers as Wagner and Beethoven and on, for instance, the encouragement of the BBC at a time when Stravinsky's fortunes in this country certainly languished. Eric Walter White's short introduction is useful, but what a pity that the opportunity wasn't taken to incorporate his corrections of the translation into the body of the text or at least as footnotes on the relevant pages. Incidentally, it is strange that the mystery of the anonymous translator is still unsolved. The autobiography remains an account remarkable as much for what Stravinsky does not discuss (as I have mentioned above) as for what he does, and will always need to be read alongside the later, freer conversation books.

NOTES:

¹Eric Walter White, *Stravinsky: the Composer and his Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 1966).

²Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Expositions and Developments* (New York: Doubleday, and London: Faber and Faber: 1962).

³*Stravinsky in Conversation with Robert Craft* (London: Penguin Books, 1962).