

Igor Stravinsky: Some Ideas About My Octet (1924)

My Octuor is a musical object.

This object has a form and that form is influenced by the musical matter with which it is composed.

The differences of matter determine the differences of form. One does not do the same with marble that one does with stone.

My Octuor is made for an ensemble of wind instruments. Wind instruments seem to me to be more apt to render a certain rigidity of the form I had in mind than other instruments—the string instruments, for example, which are less cold and more vague.

The suppleness of the string instruments can lend itself to more subtle nuances and can serve better the individual sensibility of the executant in works built on an "emotive" basis.

My Octuor is not an "emotive" work but a musical composition based on objective elements which are sufficient in themselves.

The reasons why I composed this kind of music for an octet of flute, clarinet, bassoons, trumpets and trombones are the following: First, because this ensemble forms a complete sonorous scale and consequently furnishes me with a sufficiently rich register; second, because the difference of the volume of these instruments renders more evident the musical architecture. And this is the most important question in all my recent musical compositions.

I have excluded from this work all sorts of nuances, which I have replaced by the play of these volumes.

I have excluded all nuances between the *forte* and the *piano*; I have left only the *forte* and the *piano*.

Therefore the *forte* and the *piano* are in my work only the dynamic limit which determines the function of the volumes in play.

The play of these volumes is one of the two active elements on which I have based the action of my musical text, the other element being the movements in their reciprocal connection.

These two elements, which are the object for the musical execution, can only have a meaning if the executant follows strictly the musical text.

This play of movements and volumes that puts into action the musical text constitutes the impelling force of the composition and determines its form.

A musical composition constructed on that basis could not, indeed, admit the introduction of the element of "interpretation" in its execution without risking the complete loss of its meaning.

To interpret a piece is to realize its portrait, and what I demand is the realization of the piece itself and not of its portrait.

It is a fact that all music suffers, in time, a deformation through its execution; this fact would not be regretted if that deformation were done in a manner that would not be in contradiction to the spirit of the work.

A work created with a spirit in which the emotive basis is the nuance is soon deformed in all directions; it soon becomes amorphous, its future is anarchic and its executants become its interpreters. The nuance is a very uncertain basis for a musical composition because its limitations cannot be, even in particular cases, established in a fixed manner.

On the other hand, a musical composition in which the emotive basis resides not in the nuance but in the very form of the composition will risk little in the hand of its executants.

I admit the commercial exploitation of a musical composition, but I do not admit its emotive exploitation. To the author belongs the emotive exploitation of his ideas, the result of which is the composition; to the executant belongs the presentation of that composition in the way designed to him by its own form.

It is not at all with the view of preserving my musical work from deformation that I turn to form as the only emotive basis of a musical composition. I turn to form because I do not conceive nor feel the true emotive force except under coordinated musical sensations.

These sensations only find their objective and living expression in the form which, so to speak, determines their nature.

To understand, or rather feel, the nature of these sensations according to that form (which is, as I said, their expression) is the task of the executant.

Form, in my music, derives from counterpoint. I consider counterpoint as the only means through which the attention of the composer is concentrated on purely musical questions. Its elements also lend themselves perfectly to an architectural construction.

This sort of music has no other aim than to be sufficient in itself. In general, I consider that music is only able to solve musical problems; and nothing else, neither the literary nor the picturesque, can be in music of any real interest. The play of the musical elements is the thing.

I must say that I follow in my art an instinctive logic and that I do not formulate its theory in any other way than *ex post facto*.

Igor Stravinsky, "Some Ideas About My Octuor," reprinted in Eric Walter White, *Stravinsky: The Composer and His Works* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 528-31.