Program Notes
by Phillip Huscher

Igor Stravinsky
Born June 17, 1882, Oranienbaum, Russia.
Died April 6, 1971, New York City.

Petrushka (1911 version)

Stravinsky composed Petrushka between August 1910 and May 26, 1911. The first performance of the ballet was given by Sergei Diaghilev's Russian Ballet and conducted by Pierre Monteux in Paris on June 13, 1911. Stravinsky streamlined the orchestration in 1946, but at this week's concerts the original 1911 version is performed. It calls for an orchestra consisting of four flutes and two piccolos, four oboes and English horn, four clarinets and bass clarinet, four bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, four trumpets, three trombones and tuba, timpani, triangle, cymbal, bass drum, tambourine, side drum, tam-tam, xylophone, celesta, two harps, piano, and strings. Performance time is approximately thirty-four minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra first performed a suite from the 1911 version of Stravinsky's Petrushka on subscription concerts at Orchestra Hall on November 21 and 22, 1930, with Frederick Stock conducting.

The Firebird was Stravinsky's first big hit, and it made him famous, almost literally overnight, at the age of twenty-eight. Petrushka is that most difficult of artistic creations—the follow-up. The Firebird had not only made Stravinsky the talk of Paris, then the capital of the international art world—capturing the attention of the city's biggest names, including Debussy and Proust—but it had scored a huge success for Sergei Diaghilev, who had taken a risk hiring the young, relatively unknown composer to write music for the Russian Ballet's 1910 season. Naturally, both men wanted another sensation for the next year.

Stravinsky already had an idea. While he was finishing the orchestration of The Firebird, he had dreamed about "a solemn pagan rite: wise elders, seated in a circle, watching a young girl dance herself to death. They were sacrificing her to propitiate the god of spring." These powerful images suggested music to Stravinsky and he began to sketch almost at once. (Early in his career, most of Stravinsky's initial musical ideas were inspired by visual imagery.) At first he thought of it as a symphony, but when he played parts of it at the piano for Diaghilev early that summer, the impresario immediately knew that this was music for dance. With Diaghilev's urging, Stravinsky continued working on the score that would eventually become their biggest sensation, Le sacre du printemps—The Rite of Spring. But in the meantime, Stravinsky got sidetracked.

When Diaghilev went to visit Stravinsky in Switzerland at the end of the summer, he was stunned to discover that the composer had begun a completely different work instead. As Stravinsky recalled, Diaghilev "was much astonished when, instead of the sketches of the Sacre, I played him the piece which I had just composed and which later became the second scene of Petrushka."

For the second time that year, one of Stravinsky's landmark ballet scores started out not as music to be danced, but as an unnamed abstract symphonic score. But unlike The Rite of Spring, Petrushka moved from sketch to stage without serious interruption. What had begun as just a detour from The Rite now became the main project of the year, and at the same time, the score with which Stravinsky found his modernist voice—the voice that made The Rite possible. Musically, it had started innocently enough, almost as a kind of warm-up for The Rite. "I wanted to refresh myself," Stravinsky later explained, "by composing an orchestral piece in which the piano would play the most important part." The narrative and the title came later, although Stravinsky admitted that "in composing the music, I had in mind a distinct picture of a puppet, suddenly endowed with life." (Petrushka is a Russian version of the male half of the
Punch and Judy puppets.) As with *The Rite*, it was Diaghilev who immediately saw the potential in Stravinsky's dazzling music for another dance classic:

[Diaghilev] was so much pleased with it that he would not leave it alone and began persuading me to develop the theme of the puppet's sufferings and make it into a whole ballet. When he remained in Switzerland we worked out together the general lines of the subject and the plot in accordance with ideas which I suggested . . . I began at once to compose the first scene of the ballet.

There were still a few details to be worked out, including Stravinsky's fee (1,000 rubles) and the selection of the painter Alexandre Benois to polish the scenario and to provide costumes and scenery. (Michel Fokine soon signed on as choreographer and Pierre Monteux agreed to conduct the premiere.) With this extraordinary team lined up, Stravinsky and Diaghilev now had their sights set on surpassing the success of *The Firebird*. Aside from Stravinsky's brush with nicotine poisoning in February 1911, work on *Petrushka* progressed smoothly. Rehearsals were a different story. The dancers and orchestral musicians, innocent of the terrors of *The Rite of Spring*, still no more than a pile of sketches, found the complexities of Stravinsky's score almost unmanageable.

Opening night, however, was a great triumph, crowned by Vaslav Nijinsky's brilliant dancing of the title role. Brash, bold, exciting, and in-your-face "modern," *Petrushka* was another overnight hit with the public. For the next two years, until the legendary premiere of *The Rite of Spring* set Paris afire with fresh controversy, Petrushka was the latest word in musical modernism.

The scenario is in four scenes; the first and last are public, taking place on the Admiralty Square in Saint Petersburg, in the 1830s; the middle ones are set in private rooms and focus on individual characters. *Petrushka* opens with a busy crowd scene, a kaleidoscopic panorama of street dancers, drummers, a magician playing a flute, a street musician with his hurdy-gurdy, and three puppets—Petrushka, a ballerina, and the Moor. Stravinsky shifts focus and shuffles events like a modern filmmaker: musical passages are cut and spliced, rhythmic patterns jostle one another. Finally the solo flute charms the three puppets to life and they join in a brilliant Russian dance.

The two middle scenes are more intimate, relying less on the full orchestra, and built of more modestly scaled materials. In the first of these scenes, the spotlight falls on Petrushka, alone in his room, pondering his grotesque appearance and despairing over his inability to win the love of the ballerina. This is the music Stravinsky had first played for Diaghilev, with a piano solo "exasperating the patience of the orchestra with diabolical cascades of arpeggios. The orchestra in turn retaliates with menacing trumpet blasts. The outcome is a terrific noise which reaches its climax and ends in the sorrowful and querulous collapse of the poor puppet."

When he first began sketching *Petrushka*, Stravinsky was haunted by the image of a musician rolling two objects over the black and white keys of the piano, which led him to the idea of a bitonal effect made by combining the white-note C major arpeggio with the black-note F-sharp major arpeggio. This double-sided sonority dominates Petrushka's scene (the first music Stravinsky wrote) and as the work progressed, it came to represent the conflicting sides of his character—the human versus the puppet.

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