PROGRAM NOTES
by Phillip Huscher

Igor Stravinsky
Born June 18, 1882, Oranienbaum, Russia.
Died April 6, 1971, New York City.

Pulcinella, Ballet in One Act with Song

Stravinsky began the ballet *Pulcinella* in the late summer of 1919 and completed it on April 20, 1920. It was premiered on May 15 of that year by the Ballets Russes, at the Paris Opera. The complete score calls for soprano, tenor, and bass soloists, with an orchestra of two flutes, two oboes, two bassoons, two horns, trumpet, trombone, tenor and bass trombone, a quintet of solo strings, and orchestral strings. Performance time is approximately forty minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra first performed the suite from Stravinsky's *Pulcinella* on subscription concerts at Orchestra Hall on July 17 and 18, 1935, with the composer conducting. Stravinsky also conducted the Orchestra's first performance of the complete ballet score on a special concert at Orchestra Hall on April 17, 1965, with Irene Jordan, Nicholas di Virgilio, and Donald Gramm as soloists. The first subscription concert performances of the complete ballet were given on March 8, 9, and 10, 1973, with Bethany Beardslee, Robert Johnson, and Leslie Gunn as soloists and Lukas Foss conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances of the complete ballet were given on February 8, 9, and 10, 1979, with Maria Ewing, Ryland Davies, and Claudio Desderi as soloists and Claudio Abbado conducting. The suite was most recently performed on subscription concerts on November 28, 29, 30, and December 2, 1997, with Pinchas Zukerman conducting. The Orchestra first performed music from *Pulcinella* at the Ravinia Festival on July 12, 1970, with Michael Tilson Thomas conducting, and most recently on August 13, 1987, with Leon Fleisher conducting.

How odd Stravinsky's *Pulcinella* must have sounded in 1920—charming, witty, disarmingly simple eighteenth-century music from the man who had shocked Paris only seven years earlier with the fierce modernism of *The Rite of Spring*. But *Pulcinella* was also, in its own way, radical: Stravinsky seemed to be saying that the music of the future might well learn from the lessons of the distant past. *Pulcinella* is usually credited as the first music of neoclassicism. It did, certainly, signal a shift in Stravinsky's own thinking that served him well for years to come. "*Pulcinella* was my discovery of the past," the composer wrote—"the epiphany through which the whole of my late work became possible." "It was a backward glance, of course," he later said, "but it was a look in the mirror, too."

For all its importance to Stravinsky's musical development, the idea for *Pulcinella* was not his, but that of the great Russian impresario Sergei Diaghilev. By 1919, Diaghilev and the young composer were no longer on the best of terms, and Diaghilev was determined to patch up their differences and revive the collaboration that had produced *The Firebird*, *Petrushka*, and *The Rite of Spring*. One spring afternoon, when he and the composer were strolling in the Place de la Concorde, he proposed that Stravinsky take a look at some eighteenth-century scores with the idea of orchestrating them for a ballet. "When he said that the composer was Pergolesi, I thought he must be deranged," Stravinsky later remembered, thinking unhappily of the *Stabat Mater* and the slight comic opera *La serva padrona*. Finally, Stravinsky promised to at least take a look.

"I looked, and I fell in love," the composer recalled. And so the two men began to plan. Diaghilev showed Stravinsky a manuscript dating from 1700 which he had found in Italy; the subject of its many comic
episodes was Pulcinella, the traditional hero of the Neapolitan commedia dell'arte, and a perfect focus for the action of their own eighteenth-century ballet. Meanwhile, Stravinsky had been sifting through the pile of manuscripts that Diaghilev had thrust in his hands, picking and choosing among trio sonatas, assorted orchestral works, and operatic selections. More than half of these works are not even by Pergolesi, as we have since learned; among Stravinsky's unwitting collaborators in *Pulcinella* are a handful of forgotten eighteenth-century composers, including the Venetian Domenico Gallo; Count van Wassenaer, a Dutch diplomat; and Carlo Ignazio Monza, a Milanese priest.

Then Stravinsky set to work in a fashion entirely new to him. "I began by composing on the Pergolesi manuscripts themselves, as though I were correcting an old work of my own," he later wrote. "I knew that I could not produce a 'forgery' of Pergolesi because my motor habits are so different; at best, I could repeat him in my own accent."

What Stravinsky created was, in fact, something entirely his own. He left the eighteenth-century bass lines and melodies alone, but the inner harmonies, the rhythms, and the sonorities all bear Stravinsky's stamp, in one measure after another. "The remarkable thing about *Pulcinella*," Stravinsky later said, "is not how much but how little has been added or changed." His achievement, then, is all the more remarkable.

The music was misunderstood from the first rehearsals. Diaghilev, expecting a harmless adaptation like Respighi's recent tribute to Rossini, *La boutique fantasque*, was shocked. "He went about for a long time with a look that suggested the Offended Eighteenth Century," the composer reported. Diaghilev was not even sure whether to acknowledge Stravinsky as the composer of *Pulcinella* or merely as its arranger. Stravinsky had the last word:

> I was . . . attacked for being a *pasticheur*, chided for composing "simple" music, blamed for deserting "modernism," accused of renouncing my "true Russian heritage." People who had never heard of, or cared about, the originals cried "sacrilege": "The classics are ours. Leave the classics alone." To them all my answer was and is the same: You "respect," but I love.

The ballet had its premiere at the Paris Opera House in May 1920. The choreography was by Léonide Massine, with scenery and costumes by Picasso—the collaboration of these two had been part of Diaghilev's lure. (This was Picasso's third assignment for Diaghilev, following *Parade*, with music by Eric Satie, and Manuel de Falla's *Three-Cornered Hat*.) This dream collaboration was no picnic, however. Diaghilev asked Picasso to redo the designs twice and at one point threw his drawings on the floor and stomped on them. In the end, according to Diaghilev biographer Richard Buckle, "the finished result, a Neapolitan street scene conceived in Cubist terms and painted blue, grey, dark brown, and white, the houses framing a view of the bay, with a boat, Vesuvius, and the full moon, is one of the most beautiful stage settings ever made." (The stunning white floor had to be repainted for each performance.)

*Pulcinella* was a triumph—"one of those productions," the composer reported, "where everything harmonizes, where all the elements—subject, music, dancing, and artistic setting—form a coherent and homogeneous whole." Yet only the music endures today. (According to the composer, Picasso's backdrop ended up in storage at the Paris Opera, where it faded irrevocably, save for the moon, "whose yellow had been renewed, in part, by a cat.") In 1922, Stravinsky compiled an orchestral suite that has become popular in the concert hall; it is scored for the same orchestra as the ballet: woodwinds without clarinets, strings divided into *concertino* and *ripieno* groups (the solo and full orchestra divisions of the baroque *concerto grosso*), with no percussion. But the true measure of *Pulcinella*—and of Stravinsky's ingenuity—can only be appreciated when the full ballet score is performed in its original form, as it is this week, complete with solo voices singing the "Pergolesi" arias that dot the score—even though those eight numbers (drawn from four different sources and composed by two different composers) have nothing to do with the plot.

In his old age, Stravinsky said that *Pulcinella* was the only work of Pergolesi's that he really liked.
Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

© Chicago Symphony Orchestra. All rights reserved. Program notes may be reproduced only in their entirety and with express written permission from the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.

These notes appear in galley files and may contain typographical or other errors. Programs subject to change without notice.