

NOTES

"My profound emotion on reading the news of war [World War I], which aroused patriotic feelings and a sense of sadness at being so distant from my country, found some alleviation in the delight with which I steeped myself in Russian folk poems," Stravinsky wrote in his autobiography. This fact was confirmed by Vera Stravinsky and Robert Craft in their book *Stravinsky in Pictures and Documents*:

Although domiciled on the shores of [Switzerland's] Lake Geneva during the war, Stravinsky identified with the struggle of the Russian people, and his isolation from them made him more conscious than ever of his own Russian-ness. He immersed himself in [Russian] folk literature and—contrary to his own statements on the subject in later years—in [Russian] folk music.

Interest in folk music was not something new in Stravinsky's musical evolution, however. Firebird (1910), Petrushka (1911) and Le sacre du printemps (The Rite of Spring, 1913) explored the world of Russian folklore, taking it into hitherto unseen musical venues and releasing its energy in all its breadth and fullness. Stravinsky crowned his "Russian musical revolution" with Renard (1916) and Les noces (The Wedding, 1923). These large-scale ground-breaking compositions are known and loved worldwide. However, his small compositions written during the same period—the four songs "Pribautki" for voice and piano (or ensemble), "Four Russian Peasant Songs" ("Podbliudnye") for female chorus a cappella, "Cat's Cradle Songs," and "Four Russian Songs" for voice and piano (or ensemble)—are less known to the public. Yet all these songs deserve the closest attention, for they are veritable gems in which the essence of Stravinsky's revolutionary musical thought, including his modal and rhythmic ideas, are concentrated as densely as a dwarf star's matter.

"With these songs Stravinsky "destroyed the prerogatives of old-fashioned song and lazy ethnography," wrote Russian composer and musicologist Boris Asafiev in his *A Book about Stravinsky*.

Among the most commonplace and mundane sources he found a music that was authentically Russian, and he gave it artistic shape without deforming or disguising its nature and origins. He declared the supremacy of mode as a free, independent principle, no longer obedient to the dictates of major and minor, which are suitable only for stylization and outmoded [harmonic] coloration.

Though Stravinsky quoted Russian folk songs in *Firebird*, *Petrushka* and even *The Rite of Spring* (in the latter he did not use songs in their complete form but educed from them laconic motives, primitive recurring formulas very characteristic of early Russian folk idioms), the themes of his songs are not borrowed, but are, rather, imitations of Russian folk music themes. "Stravinsky never mentions the source of his themes," wrote Bela Bartok in his *Essays*.

Neither in his titles nor in footnotes does he ever allude to whether a theme of his is his own invention or whether it is taken over from folk music... Stravinsky apparently takes this course deliberately. He wants to demonstrate that it does not matter a jot whether a composer invents his own themes or uses themes from elsewhere. He has a right to use musical material taken from all sources. What he has judged suitable for his purpose has become through this very use his mental property... This much is certain, that if among the thematic material of Stravinsky's there are some of his own invention (and who can doubt that there are), these are the most faithful and clever imitations of folk songs.

All this is true of the "Four Russian Peasant Songs" for female chorus a cappella, composed in 1914-1917 on Russian folk texts. The third one—"The Pike"—was written in December 1914; the fourth—"Fatso"—in January 1915; the first—"Near the Savior's Church in Chigisy" in December 1916; and the second—"Ovsen" (the name derives from "prosinets," an archaic Russian name for January)—in January 1917. In Russian these songs are called podbliudniye ("platter" or "saucer" songs) because of their connection with fortunetelling rituals practiced by peasants (and some aristocrats as well) during Yuletide (sviatki) celebrations. In the ritual young women tried to discern when they would get married, and whether wealth or misery awaited them in the future. The girls would put their rings, earrings, and hair ribbons onto a covered saucer, along with grain kernels and cinders. Then they sang the podbliudniye songs. With each song an object was plucked from the plate. Whatever the song's text promised was interpreted as a prediction, although the melody's character could also change the nature of the message. The messages, naturally, were wrapped into a rich metaphoric form.

Poet Alexander Pushkin describes such a fortunetelling ritual in his masterpiece, the novel in verse *Eugene Onegin* (Chapter 5, Stanza 8):

Tatyana looks with pulses racing at sunken wax inside a bowl: beyond a doubt, its wondrous tracing foretells for her some wondrous role; from dish of water, rings are shifted in due succession; hers is lifted and at the very self-same time

the girls sing out the ancient rhyme:
"The peasants there have wealth abounding,
the help up silver with a spade;
and those we sing for will be paid
in goods and fame!" But the sad sounding
ditty portends a loss...
(transl. by Charles Johnson)

The first three of the "Four Russian Peasant Songs" predict wealth for the one to whom they are sung. The fourth song, in a grotesque and allegoric form, foretells poverty. As for the songs' musical language, one should bear in mind that they are the product of a modern-day intellect. Stravinsky understands folk music as a live, pulsating, and intensely contemporary mode of expression, which is fully able to reflect the 20th- century world. Totally absent is even the smallest hint of a romantic "sacred trepidation" towards folk music; neither does one perceive even the remotest intention to idealize folklore, as was done in the 19th-century. As Paul Griffiths notes in his book *Stravinsky*, these songs are "futurist photographs of something ancient."

In 1954 Stravinsky added an accompaniment of four French horns to the songs, also making minor metric and key changes. In this new version the songs were first performed in Los Angeles by Marilyn Horne with Robert Craft conducting.

In both the large and small compositions of his so-called "Russian period," Stravinsky derived a new content and imagery from folklore, discovering new principles of musical reasoning that were previously unheard of. As Asafiev notes in his *Symphonic Etudes*, Stravinsky ranks alongside Glinka in terms imparting to Russian music both a renaissance and a new direction.



1. У Спаса в Чигисах

U Spása f Chigisá<u>h</u>

Near the Savior's Church in Chigisy

U, u Spása, u Spása f Chigisáh, za Yaúzŏyu...

Across the Yauza River... Slávna, slavná!

Near the Savior's church in Chigisy

Glory! Glory!

Zhïvút muzhïkí bŏgátïye...

There the wealthy farmers live... Slávna, slavná!

Glory! Glory!

Gřebút zólŏtŏ lŏpátami...

Slávna, slavná!

Chístŏ, chístŏ šeřebró, chístŏ šeřebró lukóshkami...

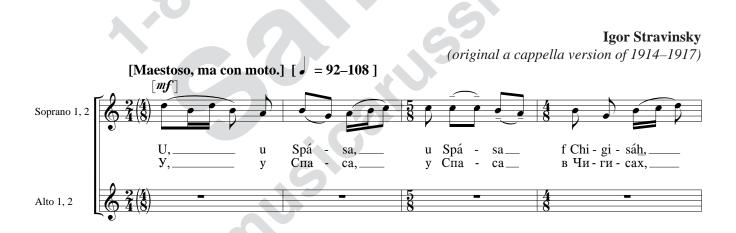
Slávna, slavná, slavna!

They rake up gold by the shovelful...

Glory! Glory!

They gather up pure silver by the basketful...

Glory! Glory! Glory!















2. Овсень

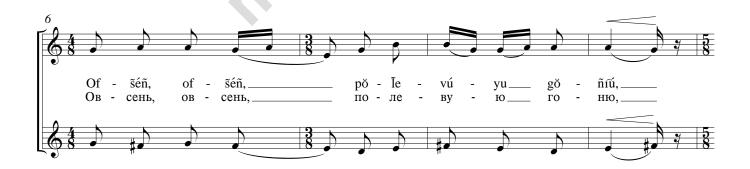
Ovšeñ

Ofšéñ, ofšéñ, ofšéñ!
Ya řeřéřîu gŏñíú,
Ofšéň, ofšéň,
pŏlevúyu gŏñíú,
Ofšéň, ofšéň, ofšéň!
ŏná pŏd kust, a ya za hvost.
Ofšéň!
Mñe nachlá hvost. Ofšéň!
Mñe nachlá hvost, an, děňeg gorší.
Ofšéň! Ofšéň, ofšéň, ofšéň, ofšéň!

Ovsen

Ovsen, ovsen, ovsen!
I'm hunting a black grouse...
Ovsen, ovsen!
I'm hunting a black field grouse...
Ovsen, ovsen, ovsen!
It hides under a bush, but I grab its tail...
Ovsen!
Its tail stuffed in my hand... Ovsen!
Its tail stuffed in my hand a handful of money.
Ovsen! Ovsen, ovsen, ovsen, ovsen!









3. Щука

Shchúka

Shchúka shla iz Novagórŏda...

Sláva!

Ŏna hvost vŏlŏklá iz Belaóžera...

Sláva!

Kak u shchúki cheshúyki šeřébříanïye...

Sláva!

Shto šeřébříanïye, pŏzŏlóchennïye...

Sláva!

Kak u shchúki spiná zhémchugom spletena...

Sláva!

Kak gŏlófka u shchúki uñízannaya...

Sláva!

A na méstő glaz dőrogóy almáz...

Sláva!

The Pike

A pike came from Novgorod...

Glory!

It dragged its tail from the White Lake...

Glory!

Its scales are of silver...

Glory!

They are gilded with gold...

Glory!

Its back is braided with pearls...

Glory!

Its head is studded with pearls...

Glory!

And in place of its eyes are precious diamonds...

Glory!









4. Пузище

Púžishche

Uzh, kak vishlŏ Púžishche na řépishche. Sláva, sláva, sláva, sláva!

Viñeslŏ Pužishche ŏsmínu fshey. Sláva, sláva, sláva, sláva!

Ŏs̃mínu fshey, pol ŏs̃mínï blo<u>h</u>. Sláva, sláva, sláva, sláva, sláva!

Fatso

Fatso ventured out into the turnip patch... Glory, glory, glory, glory, glory!

Out of Fatso burst out a pound of lice. Glory, glory, glory, glory, glory!

A pound of lice and a half-pound of fleas. Glory, glory, glory, glory, glory!





