

Oedipus Rex Film Transcript

Simon Russell Beale takes the role of Narrator in Stravinsky's *Oedipus Rex* as part of Esa-Pekka Salonen's season opening concert in London.

We sent Simon to meet Professor Jonathan Cross to find out some more about the piece and its performance history.

Jonathan, can we start by putting Stravinsky in a European context, as a Russian composer?

Well, the piece was composed in Nice which was where he was living 1926/27 which was the period of composition. Stravinsky wore so many different masks throughout his life. How do we tell who the real Stravinsky was? How important were his Russian roots to him? Progressively he turned his back on that Russianness particularly once it was clear that he was never going to return and as it were reinvented himself as a Western, European composer.

Paris could lay claim to be possibly the most exciting city, at least culturally, in Europe and, what with Diaghilev being there. Stravinsky had done some stuff already with him. So how did *Oedipus Rex* fit into that particular line of work?

It was put on as part of the twentieth anniversary season of the Ballet Russes and in fact its first performance was sandwiched between two ballets. Stravinsky gives this as one of the reasons why perhaps the audience was rather nonplussed by the piece at its first performance. They were used to the excitement, the drama, the exoticism of the ballet and they got this rather dour classical piece.

Can you explain a little bit about the relationship between Stravinsky and Cocteau and what precisely they wanted to do with this rather extraordinary piece and something about their creative relationship?

Well, Stravinsky's original idea and he'd had this idea for quite some time before he approached Cocteau to write the text for the piece, was that he wanted something very formal, very monumental. Those are the two words that keep cropping up time and time again, a monumental work. In a way you can say it was an explicitly anti-Romantic work. It wasn't concerned with the overt presentation or expression of emotions and character but rather, with this distancing; it is ironic in the best sense of the word.

I find it emotionally engaging, despite all the theoretical stuff. I was emotionally engaged by the characters, especially by Jocasta and that enormous aria she does. I find that completely emotionally compelling.

I think that's right and these individual moments do but I think in this work the context is crucial as well and I think that's true of Brecht as well. One may get momentarily caught up in the emotions in Brecht but there's a change that's constantly pushing your emotions in different directions. It's not Puccini!

So Oedipus is a very confident and very bullish character and I noticed when I last did it that he seems to be very high up in his range; that the tessitura is very, very high. It's a high part so you get that sort of excessive 'Verdianism'; that high tension.

But there's also a decorative aspect to his music which I find intriguing. The work begins with this monumental music for the chorus; very block-like. And then we get the first entry of Oedipus and it's a much more decorated line. It seems to come from somewhere else and I think there's a very striking contrast between this monumental music and this more decorative music. All the other characters, as you say, we only see them or hear them once and then they're gone; they're like cardboard cut-outs. But Oedipus changes and we have to build Oedipus up as this character in the first place to make his fall seem all the greater later on; in the way that it did of course in the Sophocles original.

So, moving on to the orchestra and the instrumentation. How big is this?

We've still got a big orchestra but it's used in a very, very different way. He's aiming again for a kind of clarity so you get blocks of sound, you get layers of sound. I think what's extraordinary about this is the way that it's orchestrated. You never lose sound or sight of the voices.

Could you define the impact it's had on future composers?

In the way it suggests a new possibility for a new kind of musical theatre. The music is built up by a lot of ostinatos, repeating patterns that sound familiar but they simply repeat; they don't go anywhere. Models that Stravinsky was looking to – Handel – there was a very clear forward directedness to that music which is never there in Stravinsky. You get something that's much more block-like, much more like a mosaic.

This is probably an unfair question but is there a single piece or a couple of pieces that you could definitely say this is a son or daughter of Oedipus?

Direct, maybe not but I think there's definitely something of that there. This tradition in the twentieth century of music theatre that is neither concert work nor opera but is something else.

And nor entirely narrative either.

Not narrative, stylised, multiple kinds of theatre. And I think it's those aspects and the role that music plays in creating a very vibrant kind of direct, non-narrative stylised theatre that's been the greatest impact of this piece on later composers.

It's extremely listenable too, that's the other thing. It's actually a good listen.

It's a good listen, it's a very engaging piece, musically varied yet consistent, it's familiar enough for anybody without any real knowledge of Stravinsky's musical language to find a way in but is challenging in all sorts of interesting ways. I'm not a great fan of that word 'accessible' but it is a kind of accessible modernism.

Shall I really irritate you and say it's an accessible masterpiece? No, I won't! That would be unfair. It's extremely accessible. Thank you Jonathan, that was great, thank you very much.