

Stravinsky, *Petrushka* (1st Tableau)

Stravinsky composed *Petrushka* in 1911 for the Ballet Russes. *The Firebird*, Stravinsky's first ballet for the troupe, managed by Sergei Diaghilev and based in Paris, had been a great success in 1910, and Stravinsky was already at work on another ballet, which was to become *The Rite of Spring*. But meanwhile he composed a short piano piece that he said represented a puppet dancing. Diaghilev heard the music and thought it could be the basis for a ballet. He put Stravinsky in touch with Alexander Benois, who had worked out the stories and designed the sets for several of the company's previous ballets. Together Benois and Stravinsky worked out a scenario that takes place in St. Petersburg during the Shrovetide fair (i.e. Mardi Gras). In the first tableau various groups of dancers present the color, confusion and folklore of a 19th-century Russian carnival. We see drunken revelers, an organ grinder, two competing street dancers, each with their own distinctive music, juxtaposed and sometimes overlapping. The climax of the act is the puppet master, who attracts a crowd with his flute playing, then touches each puppet with his flute, and . . . the puppets miraculously spring to life and dance without strings.

The puppet characters are: *Petrushka*, the Russian equivalent of Punch; the Ballerina, with whom *Petrushka* is head-over-heels in love; and the coarse and brutal Blackamoor. The loves, fears, jealousies, and despair of the puppets are played out over the course of the following three tableaux, culminating in a fight, in which the Blackamoor kills *Petrushka* with a saber stroke to the head. The crowd of merrymakers is momentarily silenced by this tragic turn of events. But look . . . says the Puppetmaster, picking up *Petrushka*'s lifeless body and shaking it . . . it's only a puppet. Above the stage, however, appears *Petrushka*'s ghost – who gives the puppetmaster the finger. At the Ballets Russes premier in 1911 the role of *Petrushka* was created by the great dancer Vaslav Nijinsky.

In keeping with the folkloric theme of the scenario, much of the music for the ballet is based on traditional Russian tunes. Stravinsky found many of these in printed collections compiled by folklorists and ethnologists. Others he may have heard himself in the Russian countryside. Still others were 19th-century European pop tunes – for example an Austrian waltz popularized by Joseph Lanner, and a Parisian café song by Emile Spencer (c. 1908) entitled “Elle avait une jambe en bois [she had a wooden leg].” In the first tableau Stravinsky takes bits and pieces of these received materials, enhances them with ornamentation, dissonance, and piquant instrumentation, then juxtaposes them end to end or superimposes them on top of one another to create an ambience of gaiety, confusion and nostalgia. The tunes, rhythms and orchestral textures are closely coordinated with the action on the stage, and although *Petrushka* is often heard on concert programs, it is best understood and appreciated as a ballet.