

Chorus honors Stravinsky

Austin fondly remembers visit in 1965

There's no doubt that the unifying theme for concerts in 1991 has been the 200th anniversary of the death of Mozart. This year also marks the 20th anniversary of the death of Igor Stravinsky. When he died at 88, Stravinsky left us with few questions of what might have been — he wrote a great deal of music, and made many unexpected turns by interspersing symphonies and operas with music for Woody Herman's Orchestra, a ballet for a young elephant, and even a setting of the *Star-Spangled Banner* that got him arrested in Boston for tampering with national property.

There's also little of the intrigue of Mozart's death. Stravinsky had suffered ill health most of his life, and accounts of his later years are peppered with references to his vast personal pharmacy and of close calls aggravated by his culinary indulgences.

He died on April 6, 1971, and was buried in Venice, Italy, not far from the grave of Serge Diaghilev, whose Ballet Russe made it possible for Stravinsky to create the stage works that he is still best known for — *The Firebird*, *Petrushka* and *Rite of Spring*, as well as works that should be better known — the opera *Le Rossignol* with scenery and costumes by Matisse, *Pulcinella*, with scenery and costumes by Picasso, and *Les Noces*, a work soon to be performed by the Austin Civic Chorus.

In 1964, University of Texas professor Lothar Klein learned that Stravinsky was available for a visit to Austin. He approached Kent Kennan, who was the chairman of the UT Music Department, and after some politicking, plans were laid for several days of public events and concerts conducted by Stravinsky's assistant Robert Craft in the first week of April 1965.

Kennan remembers the visit with undiminished awe. "It was like something from another planet," Kennan said. "I had idolized the *Rite of Spring* since I was in college, and to have this composer who had heretofore been a mythical figure was too much. When I met him in the airport I stayed carefully in the background."

A CBS-TV crew filmed the visit as part of a special on Stravinsky. One of the most memorable bits of film was when Stravinsky emerged from Robert Mueller Municipal Airport to be greeted by a contingent that included dignitaries and several members of the Texas Cowboys student spirit group. Stravinsky was given a 10-gallon cowboy hat, a gift that Kennan feared was not well-chosen. "I thought it was a very corny idea to give a cowboy hat to the world's greatest composer, but they went ahead and gave it to him — nothing could have delighted him more. He put the hat on the end of his walking cane and twirled it around in the air. Later, someone went up to his hotel room and Mrs. Stravinsky was wearing the hat."

With apparent regrets, Kennan admits that he never spoke to the com-



Igor Stravinsky, one of the greatest composers of modern classical music, visited Austin in 1965, and was given a 10-gallon hat. Photo by Eugene C. Barker, Texas History Center



Classical music

Jerry Young

poser. Singer and local businessman Russell Gregory was much less abashed. Gregory, who is known for his many solo performances with the Austin Choral Union, sang the role of Tiresias in the performance of *Oedipus Rex* and shared the role of the voice of God with Orville White in *The Flood*, which Stravinsky attended.

"During the week prior to that performance I discovered that Mr. Stravinsky was staying in what was then the Commodore Perry Hotel, which was right across the street from my insurance offices in the Vaughn Building. So I just went over one afternoon and knocked on his door and had a most charming encounter with Igor Stravinsky — a tiny, tiny little man. (Stravinsky, like Beethoven, was only 5 foot 2 inches tall, and likely lost an inch or two by 1965.) He had drinking-glass-thick eyeglasses.

"He greeted me with a warm smile and I thanked him for *Oedipus Rex* because I thought it was a wonderful work. He said, 'Yes. Isn't it wonderful? But it is not my greatest. One of the two great operas of this century is my greatest — *The Rake's Progress*.' Then he went on to explain that the other one was *Wozzeck* by Alban Berg.

"He waxed eloquent a bit about that and then I said, 'I feel obliged to apologize to you sir for that which will likely transpire when Mr. Orville White and I

collaborate to sing the voice of God in *The Flood*.' There are innumerable places in that work where it is impossible to find the pitch. He looked at me with the most wonderful wide eyes and said with a shrug of his shoulders and the proper gesture with his hands, 'Who will know?'"

Gregory was charmed. "He clearly loved what he was doing, where he was and who he was and where he found himself to be at that point in his life. There wasn't a line of concern or stress etched on that aging face — he was a wide-eyed, enthusiastic, happy camper."

Janet McGaughey, who was on the music faculty at the time, remembers the composer's sense of humor. "I remember him answering questions and at one point he turned to (his wife) Vera to get clarification on something and he turned back to the audience and said, 'She answered me in French.'" Some of the student question-and-answer sessions made it into the CBS special, and into the Columbia LP *A Portrait of the Composer*, included in the set "Nine Masterpieces Conducted by the Composer."

Martha Deatherage, a UT voice faculty member who sang the solo in a performance of the *Cantata* as part of the week's events, remembers the questions. "Students asked a lot of interesting questions, and he spoke very well. I remember somebody asked him about time and he said, 'I don't understand time, I only understand durations.'"

When I was in school at UT several years after Stravinsky's visit, I managed the Recital Hall (now called Jessen Auditorium), and confess that I often thought about the fact that Stravinsky had been in the hall. I always wondered

if one of the... the chair he had sat on. Stravinsky was the composer who drew me into classical music, and he provided a connection into arts of this century.

Listening to the recordings in the 22-CD set that CBS Sony released last month to mark the 20th anniversary of Stravinsky's death has been a chance to rediscover works I hadn't heard in a while — the luxurious ballet *Persephone* with texts by Andre Gide, the giddy *Scherzo A La Russe* written for Paul Whiteman's Band, and the *Mass*. There are a few gems missing from the set, such as *Star-Spangled Banner* and the part of "A Portrait of the Composer" recorded at UT. There are also missed opportunities — the recording Stravinsky made of the complete *A Soldier's Tale* has never been released in the United States.

If you are looking for a chance to sing in the Austin Civic Chorus's February performance of *Les Noces*, the chorus still is auditioning altos, basses and tenors. The season, which promises to be exciting as the chorus begins its first year under the direction of Dr. Fiora Contino, also includes Beethoven's *Miss Solemnis* and Carissimi's oratorio *Jephthe*, in Contino's own edition. For information, call 472-2224.

The Jessen Concerts begin Sept. 28 with a performance by the Gratoich/Golman duo. Last year's inaugural season, which showcased many of UT's internationally known music faculty, was one of the year's high points, and this season promises to be the same. For information on the Jessen Series, call 471-5496.