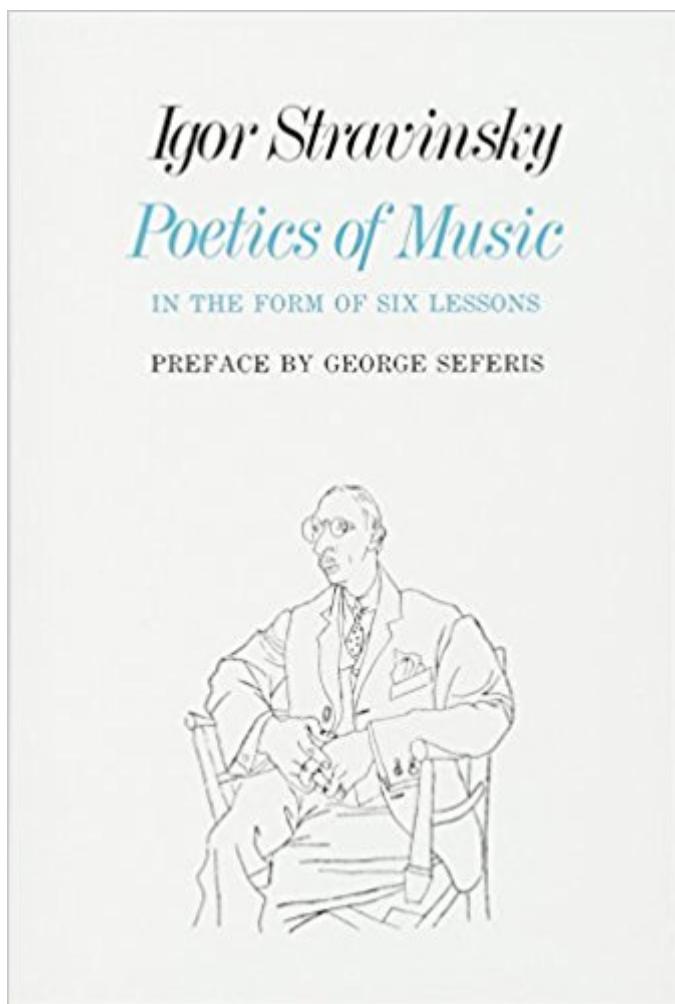


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Poetics Of Music In The Form Of Six Lessons (The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures)



Synopsis

One of the greatest of contemporary composers has here set down in delightfully personal fashion his general ideas about music and some accounts of his own experience as a composer. Every concert-goer and lover of music will take keen pleasure in his notes about the essential features of music, the process of musical composition, inspiration, musical types, and musical execution. Throughout the volume are to be found trenchant comments on such subjects as Wagnerism, the operas of Verdi, musical taste, musical snobbery, the influence of political ideas on Russian music under the Soviets, musical improvisation as opposed to musical construction, the nature of melody, and the function of the critic of music. Musical people of every sort will welcome this first presentation in English of an unusually interesting book.

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Customer Reviews

Some good (and some specious) phrases from one of music's finest phrase-makers; a fascinating and sporadically valuable attempt to come to grips with the metaphysics of music; and a rich assortment of historical aperçus. More than that, it is, of course, an intimate profession of faith revealing the detailed ideological context of the music; it is also the source of that unforgettable advice to the violinists: "It is ill becoming when playing, to spread one's legs too far apart." During the academic year 1939-1940, Stravinsky delivered the Charles Eliot Norton Lectures at Harvard. He spoke in French. An English translation appeared in 1947, and now this bilingual edition enables

the reader to study both the language in which Stravinsky conceived his "lessons" and the excellent English translation...printed on the facing pages...The six lectures that make up Poetics take the form of an "explanation of music"...[The book] remains a quintessence of Stravinsky's reactions to the phenomenon of music. Poetics of Music offers the most coherent statement of the unchanging values behind Stravinsky's many apparent shifts of manner: his insistence, for example, that music should be a revelation of a higher order to be faithfully executed by the performer, rather than a medium of self-expression to be interpreted. Above all, the composer must submit to rules, no matter how arbitrary, for "the more constraints one imposes, the more one frees one's self of the chains that shackle the spirit." (G. W. Hopkins Musical Times)[These lessons] provide penetrating glimpses into the thought processes of Stravinsky's mind. While dealing with his chosen topics--the phenomenon of music, the composition of music, musical typology, the avatars of Russian music, and the performance of music--he reveals his reverence for tradition, order and discipline. He believes "the more art is controlled, limited, worked over, the more it is free." His opinions about Wagner, Verdi, Berlioz, Hindemith, Weber, Beethoven, Glinka, Tchaikovsky, Moussorgsky and Bach are refreshing. He also analyzes the function of the critic, the requirements of the interpreter, the state of Russian music, and musical taste and snobbery. (The American Recorder)

Text: English, French --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

These six lectures were given at Harvard during the 1939-40 academic year in French. They are presented here in English translation and have been the subject of a great deal of discussion over the past sixty-plus years. In re-reading them, I have to say that my opinion of them has risen a great deal from my student days. Maybe it is because I am now about the age he was when he gave them, maybe it is because I am now more well read and have thought more about music since my youth, or maybe it is because I now see the solid philosophy and healthy insights he had and the rather unhealthy directions that academia was taking that he was resisting. Probably it is all of these. Reading these lectures are not easy sledding for those not already familiar with Stravinsky, his life, work, and the context for these lectures. Also, the reader will need to go to the various conversation books Stravinsky did with Robert Craft to get later clarification and further insight into what he was saying. However, they are not profoundly technical in music theory. What they require from the reader is a broad understanding of music, art, and European political and religious history to have a framework for understanding what Stravinsky is saying. The first lecture lays out what he intends to do with the lectures. The second talks about what he believes music is, what it isn't, and

provides great insight into what Stravinsky believes is important in the art of music and what corrupts it. In the third lecture he talks about composition and provides wonderful insights into what it is for him. He really does undermine the common notion of the role of inspiration in composition. The fourth lecture says it talks about musical typology (whatever that is). What it talks about is what the composer must do in choosing his own rules in composition. In Stravinsky's view the stricter the rules the more free the composer is to create. I think this is a particularly strong lecture. The Russian character in music and the Soviet corruptions of that are the topic of the fifth lecture. In 1939, taking on Stalin was a brave thing even in the West because of the way academics and the media lauded Uncle Joe. The last lecture talks about performance issues that were of particular concern to him. This is also quite interesting because of the way performance practice became such a vital force in the last quarter of the twentieth century. His principles and desires are quite profound and interesting, and do require the clarification from the conversation books to avoid being taken out of context. The epilogue ties things up nicely and raises the issues of ontology once again. Along the way Stravinsky over and over again talks about religion and music in the Church versus the attempts to replace religion with art (which Stravinsky considers a terrible and failed notion). A fine and important work by one of the great composers.

No student or lover of Stravinsky's music should be without this book. It is a rare opportunity to see into his thought processes, and it makes one realise just how much music meant to him- that he sought to serve it by understanding it as deeply as he could. In communicating this understanding, Stravinsky makes for an engaging, if somewhat challenging, read. The book is a transcript of six lectures given by the composer to French students, and the translators have seen fit to cast his words into a large quantity of "verbal Victoriana." If at times it seems boring, it is all due to that style of language. Apart from that, it is an excellent account on the part of a man who (for all his known self-contradictions) clearly used his heart as well as his hands and his head. For students of Stravinsky, this book is essential. As a record of his personality and thought processes, it takes some beating.

it is always interesting to me to read a book by an artist talking about his art. why read on the subject of some art by a critic rather than artist, who can reveal the thought process and energy that goes into the actual creation? here, the art is music, but the whole book (especially chapter three) should be read by artists in all fields. here he discusses inspiration, and the role that it plays and how it functions in making art (less than one might suppose). the crux of stravinsky's claim is that

artists should always make art, as a function of their being, and not wait for inspiration (which should, in any case, be found everywhere). being a fan of other russian composers, especially those of communist ussr, the chapter on russian composers was interesting. he discusses the role that politics played and how it stifled music and art there. there is also an interesting discussion on the role of the artist in contemporary times. he abhors the notions of 'modern' and 'academic,' and considers himself (and the 'rite of spring') as conservative music, and not revolutionary, while demeaning the critics and listeners whom he describes as 'snobs.' (in fact it is this conservatism that allows him to attack wagner and deride his music.) the arguments that he presents in such discussions are very enlightening for any artist, as well as a musician.

As a composer of over 250 classical and jazz works, I can't stress enough how important "Poetics of Music" was to me in my musical development. I read this book from a composer's perspective with hopes that I could get into the mind of this great composer. From "Poetics of Music" I learned that inspiration is never contrived and always accidental. Stravinsky said that a composer "improvises aimlessly" the way an animal grubs for food. Both seek personal satisfaction. He said this in the context of the "rules of music", making it clear that there really are no rules in musical composition. All that drives us in our art is that need to find our musical satisfaction.

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