



IGOR STRAVINSKY

Circus Polka for a young elephant

Igor Fyodorovich Stravinsky was a Russian composer and conductor with citizenship in France (from 1934) and the United States (from 1945). He is widely considered one of the most important and influential composers of the 20th century and a pivotal figure in modernist music. Stravinsky's father was an established bass opera singer, and Stravinsky grew up taking piano and music theory lessons. While studying law at the University of Saint Petersburg, he met Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov and studied under him until Rimsky-Korsakov's death in 1908. Stravinsky met the impresario Sergei Diaghilev soon after, who commissioned Stravinsky to write three ballets: *The Firebird* (1910), *Petrushka* (1911), and *The Rite of Spring* (1913), the last of which brought him international fame after the near-riot at the premiere, and changed the way composers understood rhythmic structure. Stravinsky's compositional career is divided into three periods: his Russian period (1913–1920), his neoclassical period (1920–1951), and his serial period (1954–1968). Stravinsky's Russian period was characterised by influence from Russian styles and folklore. *Renard* (1916) and *Les noces* (1923) were based on Russian folk poetry, and works like *L'Histoire du soldat* blended these folktales with popular musical structures, like the tango, waltz, rag, and chorale. His neoclassical period exhibited themes and techniques from the classical period, like the use of the sonata form in his Octet (1923) and use of Greek mythological themes in works like *Apollon musagète* (1927), *Oedipus rex* (1927), and *Persephone* (1935). In his serial period, Stravinsky turned towards compositional techniques from the Second Viennese School like Arnold Schoenberg's twelve-tone technique. *In Memoriam Dylan Thomas* (1954) was the first of his compositions to be fully based on the technique, and *Canticum Sacrum* (1956) was his first to be based on a tone row. Stravinsky's last major work was the *Requiem Canticles* (1966), which was performed at his funeral. While some composers and academics of the time disliked the avant-garde nature of Stravinsky's music, particularly *The Rite of Spring*, later writers recognized his importance to the development of modernist music. Stravinsky's revolutions of rhythm and modernism influenced composers like Aaron Copland, Philip Glass, Béla Bartók, and Pierre Boulez, all of whom "felt impelled to face the challenges set by [*The Rite of Spring*]," as George Benjamin wrote in *The Guardian*. In 1998, *Time* magazine named Stravinsky one of the 100 most influential people of the century. Stravinsky died of pulmonary edema on 6 April 1971 in New York City. Stravinsky is widely regarded as one of the greatest composers of the 20th century. In 1998, *Time* magazine named him one of the 100 most influential people of the century. Stravinsky was not only recognized for his composing; he also achieved fame as a pianist and as a conductor; Philip Glass wrote in 1998, "He conducted with an energy and vividness that completely conveyed his every musical intention. Here was Stravinsky, a musical revolutionary whose own evolution never stopped. There is not a composer who lived during his time or is alive today who was not touched, and sometimes transformed, by his work."

Circus Polka: For a Young Elephant was written by Igor Stravinsky in 1942. He composed it for a ballet production that the choreographer George Balanchine did for Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus. The ballet was performed by fifty elephants and fifty ballerinas. In 1944, Stravinsky published an orchestration of the piece, which is now part of the repertoire of many orchestras. Igor Stravinsky and George Balanchine first met in 1925, as Balanchine, who just had started working for Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, choreographed the ballet version of Stravinsky's *Le chant du rossignol*. This was the start of a long friendship and many years of collaboration, which continued after both emigrated to the United States in the 1930s. In late 1941, the Ringling Brothers & Barnum & Bailey Circus made Balanchine the unusual proposal to do the choreography for a ballet involving the circus's famous elephant group in the spring of the following year in New York. Balanchine immediately suggested bringing in Stravinsky, much to the delight of the circus company. However, Stravinsky was only contacted by phone on January 12, 1942. Although Stravinsky was busy with other projects at the time, he negotiated a high fee with the Ringling Brothers & Barnum & Bailey Circus for a short instrumental, which he composed within a few days. The piano version of *Circus Polka*, subtitled "For a Young Elephant" as an allusion to the phone conversation with Balanchine, was finished on February 5, 1942. Although the piece is, according to its name, a polka, it does contain a number of changes in rhythm. It only sounds like a polka towards the end, but this part is actually a borrowing from Franz Schubert's *Marche Militaire No. 1* in D major, D. 733. Stravinsky always denied that this was a parody of the *Marche Militaire*. He later called the whole piece a satire, the musical equivalent to Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's drawings, but his notes do not reflect this. By the time the ballet was performed, Stravinsky was no longer involved with the project. The arrangement of the piece for an organ and a concert band was done by David Raksin.