Picasso and Stravinsky: Notes on their Friendship

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In April 1917, under the warmth of the Italian Mediterranean sun, two modernist titans began a friendship that would lead to a special artistic collaboration. Pablo Picasso and Igor Stravinsky were brought together as artists commissioned by Serge Diaghilev's celebrated and notorious Ballets Russes. From 1917 until 1919 the pair engaged in an artistic dialogue which formed the basis for their collaboration on *Ragtime*. The journey from friendship to collaborators and the fascinating artistic works this yielded are often neglected in the vast literature on each of these geniuses. I argue, however, that the works Picasso and Stravinsky produced in friendship from 1917 to 1919 reveal insights into their eventual collaboration on *Ragtime*, where each tried to capture the other's medium in his own. Although *Ragtime* is a comparatively small work that is often considered incidental, especially when compared to their ballet collaboration on *Pulcinella* (1920), it is actually a crucial statement of artistic collaboration borne out of the intimacy of friendship.

Despite the iconic status of both Picasso and Stravinsky and the enormous bodies of literature concerned with each, little scholarly attention has been paid to their relationship or collaboration. This may be explained to some extent by the exalted position in prewar modernism that each artist inhabits, which has resulted in a skewed focus on the seminal early works of each artist. Picasso's prewar Cubism and collage placed him clearly at the head of the Parisian avant-garde. Meanwhile, Stravinsky's seminal *Rite*

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of Spring (1913) provoked an infamous riot as audiences grappled with its dark modernist claims. Owing to strikingly similar artistic trajectories, each had achieved seminal status in modernism prior to the outbreak of the First World War.

However, the wartime splintering of the avant-garde and the financial difficulties that each artist separately faced created the perfect conditions for the savvy impresario of the Ballets Russes to bring the pair together. Diaghilev understood Picasso's need for a vibrant artistic community, which he was able to provide in the form of the Ballets Russes. Once Picasso accepted the commission for his first ballet, *Parade*, he was quickly whisked to Rome where, from 17 February to 5 April 1917, the ballet was being rehearsed.[1] Suddenly, the artist was engaged in the new artistic world of ballet collaboration. Immersing himself in rehearsals, Picasso's famous prewar *bande á Picasso* was now replaced by the flamboyant and diverse group of Russian artists who, according to Alexandre Benois, thrived on "a romantic working climate ... [where] all work had the charm of a risky escapade."[2] Moreover, Picasso was enchanted by the flock of young ballerinas, boasting to Gertrude Stein that "I have sixty ballerinas."[3] With Picasso as designer, Diaghilev's ambition of a genuine unity between art, music and dance was now a tantalising possibility.

On 5 April 1917, with *Parade* almost complete, Stravinsky suddenly arrived in Rome. He recalled that within "a whirlpool of artistic enthusiasm and excitement I at last met Picasso."[4] Immediately the composer and artist struck up a deep friendship which had artistic ramifications for each. Stravinsky later wrote that "I liked his flat, unenthusiastic manner of speaking and his Spanish way of accenting each syllable: 'He ne suis pas musician, he comprends rien dans la musique,' all said as though he couldn't care less."[5]

On around 16 April 1917, Picasso and Stravinsky travelled to see two performances given by the Ballets Russes at the Teatro San Carlo in Naples.[6] Alongside Naples' rich classical past, the pair especially enjoyed the popular culture. They scoured the backstreets of Naples collecting kitsch memorabilia, including tourist postcards and nineteenth century watercolours from secondhand dealers.[7] Rowdy drunken nights followed sightseeing adventures to the aquarium, puppet shows and *commedia dell'arte* performances. One such bawdy evening adventure saw the pair arrested for urinating in the Galleria. According to the anecdote, they were only released when the policeman heard them being addressed as "maestri."[8]

Picasso and Stravinsky's friendship coalesced around their shared love for the caustic *commedia dell'arte* and its main character, Pulcinella.[9] In Naples, Pulcinella shows were often performed in the street where the

acerbic main character would harangue passersby with caustic banter.[10] This popular cultural forum, with its tendency to vulgarity, lewd humour and slapstick, demonstrated a complete absence of romanticism. Stravinsky recalls that, "We were both much impressed with the *commedia dell'arte*, which we saw in a crowded little room reeking of garlic. The Pulcinella was a great drunken lout whose every gesture, and probably every word, if I had understood, was obscene."[11] It was the underlying threat of violence and the tendency towards obscenity which appealed most to the composer and artist.

Picasso had long been fascinated with masked performers and while in Naples he purchased an antique *commedia* mask alongside several *commedia* puppets.[12] However, the best evidence for Picasso's fascination with the character at this time is found in his notebooks, which were quickly filled with sketches of the character Pulcinella.[13] Like Stravinsky, Picasso focused on this character's malevolence and lewd vulgarity. Moreover, Picasso's Pulcinella sketches are bookended by a series of phallic sketches, a jotted note regarding the location of a bordello and the statement that "*A Naples, les demoiselles ont quatre bras*" ("In Naples, the girls have four arms"). Picasso places his images of Pulcinella within a highly sexual context at odds with images of the charming and romanticized *harlequinade tradition* of artists including Domenico Tiepolo.[14] Instead, Picasso revels in the bawdy mayhem of the Neapolitan *commedia*.

It seems that a ballet production based around Pulcinella was discussed during this visit to Naples.[15] Picasso's sketches of Pulcinella from the Italian notebook of 1917 are supplemented by a list of characters for a ballet above a sketch of the requirements for the décor. The artist drew this on a sheet of letter paper from his hotel in Madrid which he inserted into the notebook.[16] Although *Pulcinella* was not commissioned until 1919, it is clear that Picasso was interested in the ballet from the outset and had formulated his design concept around the time spent in Naples with his composer friend. Stravinsky, however, was Diaghilev's second choice as composer after the Spaniard Manuel de Falla rejected the project.[17] Falla's rejection was fortunate for the impresario, who used the commission of a collaboration with Picasso as a way to entice Stravinsky back into the Ballets Russes fold. Stravinsky later recalled that "the proposal that I should work with Picasso, who was to do the scenery and costumes and whose art was particularly near and dear to me, recollections of our walks together and the impressions of Naples we had shared … combined to overcome my reluctance."[18] Stravinsky's explicit contextualization of their collaboration on *Pulcinella* within the period they shared in Naples in 1917 demonstrates the importance of friendship to the development of their collaborative practice.

The ballet *Pulcinella*, which premiered in 1920, demonstrates on a large scale the collaborative process of Picasso and Stravinsky, however it is the steps from 1917-1919 which formed the techniques used in the later work which are of particular interest in this article.

Between the genesis of the ballet Pulcinella in 1917 and the commission in 1919, Picasso and Stravinsky engaged in an artistic dialogue in which they created small miniature works of art for each other as a sign of intimacy. This artistic exchange between the pair, which culminated in the collaboration on *Ragtime*, saw them try to capture something of the other's medium in their own work. It is this technique which forms the basis of the unity in the 1920 ballet, making *Ragtime* a crucial area of enquiry into how Picasso and Stravinsky approached their collaborative practice. The beginning of this artistic exchange occurred when Stravinsky wanted to commemorate his new friend in musical form.

On the 13th of April, 1917, Stravinsky used a hotel telegram to create a *Sketch of music for the Clarinet,* which he gave to Picasso.[19] Stravinsky acknowledges Cubism by creating a confluence of lines over this short five-bar piece. He exploits the interface between the lines of the telegram note paper and the bar-lines and note stems through the simple act of turning the telegram on its side so that the original horizontal lines become reframed as vertical lines. The visual complexity this creates suggests Cubism's fractured perspective. Moreover, the fluctuating perspective of the telegram is reiterated in the rhythmic complexities of this five bar miniature. Stravinsky oscillates between metres and adds rhythmic devices, such as tied notes, triplets and a mordent ornament, which confound a stable rhythm. Stravinsky's rhythmical and metrical game reaches its height in the metrical displacement of the third bar. Although he has deliberately gone into 6/8 or six quavers in a bar, which is most often notated as two dotted crotchets in a bar, Stravinsky delineates the bar as three crotchets. Without the anchor of a stable metre in the previous bars, these accented crotchets could just as easily belong to a 3/4 metre as to the written 6/8 metre. Stravinsky is suggesting that, like Picasso's Cubism, the conventional structures which frame our understanding of art can be pulled apart and rearranged in new ways without breaking down the fundamental grammar of music.

Stravinsky underwrites the Cubist references of this miniature by scoring it for the clarinet, an instrument which featured in many of Picasso's Cubist still-life canvases.[20] By 1917, the clarinet had become the stalwart of Stravinsky's pared-back style of the years surrounding the First World War. The composer who had made his name with large scale orchestral works, notably the *Firebird* and *Rite of Spring*, now shifted emphasis to-

wards smaller chamber ensembles featuring wind instruments. Consequently, Stravinsky's use of the clarinet in this small piece both recognises his new friend Picasso's interest in the instrument as seen in his Cubist works, and is also part of the emerging wind-dominated chamber instrumentation favoured by the composer at this time.

Stravinsky's chief concern in this short five-bar piece is to destabilize rhythm and metre as a means of exploring Cubist ideas in a musical context. He parallels Picasso's interest in exploring the limits of the grammars and structures which bind musical or visual language into a cohesive and recognisable form. Stravinsky underlines his challenge to language in the inscription below the stave which reads, "*Pour Paolo Pi/ca/ss/o / le posterité / Igor Strawinsky, Apprele, 13ieme 1917.*" Stravinsky breaks Picasso's name down into syllables, which suggests Cubism's relationship to language and Picasso's characteristic practice of breaking up words to create multiple meanings. Stravinsky has also immortalised the Neapolitan meeting place by writing Picasso's name in its Italian incarnation as "Paolo" rather than "Pablo" and further has included the date in Italian. His scrupulous inscription of the date on this piece is both a sign of his meticulous nature and a canny identification of the fact that, for both himself and his friend, every utterance from timid sketch to completed artwork, was deemed worthy of archival treatment. Hence, he irreverently dedicates this throw-away five-bar piece to his friend to "*le posterité.*"

Possibly in response to this musical work, Picasso completed the *Drawing for Stravinsky.* This work appears within Picasso's Italian notebook of 1917 amidst the pages dedicated to sketches of Pulcinella, thereby linking the composer to the *commedia* character. This strange drawing is like a frontispiece for a Stravinsky score. However the joke is that no score exists behind the façade of this cover art which is underlined by the presence of a blank, three-line stave at the centre of the drawing. Picasso's Cubist sketch shows a conglomeration of violin, cello, clarinet, keyboard and manuscript bursting through the drawn-on frame. Picasso is intrigued with the visual possibilities of the instruments which formed the basis of Stravinsky's wartime instrumentation. Akin to the conventional manner of presenting frontispieces for scores, Picasso has written the name of the composer beneath a decorative scroll. However, he has intentionally misspelled the name as "Strawinky," which suggests a droll critique on the notion of the celebrity artist, a category to which both the artist and composer now belonged.

After these joke exchanges, Picasso finally drew an entirely serious portrait of his friend. On 16 April 1917 in Rome, after less than a fortnight in each other's company, Picasso created the first of his three portraits of

Stravinsky. The severity of the composer's personality is found in the unsmiling figure with carefully brushed hair, impenetrable eyes behind a monocle, tidy moustache and starched collar.[21] The careful modelling on the left ear signals that for the composer, hearing was a crucial sense, equivalent to the artist's eye.[22] With a few simple lines, Picasso has created a powerful portrait capturing the composer's personality and musical language. On 24 April 1917 Stravinsky left Italy and returned to Morges, Switzerland As he was leaving Italy, the border police insisted that Picasso's portrait of him was in fact a map of secret military fortifications and the sketch was confiscated. It was only through the intervention of Stravinsky's friend Lord Berners in the English High Commission that the picture was returned.[23] That the heightened austerity of this portrait could be transformed into the straightforward architectural designs of military plans emphasises the mutability of meaning in the artwork.

Finally, after having created intriguing miniature artworks for each other, the pair collaborated when Picasso drew the front cover design for Stravinsky's piano transcription of his *Ragtime* score of 1919.[24] Stravinsky's complex piece extends the characteristically swung dotted ragtime rhythm through syncopation, cross-rhythms and ostinato procedures which create a lurching and often abrupt rhythm. The irregularity of the underlying beat is heightened by a jerking melodic line, which abruptly moves between different registers. Picasso matches the awkward but persistent movement of Stravinsky's rhythm and melody with his own virtuosic drawing using a single continuous line which staggers across the page to create an image of two instrumentalists. The parallel musical and pictorial lines achieve a tremendous unity and symbiosis.

Indeed, Picasso's virtuosic line drawing explicitly uses musical symbols in the formation of the figures as if to embed his drawing directly into Stravinsky's score. This is clear in the violinist's facial features, which have been created through the characteristic loops of the treble clef which have been teased apart and inverted. This acknowledges that the violin is written in the treble clef, owing to its higher register. Meanwhile, a bass clef becomes the basis for the banjo player's left ear. The register of the banjo is lower and corresponds to the bass clef, with the added complexity that the instrument sounds an octave lower than the written pitch. Picasso is using musical iconography to create features of his instrumentalists, while also cannily displaying his understanding of the processes of notating music.

Moreover, Stravinsky employs the typical gesture of Picasso to complicate language into multiple meanings depending on the audience: written notes appear on the stave as one note but are heard as another pitch. At bar 19, the F when viewed on the page appears to form part of a B major

tonality. However, Stravinsky adds a double sharp to the note meaning it would sound as a G, thereby altering the perception of the tonality. This creates a conflict between the written notation and the sonic potential of a score. Such a game was underlined by Picasso's cover drawing in the written text. Picasso has taken liberties with the spelling of the publisher's name and address. Dispensing with some accents and adding in others Picasso has created a text punctuated by staccato accents. This mirrors the sharp dotted rhythm of the opening of Stravinsky's music. Moreover, although the words appear to be simple, they are in fact transformed through misspelling into something else. Brimming with visual complexity, they lead the viewer directly into the chaotic sound world of Stravinsky's version of the popular American genre.

The friendship between Picasso and Stravinsky is all the more intriguing because of the artworks each produced for the other which culminated in the collaboration on *Ragtime*. In this analysis, I have argued that the score and cover art of *Ragtime* is a unified art work that demonstrates how the intimacy between the two artists was translated into a unified collaborative practice where each captured the other's medium in his own. Ultimately, the two years from 1917 to 1919 reveal a wealth of material exchanged between the pair which contains the basis of the ideas and collaborative process that would be employed in their next collaborative project, the 1920 ballet *Pulcinella*.

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NOTES

[1] John Richardson, *A Life of Picasso: Volume III The Triumphant Years 1917-1932* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1997), 3.

[2] Sjeng Scheijen, *Diaghilev: A Life*. Translated by Jane Hedley-Prôle and S.J. Lleinbach (London: Profile books, 2009), 101.

[3] Josep Palau I Fabre, *Picasso: De Los Ballets Al Drama* (1917-1926) (Barcelona: Ediciones Poligrafa, 1999), 20. Picasso wrote to Gertrude Stein from Rome in April 1917.

[4] Stephen Walsh, *Stravinsky A Creative Spring*: *Russia and France 1882-1934* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 276.

[5] Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Conversations with Igor Stravinsky* (New York: Doubleday, 1959), 116.

[6] Richardson, *A Life Of Picasso*, 25.

[7] Walsh, *Stravinsky*, 277.

[8] Richardson, *A Life of Picasso*, 26.

[9] Douglas Cooper, *Picasso Theatre* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1968), 43.

[10] Giovanni Carandente, "Picasso and the Italian Scene," in *Picasso: The Italian Journey 1917-1924*, ed. Jean Clair and Odile Michel (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998), 42.

[11] Walsh, *Stravinsky*, 139.

[12] Richardson, *A Life of Picasso*, 27.

[13] Picasso's Italian notebooks from 1917 are reproduced in Brigitte Léal, *Musée Picasso: Carnets: Catalogue des dessins*, vol. 1, (Réunion des Musées Nationaux, 1996), 256-7, 259. Some of the sketches are also available at the Online Picasso Project: Digital Catalogue Raisonné http://picasso.shsu.edu/ OPP.17:119-121.

[14] Richardson, *A Life of Picasso*, 26.

[15] Richardson, *A Life of Picasso*, 26.

[16] Léal, *Musée Picasso: Carnets*, 265.

[17] Walsh, *Stravinsky*, 306.

[18] Igor Stravinsky, *Chroniques de ma vie*, (London : Calder and Boyars, 1975), 81

[19] A performance of the piece by Charles Neidich is available at http://www.classicalarchives.com/work/336215.html

[20] See Simon Shaw Miller, "Instruments of Desire: Musical Morphology in the Early Work of Picasso", *Musical Quarterly*, vol. 76, no. 4, 1992: 443-464.

[21] Elizabeth Cowling, *Picasso: Style and Meaning* (Phaidon: London, 2002), 307.

[22] Walsh, *Stravinsky*, 278.

[23] Richardson, *A Life of Picasso*, 26.

[24] The Faculty of Music at The University of Melbourne has purchased copy 674 / 1000 of Stravinsky's piano transcription of *Ragtime* with the Picasso cover art which formed the basis for this analysis. The cover art can be viewed at: http://www.lib.unimelb.edu.au/collections/music/rare/stravinsky.html.