CHAPTER 4

Time, Trace, and Movement in Stravinsky’s Three Japanese Lyrics

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Abstract

Artists and poets have evolved techniques to convey depth and complexity of temporality and also movement in a two-dimensional art form. Among such art forms were the waka poetry and wood-block prints of Japan. These art forms inspired Igor Stravinsky to explore a musical analogy of two-dimensionality in Three Japanese Lyrics: each of the songs creates its own elusive quality of temporality by the differing actions of just two streams of movement.

Keywords


During the years 724–736 CE, the Japanese court poet Akahito Yamanobe travelled extensively throughout some of the remoter regions of Japan with the Emperor Shomu and his entourage. As he travelled, he recorded his impressions of the wonderful sights and sounds of the natural world in brief, concisely-structured poems. In 1912, nearly 1200 years later, the essential elements of this delicate poetic form resurfaced to inspire new expression and interpretation. A poem by Akahito became the first of Igor Stravinsky’s Three Japanese Lyrics, in which Stravinsky continued to explore a new direction he was taking in musical structure.

By the time that Stravinsky arrived in Paris with Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes in 1909, ‘Le Japonisme,’ the fashion for Japanese art, culture and aesthetics, had been influencing Western Europe for a generation. Since Japanese ports had opened to imports from the West in 1853, and particularly since
the Meiji Restoration in 1868, Japanese ceramics, woodblock prints, textiles, bronzes and enamels had been avidly collected by dealers and had rapidly become a source of inspiration for artists. Katsushika Hokusai’s woodblock prints were first printed in black and white in the 1860s, while his Manga, line-drawn cartoons, famously found their way to Paris wrapped around a consignment of porcelain. At the International Exposition held in Paris in 1867, Japan had its own national pavilion showing Japanese works of art, and Japanese art also featured strongly at the subsequent International Expositions held in Paris in 1878, 1889 and 1900. The director of the 1900 International Exposition, Tadamasa Hayashi, was one of many art dealers who, from the 1870s, had been bringing to Europe thousands of Japanese prints that subsequently influenced such artists as Manet, Monet, Van Gogh, Gauguin, and Toulouse-Lautrec. It was now many years since Whistler’s Purple and Rose of 1864, and the beginning of a fashion for Japanese costumes which inspired Monet to paint his wife in a kimono in 1878, and Van Gogh to paint La Courtisane in 1887, after an ukiyo-e print by Eisen had appeared on the cover of Paris Illustré in the previous year. Many art critics had travelled to Japan in order to write informed articles: thirty-six issues of Le Japon Artistique, a magazine commenting on Japanese art and culture, were published in Paris between May 1888 and April 1891. Composers, too, found new inspiration in Japanese subjects: Pierre Loti’s novel Madame Chrysanthème of 1887, about a naval officer who marries a geisha in Nagasaki became Puccini’s opera Madame Butterfly of 1904 and Gilbert and Sullivan had massive success with The Mikado in 1885. Among the many collectors of Japanese woodblock prints was Debussy, whose first orchestral score of La Mer featured Hokusai’s In the Well of the Great Wave at Kanagawa on its front cover. 1

The characteristic techniques of line-drawing in Japanese woodblock prints influenced not only the Impressionists but subsequently also the Art Nouveau and Cubist movements. Some of its strongest and most influential features can also be traced in Stravinsky’s setting of the Three Japanese Lyrics. The scenes portrayed in Japanese prints often lack perspective and their rhythmic lines project outside the frame. Coupled with this, there is a love of asymmetry and irregularity, in short, a freedom of line and positioning that likes to place the subject “off-centre.” Japanese prints lack shadow and delight in flat areas of strong colour that make a strong contrast to the sinuous curves of their lines and patterned surfaces. Stravinsky was well acquainted with Japanese art: suddenly caught up into the new and exotic environment of early 20th-century Paris, he found real friendship and encouragement for his newest works, away from the politics of the Ballets Russes, in a group of artists, musicians and poets

1 See Funayama, “Three Japanese Lyrics and Japonisme.”