

TAMARA LEVITZ, *MODERNIST MYSTERIES: PERSÉPHONE* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). ISBN 978-0-1997-3016-2, xxiv+655pp, £42.

Early on in her 600-page study of Stravinsky's fifty-five minute melodrama, Tamara Levitz remarks, *à propos* its librettist André Gide's working method, that 'most truths reveal themselves only through a heterophony of voices, or differences of opinion' (57). It might just as well stand as a motto for her own book. Of all Stravinsky's stage works, *Perséphone* is the most hybrid. Like *L'Histoire du soldat*, it combines speech, music and dance, but unlike that earlier piece it is sung as well as spoken; and so far from being conceived as a modest charade that might be thrown together on the back of a lorry in some Swiss village square, it was presented as a sumptuous spectacle on the stage of the Paris Opéra, with full-blown sets, a *corps de ballet*, on-stage chorus (costumed but not acting) and a big orchestra in the pit: 'the works', one might say.

Levitz's immense monograph is similarly 'the works'. Like the melodrama, it is laid out in three parts, optimistically labelled (after St. Paul but not in his order) Faith, Love and Hope. It has lengthy chapters on the history of Gide's association with the whole subject of Persephone (starting as far back as the 1890s) and its deep connection with what she somewhat primly refers to, in the text, as his '*pédéraste* desire' but disguises in her chapter headings as 'Gide's Anxiousness' and 'André's Masked Pleasures'. It has two huge chapters on the history and context of Stravinsky's thought at the time of *Perséphone* (it was premiered in April 1934), including the religious influences on him of Jacques Maritain and inter-war French Catholicism in general, and the vexed question of his supposed Eurasianism, as seen through the prism of his close friendship with fellow *émigrés* Pierre Souvchinsky and Arthur Lourié and his much cooler relations with the Russian-born Paris critic Boris de Schloezer and the Soviet musicologist Boris Asafyev. Finally it explores the contribution of Ida Rubinstein, who commissioned the work and played the title role, through the context of the apparently flourishing lesbian (Sapphic) scene of Twenties' and Thirties' Paris.

By any standards it's a bravura display of in-depth research, involving a quantity of reading, digression and cross-referencing that often leaves the reader gasping to keep up. Even to survey the course of Levitz's argument in a short review, never mind critique it (a favourite verb of hers), would be next to impossible. But one can map its profile and one or two of its conclusions. This is less a study of the *mélodrame* itself, such as one might expect to find in an oversized handbook, than a series of journeys towards it; the work sits in the middle like a small town to which roads travel from every point of the compass, arriving perhaps not quite in the town centre but at a ring road on which the centre is not always adequately signposted.

One of the best-known facts about *Perséphone* is that the collaboration was an unhappy one. Gide was so distressed by Stravinsky's treatment of his text, and by the

prevailing lack of empathy with a concept that had a deep personal significance for him, that he fled to Sicily before the premiere and attended none of the three performances. The once beautiful, slender-bodied, mysterious Ida was by this time a moderately well-preserved 45-year-old who could no longer dance and who spoke her exquisite lines with a bad French accent, head in air and arms waving, in the outmoded, rotund style of her one-time teacher, Sarah Bernhardt. As for Gide, the crucial significance of his libretto, in Levitz's view, was as an allegory of the pederastic deviance of which he had long since made public confession in his autobiography, *Si le grain ne meurt* (1924). In plucking the narcissus against the advice of her nymph companions, Persephone performs an *acte gratuit*, a self-motivated action committed against the grain (pun intended) and without social consequences, like Gide's sexual experiences with Arab boys in North Africa. The fact that this reading is both by no means explicit and actually fraught with difficulties seems not to have troubled him, nor perhaps does it sufficiently trouble Levitz. In Greek mythology, Persephone stands for the origin of the seasons, and her annual return to the world symbolizes spring and new growth. The standard Christian interpretation of the *mélodrame* casts her as a redemptive figure who, in descending to the underworld, performs a purely selfless re-creative action. Anything less representative of the profoundly selfish, unproductive act of sodomizing young boys in another country, like the Jew of Malta's fornication, would be hard to imagine.

Stravinsky, a devout if unorthodox Orthodox Christian, not surprisingly either ignored or rejected this reading. But it wasn't the only source of disagreement between the two authors. In exploring the roots of Stravinsky's so-called neoclassicism, Levitz greatly clarifies the unbridgeable stylistic gap between Gide's essentially sentimental (in the Schiller sense) idea of dramatic narrative and Stravinsky's cool, ritualistic, non-pantomimic style of theatre. Curiously enough—in nobly resisting what one would hope was the temptation to excoriate Gide's sexual philosophy—she is inclined to be critical of Stravinsky's stylistic discontinuities, his irrational re-ordering of Gide's text, and even here and there the quality of his material. After all, the only possible excuse for a book on this scale about a single piece of music is surely an overpowering admiration for the music itself. Levitz seems oddly un-overpowered. She seems more fascinated by the intellectual background, the religious context, the 'transnationalism' of the various collaborators (the choreographer, Kurt Jooss, was German; the designer, André Barsacq, was half-Russian, etc.) and the Eurasianism of Souvtchinsky and others, whose influence to my mind she greatly exaggerates but about which she writes in such absorbing detail that disagreement becomes part of the whole stimulating process, like losing at chess to a superior player. Stravinsky on the whole steered clear of Russian *émigré* circles, and, while Levitz may be right that he and

Souvtchinsky discussed such matters in conversation, there is not much evidence of this in their correspondence.

The truth about Stravinsky's music, in general and in this particular case, is that its inconsistencies and seemingly random stylistic references evade intellectual classification but have an aesthetic rightness that disarms hermeneutics. One can hear the jazzy allusions that sneak into *Oedipus Rex* ('the girls enter, kicking') or the anticipation of boogie-woogie in *Perséphone* as conscious parody, and interpret the composer's attitude to the drama accordingly. But it's probably more accurate to understand such details as simple emanations of the musical idea, just as the Italianate elements in Jocasta's aria in *Oedipus Rex* lend her a kind of operatic grandeur without any intention of ridiculing her as a fat soprano or vacuous Verdian heroine. There is something ineffable about this aspect of Stravinsky's neoclassicism, however, and it can be annoying to exegetists. How much more interesting to find in these inconsistencies what Levitz calls 'the refusal to mourn that [Johann Joachim] Winckelmann once postulated as the basis of neoclassical aesthetics' (475). How much better to radiate outwards from a score such as *Perséphone* and find in its hybridities an image of the rich and complex backgrounds of its contributors, the duplicities of Gide's pederasty and Calvinism, of Ida Rubinstein's Russo-Jewish origins and Sapphic Parisian present, her dancing, speaking and acting ineptitudes, and of Stravinsky's strict family life and Parisian infidelities, his spiritual Orthodoxy and intellectual Catholicism, all locked up in a short hour about a Greek demi-goddess.

To judge Levitz's book in terms of right and wrong would be unjust and misleading. It's hard to believe anyone could read it without disagreeing with something on virtually every other page. It's that kind of book. There are errors galore, including schoolboy howlers like calling the duple-time slow march in the introduction to part II a sarabande, or twice referring to Stravinsky's rewrite of Rimsky-Korsakov's ending to Musorgsky's *Boris Godunov* (it was *Khovanshchina*, and no rewrite but a replacement), or claiming that Stravinsky knew no haiku poetry in 1934 when he had famously set three such poems in 1912. There are muddles and self-contradictions and lapses into jargon and spectacular absurdities like Gide's supposed 'image of Persephone as a selfless pédéraste who commits to national service' (287). There are even questionable details in Levitz's comparatively cursory and sometimes mildly derogatory musical descriptions.

These are no more than wrinkles on the surface of a polymathic study that pulls together an immense range of superficially unrelated sources into a richly stimulating and provocative picture of a single extended moment in Parisian artistic life. Not only has Levitz apparently read practically everything of the remotest relevance published on a subject that casts its net wide over great waters, but she has unearthed plenty of

primary, unpublished sources which show that the study of individuals of this stature and complexity will never be definitive. As an account of the work itself—and certainly as a study of the work as a piece of music—it may fall short. As a discussion of how it came to be what it was and why it failed at its first performance and has hovered on the fringes of the repertoire ever since, it should provide material for research and debate and productive irritation for a long time to come.

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