**Program Notes**

**Igor Stravinsky – Apollon musagète**

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*Born June 18, 1882, Oranienbaum, Russia.*

*Died April 6, 1971, New York City.*

**Apollon musagète**

Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge, who commissioned many enduring works of music, including Stravinsky’s *Apollon musagète*, was born in Chicago in 1864. Daughter of the wealthy wholesale grocer Albert Arnold Sprague and his wife Nancy Ann, “Lizzie” grew up on Prairie Avenue (her neighbors included the Marshall Fields, the Potter Palmers, and the piano-maker Kimballs) and longed for a career as a concert pianist. That was an unlikely life for a woman born into high society in those days—although Lizzie did have one role model: Fannie Bloomfield Zeisler, a pianist who played with the Chicago Symphony during its very first season and for many years after was a friend of the Spragues. So, instead, Elizabeth eventually made her mark as a remarkably thoughtful patron, commissioning music from Stravinsky, Prokofiev, Bartók, Ravel, Britten, Copland, and Respighi, among other leading composers.

The Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge Foundation first contacted Stravinsky early in the summer of 1927—just after the premiere of *Oedipus rex*—asking for a ballet score to be performed in a contemporary music festival at the Library of Congress. As with most commissions, Stravinsky was given stipulations—the work should require no more than six dancers and should not last more than half an hour—and considerable leeway—the choice of a subject, for example, was entirely his. He jumped on an idea that had fascinated him for some time—“to compose a ballet founded on moments or episodes in Greek mythology plastically interpreted by dancing of the so-called classical school.” Stravinsky quickly settled on the theme of Apollo, leader of the Muses, whom, for these purposes he streamlined from nine to three: Calliope, the personification of poetry and rhythm; Polyhymnia, representing mime; and Terpsichore, dance.

From the beginning, Stravinsky apparently saw the ballet as something grand yet strikingly simple. The size of the stage and the lack of conventional wings dictated minimal scenery and restricted movement; those limitations may also have suggested the idea of focusing on just one family of instruments, the strings—a bracing economy of means and gesture. “The absence of many-colored effects and of all superfluities produced a wonderful freshness,” he later said.

Work began quickly. On July 16, at the back of his *Oedipus rex* notebook, Stravinsky wrote the complex chord that would accompany Apollo’s birth. Four days later he composed the first measure of the prologue. By the end of September,
Sergei Diaghilev wrote to a friend that he had just visited Stravinsky in Nice and that the composer had played through the first half of the new ballet for him after lunch—three times, in fact.

It is, of course, an amazing work, extraordinarily calm, and with greater clarity than anything he has so far done; and filigree counterpoint round transparent, clear-cut themes, all in the major key; somehow music not of this world, but from somewhere above.

As Diaghilev’s train was leaving the station later that day, Stravinsky shouted from the platform: “Find a good title!” Apollon musagète—Apollo, the leader of the muses—was finished less than four months later.

Diaghilev had not only found a good title—although at the end of his life Stravinsky preferred to call it simply Apollo—but he had immediately recognized the true nature of the work. George Balanchine, who choreographed the first European staging in 1928—a production that established his reputation—also understood the essence of Stravinsky’s achievement:

In its discipline and restraint, in its sustained oneness of tone and feeling the score was a revelation. It seemed to tell me that I could dare not to use everything, that I, too, could eliminate.

Apollon musagète opens with a prologue, which depicts the birth of Apollo, followed by a sequence of allegorical dances featuring Apollo by himself, Apollo together with the three Muses, and each of the Muses individually. In the apotheosis, Apollo leads the Muses to Parnassus.

The prologue is designed like a French baroque overture, with a formal stately opening—culminating in the birth of Apollo—followed by a lively Allegro—Apollo is here joined by two unnamed goddesses. From the first measures, Stravinsky has taken us back to an earlier time and another place. Next comes a series of dances, beginning with one for Apollo alone—it opens, pointedly, with a “cadenza” for solo violin. At its conclusion—in the meantime, it has turned into a duet for two violins—the three Muses join in and begin a lively ensemble dance (pas d’action) for all four of them together. The ending is a contrapuntal tour de force, with the main theme played in canon and simultaneously more slowly and more quickly—“The Adagio (pas d’action) has a broad theme very germane to us today; it runs concurrently in four different tempos . . . ,” is how Diaghilev first described it. This is followed by solo dances for Calliope (based on Alexandrine verse, with twelve syllables to the line, here reflected in the melody), Polyhymnia (a perpetuum mobile), and Terpsichore (a graceful allegretto). Apollo once again takes the stage, and then dances a gentle and deeply expressive pas de deux with Terpsichore. The coda to this sequence of dances seems to grow increasingly faster and more urgent. The final apotheosis, as Apollo leads the Muses towards Parnassus, recaptures the calm and majesty of the ballet’s opening. This music, at once simple and yet grand, is one of Stravinsky’s masterstrokes. Here, more than anywhere in the score, Stravinsky does seem to take us to a new place “not of this world,” as Diaghilev suggested, “but of somewhere above.”

Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.