

Stephanie Jordan
Michael Clark: Stravinsky Project
(**O, Mmm... and I Do**)

For Michael Clark admirers, it was an important moment: the completion of his Stravinsky trilogy (2 November 2007 at the Barbican Theatre, London) after several years in preparation, everything finally in place. Yet it was at this culminating moment that the singular nature of the enterprise became apparent, the deft sidestepping of the notorious images of the choreographer that spill over from his past.

It was a performance shorn of virtually everything but dance content: movement to be looked at for its own sake, and unadorned. Any references onstage to Clark's life offstage were subdued. The rude costumes and stage paraphernalia for which he remains famous were largely absent, long gone the loud allusions to club culture and renegade fashion via the iconic walking work of art Leigh Bowery and designer duo Bodymap. And, for the first time ever, all the music on the programme came from the classical tradition. Clark is much better known for ferocious rock music (The Fall most regularly, also Wire, the Sex Pistols, T. Rex and Susan Stenger) or for appropriating snatches of popular music, such as Stephen Sondheim or Nina Simone. You can count on a few fingers his use hitherto of anything classical: most notably, perhaps, his choice of Chopin **Preludes** in **Because We Must** (1987), a tongue-in-cheek reference to the regular association of Chopin with conventional ballet class and choreography. Clark has always enjoyed using music that carries associations that he can 'play with', including the most familiar or celebrated music:

It's the ambitiousness for my own work ... daring myself to do that. It's a way of upping the ante ... having the audacity to tackle these sacred cows.¹

The Stravinsky scores forming the trilogy are seminal, designated masterpieces written for Diaghilev's Ballets Russes: **Apollo** (famously choreographed by George Balanchine in 1928, here reworked and retitled **O** by Clark); **The Rite of Spring** as centrepiece (**Michael Clark's Modern Masterpiece**, later titled **Mmm...**, first set in 1913, notoriously, by Vaslav Nijinsky); and finally **Les Noces** (Clark's **I Do**, premiered in 1923 with Bronislava Nijinska's choreography). But this could be the first time that they have appeared in this order. And a kind of cyclical story might be read from the order, about the facts of life in their plainest, least sentimental form: birth and the ritual of marriage as preparation for further procreation.

At first curtain rise, on a gloomy stage, we see a grey figure caught in a hard oblong of light, flat to the floor. Pencil-straight, taut through to the toes and lean to bone and muscle outlined by the unitard, the figure's exaggerated flatness reduces human qualities, although there is a suggestion of female contour: is this strange creature a corpse in a coffin (earth to earth) or a woman lying on a bedsheet? From the orchestra pit, we hear the caress of warm strings. Soon, straining into movement, we discover that she is a woman giving birth, parallel to Apollo's mother, Leto, giving birth during the prologue of Stravinsky's score. She hoists up her pelvis and opens her legs (angled flexions at knees and ankles) in a kind of jagged scream,



Amy Hollingsworth in a publicity shot for **Mmm...**, 2006. P: Hugo Glendinning.

and soon a man rolls into place between her thighs as if the newborn infant. She is Kate Coyne, Clark's most commanding and inspirational dancer of today.

At the end of the same evening, we see Coyne again, now as the bride in **Noces**, standing bolt upright on pointe and statuesque, but again barely human, almost wholly immobilised, enclosed and tied up with bows in a giant-knitted white dress. But here, she is definitely not alone. She is a tall woman, made taller still by her headdress and, not only does she dwarf absurdly the groom at her side in his brown unitard, she also towers over the whole proceedings, upstage centre, the end of a corridor flanked by a chorus of singers on risers and 10 prone dancers laid out before them. The only movement left is the clanging of percussive pianos, antique cymbals and bells, which too gradually reduce to nothing. Of course, you could read the wedding dress (apparently after a 1965 Yves Saint Laurent original) differently; as the critic Sanjoy Roy suggested, 'like a cross between a tacky toilet roll cover and a knitted condom'²—after all, this is a Michael Clark evening—but you would only think like this if you were familiar with Clark's deeper past.

In 2004, management at the Barbican Theatre had discussed the possibility of staging Clark's dream trilogy as a three-year project, one work annually, and then appointed him artistic associate, offering him and his company an administrative base. Clark was attracted by the guarantee of live musical accompaniment on a large scale, a string orchestra for **Apollo** (originally, in 2005, the Aurora Orchestra conducted by the young rising star Robin Ticciati; in 2007, the Britten Sinfonia conducted by Jurjen Hempel), two pianos for **Rite** (played by Andrew West and Philip Moore—funds could not stretch to the original 100-plus orchestra version) and the wonderful—impossible demands of **Noces**: four pianos, percussion, four solo singers and large chorus. Never before had Clark enjoyed such musical resources.

But, there is a longer history behind the trilogy. Clark first began to think about **Rite** when he was a tribe member in Richard Alston's 1981 setting for Ballet Rambert. Towards the end of the 1980s, Peter Schaufuss suggested that he set it on a cast of 40 dancers for his company English National Ballet. In 1991, Stephen Petronio and Clark worked on a version called **Wrong-Wrong**, together taking on the role of a double-headed Sage, with Joanne Barrett as the Chosen Maiden. She remained his choice in the role for his own full **Rite** premiere in the UK in 1992. Two years later, Clark turned his attention to **Apollo**. The same year, the Royal Ballet gave him a commission: he badly wanted to set **Noces** but was dissuaded, hardly surprisingly because of the firm position of the Nijinska version in the Royal repertory. The idea of the trilogy was beginning to emerge. After all, it is not hard to find thematic links across these particular scores and Clark's new conceptions of them: stories of birth, sex, sacrifice and Chosen Ones. And, as the critic Jann Parry has observed, there is a link between **Rite** and **Apollo** in the history of ballet, via Louis XIV (who promoted the codification of ballet movements), to the sun god of **Rite**, recipient of the sacrifice that ensures the return of spring.³ Meanwhile, Clark listened voraciously to other Stravinsky music, and recently, there have been further tentative ideas for choreography to his music: a **Firebird** for the Kirov Ballet mooted in 2005, and, for Clark's own company, T. S. Eliot's **Four Quartets**, an extract from which Stravinsky set as **Anthem** ('The dove descending breaks the air', 1962).⁴ Yet, for more than a

decade, Clark held on to the notion of reworking, and in his terms, finishing the two 1992 and 1994 works. **Stravinsky Project** has asserted itself regularly—he was still reworking details up to its last performances—weaving in and out of his other work, his periods of inactivity and activity, his comebacks and disappearances.

In 1986, Clark said that he found complex, classical music dictated too much to him: *I enjoy the simplicity of... The Fall because it gives me a sort of broader canvas to make whatever I want to on.*⁵

His choreography indicates that the regular pounding beats gave him freedom: sometimes to follow them, sometimes to work within the gaps between them. When it came to Stravinsky, the **Rite** attracted him because:

*The music is incredible, some of the best dance music I've ever heard.*⁶

With the score and original ballet cited regularly as prime examples of artistic radicalism and bad behaviour, **Rite** well suited a theme of revolution:

*Not just in the political sense, but also in the sense of cycles between all opposites—like life and death, good and bad, and ugliness and beauty.*⁷

Furthermore, there was the primal urge within it:

*Sex and dance were made for each other.*⁸

And Clark was drawn to the fact that:

*One of the themes of the piece is the idea that winter can't turn to spring without dance taking place. That's quite foreign to us, the idea that dance might be necessary.*⁹

The sacrificial act itself, the crucial, final stage in making the spring happen, Clark has seen in both positive and negative terms—resonating with the life choice of professional dancers, with the conventional fate of women and domestic expectations of them, most recently with suicide bombings (not an issue in the early 1990s). But he also saw it as a potentially positive and powerful decision. The 1992 press release referred to his **mmm...** as a *fundamental, brutal and highly physical affirmation of life and death—primal, modern, necessary*. By 2006, the allusion to death had been expunged. Clark also found the equally radical construction of the score appealing:

*Stravinsky wanted to strip dance down to just its rhythmic element... He was breaking all the rules¹⁰... I wanted to underline that to try and strip away the melody from the work and make it more rhythmic and primal.*¹¹

But Clark's next Stravinsky undertaking, to the score of **Apollo** (written in 1928)—by which time the composer had long since relinquished any revolutionary ambitions—emerged for quite different reasons. Here, Clark found a parallel with Stravinsky at a personal level, identifying with the Janus-faced, transformative characteristics within the composer's life:

I often talk about myself in the past as if I was a different person, because it does feel like that...

*The person who wrote **Apollo** seems completely different to the person who wrote **The Rite of Spring**.*

*I was attracted to **Apollo**, because in the past my work has been Dionysian rather than Apollonian.*

*It has been about embracing chaos rather than order.*¹²

The reference here is to the Dionysian/Apollonian opposition, borrowing from the concept so frequently associated with Stravinsky's progress. For the composer, **Apollo**, with its sublime

lyricism and fundamental serenity, can be seen as a metaphor for the reconciliation of the various tensions in his private life and also as a signal of his renewed religious faith. It was an important stage too within his move through neoclassicism, 15 years after the rampant physical blast of **Rite** (the pinnacle of his expression of chaos and primitive oblivion). Famously, and betraying his by-then-conservative stance, he admitted that it was classical ballet that helped him see his way through ...

*... the eternal conflict in art between the Apollonian and Dionysian principles. The latter assumes ecstasy to be the final goal – that is to say, the losing of oneself – whereas art demands above all the full consciousness of the artist. There can, therefore, be no doubt as to my choice between the two. And if I appreciate so highly the value of classical ballet, it is not simply a matter of taste on my part, but because I see exactly in it the perfect expression of the Apollonian principle.*¹³

Clark had already experienced the schizophrenic juxtaposition of the immaculate cool of ballet-school classicism and the riotous, colourful subculture that formed his daily life. Oppositions were already characteristic of his work too – ‘ugliness and beauty’ – but now he needed the Apollonian Stravinsky as an additional regulatory force. Quite as important, Clark, with all three works of his trilogy, situated himself within the major dance tradition that has grown around Stravinsky’s scores. He joined a mass of choreographers who have been inspired to create new commentaries on his music, like them too moved by the celebrated Stravinsky dance premieres, especially those from the Diaghilev period:

*I’d like to think I’d made a piece that Stravinsky and Nijinsky would make now.*¹⁴

A database chronology currently lists over 700 Stravinsky choreographers and more than 1,200 dances to his scores,¹⁵ and Clark’s is not the first trilogy: Balanchine provided the most celebrated precedent with the strictly neoclassical series, **Apollo**, **Orpheus** and **Agon**. Clark’s three chosen scores represent some of the most choreographed of all, **Rite** especially, with several hundreds of settings. Acknowledging the authority of the past, most of the 30 or so recorded settings of **Apollo** have referred back to Balanchine’s ‘perfect’ ballet of 1928. Likewise, most **Noces** choreographers (about 70 settings recorded) have applied themselves to the tradition stemming from the original Nijinska. **Rite**, which Clark likens to ‘a sort of royal family [or]... your mum and dad’,¹⁶ is a different case. The choreography was lost after eight public performances until reconstructed in 1987 by Millicent Hodson for the Joffrey Ballet. But the memories of its scandalous premiere and of the terrifying, turned-in and twisted choreography have always been strong. **Rite** became both 20th-century icon and monster.

Clark did not balk at referring to his new **Rite** of 1992 as **Michael Clark’s Modern Masterpiece** in the first instance, which was a signal, if partly ironic, of taking his place as myth-maker alongside the great works and movements of past and present. But it was also a memory of Alston’s 1980 **Rainbow Ripples**, another work that Clark danced during his time with Ballet Rambert.¹⁷ Here, the sound-score by Charles Amirkhanian incorporated a lecture by the musicologist Nicolas Slonimsky on how perceptions of an iconic piece of music, like **Rite**, change over the years:

A modernistic monstrosity in 20 years becomes a sophisticated curiosity and in another 20 years becomes a modern masterpiece.

Like a jackdaw, Clark added the rebuttals of popular culture into his 1992 mix. So Stravinsky and Leonardo meet their match – an image of the **Mona Lisa** morphs into one of Andy Warhol’s **Liz Taylor**, while we listen to ‘Send in the Clowns’ from Stephen Sondheim’s **A Little Night Music**. Meanwhile, adding a touch of self-irony, Clark performed a gorgeously sensual solo wearing nothing but a fur muff covering his crotch (nought covering his backside), which became the literal centre of his dance. Clark’s art–life world was fully present: his friend Bowery, the costume designer and a protagonist on stage, and the **Rite** score topped and tailed by various rock preludes and postludes – PiL, T. Rex, The Velvet Underground and the Sex Pistols. Originally, Clark says, he wanted the freedom to break into Stravinsky’s score with interpolations of this kind of music and indeed to give the composer a touch of electronic treatment.¹⁸ (According to the terms of the Stravinsky estate, Boosey & Hawkes could allow none of this.)

Here in **Mmm...**, there was even the startling debut of Clark’s own bare-breasted mother Bessie, one of her jobs being to perform a re-enactment of giving birth to her own son (in the muff) during one of the preludes, with the enormous, padded, blubbery Bowery operating as the midwife who hauls him out from between her legs. This was high-definition Clark of the period, both funny and chilling in its remorseless bad behaviour, alongside images of Bowery turning into a cowering creature on all fours, to be walked upon, kicked and led like a dog, or appearing during the **Rite** score as pregnant Earth-Mother-cum-Mr-Blobby; then the toilet-collar costumes in the second half of **Rite**, with lids as haloes screaming horror about their association with human waste; and finally the Hitler moustache worn by the Chosen Maiden. The writer David Hughes explained it in the terms of contemporary postmodern and post-structural thought, Clark being a *product not of a moment of history, but of histories, then, conflated in a moment. This is the condition of the work itself, a compacting of references and a series of images which run into each other through their connecting elements.*¹⁹

At the same time, Hughes questioned the value of such ‘glamorised and fetishised autobiography’. Yet a strength of the work was its highly ambiguous nature, that it registered a breakdown of civility as both disturbing and entertaining. Clark had enough theatrical know-how to tread this dangerous borderline in such a way that we were made to feel uncomfortable, forced to question our reactions to such outrage, and to note its double-edged comment on the virtuoso violence of today’s media.

In fact, **Mmm...** turned out to be a transitional work – with much less than expected in the way of props, theatrical paraphernalia and Clarkian life references to disturb our view of the real dancers, especially in the **Rite** section. Clark said in a 1998 interview:

*I had already started to draw the line between my private life and my work.*²⁰

Even the original narrative was kept to a minimum, with little notion of a specific place where ritual happens, or of a tribe, or separate bands of men and women – costumes by Bowery and Stevie Stewart were unisex and strange enough to be objectifying (like the rubber kilts lightly referencing Clark’s Scottish background and worn together with yarmulkes). There was a Chosen Maiden and a Sage, in 1992, his mother, regularly described in interviews as ‘the wisest person I know’. But, typically of all Clark’s Stravinsky works in all versions, the programme

named no characters. The performers seemed to have stepped off another planet, earnest of energy, facially withdrawn, often literally turned upside-down. In 2006, if anything, this was even more the case, with the performers increased from six to 12 – we felt that we had got to know them all personally in 1992 (Barrett, Bowery, Bessie Clark, Clark himself, Matthew Hawkins, Julie Hood) – with the formality and clarity of doubling up in unisons, and the guests from life all gone. The stage was now brighter and whiter (and there were new colourful flower-print leotards in Part 2 of **Rite**), the movement lighter, and Nijinsky's presence diminished. But there was one especially significant new twist: Clark now as the Sage (sinister in toilet collar and black dress), wielding two black sticks, a disturbing, poignant reflection upon the passing of time, and – now he was no longer 'dancing' – upon Clark's difference in age from the rest of his cast.

Back in 1992, press releases reported a new movement focus, that Clark had 'developed a technique where movement is initiated from and centred around the pelvis. Complex and technically demanding, this expresses the life force – libido – that is the essential source of dance.' The performers swung their pelvises vigorously in circles and wave-like undulations. They also imprinted their new identity with a memorable slow, slow processional to PiL, entering one by one in their light-front, dark-back unitards, hips forward, chins to the chest, evoking the idea, says Clark, of 'your brains being between your legs.'²¹ You can glimpse this move in his later Apollo setting. There have always been many links across the three Stravinsky pieces, both images and movement sequences, binding them together, so we read a continuity between them. However, in 2007, with **Mmm...** placed second in the full Stravinsky trilogy, we spotted the references between it and **O** backwards, in reverse order.

The dance writer Rachel Duerden has written of the parallel, or turned-in stance – or other oppositional movement – acting in a 'chromatic', dissonant way against Clark's background in *danse d'école*: *To push the musical parallel further, the chromaticism may escalate but tonality never completely dissolves.*²² Notably, the opening of Part 2 of **Rite**, despite the toilet costumes, brings back Apollonian crossed-leg (ballet) fifth positions as a signal of calm. Otherwise, **Mmm...** (especially the 1992 version) stretches as far away from stable, consonant 'tonality' as any piece that Clark ever made, frequently removing clean body lines in its frenzied scribbles of motion, base squats and (reminiscent of the Nijinsky choreography) helpless knock-knees. (In 1992, it seemed that Clark 'turned into' Nijinsky just before Stravinsky's score begins.) The Chosen Maiden's solo Sacrificial Dance is an extreme account of Clark's new style and of various striking floor moves now propelled to find their resolution in triumphant standing and aerial celebration. In 1992, after ambivalence with regard to the rest of the piece, Hughes welcomed this solo as a potential re-writing of the score:

*Here there is no sacrifice or martyrdom to the demanding dance... She gives herself to us and keeps herself all to herself. We almost dare not look, we are dared to look, we are looked at very directly, causing us to reflect on our gaze. Here is not the seduction of the melting image and the compliant body, but the body refigured in stone.*²³

Yet the final image is two-faced, typical of Clark: the Chosen Maiden wears a Hitler moustache, she is evil, frightening, perhaps a touch comical, as much as inspiring.

This most famous solo is balanced by another representing sexual awakening in Part 1 of **Rite**, to the section of the music called **Spring Rounds**. Significantly, this solo was also scored for a woman (initially Julie Hood, more recently Melissa Hetherington). She wears a purple satin unitard with a leg and arm stripped out to reveal the full connection of hip, shoulder and crotch. A moment in the solo surely primed Ajay Close's observation that women find **Mmm...** powerfully erotic:

*Sex from the inside, tracing the twisting route of desire and arousal, the elaborate, insistent pattern...*²⁴

The woman places a hand inside her groin, then closes her thigh and turns her back on us. This onanistic action is soon adopted by others (including Clark in the original **O**), but the primary sexual empowerment of woman is crucial, set off in the 1992 work by the rude 'trash', in 2006 by a more well-behaved and pristine neoclassicism. It is not long before the same woman expresses herself in utterly abandoned positions, buttocks skywards or legs split apart. She too is incontinent, 'keeps herself all to herself', and invites us to ask questions of ourselves as onlookers.

The 'purple' solo is also an example of Clark's special adagio choreography – the speed that suited him best during schooling,²⁵ and that remains a special choreographic strength – sustained single-tempo arcs and circles that stop in striking sculpted positions. He went further with this in **O**, dividing the work into just two speeds more broadly than Stravinsky suggests – or, indeed, Balanchine, to whose masterpiece he turned for inspiration. The first piece reworked for the Barbican, **O** represents Clark's need to take stock and find order, and the next step in jettisoning quotations from his life. Even if its titled prelude, **OO**, incorporated some of the noisy punk material that accompanied Stravinsky's **Rite** in **Mmm...** there was a major commitment to purity when it came to the string score, a redefinition of classicism. Crucially, Balanchine and Stravinsky had themselves spoken of the work as an exercise in elimination, gestures selected according to 'family relations'.²⁶

Programme notes suggest that Clark went for the image of an infinity of nothingness that contained everything:

O is the hole in the whole... [Clark] abstracts Stravinsky's rhythms and distils from his music the most elevated pronunciation of all: an inexorable, single syllable.

In 2005, this was modified and updated, to include the statement that the work was his 'ground zero' and further oppositional concepts:

[Clark] takes ideas of fullness becoming empty, the hole becoming whole, negative space becoming positive.²⁷

Clark chooses not to mention the obvious resonances with the vaginal 'o' or the 'o' of orgasm. The **O**s of 1994 and 2005 led to the formalisation of **Mmm...** in 2006, though both pieces, Clark maintained, were always tightly linked as:

*two sides of the same coin. It's that thing of opposites confirming one another. [In **Rite**] I wanted a quality there of the phrase doing a dancer, rather than the dancer doing a phrase. In contrast, Apollo is the Sun God. He's in control, he divides day from night, a god of clarity. Apollo moves to make the only possible choice from one reason to the next.*²⁸



In **O**, there was the same broad outline of prologue, apotheosis and solos and a couple of group dances in between, as in Stravinsky's score and Balanchine's setting of it. But in 1994 there were two men in white – both Apollos (though no one has ever been formally named as such)? Daniel Squires wriggled out from under a duvet – Clark's mother giving birth again – and there was Clark himself, rapidly recognised by critics as their Apollo (another Chosen One) if there was one at all. Balanchine's three women in white were featured (he referred to them as Muses), but there was no sense in Clark's piece of one being a favourite (Terpsichore), and the duet that once emphasised male-female union as a symbol of artistic idealism rapidly became a quintet. Since 2005, in further pursuit of reduction and classical clarity, there has been just one possible Apollo, a real duet (though for no narrative reason), and no reference to Clark's life history whatsoever. The piece develops as a kind of glassy meditation on the past. The women now wear pelvis-covering tunics for the central Muse section, just as they did for Balanchine. In 1994, they wore pelvis-revealing unitards.

In the meantime, Clark had undertaken detailed video analysis of the Balanchine. Classical-academic steps and positions – but absolutely no *pointe* work – replaced some of the earlier dance material. Still, there was pelvic-led movement, in 'family relations' with his **Rite** setting, also free-curving torsos and a code of angular arm gestures, all of which counterpointed academicism. There were actual quotations from Balanchine in both versions, the Michelangelo image of the hand of God giving life to Adam being a shared motif of the early duet/quintet – in 2005 this was reduced to the pair pointing to each other across the space. But there were a number of other more subtle and fleeting recollections and allusions, often appearing during the same passages of music as in Balanchine's choreography.

The adagio material remained relatively intact across the decade, like the early solo for Clark himself in a see-through mirrored box, stretching, exploring, walking the walls with his feet, and self-contemplating like Narcissus before he opens the door on to the world. The end of **O**, with a touch of aqua lighting, evokes slow-rolling through water. In the current version, Coyne completes a brisk little solo with a hard arabesque arm pointing the way, whereupon the apotheosis begins and the dancers relinquish upright classical poise and surge to the floor in a sort of primeval return to the deep. There is one especially memorable moment: the three women lift their pelvises, swing their legs around each other into a knot, knees to the left, toes to the right reaching like needle points to the ground. So there



Melissa Hetherington performing **mmm...**, Barbican Theatre, London, October 2006. P: Hugo Glendinning.

is none of the idealism of Parnassus – originally Apollo led his Muses up a stairway. Rather, Clark's Apollo touches the floor in a final *penché*, one leg raised in the air behind him, the direction of attention bluntly downwards, which cannot but be read against the original.

In 1994, I remember how many of us enthused about the new 'seriousness' of the **O** enterprise and Clark's unforgettable beauty and vulnerability as Apollo, deliciously languid, supremely poised, and claiming a seemingly inevitable rightness, in both refinement and awkwardness. But impressive too was the fierce commitment of his super-strong women, firmly rooted with powerful leg extensions and abandoned head circlings initiated from churning, plunging pelvises. In the 2005 revision, the performers looked uncertain, even bland. By 2007, the new material, more rehearsed and legible, revealed the strength of its own personality and the 'truth' of enriched movement material, a huge development in Clark's negotiation with Stravinsky.

I Do followed the trend set by the revised **O** and **Mmm...**, even more highly choreographed, even more formal than its precedents. There were new challenges with regard to complexity, a Russian text assembled by the composer from folk sources – if you understand the language, a wild, sometimes bawdy, Joycean collage of nonsense prattle that led semantically in multiple directions – and fresh rhythmic complications in a score that often does not look as it sounds.

Yet Clark still wanted to make a generalised critique of regulation and the problematic aspects of social conventions, which remain with us today (a theme from his own creative history). He explains what the libretto meant to him:

It's full of anguish about getting married; in the piece the woman's dreading it. This is what's going on. Different conversations are heard in the music, different perspectives on marriage... And it's all to do with control. She doesn't want to leave her family and the freedom...²⁹

Like many other choreographers following Nijinska, whose work he studied carefully and remembered well from his days at the Royal Ballet School, Clark did not go for the composer's much more upbeat conception of a 'divertissement of the masquerade type',³⁰ even had he known Stravinsky's intentions. Yet, as in some other stagings (most notably that of Jerome Robbins in the US in 1965), he did share the composer's idea that the music should be a visible part of the action. Stravinsky wanted to see the pianos and percussion on stage. In Clark's work, we see the 40-strong choir on risers, divided in two by a corridor, with the upper bodies of the four solo singers visible in the pit. The effect is highly theatrical: oppressive, almost as if ambushing the 12 dancers, but also adding to their numbers, symbolic of a much larger wedding crowd.

In 1923, Nijinska's **Noces** was already innovative for its time, an early example of neoclassicism, with stripped-down narrative, giving pride of place to movement concerns. In accordance with his other Stravinsky practice, Clark went for an even more stripped-down account. So there were no parents, or specific entourage, no Tableaux 1, 2 and 3 designated as taking place in the home of the bride or groom or showing the journey to church, though perhaps finally (equivalent to the score's Tableau 4), there was a kind of party with all the dancers on stage together for the first time. The bride is seen in a state of undress at the start, emerging from a huge matryoshka doll, then fully ready at the very end. During the centre

of the piece, she sometimes dances as just one of the community, sometimes emerges as the figure we recognise with an identity. At the halfway point, she is lifted up flat like a table and deposited on the floor, where she goes through the opening section of her Leto solo from **O**. It could be seen as a dream of impending motherhood.

Again, the community seems distant, both prehistoric and ungendered post-human in their beige/brown leotards and tight caps. Nijinska had hers in brown and white peasant uniform: shirts, pinafores and leggings. When wearing leotards, dancers already seem less human, more unreal, but here, in Clark's **I Do**, we read them through Nijinska as people who have lost something of their original identity. Yet crisscross peasant garters are painted onto their unitards; colour variations and detail of decoration confirm that they are six couples as much as 12 people, as much as a whole community. Nijinska's broad division of men and women is transplanted here on to the choir, men and women on each side of the corridor.

From Nijinska's model, Clark absorbed key principles that he could use in his own way – like geometry, closed-up lines and walls of dancers, square and horizontal pyramid formations, and interweaving trellis sequences reflecting the braiding image within the text (symbol of sexual violence and the interpenetration of two families). She proposed a strictly reduced range of movement ideas. Clark followed suit, building on his previous Stravinsky vocabulary: ballet steps and arms, with Nijinska's half-fists blunting line, torso curves and twists (Merce Cunningham's style was a distant base), and gestural hieroglyphs. Clark pressed his ideas into short, repeating units, or let them unfold into longer accumulations or chains of motion. Nijinska favoured moments of frieze, with the piling of body upon body; his multi-body sculptures tend to be more entangled, three-dimensional and slow-moving. She responded to the counterpoint and textures in the music while adding her own chords, polyphonic strands and isolated solo utterances; so, in a different way, did he. Always, pattern is of the essence. And rhythm. It is impossible to overestimate the importance of rhythm in establishing the main tenor of the piece and of the image of mechanisation constituted by rhythm. Even if he wrote gaily about masquerades and divertissements, Stravinsky's music has often evoked the image of the machine, read as both thrilling and terrible. Listen to what T. S. Eliot wrote in 1921 about **Rite**, which seemed to him to 'transform the rhythm of the steppes into the scream of the motor-horn, the rattle of machinery, the grind of wheels, the beating of iron and steel, the roar of the underground railway, and the other barbaric noises of modern life.'³¹

One central component of Stravinsky rhythm is its motor. Charging just about all his work, this is exceptionally pronounced in **Noces** by virtue of its extreme percussive orchestration. Here too, images of mechanisation extend further, across Nijinska's choreography as well as the music: the processes of new cinema, the semblance of puppets in motion, the factory at work, the noise of metal upon metal.

The music critic Émile Vuillermoz wrote in 1923:

The only thing [Stravinsky] needs, in order to create his special pathos, is a solid machine with which to forge lovely accents, a machine to hit, a machine to lash, a machine to fabricate automatic resonances. His genius resides in the organisation of the rhythmic panting of this sonorous factory...



Artists of the Ballets Russes in Nicholas Roerich's costumes for Nijinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps*, Paris, c.1913. P: Top Foto.



Vaslav Nijinsky and Bronislava Nijinska in Nijinsky's *L'Après-midi d'un Faune*, c.1912. P: akg-images.



The Ballets Russes performing Bronislava Nijinska's *Les Noces*, c.1923. P: Lebrecht Music.



The Chosen Maiden solo in Millicent Hodson's reconstruction of Nijinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps*, performed by The Joffrey Ballet, 1987. P: Colette Masson/Roger-Viollet/ArenaPAL.

*On the stage – without decors, and transformed into a vast cinematographic screen – moves a simplified humanity, black and white, as if it came from a projector ... these synthetic marionettes ... One remains forever troubled by the strange accent of humanity possessed by the laments, laughs, and yells that escape from the forge where one sees the great blacksmith Ansermet brandish his menacing fists in order to bend all of his workers on their anvils!*³²

Vuillermoz had already read Nijinska's ballet as a statement about us, a metaphor for 'the mechanisation and automatism of society'. He went on to ask: 'In the games of social and religious ritual, are we anything other than obedient marionettes?'³³

Clark takes the machine metaphor just one stage further, renewed for our own times, with his further level of dance abstraction: people are negligible, like emotionless androids. It might also have encouraged him to explore the opposite, confirming the motor through contrast. In *Noces*, Stravinsky provided the clues for contrast with his more or less rhythmless sung laments interpolated between dominant, urgent, chug-chug sections. Clark expresses these laments through his slow-moving multi-body sculptures.

There are times when Clark shows beat very plainly and clearly, especially in *mmm...*, for instance, in the quick limping step motif that permeates the early, regular sections of Stravinsky's score. But the dizzy riffs that used to break out of his pumping earlier dances to rock music do not work with the more complex, dense rhythms of classical music, and he has found other tactics. One thing is for sure: drawing from the American Cunningham and postmodern dance traditions, he celebrates dance autonomy, the power of movement to act as a separate voice or layer, interdependent with the music, touching it lightly, as it were, with occasional shared exclamations. He is vigorously anti 'Mickey Mousing' or 'Keystone Kops'. One tactic is to make blocks of movement material for their own sake and then to try them out to music, looking at how a change of music can make the dance speak in a new way. Nonetheless, Clark is led by his ear. Noting that Stravinsky's *Noces* rhythms read quite differently on paper from how they sound – even different metres suggested – Clark had no hesitation in choosing a closer relationship with the aural experience.³⁴

When Clark's tactic is smooth adagio, we comprehend the broad span of a musical passage. But whether we hear the detail of music less keenly or more so when there are so few points of contact with the dance is moot: probably both according to context. What is certain, however, is that we hear music differently when we see it choreographed differently, and our musical perceptions are refreshed. Consider the powerful effect of highlighting a key structural moment in the score. Without warning, adding to the sound blast, the crouching 'purple' soloist in *mmm...* throws a leg and arm as far away from her as she can, like taking an enormous, straining stride at floor level. Or the prone Leto suddenly arrives in a sitting position, articulating a hiatus in Stravinsky's *Apollo* prologue.

It is revealing to compare two of the Muse Variations from *O* with their counterparts in Balanchine's *Apollo*, the dances for Calliope and Terpsichore. Clark is much less literal in terms of following musical structure than Balanchine, who favours short movement units that often repeat with their music: our perceptions are probably ready for more challenge these days. Neither does Clark staple an obvious ABA form to each of Stravinsky's

dances: his continuity reaches ahead for longer time-spans. Now that a strong or regular dance pulse is rare, the short–long repeating patterns in the music seem less prominent. So do the pizzicato upper strings accompanying the cello melody in the centre of Calliope’s variation. Whereas Balanchine’s dancer steps consistently on each pizzicato pluck, Clark’s tips at them on and off with arm or step detail and our ears are drawn to the cello in between times. The same variation also alludes to Leto’s slow floorwork, but with the anguish removed, and Clark allows this sequence to roll on freely over the musical seams. As for accents and punctuating points, there are four startling thuds (deep D-minor pizzicato chords) where Balanchine’s Calliope contracts her torso and clutches her heart four times, a violent emotional reaction and an eccentric touch, classicism suddenly abandoned. Clark uses just two of these, one for a plunge to the floor, the other for an airy ballet *changement* (a jump, with changing foot in front) – the other two you barely hear, covered over by dance phrases. Terpsichore’s variation is famously punctuated by ‘four huge sustained attitudes’,³⁵ when she crosses one leg over the other, one arm up, the other pressing down, thrilling to her personal power. Coyne’s halts to the same music are all different. Two of them are precarious balances on one leg, in *attitude* and in *à la seconde* (the other leg bent behind or extended to the side); another is a reflection of Balanchine’s position; all of them are suddenly laid bare, held longer and with less activity between them than in **Apollo**. Some of us cannot help but read them through the famous precedent.

Perhaps Clark’s 1992 setting of the Sacrificial Dance, fundamentally unchanged ever since, represents his most sophisticated negotiations with musical time. It is harder to read than the **O** solos, but that is absolutely appropriate given that it is a metaphor for extreme struggle. Choosing Joanne Barrett for it in 1992 was a brilliant decision, and she remains unmatched in the part. She is a gymnast dancer, with the kind of arm and fist power that can initiate whole-body action and that dance training does not provide. Yet the gymnast in her is disguised in this solo, through her total immersion in what she has to say. She is clad only in knickers (and the Hitler moustache) so that her muscle power is fully exposed and operates in a constant state of resistance, working against the urge to move on. But that urge is all-powerful. The concept of more and still more encapsulates the solo, more turned in, more split asunder and more thrust upward to counteract the pull of gravity. Even as she falls with increasing frequency in the final stages, Barrett picks herself up to be strong again.

Compare Pina Bausch’s formidable Sacrificial Dance in her 1975 **Rite**, which is a crazy assemblage of movement recollections, much reduced, sketched, barely there, ending in collapse. In Clark’s account, the body never loses high tension, and movement memories are displayed in the spirit of triumph, of will to overcome their bitter resonances. Leto’s image of giving birth, the jagged scream, becomes an enlarged scream of revolt, driven by quick tempo and crazed impatience. Compare the Hodson/Nijinsky Sacrificial Dance. Clark found it disappointing:

... surprisingly static for someone who is dancing herself to death... I wanted to make it a dance where someone really could die, with some really full-on dancing³⁶ ... [and yet] to fight it, to not die.³⁷

Hodson’s reconstruction matches the pattern repetitions in the music schematically.



Eryck Brahmnia, Stefano Rosato, Alexander Whitley and Simon Williams performing **O**, Lincoln Center, New York, June 2005. P: Stephanie Berger.

Clark does the opposite. The gulping signature music comes back again and again, and once as a false start. Clark teases us with a Nijinskian leitmotif, the two-dimensional *tendu* opening position (pointed foot extended forwards), and just once he repeats the whole first section, forging into new spatial directions. Otherwise there is no return. Rather he goes for the significant changes in energy and drama in the music: the repeat of the opening down a notch, then ratchet up in pitch, adding tension and renewing energy, a sharpened inflection rather than mere restatement. And he paces his progression by etching stillnesses and visual accents into the memory. At the start of an early Interlude with irregularly spaced, repeating, stuttering chords, Barrett huddles over, arms (as at the end of **O**) wrapped tightly around her, and waits... Later, to a brass outburst, she propels herself flat on to her front, legs flung wide, and waits... The Interlude ends with her suspended on her forearms, her legs rearing up behind her in an excruciating tail curve. Later she runs up the stage diagonal – a strong pathway – and throws herself flat on her back, body and arms at alarming full stretch. These are all moments of frozen terror or violence, the foil to, but no release from, her furious rush of thoughts. Both procedures together build energy, and together with the score, they create the big storm. At the end of the dance, there is the final salute (a gesture from Clark’s Stravinsky collection in a new guise), one right-angled arm slung over the head, vicious and triumphant. All three of Clark’s Stravinsky pieces have terrific endings, but I can think of no finer Sacrificial Dance.

When, in 2007, the full trilogy went public, Clark had clear reasons behind the order of its parts. He wanted to increase the sense of integration between music and dance across

the three works, with a growth in the physical, onstage presence of the music. He also wanted to demonstrate a move from convention as the evening progressed – from **Apollo's** classicism and setting with the orchestra in the pit to the radical sound and staging of **Noces**.³⁸ He then suggested how the trilogy could be read:

... the marriage in **I Do** might mean that after going through those earlier stages, one could unite with another person, or it could simply be a celebration of community. But I'm never literal.³⁹

My reading is different, of a cycle from birth, **O**, to a kind of living death, with an important challenge to the scheme, **Mmm...**, in the centre. I suggest the idea of living death because the form of resignation at the end of **I Do** is wholly uneasy, with all serenity left far behind. The extreme immobility and confinement of the Bride is like an annihilation, magnified by the accompanying dancing group strewn defeated and exhausted at her feet. It is a hugely bleak outcome.

But a sense of loss, of severance, also hangs over the entire trilogy. Clark gets rid of so much of his past: the fun; the angry choreographic preludes stemming from a long creative history; the intimate clutch of friends whom we felt we knew given way to a larger, more anonymous company; his own dancing history – we have seen him progress from Nijinsky and Apollo to the Sage once played by his mother, and now, in brief stage appearances, he is older, wiser, distanced through age.

After the shock of severance, we begin to look at all three pieces anew. Now they seem to reference other histories more strongly, the bigger histories of dance, and the history of the composer. We see them as a single entity with internal dialogues leaping between them, about the power of women performers embodying the meta-story (most spectacularly Coyne and Hetherington), about the movement vocabulary that twists and turns in its meanings as it binds fast the three pieces. The entity becomes more object-like and modernist, I feel its solidity, its thereness, the more I write and think about it. And Stravinsky, icon of modernist purity, has the last laugh, looming godlike over it all – even appearing in person on an old film conducting **Firebird** (screened just before **I Do**).

Yet, will we ever see the trilogy in its pure form again, with or without live music? Since the series of performances at the Barbican, it has never again been shown like this. At Lincoln Center, for instance, it was split into two programmes, the first of which began with a rock prelude. The Barbican was a moment, a frozen statement about life, beautiful, full-on physical, and also removed, life with the disruptions of the life force finally unable to penetrate it. But it could be one of the key staging posts in Clark's career.

Author's note: I am grateful to the Michael Clark Company for providing recordings of the Stravinsky works: **Mmm...** (Glasgow, Tramway, c. 1992); another close-up recording of Joanne Barrett in the Sacrificial Dance from **Mmm...** (c. 1992); excerpts from **O** (c. 1994); **O** and **OO** (Barbican, London, 2005, and Lincoln Center, New York, 2008); **Mmm...** (Barbican, 2006); the full trilogy (Barbican, 2007).

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