Igor Stravinsky

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

* Died April 6, 1971, New York City. 

**Oedipus rex**

The Oedipus story has been traced to cultures all over the world, and it has inspired musical treatments through the centuries—from Andrea Gabrieli in 1585 to Purcell and Mendelssohn (and closer to our own time, P.D.Q. Bach, whose *Oedipus Tex* added an unexpected country-and-western flavoring to Sophocles's fifth-century B.C. tale). Igor Stravinsky came to the subject at a crossroads in his life and career, when he was learning how it felt to be an expatriate, rediscovering religion, and assessing his own relationship to the musical past. Passing through Genoa in 1925, he chanced upon a bookstall, where he bought Jörgensen’s *Life of St. Francis*, and was stunned to read:

> French was, for Saint Francis, the language of poetry, the language of religion, the language of his best memories and most solemn hours, the language to which he had recourse when his heart was too full to express itself in his native Italian, which had become for him vulgarized and debased by daily use; French was essentially the language of his soul.

At that moment, Stravinsky’s longtime desire to compose a large-scale dramatic work found its voice—not in the Russian of his childhood or the French, German, and Italian he now more regularly spoke, but in ancient Latin. “The choice,” he later realized, “had the great advantage of giving me a medium not dead but turned to stone and so monumentalized as to have become immune from all risk of vulgarization.” That October, Stravinsky turned to his friend, the writer Jean Cocteau, who had known the composer since the days of the riotous premiere of *The Rite of Spring* in 1913—“There, for the expert eye, were all the makings of a scandal,” Cocteau reported—and who had already collaborated with Satie and Picasso on *Parade* and with Milhaud on *Le boeuf sur le toit*. Stravinsky had been highly impressed with Cocteau's recent adaptation of *Antigone* and with “the manner in which he had handled the ancient myth and presented it in modern guise.” On October 11, Stravinsky wrote to Cocteau:

> For some time now, I have been pursued by the idea of composing an opera in Latin on the subject of a tragedy of the ancient world, with which everyone would be familiar.

Stravinsky was already set on taking Oedipus the King as his subject, remembering how great an impression the story had made on him as a teenager, when he read Sophocles in Russian translation. “I wished to leave the play, as play,
behind,” he now said. “I thought to distill the dramatic essence by this, and to free myself for a greater degree of focus on a purely musical dramatization.” Stravinsky told Cocteau he did not want an action piece, but rather a “still life,” and it took the writer more than one attempt to achieve what the composer demanded. Then, after further “shearing,” Cocteau’s French text was turned over to Abbé Jean Daniélou, who translated it into Latin. It was Cocteau’s idea to use a speaker—a narrator in contemporary evening dress who would give advance commentary on the action, scene by scene, in the language of the audience—a device that only heightened the sense of distance between the ancient tale and the modern world. (At this week’s performances, Cocteau’s narration has been translated and adapted by Michael Tilson Thomas and Jasper.)

Stravinsky began writing the music in January 1926, while making a few further adjustments to The Rite of Spring. Work continued, on and off for months (the summer was entirely “off”) until Stravinsky finished the score in March 1927. The orchestration was completed in early May, less than three weeks before the public premiere.

From the start, Cocteau and Stravinsky intended to offer Oedipus rex to Diaghilev as a birthday present to mark the twentieth season of the Ballets Russes in 1927. They kept their plan from Diaghilev for a while, but eventually had to let him in on the secret, since it was his company, after all, that was slated to give the premiere. Although Stravinsky and Cocteau conceived the work operatically, with precise staging directions written into the score, as time grew short and as the projected costs soared, it became clear that this idiosyncratic work, combining elements of both opera and oratorio, would be introduced as a concert piece. Early in 1927, Diaghilev announced: “I’ve thought of the way to do Oedipus. We’ll simply give it a concert performance—no decor, and the cast in evening dress, sitting on the stage in front of black velvet curtains. Musically it will even gain.” (Eventually Stravinsky simply labeled the work an opera-oratorio.)

Oedipus rex was first performed privately, with the composer accompanying the singers from the piano, at the home of the Princess Edmond de Polignac, American-born Winnaretta Singer, the sewing-machine heiress who loved music both old (Bach was a particular passion) and new. (The Singer money had already allowed Stravinsky to write Renard in 1916.) “From the reactions of the guests, I foresaw that Oedipus rex was not likely to succeed with the Parisian ballet audience,” Stravinsky remarked. The official premiere was given at the Théâtre Sarah-Bernhardt on May 30, with Stravinsky conducting. The response was cool. Audience members, not knowing what to expect, were put off by its formality, with characters who behave like monuments—“Only their arms and heads move,” the score dictates. “They should give the impression of living statues”—and issue prepared statements. (The singers were further removed, both from the drama and the audience, by wearing masks, a clever theatrical device, although, as director Ingmar Bergman later told Stravinsky, “a mask may be beautiful and it can be a useful façade for all sorts of things, but the price, which is loss of contact, is too great.”)

The critics, still coming to terms with the idea of neoclassicism, harped on Stravinsky’s return to the musical sensibilities of the past. Ironically, in Stravinsky’s organization of arias, duets, ensembles, and choruses they found echoes of Handel and other eighteenth-century music, but initially overlooked the greatest influence of all: the Italian operas by Giuseppe Verdi, with their vaulting vocal lines and repeated-chord accompaniments. Jocasta’s big aria, with its concluding cabaletta, confirms that Stravinsky’s enthusiasm for Verdi’s opera throughout the 1920s was not only high, but deeply influential.
“One part of the press says that I should continue to shock,” Stravinsky later commented. “Another part says that I am now making the right music since I have started to compose like Verdi. They are actually unable to hear that I am doing something different altogether.”

_Oedipus rex_ has always had its detractors. It is too singular a composition—too specific in its musical style, too abstract as a work of drama—to fit easily into the tradition of musical theater pieces. Schoenberg, predictably, had nasty things to say about it, but by this time he and Stravinsky had chosen to follow separate paths to very different musical destinations, even though they were fated to live only miles apart in Los Angeles at the ends of their lives. Even Stravinsky eventually confessed he no longer cared for the narration (“I detest the speaker device” is how he put it), but he never tired of his score: “I love it, all of it, even the Messenger’s fanfares, which remind me of the now badly tarnished trumpets of early 20th Century Fox.” _Oedipus rex_ is a landmark of the twentieth century—the first large-scale masterwork of Stravinsky’s neoclassical maturity—and a pivotal score in the output of one of the twentieth-century’s true modern masters. It crystallizes many of the ideas Stravinsky had been playing with since _The Firebird, Petrushka_, and _The Rite of Spring_, and it points the way forward to the solemn splendors of the Symphony of Psalms and the brilliant Hogarth romp, _The Rake’s Progress_. But it is, above all, a piece that defies categorization and cannot be contained even by Stravinsky’s proposed hyphenate: opera-oratorio. Like the great Requiem Mass by Verdi, which at first divided listeners because of its mixture of the operatic and the ecclesiastical, _Oedipus rex_ has come to be understood as a work that stands alone.

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