

Valery Gergiev in concert: Stunning power, but it can be wearying

Robert Harris

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There aren't many classical musicians that you'd invite to front a gala asking patrons to fork over \$1,000 for drinks, a concert and dinner with the artist.

Valery Gergiev is one of them. The Russian-born conductor is a true international superstar, the hardest-working man in classical show business and a powerhouse of an artist.

Gergiev made a rare Toronto appearance with the Marinsky Theatre's Stradivarius Ensemble on Friday evening as part of the Royal Conservatory's season-opening gala at Koerner Hall, playing music by Richard Strauss, Dmitri Shostakovich and Tchaikovsky. And I doubt that any of the Gala participants regretted their cash outlay.

The Stradivarius Ensemble is a string orchestra made up of members of Gergiev's Marinsky Theatre Orchestra, all playing instruments made by Antonio Stradivarius and his contemporaries, thus making an absolutely beautiful blended sound only amplified by the superb acoustics of Koerner Hall. But what made the concert interesting was not the sound of the instruments but the use to which Gergiev put them.

Gergiev is a take-no-prisoners kind of conductor, an artist confident in his ability to create and shape power out of music – a power of contrast, drama, intensity and control. A Gergiev concert is like a military campaign, with each phrase plotted for its maximum expressive value. Nothing seems left to chance, or to whimsical spontaneity. The result is not unmusical – in fact, many find it superbly musical. But the overall effect can be wearying. At least to one listener.

Gergiev's program was especially interesting given his powerhouse style of music-making. Strauss's *Metamorphosen* and Shostakovich's *Chamber Symphony*, a transcription of his *String Quartet No. 8*, are almost the same piece; both are tied to the horrifying political realities of the 20th century. A bewildered, 80-year-old Strauss wrote his work in late 1944 and early 1945, as his country and his world faced utter collapse at war's end. A bitter Shostakovich wrote his *Quartet* in an almost-suicidal frenzy in 1960, having been finally forced to join the Communist Party he detested. Both works have a melancholic, wistful heart.

But Gergiev chose to find the drama in each. The middle section of Strauss's tone poem recalls happier times, but is insistently called back to tragedy by a motif that ultimately mimics the funeral march from Beethoven's *Eroica Symphony*. The sharp, cynical rhythms of the middle movement of Shostakovich's *Quartet/Chamber Symphony* haunt it throughout. But there is more than drama in both these pieces. There is in each a soul questioning itself. Gergiev didn't ignore this aspect of the music, but it was sometimes overwhelmed by the sheer dramatic power of his interpretation.

It was in the famous Tchaikovsky *Serenade for Strings* that Gergiev's insistence on power was most evident. Tchaikovsky was also a composer who suffered his own political tragedy – except, in his case, the political was personal – his guilt and fear about his homosexuality. But in works like the *Serenade*, Tchaikovsky seems to have sublimated his pain in a fantasy of beauty and grace. Gergiev chose to hear the pain in the *Serenade*, rather than the charm. He placed the work in the company of Tchaikovsky's achingly personal last symphonies, rather than the glittery world of *The Nutcracker*. And while that meant some of Tchaikovsky's most subtle moments were paraded across the Koerner Hall stage like tanks at a May Day parade, it also meant the elegiac third movement of the *Serenade* was given an amazingly dramatic reading, making it the heart of the work.

At moments on Friday night, the entire Hall, and everyone in it, reverberated, it seemed, in unison. A powerful achievement for a powerful musician.

<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/music/valery-gergiev-in-concert-stunning-power-but-it-can-be-wearying/article4733371/?cmpid=rss1>

How the Mariinsky Orchestra Beat Sandy

Brian Wise

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Hurricane Sandy is not the only thing barreling through the East Coast this week. The Mariinsky Orchestra and its conductor, Valery Gergiev, have been on a breathless tour that's complex even by the company's own go-for-broke standards.

As winds were gathering strength Sunday evening, the orchestra from St. Petersburg, Russia, was finishing a 4 pm concert at the New Jersey Performing Arts Center in Newark, NJ. The group of 105 musicians and staff was scheduled to board a chartered jet to Raleigh-Durham, NC, on Monday at noon. But the orchestra's manager made an executive decision: hightail it out of Newark 16 hours before their planned departure, thereby beating the category-one hurricane and getting to their next tour stop. The orchestra is to play [two concerts](#) at Memorial Hall at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, on Monday and Tuesday nights.

Although the exact maneuvers behind the orchestra's trip to Chapel Hill remain somewhat unclear, they formed a sprint against the clock, said Joe Florence, a spokesman for Carolina Performing Arts. The ensemble had reportedly changed its program at NJPAC so that some members of the orchestra could travel to Newark Liberty Airport while others were still on stage performing.

Meanwhile, venue management in North Carolina was busy considering a number of fallback scenarios if the flight didn't proceed in time. The orchestra finally did get clearance to take off just as airlines were suspending operations at airports along the East Coast. The Mariinsky arrived at 11 pm in Chapel Hill where the presenter hosted a buffet dinner and drinks at a local restaurant.

Currently, the orchestra intends to leave for New York this Wednesday morning, in order to perform at [Carnegie Hall](#) that night. A spokesman for the hall said the performance remains on schedule.

Not everything on the Mariinsky's tour has gone according to plan. A pre-concert talk in Chapel Hill by the composer Matthias Pintscher has been called off because of travel complications. And the second stop on the orchestra's tour, in Ann Arbor, MI on Saturday, almost didn't happen; 30 of the musicians and Gergiev were delayed in Toronto, due to weather, and the Ann Arbor concert started 30 minutes late.

Gergiev is known for his extreme touring habits, conducting concerts in multiple continents in a single day, and showing up at the stage door to a concert hall – in street clothes – five minutes before his performance is to begin. He is also known to tour with substantial programs and ample sponsorship deals. The Mariinsky's final tour stop at Carnegie Hall on Halloween is to end with Strauss's ode to heroism: *Ein Heldenleben*.



<http://www.wqxr.org/#!/blogs/wqxr-blog/2012/oct/29/mariinsky-orchestra-plots-hurricane-high-wire-act/>

The New York Times

Arts Beat

The Culture at Large

Stravinsky and 'Rite,' Rigorously Rethought

James R. Oestreich

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CHAPEL HILL, N.C. — Stravinsky a sadist? Maybe, but only in the kindest sense. Stravinsky a Fascist? No, but a sympathizer perhaps.

Those and many other issues were discussed here at the University of North Carolina over the weekend. As Mark Katz, the chairman of the music department, told graduate students in his seminar on music technology on Monday afternoon — while they prepared to discuss the composer's passing infatuation with the pianola, or player-piano — for a few days the university had become “the center of the Stravinsky universe.”

The occasion was an academic conference, “Reassessing ‘The Rite,’ ” part of Carolina Performing Arts’ “ ‘Rite of Spring’ at 100”, a season-long celebration of the centennial of that ballet, which had its premiere in Paris on May 29, 1913. Scholars from around the United States, Western Europe and Russia [convened on Thursday](#), and mostly stayed until Sunday, when travel concerns raised by Hurricane Sandy forced a slightly premature close. (This area remained on the edge of the storm, as it passed by the Carolina coast and veered inland, bringing moderate wind and rain.)

Not that Stravinsky was the only subject of discussion. As Richard Taruskin, a music historian at the University of California, Berkeley, [said of that riotous premiere](#) in his keynote address on Thursday, “it was not Stravinsky’s music that did the shocking.” It was the ungainly choreography of Vaslav Nijinsky.

And the ruckus — not without recent precedent in Paris theaters, as Annegret Fauser, a music professor at the University of North Carolina, established — was fomented partly by the marketing hype of the presenter, Sergei Diaghilev, for his Ballets Russes production.

So there were talks not only on the music, but also on the dance and theatrical aspects of the work and even on its role in French fashion. Particularly fascinating were the many filmed glimpses into what the original staging might have looked like, by way of Millicent Hodson and Kenneth Archer's reconstruction, which was presented first by the Joffrey Ballet in 1987 and has since been adopted by other companies. (The Rite at 100 will present the Joffrey production here in March.)

Ms. Hodson, a choreographer and graphic artist, herself gave a talk with rich video illustrations, stressing her contention that the scenario's sacrificial virgin dies from exhaustion — in effect, dancing herself to death — rather than from attack by members of her community. Others argued variously for either murder or suicide, drawing implications for how the work's larger message should be construed with respect to personal identity or social or political system.

That notion of Stravinsky's sadism was raised by Pieter van den Toorn, a music professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and the author of "Stravinsky and 'The Rite of Spring,'" who seemed to mean it as a compliment. Analyzing the physicality of "The Rite," he was trying to locate what it is that makes Stravinsky's music so viscerally compelling, and one of the things he pointed to was the glee Stravinsky took in disrupting a steady pulse, which is, after all, a part of the human condition (except for those of us who have dealt with heart arrhythmias) and of human comfort (especially for those of us freed of arrhythmias). And yet that disruption can inject life, surprise, a giddy imbalance, even explosiveness, into music: in short, enjoyment.

"It's a touch of sadism," Mr. van den Toorn said. "Maybe that is the art itself of Stravinsky."

On the evidence here, Stravinsky scholars seem to be a congenial bunch these days (in contrast with, say, Shostakovich scholars). Mr. Taruskin, who has had serious disagreements with Mr. van den Toorn over the years, dedicated a recent book to him, as "Public Adversary, Private Pal." Mr. van den Toorn reciprocated with an in-joke, using initials, P.A., P.P.

The strongest argument came at the very end, when Tamara Levitz, a musicology professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, suggested that Mr. Taruskin had called Stravinsky a Fascist. She, on the other hand, thought that Stravinsky, who was always playing to a public, was merely cozying up to the likes of Mussolini and Franco for the sake of convenience.

"I don't think Stravinsky was a Fascist," Mr. Taruskin said. "But he identified himself with authoritarian regimes."

Well, no one will mistake a musicological conference for the Ultimate Fighting Championship. Or for a stand-up comedy club, though Michael Beckerman, the chairman of the musicology department at New York University, who loves to play the class clown, had the group in stitches with his little self-made e-book, "Mike's Little Book About Stravinsky," haplessly trying to tie the composer to Mr. Beckerman's specialty, Czech music.

It was hard to imagine, at the end of the conference, that there could be much more to say about "The Rite," but present, still largely unformed plans are to resume the discussions in Moscow on May 12. That conference may extend beyond a single day, said Severine Neff, a Schoenberg scholar at the University

of North Carolina, who spent five years organizing the conference here (having met with little enthusiasm for a centennial conference on Schoenberg's "Pierrot Lunaire").

Meanwhile, insatiable Stravinskians can busy themselves with "[Reflections on 'The Rite,'](#)" an entertaining blog on the "'Rite of Spring' at 100's" Web site (theriteofspringat100.org), organized by William Robin, one of Mr. Katz's graduate students and an occasional contributor to The New York Times.

The conference carried a sense of gratification delayed or denied. Although many snippets were heard, some of them repeatedly, "The Rite" was never heard complete.

For that you had to wait for the concerts by Valery Gergiev and the Mariinsky Orchestra after the conference, on Monday and Tuesday. (Most of the visiting scholars did not.) And even then, "The Rite" came only at the end, concluding Tuesday's concert. (More on the concerts later this week.)

There was considerable question on Sunday whether Hurricane Sandy would even let Mr. Gergiev and the orchestra get here after its concert in Newark. The question then became whether they would get back to New York for their [concert in Carnegie Hall](#) on Wednesday, which the hall has now canceled.



Stravinsky feted in top London dance house season

Michael Roddy

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(Reuters) - London dance house Sadler's Wells will mark the centenary of the riotous premiere of Russian composer Igor Stravinsky's "Rite of Spring" with a commission that uses neither the original music or scandalous choreography, opting instead for a piece inspired by it.

[Olympics](#) opening ceremony choreographer Akram Khan's "ITMOi (in the mind of Igor)", with music by three composers that will in part draw on Stravinsky's groundbreaking work of musical brutality, will have its first public performance on May 29, 2013, Sadler's Wells said on Tuesday.

That will be 100 years to the day after a near-riot broke out at the premiere of the ballet, choreographed by Vaslav Nijinsky, at the Theatre des Champs-Elysees in Paris.

Sadler's Wells will also revive a modern choreography by Michael Keegan-Dolan of Stravinsky's rhythmically ferocious and paganistic ballet that changed the course of 20th century music, the venue said at a news conference announcing its new season.

Other venues around the world will mark the centenary, including 14 performances of various versions and tributes to the work at the Theatre des Champs-Elysees, **starting on the anniversary day with the Ballet of the Mariinsky Theatre and conductor Valery Gergiev in a re-creation of Nijinsky's original.**

Khan, whose dance piece for the 2012 Summer Olympics was intended as a tribute to the 52 victims of bombing attacks on the London public transport system in July 2005, said that given the brilliance of Nijinsky's work, and a more recent version by Pina Bausch, he had decided to go in a different direction.

"It's not really a piece about Stravinsky, it's inspired by his concepts...but it's still about the story of the 'Rite of Spring'," the British-Bangladeshi choreographer said.

He said he had asked three composers to provide the music because "I just wanted to make things more difficult" - partly in the spirit of paying homage to the sense of rhythmical and musical rupture that he senses in Stravinsky's score.

He said that one of the vivid memories Stravinsky recalled from his youth was the sound of ice breaking on the river in St. Petersburg: "He would never forget the sound so the idea of rupture fascinated me."

Sadler's Wells executives said the venue had presented 677 performances in its 2011/12 season, an increase of 53 shows on the previous year.

Artistic Director Alistair Spalding decried recent proposals by the Conservative-led government to drop dance from the core curriculum under a sweeping revamp of the British education system, saying the move would likely reverse a trend of more young people learning dance in school and choosing dance as a profession.

"The predominance of dance in the Olympic ceremonies shows how rewarding and involving it can be," Spalding said. "It will be deeply damaging to reverse this investment."

He said dance was the second most popular activity in British schools, after football, and ranked first for girls.

<http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/10/30/uk-arts-music-sadlers-idUSLNE89T02P20121030>