Igor Stravinsky
Music for Piano (1911-42)
Aleck Karis, piano

Three Movements from "Petrouchka" (1911/21) 16:19

1 I Russian Dance 2:35
2 II Petrouchka's Room 4:44
3 III Shrovetide Fair 8:59

4 **Valse pour les Enfants (1917) 0:51**

5 **Ragtime (1918) 4:41**

6 **Piano-Rag-Music (1919) 3:04**

The Five Fingers (1921) 7:49

7 1. Andantino 0:58
8 2. Allegro 0:59
9 3. Allegretto 0:39
10 4. Larghetto 1:37
11 5. Moderato 0:39
12 6. Lento 1:20
13 7. Vivo 0:22
14 8. Pesante 1:11

Sonata (1924) 10:18

15 I ♩ = 112 3:19
16 II Adagietto 4:21
17 III ♩ = 112 2:35

Serenade in A (1925) 12:04

18 I Hymne 3:06
19 II Romanze 3:09
20 III Rondoletto 2:45
21 IV Cadenza Finala 3:02

22 **Tango (1940) 4:11**
23 **Circus Polka (1942) 3:30**

Three Easy Pieces for Piano Duet (1914-15) 3:19

24 1. March 1:12
25 2. Waltz 1:18
26 3. Polka 0:47

Robert Lubin, seconda

Five Easy Pieces for Piano Duet (1916-17) 5:55

27 1. Andante 1:15
28 2. Española 0:54
29 3. Balalaîka 0:45
30 4. Napolitana 1:07
31 5. Galop 1:53

Robert Lubin, prima

Total time 73:12

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As musicians go, Igor Fyodorovich Stravinsky (1882-1971) started rolling toward his profession rather late. He was not one of those composers who, if the legends are to believed, signal their talent by picking out tunes on the piano before they can even walk. In fact, Stravinsky didn't begin piano lessons until he was nine, but these were soon supplemented by private tutoring in harmony and counterpoint. His inclinations toward music were supported by his parents, who knew what their teenager was getting into, since they were themselves musical. (Stravinsky's father was a bass singer at the opera houses of Kiev and, later, St. Petersburg; his mother was an accomplished amateur pianist.) As it happened, one of Stravinsky's friends at school was the son of the celebrated composer Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov. When Stravinsky's father died, in December 1902, Rimsky-Korsakov became something of a mentor, both personal and musical, to the aspiring composer.

By the time he began working seriously with Rimsky-Korsakov, Stravinsky had already composed two works for solo piano, a *Tarantella* (written when the composer was sixteen, and never published) and a Tchaikovskyesque *Scherzo* (which remained unpublished until after Stravinsky's death). Under Rimsky-Korsakov's watchful eye, he plunged into a *Piano Sonata in F-Sharp Minor*, a study in late-Romantic idiom. Stravinsky would later dismiss it, without entirely disowning it; and, like the *Scherzo*, it would be published only posthumously.

By 1907, Stravinsky (already twenty-five years old) was ready to bestow an opus number on one of his compositions, a *Symphony in E-Flat*, which he dedicated to his mentor. Only a year later, Rimsky-Korsakov would be dead; of his musical achievements, *Schéhérazade* and Stravinsky were probably his greatest.

Now making his own path in the world of composition, Stravinsky showed a predilection for colorful orchestral writing, as evinced by such early works as the *Scherzo Fantastique* and *Feu d'Artifice*, which won the admiration of the impresario Sergei Diaghilev. Diaghilev wasted little time enlisting Stravinsky to compose ballet scores, an ideal milieu in which the composer's evocative, almost descriptive, style could both flourish and turn a profit.

Perhaps this early impulse toward orchestral writing helps explain why solo-piano music makes up a relatively modest portion of the composer's output, though he was a reasonably adept pianist himself. Indeed, the works on this recording represent very nearly his complete oeuvre for piano, lacking only the early *Tarantella, Scherzo, Sonata,* and *Four Études* (Op. 7, from 1908), a negligible *Souvenir d'une Marche Boche* (1915), and unpublished *Berceuses* (1940). (Two works for two pianos—a lost *Valses des Fleurs*, written in 1917, and a *Sonata*, from 1943-44, obviously go beyond the bounds of a single keyboard, as does a 1917 *Study for Pianola*). The *Ragtime* and *Circus Polka* are among Stravinsky's numerous reductions of his own orchestral works, as are the *Three Movements from "Petrouchka"*.

Petrouchka was the second of Stravinsky's major Diaghilev ballet scores, having been preceded by *The Firebird*. The composer had initially conceived of at least some of its material as a piano concerto, but by the time the half-hour-long ballet was premièred in 1911, in Paris, the piano had receded to a less prominent position in the vivid orchestration. A decade later, in 1922, Stravinsky transcribed three of the ballet's movements—totaling about half the length of the entire ballet—specifically crafting them to the virtuosic technique of Arthur Rubinstein. The resulting transcription is one of the most astonishing in the repertoire, both in its difficulty and in its musical

impact. Brashly mingling the primitive with the complex, its textures and harmonies succeed one another with such imaginative variety that a listener is left exhausted at the end. Not so exhausted as the pianist, though. Certain of the passages threaten physical harm to the performer, if not approached in perfect equilibrium. Stravinsky demands a texture so rich—so symphonic, one might say—that his notes occupy three staves (rather than the normal two) for several expanses, presaging the look of his later scores; and a sixteen-measure passage near the end, where the notation spreads to four staves, guarantees to strike terror in the heart of all but four-handed pianists.

The *Valse pour les Enfants*, a bagatelle if ever one was, is thought to have been written in 1918. But it was not published until May 21, 1922, appearing in that day's edition of the Paris newspaper *Le Figaro*. According to the piece's "headline," it was improvised by the composer at the newspaper's offices—a credible assertion, given the piece's charmed simplicity and arbitrary-sounding casualness. *Ragtime* (also from 1918) and *Piano-Rag-Music* (1919) attest to Stravinsky's fascination with music of all styles, and to his ability to absorb, digest, and transform it into something his own, without being merely chameleonic. *Ragtime* started life as a chamber work for eleven instruments, but its reduction for solo piano sharpens the listener's focus on its formal elements, which might be viewed as a rather repetitive musical equivalent to Cubism. In fact, when the transcription was published, in 1911, Picasso contributed the volume's cover art. Compared to the steady beat of *Ragtime, Piano-Rag-Music* (which, like the *Three Movements from Petrouchka,* was written for Rubinstein) ranges through constantly changing meters—some passages are notated without meter altogether—yielding a tipsy rhythmic dissonance that mirrors and supports the dissonance of the harmony. Apart from standing as a monument of the rhythmic liberation movement, *Piano-Rag-Music* is an exemplar of the sort of musical rudeness that came into flower just after "The Great War," an aesthetic championed by Satie and Cocteau—both intent on "shocking the bourgeoisie"—and finding merry adherents in Poulenc, Milhaud, and the rest of "Les Six."

The Five Fingers ("Les Cinq Doigts," 1921), *Three Easy Pieces for Piano Duet* (1914-15), and *Five Easy Pieces for Piano Duet* (1916-17) form a triumvirate of curious works written expressly for use in teaching beginning pianists. Stravinsky composed *Les Cinq Doigts* while he was staying at the home, near Paris, of Gabrielle Chanel (of perfume fame). "My idea," Stravinsky would later explain, "was to exercise the five fingers of the right hand by confining each finger to a single note; or, in other words, to limit myself, compositionally, to a 5-note row or scale." The left hand is allowed to range more widely, but its material, too, remains modest. The resulting eight movements go far beyond technical exercises, achieving a level of musical interest that one might have thought unlikely, given the constraints Stravinsky placed on their composition. Stravinsky's two four-hand collections—the *Three Easy Pieces* (1914-15) and the *Five Easy Pieces* (1916-17)—fall into an ancient tradition of pedagogical works for student and teacher, with one part simple and the other more difficult. Stravinsky wrote the *Polka* of the earlier set specifically to play with Diaghilev, who was competent enough to handle the lower part. (And who wouldn't be? Once the fingers are positioned over the correct keys, all the player has to do is oompah). The composer Alfred Casella overheard them playing the movement, and begged Stravinsky to write one for him, too. The opening *March* resulted, and then, Stravinsky finding himself on a roll, added a central *Valse* for Erik Satie. The high-spirited *Five Easy Pieces* that followed were composed expressly for the use of Stravinsky's children. For variety's sake, he reverses

the disposition of his earlier set, so that now the top part becomes simple and the bass quite intricate. By now, these three Stravinsky sets have opened the ears of several generations of incipient pianists, giving many their first serious exposure to the sounds—and to the physical sensations—of "modern music."

It seems odd that Stravinsky's *Piano Sonata* (1924)—his second, if you count his early essay—does not appear more frequently on recital programs. A tightly wound classic of neo-classicism, its principal inspiration is certainly Bach, though it also nods to Haydn and even Beethoven in some of its details. Sometimes the references are practically literal: snatches of "Sheep May Safely Graze," or of the sinfonia to a cantata, seem to leap momentarily out of the texture. Other allusions are more general: the propulsive figuration of the organ toccatas, the transparent textures of the two-part inventions. Stravinsky himself premièred the sonata, which attests to his fluency at the keyboard, just before embarking on his first American tour as a pianist and conductor. While he was in the United States, a record company commissioned him to compose a piano work custom-made for the phonographic medium: each of its four movements was to fit on a single side of a 78-r.p.m. platter. The result was the *Serenade in A* (1925), and its movements do, in fact, each hover around three minutes in length. The stately opening *Hymn* sounds redolent of Poulenc; who knows who was influencing whom? A *Romanza* ensues, sounding almost improvisatory as it moves through several changes of character. With the bustling *Rondoletto*, Stravinsky returns to the sound-world of his *Sonata*, although this time Bach seems to be having a chattering tête-à-tête with Mozart. The work ends in a *Cadenza Finala*, a curious designation that, in the end, describes perfectly the extended irresolution of the meandering eighth-notes.

The *Tango* (1940) and *Circus Polka* (1942) are autonomous occasional works. Just as his *Sonata* had drawn on Bach's style without actually aping him, so the *Tango* transforms the form and spirit of Argentina's contribution to classical genres. Some distance removed from the sensual tangos of Argentina's steamy dance-halls, and farther still from the stylized derivations that resounded throughout the world's palm courts in the 1920's, Stravinsky here covers the dance's sultry intensity with the fingerprints of his own harmonies. The *Circus Polka* offered here is the composer's own piano reduction of what was originally an orchestral romp—complete with a quotation from Schubert's *Marche Militaire*— written at the behest of choreographer George Balanchine. Wrote Stravinsky: "He wanted a short piece for a ballet of elephants, one of which was to carry Vera Zorina. . . . After conducting my orchestral original, in Boston in 1944, I received a congratulatory telegram from Bessie, the young pachyderm who had carried the ballerina and who had heard my broadcast in winter quarters of the circus at Sarasota. I never saw the ballet, but I met Bessie in Los Angeles once and shook her foot."

—James M. Keller

James M. Keller, who writes about music on staff at *The New Yorker*, is also the music critic for *Piano & Keyboard*.

At home with both contemporary and classical works, **Aleck Karis** has recently appeared with New York's Y Chamber Symphony, St. Luke's Chamber Orchestra, the Richmond Symphony, and the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra. He has been featured at leading international festivals including Bath, Geneva, Sao Paulo, Los Angeles, Miami, New York Philharmonic's Horizons Festival, Caramoor, and the Warsaw Autumn Festival. He is the pianist with Speculum Musicae, the New York League-ISCM Chamber Players, and SONOR, the contemporary music ensemble of the University of California, San Diego. Awarded a solo recitalists' fellowship by the NEA, Karis has been honored with two Fromm Foundation grants "in recognition of his commitment to the music of our time." Karis has recorded for Nonesuch, New World, Neuma, Centaur and CRI Records. His solo debut album for Bridge Records of music by Chopin, Carter and Schumann (BCD 9001) was nominated as "Best Recording of the Year" by Opus Magazine (1987). His second album for Bridge (BCD 9011) is a Mozart recital. He has also recorded solo music by Reynolds, Anderson, Davidovsky, Krieger, Babbitt, Primosch, Yuasa, and Cory. Chamber music recordings include works by Carter, Wolpe, Crumb, Babbitt, Martino, Lieberson, Steiger, and Shifrin. Artur Balsam and Beveridge Webster were among his major teachers while at the Manhattan School of Music and the Juilliard School. He credits William Daghlian as a key mentor and his most important teacher. Karis is currently an Associate Professor of Music at the University of California, San Diego.

Robert Lubin is a versatile musician who is equally at home with the piano, harpsichord and organ, as well as conducting. He has performed in Europe and the U.S. as a recitalist and with major ensembles and orchestras. Lubin is the organist/choir director at the Church of St. Bernadette in Brooklyn, NY. His piano teachers include Agustin Anievas, Paul Jacobs and, since 1984, William Daghlian.

Producer: William Daghlian
Engineer: Mike von Kurtzfrau
Digital Editing: Jonathan Schultz
Recorded at The American Academy of Arts and Letters: March 12, 13, 14, 1993
Piano: Steinway D
Stravinsky photo: Courtesy of Robert and Alva Craft
Karis photo: Christian Steiner
Typography: Leslie Schechter
Executive Producer: Becky Starobin

Three Movements from "Petrouchka", *8 Easy Pieces for Piano Duet* published by International Music Co.; *Valse pour les Enfants* published in Le Figaro May 21, 1922; *Piano-Rag-Music* and *Ragtime* by J&W Chester; *The Five Fingers* by Omega; *Serenade in A* by Edition Russe de Musique; *Tango* by Mercury Music Corp.; *Circus Polka* by Schott.

This recording was made with the assistance of an Academic Senate grant from the University of California, San Diego.

Special thanks to Jeffrey Herman and Holly Mentzer of Boosey and Hawkes, and to Alva and Robert Craft.