

Book Review: *Stravinsky: Difficult Passages for Bassoon*

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Bassoon Music Reviews
Stravinsky:
Difficult Passages for Bassoon
Selected by Frank Morelli, Preface
by Robert Craft
Boosey & Hawkes

This past year saw the release of a new collection of orchestral and chamber music excerpts for the bassoon that brings together in one volume nearly all the bassoon parts of one of the most important composers of this century, **Igor Stravinsky**. This long-overdue project should be welcomed by bassoonists everywhere. Unfortunately, some crucial questions that have been lurking in these scores remain unanswered by this collection, and this shortcoming ultimately weakens the impact of this great undertaking.

Stravinsky: Difficult Passages, selected by **Frank Morelli**, with a preface by Robert Craft (Boosey & Hawkes, 1997), is nearly comprehensive in its scope, barring the omission of a few chamber works, early orchestral songs, the *Symphony in E flat*, the *Scherzo Fantastique*, *Fireworks* op. 4, *Ode*, and the cantata *Babel*. Mr. Morelli was perhaps the perfect person to compile and produce this text. His work in several New York-based ensembles such as Orpheus, the New York City Opera and the Orchestra of St. Luke's places him in regular and direct contact with Stravinsky's orchestral, chamber and operatic works. Especially important is his connection with the ongoing series of recordings made by St. Luke's and Robert Craft, Stravinsky's personal assistant for the last part of the composer's life. These recordings, on the Music Masters and Koch labels, will present all of Stravinsky's major works in their various versions, plus a few gems that have never before appeared on disc.

In Morelli's 184 page volume you will find everything from the high solos in the *Rite*, to the "ribbons of scales" of the *Octet*, to the lyrical counter-melody from Ann's Act I aria in *The Rake's Progress*. There is no better testimony to the expressive range of our instrument and Stravinsky's full understanding of it than to sit and play through this book and notice how well and how naturally these parts fit in the fingers.

This said, what could possibly be missing?

It is an unfortunate fact that many of the orchestral scores of Stravinsky are plagued by mistakes. These range from single wrong notes hidden deep within the fabric of obscure pieces to mistakes that are audible to any listener and which appear in the best-known works. Of the numerous mistakes in the bassoon parts, only a single correction seems to have made its way into this volume, and goes unmentioned at that.

Before assuming that Mr. Morelli's occasional connection with the Craft recording project meant he had full access to the corrected parts, I contacted the author to ask if any of the concerns over misprints had been addressed. He responded that many such corrections were in fact pointed out to Boosey, and that the idea of including a critical forward or of giving some documentation of the changes was dismissed by the publisher. Full blame, then, rests squarely on the shoulders of Boosey & Hawkes, whose decision to leave the parts as they are, rather than correcting them for the very players who will bring the scores to life in the concert hall, greatly diminishes the value of this publication.

Difficult Passages does correct the misprint at the end of the second solo in *The Rite of Spring*, presenting for the first time outside of a musicology journal a tied a1 flat in the fourth bar of Rehearsal 12 (replacing the incorrect f1). As mentioned above, this goes by without so much as a footnote, and the perennial battle between d1 natural and d1 flat in the Berceuse of *Firebird* is not even addressed. Instead, we are provided with passages from the full ballet version and the 1919 suite, but not the 1945 suite. Without the 1945 part for comparison, which contains most definitely and undeniably a d1 flat, the question remains unanswered by the one publication most people will look to for clarification.

Another example of the kind of detail that could have come from a greater use of Mr. Craft's expertise, and which would have added immeasurably to the value of this collection, occurs in *Pulcinella* at the Gavotte, Variation IIa. If you listen closely to Craft's recording with St. Luke's on Music Masters 01612-67086-2, you'll hear a "mistake" by the first bassoonist in the third bar of the second repeated section (2

measures after 168, or after 83 in the suite). The first sixteenth note on beat four of the printed part is g natural. However, in Craft's recording and in every score in Stravinsky's hand the note in question is changed to g sharp. Check the note in the Boosey collection and not only does the correction to g sharp not appear, but instead there is a cautionary g natural!

Many other points might have been addressed in the *Octet*, *Firebird*, *Histoire du Soldat*, etc.. The oddest editorial decision in the entire text occurs in the excerpted part for the *Septet*. In the second movement, between #19 and #20, there is a low A1 written for the bassoon which, according to Craft's authority, must be played. However, that portion of the excerpt is removed from this text, while the notes just preceding it and just following it are kept. On the Music Master recording by Craft, the bassoonist playing that missing low A is none other than Mr. Morelli himself.

If it seems that the above criticisms go overboard or that these concerns are more for musicologists than for performers, let me counter with the point that every musical text is a performer's raw material, and that an accurate performance can only begin with an accurate text. Stravinsky's scores have for some reason been cursed with an abundance of misprints from the earliest days of his career, and recognizing this, the publisher Bärenreiter recently proposed creating a new critical Stravinsky Edition comparable to their Neue Mozart Ausgabe. However, all of the publishers of Stravinsky's works, including Boosey & Hawkes, summarily rejected this idea, so it is only in smaller publications like this by bassoonists like Mr. Morelli that we can ever hope to have the corrected parts presented.

Perhaps Boosey & Hawkes never intended for this volume to correct the texts once and for all. (The title page, after all, reads "Selected by" not "Edited by" Frank Morelli.) Perhaps the approach was meant to be user-friendly, not musicologically accurate on all accounts. Whatever the reason, these and other corrections would have added immensely to the historical and scholarly value of this text. Should the above mentioned concerns keep anyone from purchasing or making great use out of this? I truly hope not, and I would be the last person to suggest doing so. In fact, I may have been one of the first to shell out the \$50 for my personal copy, so valuable do I find this incredible collection, and so eager was I to own it. However, as I sit teaching these excerpts to my students, I find myself, as surely others will, alerting them to the same questions that have plagued the players of these parts since their first publication. Boosey had the perfect opportunity to provide answers to questions and corrections to flawed texts with this collection, and has failed to do so. The project of presenting the parts in their fully-corrected versions still awaits completion, and will be welcomed by every concerned performer. Until then, go buy this book and enjoy some of the greatest orchestral parts ever composed for the bassoon.

Now, who's going to tackle Shostakovich?

About the Reviewer ...

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