

CHAPTER I

Memory and Truth: Stravinsky's Childhood
 (1882–1901)

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'I wonder if memory is true, and I know that it cannot be, but that one lives by memory nevertheless and not by truth,' Stravinsky told Robert Craft.¹ There are modernist writers – Proust, Nabokov – who see childhood joys as a vital stimulus to art. For Jean-Paul Sartre, on the other hand, it was recollected disgust that shaped the adult self: 'I loathe my childhood and all that survives of it'.² Stravinsky's relations with his early life lay somewhere midway. In *Chroniques de ma vie* and his late conversations with Robert Craft he underlined the importance of the sound environment in which he grew up and his early exposure to professional music making. Yet he also stressed the emotional, aesthetic and psychological distance between that early world, where the values of his parents and teachers prevailed, and his own adult self. He constantly emphasised, too, his solitude, with just his brother Guri and his German nurse, Bertha Essert, as soulmates in the family apartment on Kryukov Canal, and few companions and friends beyond.

In their delineation of an isolated younger self that battles with suffocating banality, Stravinsky's memoirs echo Osip Mandelstam's *The Noise of Time* (which he had possibly read);³ in their picture of the rural landscape as a haven, they echo Leo Tolstoy's *Childhood* (which he certainly had). But there were other prompts too. There was the Russian émigré's fear of exposing acquaintances to political repression (hence the dearth of names in *Chroniques*, written during the Stalin era). The sense of an audience (whether Craft himself or the eventual readers) who understood the Russian milieu imperfectly and admired psychoanalytical

¹ *Expo.*, p. 26. ² John-Paul Sartre, *Les mots* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963), p. 140.

³ The book was published in 1925 and widely read at the time. The main Mandelstam in Stravinsky's life, however, was his son-in-law Yuri (married to Lyudmila) – no relation to Osip, though also a poet (b. Moscow 1908, d. Auschwitz 1943).

investigation, also dictated feinting tactics.⁴ In any case, even when he wrote *Chroniques*, Stravinsky had been absent from Russia for nearly three decades and was forty years away from his childhood. By the time he talked to Craft, the gap had stretched to over sixty years. Like many St Petersburgers, too, he was reserved by nature and disinclined to comment on private matters. (Invited to talk of his first marriage, he replied, ‘I dislike talking about that now; I am afraid I might betray something sacred’.)⁵

Stravinsky’s memoirs include many fluffs or deliberate obfuscations. His second school, the Gurevich Gymnasium, was five kilometres from home, not eight miles (he had correctly remembered the ratio of five to eight but reversed it); he went there in September 1898, when he was sixteen, not ‘fourteen or fifteen’; the priest teaching religious knowledge at his first school, the Second Gymnasium, was called Father Konstantin Smirnov, not Rozhdestvensky (the latter is a generic clerical name). One could continue.⁶

Added to this, Stravinsky’s memoirs may also be unreliable in a more important sense. A family friend, Eduard Stark, remembered the ‘exceptionally affectionate atmosphere’ in the Stravinsky home.⁷ The discrepancy is striking. Precisely the emotional dimension that is often understood to be authentic in memoirs may be suspect. In particular, Stravinsky seems to have misremembered, or deliberately downplayed, the impact, both on his parents and on himself, of his brother Roman’s tragically early death, on 10 June 1897.

The evidence from contemporary sources, such as the meticulous and regular entries by Fyodor Stravinsky, the composer’s father, in his almost daily account books, and the documentation kept by Stravinsky’s first school, suggest that the composer’s first years were generally sunny. For more than a decade, the boy – like his two elder brothers Roman (b. 1876) and Yuri (b. 1878), and Guri, the youngest, who arrived in 1884 – was raised at home, using a characteristically Russian mixture of traditional and modern. The Stravinsky parents engaged a wet-nurse, Tatiana Yakovleva, and equipped her with the traditional wardrobe, including embroidered

⁴ In his conversations with Craft, Stravinsky regularly anticipates possible psychoanalytical interpretations in order to head them off, in the spirit: ‘I’ve thought of that already’.

⁵ *Expo.*, p. 43.

⁶ The recollections of Aleksandr Bryantsev, later director of the Leningrad Youth Theatre, who was in the year below Igor at the Second Gymnasium, are far more accurate, though also written very late in life. See *Vtoraya Sankt-Peterburgskaya gimnaziya: 190 let istorii* (St Petersburg: BIS-print, 1997), pp. 53–7.

⁷ E. Stark, *Peterburgskaya opera i ego mastera* (Leningrad, 1940), quoted in Svetlana Savenko, *Mir Stravinskogo* (‘Stravinsky’s World’) (Moscow: Kompozitor, 2001).

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sarafan and velvet headdress for high days and holidays. But Tatiana was also assigned several changes of underwear and bed linen, showing an attention to hygiene that was also marked by the purchase of a baby bath, talc and ointments, and later a porcelain potty. Tatiana was replaced, in the autumn of 1883, by a Russian nanny, Nastasya, but she lasted only a few months before being replaced by Marya Bogdanova, who made equally little impact. It was Bertha – rewarded in 1891 for ten years of service by the valuable gift of a ruby pendant – who had the honorific family member status accorded in previous generations to the Russian nanny. (Here, Stravinsky resembled Nabokov, whose beloved Swiss ‘Mademoiselle’ was a key figure in his early life.)

Like most St Petersburgers who did not belong to the plutocracy, the Stravinskys rented their apartment (see Fig. 1.1). However, its size (seven, later nine, rooms) and the fact that it remained in family hands for decades placed them at the top end of what was known in nineteenth-century parlance as ‘the middle state’. So, too, did Fyodor Stravinsky’s salary (8,000 rubles per season, at a time when university professors received around 3,000). Labour was cheap: foreign maids and student tutors were paid around 20 rubles a month. Therefore, the boys could be given a wide-ranging home education, including, of course, music lessons.

Lessons, though, were no more than an annoying interruption to an existence that allowed the children plenty of indulgence. Although a third child, Igor was mainly spared hand-me-downs.⁸ In 1882 there were purchases of piquet and white serge to make him shirts and a coat, and in 1886 the Stravinskys ordered the fashionable wear for nicely brought-up children all over Europe: a sailor jacket. At intervals the children received treats: sweets and fruit from Eliseev’s, the city’s best grocers, a trip to the zoo, a sleigh ride on the frozen Neva. And there were long summer holidays out in the country. The Stravinskys were not landowners, but rented dachas; later, holidays with relatives and friends provided a similar rural idyll for the children. ‘I’m completely well now and I’ve been out for a ride on one of the officers’ horses’, Igor wrote excitedly to his parents at the end of August 1893, on paper decorated with his initial, И, in metallic blue. (When it rained the children sat indoors and read adventure stories: *Six Years at the North Pole, Alone in the World, On the Don*,

⁸ Only as a teenager did he have made-over versions of his father’s clothes. See Fyodor I. Stravinsky’s account books (*raskhodnye knigi*), 1881–93, 1897–1901, and family letters, published in Viktor Varunts (ed.), *I. F. Stravinsky: Perepiska s russkimi korrespondentami: Materialy k biografii*, vol. 1 (1882–1912) (Moscow: Kompozitor, 1998).



Figure 1.1 The library in the Stravinsky flat at 66, Kryukov Canal, St Petersburg, opposite the Maryinsky Theatre. Fyodor Stravinsky (1843–1902) was the most celebrated Russian bass-baritone of his time, in many respects the direct predecessor to Chaliapin. He was noted for his deeply psychological and well-researched characterisations.

Image courtesy of the Estate of Fyodor Ignatyevich Stravinsky, with thanks to Anastasia Kozachenko-Stravinsky and the 'Stravinsky Family Fund', Moscow (Фонд семьи Ф. И. Стравинского и его сыновей)

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The Lost Wager.)⁹ By the time this letter was written Igor had already been admitted to Gymnasium No. 2, one of St Petersburg's best-regarded state schools, where his brother Roman was a senior pupil. If educationally prestigious, though, the school was not socially lustrous. Originally, the sons of top officials had predominated, and Igor's class still included one or two scions of state councillors. But by the 1890s the school had a large proportion of children from humbler origins: accountants in factories, tradesmen and craftsmen from the surrounding streets. In Stravinsky's class there were even a few boys of 'peasant' origin and the son of a single mother, firmly labelled 'Illegitimate'.

Fyodor Stravinsky, recorded in the school's lists as 'a member of the hereditary gentry and nobility', could identify himself as being comfortably towards the top of the social hierarchy, and his dealings with the school conveyed a spirit of entitlement. Officially, the entrance examinations took place in August, immediately before the school year began. But Igor sat them in April, a circumstance that required special permission and payment of a fee. Later, too, the family holiday often took precedence over lessons and sometimes even over end-of-year examinations. 'Exceptional reasons' such as family illness were regularly accepted.

In the circumstances, it is unlikely that transition to school life marked as much of a break as Stravinsky was later to suggest. Certainly, the educational politics of the time placed great emphasis on skills such as parsing and almost none on creativity. The daily ritual of publicly regurgitating homework was dreaded even by the best pupils. Crammed into an unyielding and scratchy military-style uniform and marshalled from class to class in a cramped block – painted the regulation yellow used for all government buildings, from tax offices to mental hospitals – which directly faced the neighbouring prison, eleven-year-old Igor no doubt would have endorsed poet Anna Akhmatova's dismissal of her school as 'a barracks'.

Yet by the exacting standards of the day Igor was not a hopeless pupil. In the Soviet period any mark lower than four out of five was regarded as a real disgrace. Before 1917 the same scale was used to very different effect. Even top pupils could expect at best a mixture of 4s and 5s. In the circumstances, Igor's admission test marks of 3 (satisfactory) for religious knowledge, 3+ for arithmetic, and 4+ (very good) for Russian language,

⁹ Manuscript Department of the Russian National Library, St Petersburg (RNB RO), f. 746, no. 83, ll. 1–4.

represented quite a creditable effort. His performance in 1894–5 was also solid: 4s and 5s for Russian, mainly 4 and 4– in Latin, and 4 and 3 in maths, despite a large number of missed lessons, probably through illness. Two years later, his marks were less secure in some subjects, with a sprinkling of 2s, particularly in religious knowledge and maths. But he still finished the year with a ‘satisfactory’ or good ‘average’ in all subjects and, after retaking religious knowledge and maths, in the end-of-year exams. Around a third of the year group was failed overall and made to repeat the course; Igor was comfortably above that threshold.

The loss of Fyodor Stravinsky’s account books for the period running from the end of 1893 to the end of 1896 means that there is little precise information about the children’s lives outside school at this point. But the diary of one P. P. Borisov, attending a classical high school in the same era (1886–7), indicates that fretting over undone homework did not stop pupils enjoying the chance to spend their regular allowance in cafés, or attending plays, operas and concerts, reading and overeating pancakes on Shrove Tuesday.¹⁰ And though Stravinsky could remember only a couple of people at school whom he really liked, it was difficult for anyone to make close friends in circumstances where each year up to a half of the group might be kept down or transferred to the parallel class to balance numbers.¹¹ Rather than being exceptional in running his social life outside school, he was probably rather typical.

All the same, life certainly had some tensions. Fyodor Stravinsky confided in his desktop calendar on 8 June 1895, his birthday, that he was increasingly depressed by the ‘stupid life and venal society’ that surrounded him.¹² Yet, as the record of tireless financial surveillance in his account books suggests, Fyodor was by no means just the temperamental artist. Controlling and status-conscious as well as volatile (he liked to sign himself ‘Artiste of the Imperial Russian Opera’ and to give his residence as ‘beside the Maryinsky Theatre’ to offset the slightly plebeian air of ‘Kryukov Canal’), Fyodor was, as the Russians say, ‘no birthday present’ (see Fig. 1.2). There must have been many days when Stravinsky’s retrospective picture was more accurate than Stark’s.

¹⁰ RNB RO, f. 1000, op. 2, no. 170, ll. 8, 11, 45, 96, etc.

¹¹ Stravinsky remembered two Smirnovs, but there was just one boy in his class by this surname. It is more likely he had in mind two boys called Konstantin Petrov, or else Peter and Paul Feringer (possibly cousins, born 2 and 21 June 1882) who were his near-twins, while the Petrovs were over a year younger.

¹² *I.F. Stravinsky: Peregipska*, vol. 1, p. 45.



Figure 1.2 Fyodor Stravinsky as Mephistopheles in a production of Gounod's *Faust* (Maryinsky Theatre, 1873). A sense of Fyodor's art for characterisation may be imagined via his son's dramatic 'portrait' *How the Mushrooms Prepared for War* (1904).

Image courtesy of the Estate of Fyodor Ignatyevich Stravinsky, with thanks to Anastasia Kozachenko-Stravinsky and the 'Stravinsky Family Fund', Moscow (Фонд семьи Ф. И. Стравинского и его сыновей)

All the same, Roman's sudden death marked a definitive shift in the direction of misery for the whole family. The effect was the more shocking in that the Stravinsky parents and Igor were taking the waters in Bad Homburg while Roman was holidaying in Pechisky,¹³ about 1,500 kilometres away. Stravinsky's later recollection was bald:

We took the first train there. (I remember translating for my father in the Vienna railway station; he spoke Polish but no German.) We were met at Proskurov by droshkies, and we drove the fifteen versts to Aunt Catherine's house in silence.¹⁴

¹³ More properly 'Pechiski', but the spelling in *Expo* is adopted here for familiarity's sake.

¹⁴ *Expo.*, p. 42.

This presents a considerably less dramatic picture than his father's, set down at the time when Roman died:

11 June [1897] At about 8 a.m. on 11 June, a worrying telegram arrived from Pechisky about Roma's dangerous illness. We immediately wired to ask how he was and what was the matter. . . . At about 7 or 8 [p.m.], we got the fateful reply: 'Heart disease. Hurry.'

Departed Homburg for Pechisky [via] Frankfurt-am-Main, Halle, Breslau, Oderberg . . . Cracow, Lemberg, Podvolochisk, Volochisk, with the 11 pm train.

13 June. They met us at the station: Ekaterina Kirillovna, Serezha Yelachich and Yura. But our darling Romochka – our dear and only firstborn was not there.

God give her [his wife Anna Stravinskaya] strength to bear this terrible blow of fate, this unjust and pitiless decision – my Guardian Angel and my comfort, my faithful and eternal companion in my bitter existence – my endlessly adored and loved darling Nyunchka.¹⁵

Given the long and desperate journey with fears of the worst, followed by their confirmation (Roman had in fact died the day *before* the telegram was sent), and the endless stops like the tolling of a bell – it is no wonder that emotional collapse ensued.

The family plunged into full nineteenth-century mourning: black borders on letters, crape bands on coats, black crosses in Fyodor's account book, a scholarship at St Petersburg University named for Roman. Happiness was banned, with innocent greetings for New Year, Christmas and Easter creating huge offence (as late as 29 August 1899, Igor had to apologise for giving his mother his best wishes for her name-day). The impact was physical as well. A medical certificate was obtained on 20 August so that Igor could delay retaking his end-of-year exams, and later there were visits to Dr Okunev, an ear, nose and throat specialist, and to Dr Alexander Russov, one of Petersburg's top physicians for paediatrics and internal diseases.¹⁶ Anxious enquiries about health were the order of the day in family letters.

Roman's sudden demise in the prime of life put all kinds of pressure on his two youngest brothers. In the autumn of 1897 Igor began behaving in a seriously disruptive fashion at school. In November and December his

¹⁵ *I. F. Stravinsky: Perepiska*, vol.1, p.49.

¹⁶ A 1 October 1897 letter from Russov preserved in RNB reads, 'I will be at your service on Tuesday 14 October and will expect your lady wife at 1 pm' (f. 423, ed. khr. 1488, l. 1). However, the *Raskhodnye knigi* record a payment on 24 November 1897 to Russov for two visits to Igor (ten roubles, or five times as much as paid per visit to Dr Okunev on 8 November).

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conduct mark slipped to 3+; in January to March it was a barely passable 3.¹⁷ This reflected a persistent presence in the *konduitnyi spisok* or record of poor behaviour. '25 September: very agitated in class; despite warnings from the teacher his chatter stops his fellows from listening; also permitted himself the discourtesy of addressing the teacher while seated.'¹⁸ More 'agitation' and 'chatter' followed on 27 and 28 October, while on 7 November Igor again made so much noise as to interfere with the course of the lesson. Worse was to follow.

10 December [1897]: having not prepared his Greek homework before the start of the lesson, Stravinsky pestered his teacher to test him on it, knowing perfectly well that the teacher had the habit of not calling on pupils who put themselves forward. However, on this occasion the teacher did cross-question Stravinsky, who turned out to have done no preparation whatever. Having approached the teacher while the latter was on duty in the recreation room and learned that he had been assigned 'unsatisfactory',¹⁹ Stravinsky began rudely asserting that he had done the preparation and making insolent comments and threats to the teacher's face in front of pupils of all kinds of ages, viz.: 'I shall tell my father to call on the Director and Guardian of the school and complain about you. It is quite irresponsible for you to assign marks of unsatisfactory'. When Stravinsky replied in this way, even the youngest pupils were extremely shocked by his insolence to the teacher and his classmates asked the teacher to punish him and stop him from making comments like this. An hour later, Stravinsky came to see his teacher and expressed genuine regret for the transgression he had committed as a result of his nervous character and promised faithfully never to do anything like this again.²⁰

The record indicates that, at the very least, Stravinsky's classmates had enough of a hold over him to take action when they found his behaviour annoying.

On 11 December Igor's form master contacted Fyodor Stravinsky to call him in for an interview at the school. However, this had little effect: the *konduit* records three further transgressions in January and March.

¹⁷ While 3 was a satisfactory mark for academic subjects, it was rarely awarded for conduct and effectively meant 'unsatisfactory'.

¹⁸ The official rules in all state Gymnasiums required pupils to stand up when addressing a teacher.

¹⁹ Igor's reaction indicates that he had probably been assigned a 1, which was occasionally, though rarely, awarded in pre-revolutionary schools (never in Soviet ones). The unfortunate Count Alexei Tatishchev, a classmate of Guri's, clocked up a couple of these before disappearing from the Second Gymnasium in November 1895, after just three months' study.

²⁰ School records in the Central State Historical Archive, St Petersburg (TsGIA), f. 171 (Gurevich Gymnasium), op. 2, d. 3156, ll. 4–5.

Expulsion from the school was now a very real possibility. A mark of 3+ or 3 for conduct was rare. Two in a row was exceptional.

Meanwhile, Igor's younger brother Guri had problems of his own. Formerly with practically flawless marks for behaviour, he made it into the *konduit* five times over the course of 1897–8, though for noise and 'mischief' rather than insolence. Added to this, between August and December he missed a staggering 434 lessons and received no marks at all for the November–December term. In the summer, he barely scraped through Latin with 3– and passed nothing else at all.

It was, in fact, Guri's difficulties at the Second Gymnasium that proved decisive. By the fourth term of the year Igor had settled down: on 30 May 1898 his parents presented him with a valuable watch 'on the occasion of his transition to class six, and more importantly, to reward the industry that he showed while preparing for his examinations'. Possibly this had been a bribe dangled in front of him to ensure diligence. In Guri's case, however, it was only an official order from the school administration that allowed him passage to the next class. The Pedagogical Council had refused to heed an appeal from his father. 'Scoundrels and bloodsuckers', Fyodor Stravinsky noted angrily on 13 May.²¹

Indignation against the Second Gymnasium simmered over the summer. Meanwhile, Yakov Gurevich, the editor of the liberal educational journal *Russian School* and a reforming pedagogue, turned out to be a temporary neighbour of the Stravinskys at the German spa of Soden. On 12 August 1898, Fyodor noted that his family had joined the party sending off Gurevich when he left for St Petersburg. Clearly, strings were pulled. On 18 September Igor and Guri had a formal interview with Gurevich at the Gymnasium which he directed. The following day Fyodor made a written application which was accepted after the transfer of their marks and conduct record for 1897–1898 (see Fig. 1.3). The family was soon buying new uniforms, caps and coats, and a briefcase for Igor instead of the former satchel.

The Gurevich Gymnasium had already solved one educational crisis, when Yuri moved there in April 1892 from the First Realschule (a state school specialising in maths and science).²² The school had secured him safe passage to the prestigious Institute of Civil Engineers.

²¹ *I. F. Stravinsky: Perepiska*, vol. 1, p. 56.

²² Yuri must have failed the admissions test to the Second Gymnasium, since he was the only brother not to attend the school. His First Realschule record for 1891–2 covers two terms only (though he transferred more than half-way through term four) and lacks about a quarter of the marks even for those. There would have been a serious risk of having to repeat the year or flunking out.