

BERCEUSES DU CHAT BY IGOR STRAVINSKY

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SUMMARY. *Berceuses du chat by Igor Stravinsky.* *Berceuses du chat* by Igor Stravinsky for voice and clarinet trio - *piccolo* clarinet, clarinet in *A*, bass clarinet - is a cycle of four vocal-instrumental miniatures that are part of the Russian period of the composer's work, being completed in 1915-1916. The timbral balance achieved between the voice and the instrumental ensemble, the lyrical manner of musical expression, the specific rhythmic-melodic typologies of writing, the chromatic versus diatonic dichotomy, the affiliation of the opuses to the comic aesthetic category are characteristics of this series of four micro-art-songs, cradle songs, dedicated to and apparently describing the characteristics of a cat.

Keywords: art song, chamber music, clarinet, lyrical

Prolegomena

The four miniatures for voice and instrumental ensemble, composed between 1915 and 1916, are part of a period when Stravinsky's rise was fulminating due to the completion of several representative works which had a major impact on the art music at the beginning of twentieth century. We obviously refer to such works as *Petrushka* and *The Rite of Spring*, opuses to be characterized by one word - *extreme* – in which “the expressive temperature is taken to the highest degree of incandescence; the emancipation of dissonance is total, the violence is dynamic, unprecedented.”²

The obvious response regarding this expansion of the orchestra composition - involving the entire arsenal of musical, melodic, rhythmic, dynamic, and particularly expressive elements - is directing the attention onto chamber music, an equilibrium which Stravinsky needed, as proven by the long period in which he did not use a regular symphony orchestra. We refer here to the second decade of the twentieth century, a time when the composer wrote a series of works for small instrumental groups, which, by contrast to the timbral scope of the orchestra, offer the clarity and

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² Vlad, Roman, *Stravinsky*, Bucharest, Editura Muzicală, 1967, p. 48.

individuality of instrumental sounds. The vocal or vocal-instrumental miniatures we refer to – *Three Japanese Lyrics*, *Pribautki*, *Berceuses du chat* and *Four Russian Folk Songs* – sketch as well as complete an initial period of his work generically titled the “Russian period”, due to the frequent employment of the Russian folklore, both in the choice of texts, and in the approach of the melodic lines. The above-mentioned series of works reveals a new facet of Stravinsky, namely his intimate-lyrical side that complements his expansive-explosive counterpart encountered in previous orchestral works.

Igor Stravinsky’s musical works display a wide range of tonal concepts. Even if he does not entirely repudiate the elements of tonality, the composer most often chooses polytonality, by overlapping scales, resulting in complex sound conglomerates. The neomodern aspects are the result of his chromatic principles, where the phenomenon of scale oscillation - in this case the reversed chromatism – is apparent both within melodic lines and in the vertical chords. The path followed by Stravinsky along his three creative periods - the Russian period, the Neoclassical period, the atonal period - reveals the trajectory of his conception of the structural elements of music: his being anchored in the Russian folk modal system, gradually enriched by the synthesizing use of all diatonic and chromatic elements, which open up the world of polytonality – and even of metatonicity - a system whose complexity enabled the establishment of the atonal period.³

Stravinsky is the continuator of a school permanently open to innovations, following the line commenced by the works of Rimsky-Korsakov and Mussorgsky. He distinguished himself as the most important innovator of rhythm. Russian folklore was once again the starting point, as the composer intuitively sensed, employed and fully exploited the principles of the *rubato* and *giusto* systems. Innovative elements are encountered particularly in the dynamic elements of rhythm, namely in the intensities, which are treated in multiple and complex forms as timbral, dynamic or metric accents. He thus triggered, at the beginning of the twentieth century, “the offensive of searches and discoveries in the field of rhythm, being regarded, next to Schoenberg, as a promoter of the grand musical innovations that the entire twentieth century subsequently accomplished.”⁴

³ Cf. Rîpă, Constantin, *Teoria superioară a muzicii. Sisteme tonale (The superior theory of music. Tonal systems)*, Cluj-Napoca, MediaMusica, 2001, pp. 281-283.

⁴ Rîpă, Constantin, *Teoria superioară a muzicii. Ritmul (The superior theory of music. Rhythm)*, Cluj-Napoca, MediaMusica, 2002, p. 118.

***Berceuses du chat* – general features**

Photo 1

Berceuses du chat – *The Cat's Cradlesongs* – is a cycle of four songs for voice and three clarinets – piccolo clarinet in *E-flat*, clarinet in *A* and bass-clarinet. The author also wrote a version for voice and piano. "It is necessary to point out the ingenious manner in which Stravinsky manages to use this unusual trio of clarinets to achieve a timbral counterpart for the cat's physical appearance: feline, graceful, lazy, and hypocritical. *The Cat's Cradlesongs* can be viewed as some of the most personal and typical expressions of Stravinsky's Lyricism."⁵



The specificity of these art songs lies in their timbral features: the author does not define the type of voice, the indication in the score is incomplete – *singing* – and in terms of accompanying instruments, three clarinets are used due to their specific timbre – as the closest to the programmatic-mimetic idea – velvety and warm, suggesting, maybe due to custom, in a highly practical manner, the idea expressed by the title of the cycle. Stravinsky also uses the three instruments in a surprising way by means of the registers employed, without extremes that might individualize them. Thus, the piccolo clarinet is found mainly in the low register, and the bass clarinet melodies receive the acute register, thus blurring the harsh sonorities. Practically, the three clarinets represent, rhetorically speaking, the multitude of cat-specific instances described by the four pieces.

Next to the score we find a dedication by Igor Stravinsky to Natalia Gontcharova (1881-1962) – an avant-garde artist – with whom the composer worked in a project initiated by Sergei Diaghilev for a ballet – *The Liturgy* – which was unfortunately never materialized. The composer also dedicated the cycle to painter Mikhail Larionov (1881-1964) who, in turn, signed a sketch – one shocking at first sight – portraying a naked woman lying next to a cat. The correspondence created between the two characters of the sketch is more than obvious and directs the attention and the perception of the cycle of vocal-instrumental miniatures to the realm of eros.

⁵ Vlad, Roman, *Op. cit.*, p. 51.

The sketch adjacent to the score, drawn by M. Larionov⁶



***Berceuses du chat* – analytic incursion**

The cycle *Berceuses du chat* consists of four miniatures entitled: *Sur le poêle*, *Intérieur*, *Dodo* and *Ce qu'il a, le chat*. Overall they are characterized by brevity, as none of the four parts exceeds 20 bars. Regarding the main techniques of composition, we notice the frequent use of appoggiaturas, glissandos, exceptional rhythmic formulas, reversed chromaticisms, large leaps - especially the seventh - and alternative measures, a compositional principle specific to Stravinsky and frequently employed in his earlier works. The work with motives and the generating cells of the art songs is also done in an interesting manner: frequent combinations, overlaps, recurrences, augmentations and various combinations of accompaniment and vocal line.

The first number - *Sur le poêle* – consists of 16 bars structured as follows: the first four-bar phrase displays the generating motive, consisting in turn of three rhythmic-melodic cells corresponding to the three verses⁷; a three-bar cadential complement – belonging to the musical comment made by the *piccolo* clarinet and the bass clarinet (the second clarinet renders a perfect fifth-*tremolo* extended over the whole range of the piece); the second phrase is extended to five bars and stands for the first phrase presented in a varied and augmented form; a four-bar codetta - resuming the musical intervention of the bass clarinet.

⁶ Stravinsky, Igor, *Berceuses du chat – Katzenlieder*, Wiener Philharmonischer Verlag, J. & W. Chester, LTD. London, 1925.

⁷ The original verses are in Russian and the musical structure relies on them. The French translation belongs to C. F. Ramuz and the German to R. St. Hoffmann. The French and German texts do not abide completely by the structure of the rhythmic-melodic lines, hence the introduction of “auxiliary notes” is necessary, as the linguistic importance exceeds the requirements of the musical motives. Thus, we shall consider the correspondence of the music to the Russian text as more genuine.

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We thus have three distinct levels: the melodic lines dedicated to the solo voice, the interventions of the two (*piccolo* and bass) clarinets, the sound foundation given by the A-clarinet.

One element that stands out is the 6/8 (3/4)-measure structure which seems to be employed unnaturally, given that the rhythmic-melodic lines pertaining to the voice have a binary structure – which is achieved by permanently resorting to the rhythm made up by two dotted quavers – whereas only the accompaniment is conducted in a manner characteristic of the 6/8 measure. This polymetric overlap, which is a defining aspect for Stravinsky, shows, once again, the inability of meter to be the coordinating governing element, gradually transforming into an element used exclusively in order to scrupulously abide by the requirements of verticality.

The interesting aspect at this point, is the “play” with the rhythmic-melodic cells. The second phrase begins with the same musical element that ends the first phrase; the perfect fifth-leap of – A-E – is present in an augmented manner, hence the longer consequential phrase made up of five bars; the finale represents fragments extracted from the melodic comments of the cadential complement.

Ex. 1

Berceuses du chat – Sur le poêle – structure and “play” with the rhythmic-melodic cells

The musical score for "Berceuses du chat – Sur le poêle" by Igor Stravinsky is presented in two systems. The first system features the vocal line (Canto) with lyrics in Russian and French, and the instrumental accompaniment for Clarinetto in E-flat, Clarinetto in A, Clarinetto basso in B-flat, and Cto. (Cello). The second system continues the vocal line and accompaniment. Red boxes highlight specific rhythmic-melodic cells in the vocal line, and arrows point to their corresponding fragments in the instrumental accompaniment, illustrating the "play" with these cells.

The second number – *Intérieur* – spreads over 19 alternative bars and is made of two periods of two phrases each, as follows: the first period is made of two musically identical phrases of five measures each, displaying the generating rhythmic-melodic elements along with characteristic compositional techniques – the hexachord with mobile steps, the *glissando*, the reversed chromaticism, the exceptional rhythmic formulas (the triolet and the quintolet); the second period is made up of two phrases of five, respectively of four measures, with new motivic elements extending the ambitus up to octave structures, preserving the alternating chromatic elements. The accompaniment becomes more dynamic during the piece, arched structures being frequently employed. At the end of each phrase, with a conclusive as well as a motivic role, the *piccolo* clarinet intones a rhythmic-melodic quintolet-cell, presented in the first instance without its first note, subsequently completed and transposed one tone above.

Ex. 2

Berceuses du chat – Intérieur – the four phrases; the rhythmic-melodic cell played by the *piccolo* clarinet which marks the limits of the four phrases

The image displays a musical score for 'Berceuses du chat – Intérieur'. It features four systems of music. The first system includes a vocal line (Canto) with lyrics in French and German, and three instrumental staves: Clarinetto piccolo in E-flat, Clarinetto in A, and Clarinetto basso in B-flat. A box highlights a specific rhythmic-melodic cell in the vocal line. The second system continues the vocal and instrumental parts, with another box highlighting a similar cell in the vocal line. The third system shows the vocal line and the piccolo clarinet part, with a box highlighting a cell in the piccolo part. The fourth system shows the vocal line and the piccolo clarinet part, with a box highlighting a cell in the piccolo part. The score is written in 3/4 time and includes dynamic markings such as *p* and *sf*.

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The image displays three systems of musical notation for the piece 'Berceuses du Chat' by Igor Stravinsky. Each system consists of a vocal line at the top and three instrumental lines below: Clarinet in E-flat (Cl. in E♭), Clarinet in A (Cl. in A), and Clarinet in B-flat (Cl. in B♭). The vocal line includes lyrics in both French and German. The first system is marked with '10' and features lyrics such as 'fein Tot-let' and 'cherche gucken zu'. The second system is marked with '11' and includes lyrics like 'gucken zuweilender Ka-ter gu' and 'bis er sich perraj gepilng hat'. The third system is marked with '12' and has lyrics 'al-les auf-ge-mackct hat'. The instrumental parts are written in a complex, rhythmic style characteristic of Stravinsky's work.

Number three – *Dodo* – has 16 alternative bars, being made up of only two symmetrical 8-bar phrases with resembling thematic material. The first phrase consists of five bars followed by a cadential complement of three bars. The second phrase is a recommencement of the first, in a varied form, within the same structure of five plus three bars. The intensely chromatic writing specific to the preceding numbers is completely abandoned here; the

composer uses 'oligochordic', tetratonic and frequently anhemitonic pentatonic structures, everything hovering around note *D*. It is an internalized, lyrical moment, where the interval of the third represents the specific element, while the agogic gives the feeling of a *rubato* movement. The bass clarinet is also replaced with a second A-clarinet in order to further temper timbrality. Nuances lie mostly in the *piano* range, perfectly suggesting the lullaby idea expressed by the text.

Ex. 3

Berceuses du chat – Dodo

The musical score for 'Berceuses du chat – Dodo' consists of four staves. The top staff is for Canto, with lyrics in French, Russian, and German. The second staff is for Clarinetto piccolo in E-flat, the third for Clarinetto in A, and the fourth for another Clarinetto in A. The tempo is marked 'p tempo' and 'rit. a tempo'.

Canto
Da - sou - sa - sa - sa, sa - sa - sa - sa - sa...
Do - do, l'en -fant do, l'en -fant dor - mi - re bien - tôt...
Ei - ja, ei - ja, du Kind - chen schlief in Ruh...

Cl. piccolo in E♭
rit. a tempo

Cl. in A
rit. a tempo

Cl. in A
rit. a tempo

Canto
Kauz, kauz, ——— кривоног о, чейх ка - заю, Ма - ре - пе кат - уу,
Au -gard'au/le chat a mis ara bel ka-bil gris, pour fair la chose;
Kindchen lieg. ——— lieg - ram stid in der Wieg', Wästerchen bringe

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The image displays three systems of a musical score for 'Berceuses du Chat' by Igor Stravinsky. Each system includes a vocal line (Cto.) and piano accompaniment (Cl. picc. in Eb, Cl. in La, Cl. in La). The lyrics are provided in both Russian and French. The score includes tempo markings such as 'rit.' and 'a tempo'.

System 1:

Cto. *rit.* *a tempo*
 can - sy, da - an - aak - sy, A da - so, da - so
 in close' aux sou - - rit... De - do, l'en - fant de, l'en -
 dem Kind schli - ne Din - ge. El - ja, el - ja, da,
rit. *a tempo*

System 2:

Cto. *rit.* *a tempo*
 spa - sa - so ak - sa - so... Can - sy a ma - ra - ra, - Ba - da - da - da - ak - sy an
 font dor - mi - ra bien - dit... Ge - ra soz del iz - dit et l'en - fant n'est pas ge -
 macht die Augen zu... Vater wird Spiele brin - gen, Mutter wiegt dich ein mit

System 3:

Cto. *rit.* *a tempo*
 - spa - sa, A da - so, da - so, spa - sa - so - sa - sa - so...
 rit... De - do, l'en - fant de, dor - mi - ra bien - dit...
 Sin - geo. El - ja, el - ja, du schla - fe in Ruh.

The final piece – *Ce qu'il a, le chat* – is a contrast to the previous ones due to its character, being a cheerful, rhythmic, four-stanza song made up of no more than seven bars. The square meter – 2/4 – is extended only towards the end by the introduction of one single 5/8 bar due to the number of syllables in the text. The accompaniment brings back the bass clarinet, permanently accompanying the discourse of the solo voice.

Berceuses du chat – Ce qu'il a, le chat

♩ - 69

Canto

1. У ко - та ко - та Ко - ми - бель - ка зо - ло - та
 2. У ко - та ко - та И по - ду - ше - чка бѣ - ла
 3. У ко - та ко - та И пос - те - лю - шка ма - гна
 4. У ко - та ко - та О хѣ - я де - щео тен - ло
 1. Ce qu'il a, le chat, c'est un beau ber - ceau qu'il a;
 2. Ce qu'il a, le chat, c'est un cous - sin blanc qu'il a;
 3. Ce qu'il a, le chat, c'est un tout - fin drap qu'il a;
 4. Ce qu'il a, le chat, c'est un chaul bon - net qu'il a;
 1. Was ge - hört der Katz? Schö - ne Wie - ge ist ihr Platz.
 2. Was ge - hört der Katz? Wei - ßes Lin - nen ist ihr Platz.
 3. Was ge - hört der Katz? Wei - ches Kis - sen ist ihr Platz.
 4. Was ge - hört der Katz? Wer - mes Deck - chen ist ihr Platz.

Clarinetto in $\text{M}\flat$ Es

Clarinetto in $\text{S}\flat$ B

Clarinetto basso in $\text{S}\flat$ B

Cto.

1. А у ди - тят - ки мо - во И по - луч - ше то - во.
 2. А у ди - тят - ки мо - во И бѣ - лѣ - е то - во.
 3. А у ди - тят - ки мо - во И по - мя - гче то - во.
 4. А у ди - тят - ки мо - во И те - пѣ - е то - во.
 1. mon en - fant à moi en - a un bien plus beau que - ça.
 2. mon en - fant à moi en - a un bien plus blanc que - ça.
 3. mon en - fant à moi en - a un bien plus fin que - ça.
 4. mon en - fant à moi en - a un bien plus chaud que - ça.
 1. doch mein Kind, mein sü - ßer Schatz, o viel schö - ner noch hats!
 2. doch mein Kind, mein sü - ßer Schatz, o viel wei - ßer noch hats!
 3. doch mein Kind, mein sü - ßer Schatz, o viel wei - cher noch hats!
 4. doch mein Kind, mein sü - ßer Schatz, o viel wär - mer noch hats!

Cl. in $\text{M}\flat$ Es

Cl. in $\text{S}\flat$ B

Cl. b. in $\text{S}\flat$ B

Conclusions

The four miniatures for voice and clarinet ensemble belong to a time when the Russian composer had already gained fame. Moreover, they can be regarded as an experiment, a study for the composition of a small dramatic work entitled *Renard* (1916-1917), an opus written in the same manner established over time and defined by researchers as Stravinsky's "Russian period", mainly motivated by the frequent employment of the folklore of his native land.

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What unifies all four pieces, besides the vocal and instrumental parts, is the frequent oscillation of the meter, the use of a restrictive ambitus without extremes, and the placement of the pieces within the comic range of the litotes, resulting in a cycle readily accepted by the general public. The specific differences group the four songs two by two - number 1 and 2, then 3 and 4 – due to the techniques of writing. Whereas in the first two parts we find intensely chromatic melodic lines, with frequent use of exceptional rhythmic formulas, the last two bring forward mostly diatonic melodic structures placed rather in the area of anhemitonic pentatones and hexachordic scales.

Fig. 1

Berceuses du chat – specific differences

Berceuses du chat		
No. 1	<i>Sur le poêle</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 16 bars - ♩ = 52 - phrase I – 4 bars; cadential complement – 3 bars; phrase II – 5 bars; <i>codetta</i> – 4 bars - chromatic writing - three sound levels – voice; accompaniment (piccolo clarinet and bass clarinet); clarinet pedal in <i>A</i> - permutation with rhythmic-melodic cells
No. 2	<i>Intérieur</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 19 bars - ♩ = 88 - two periods of two phrases each - period I – 2 identical phrases of 5 bars each - period II – 2 phrases of 5 and 4 bars - chromatic writing - hexachord with multiple steps
No. 3	<i>Dodo</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 16 bars - ♩ = 96 - 2 phrases of 8 bars, resembling thematic material - phrase I – 5 bar motive, cadential complement of 3 bars - phrase II – repetition of the first phrase, in varied manner - diatonic writing - anhemitonic tetratone and pentatone structures - modal center <i>D</i> - lyrical, <i>rubato</i>, low nuances - bass clarinet replaced by <i>A</i>-clarinet - cradle song
No. 4	<i>Ce qu'il a, le chat</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 7 bars - ♩ = 69 - four stanzas - character contrast

As part of the series of vocal pieces from the Russian period, following the line of development inspired directly by the Russian folklore,

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Berceuses du chat stand out by means of Stravinsky's specific lyricism reflected both in the melodic lines dedicated to the solo voice and in the simple and discreet accompaniment, with sinuous melodic lines, performed by the clarinet trio, meant to create a specific atmosphere, while the composer fully exploits the expressive abilities of the clarinets.

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