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Stravinsky • *Les Noces, Renard, Ragtime for Eleven Instruments*

Columbia/[Speakers Corner](#) MS6372
180-gram LP
1959/2016

Music ●●●●●○
Sound ●●●●○

by [Mark Blackmore](#) | February 15, 2017

Igor Stravinsky began preliminary sketches for *Les Noces* as early as 1912, but he was busy working on *The Rite of Spring* and wouldn't complete the final score until 1923. It was based on folk themes and poetry, and Stravinsky would describe the ballet as a collection of "cliches and quotations of typical Russian wedding sayings." As you read the libretto, the same phrases keep repeating, much like hearing snippets of conversation from many people discussing and preparing for the wedding. If you are familiar with Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana*, then *Les Noces* will seem familiar, but certainly less melodic. Orff admitted being influenced by hearing *Les Noces* and modeled much of *Carmina* on Stravinsky's work.

Stravinsky had considered a huge orchestra for *Les Noces* but settled on the final orchestration of four soloists, four pianos, chorus and six percussionists. This choice of a smaller ensemble meant it could never be a sonic tour de force like his *Rite* or *Firebird*. Dedicated to Sergei Diaghilev, founder of the Ballet Russes, *Les Noces* was first performed in 1923 by that ensemble and conducted by Ernest Ansermet. This reissue is of the 1959 Columbia recording, which has great star power: Stravinsky conducting and the four piano parts played by Samuel Barber, Aaron Copland, Lukas Foss and Roger Sessions, each a leading American composer. Stravinsky takes a more measured approach to *Les Noces* than Bernstein or Robert Craft, which makes his version a bit too staid.



Side 2 of this LP has two seldom-performed jewels: *Renard*, whose performance bristles with energy and drive, followed by an enjoyable, playful reading of *Ragtime for Eleven Instruments*. *Renard* is described as a "Burlesque for Singing and Acting," telling a barnyard fable with some rather dark lyrics. The *Ragtime for Eleven Instruments* was composed after Stravinsky studied a collection of piano rags brought back from America by Ernest Ansermet. Both of these pieces were influenced by Stravinsky's study of those scores and sound very much like his more famous *L'histoire du Soldat*, with punchy rhythms, angular melodic lines and bursts of virtuosic display. Also, both selections use the cimbalom, a Eastern European dulcimer with damper pedals similar to a piano. Stravinsky used the cimbalom to imitate an ancient Russian instrument, the guzla, which is a metal-stringed balalaika. He was so fond of the cimbalom that *Ragtime* was composed on that instrument. Unfortunately, Stravinsky decided to abandon writing for the cimbalom due to the lack of trained musicians for the instrument.

Speakers Corner has done a wonderful job at reproducing the original Columbia release's cover and the accompanying lyrics insert. It's great to see the composer and the dream team of piano soloists pictured on the album insert, along with a shot of the recording session with all of the pianos and percussionists. Soloists are clearly heard in the mix, but I would have liked more clarity from the chorus responses, as they are obscured by the instruments too often. The choir often lacks clarity and that detracts from the recording. Percussion is quite powerful and triangle is clearly reproduced, particularly in *Renard*. I'd also mention the fine performances of the wind players in *Renard* as they execute those wicked runs and flourishes.

While this recording may not be a sonic spectacular, it is enlightening to hear a mature Stravinsky's interpretation of

music from his youthful and prolific period of composing. *Les Noces* is an influential piece of early Stravinsky writing, but it's *Renard* and *Ragtime* to which I will return. ☺

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