

U2 and Igor Stravinsky: Textures, Timbres, and the Devil
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Introduction

At first glance, Igor Stravinsky and U2 have little in common. A Russian composer known for ballets and symphonies and four Irish rock stars inhabit different musical genres and approaches. This paper argues that although Stravinsky and U2 are from separate musical worlds, each occupies a similar place of importance within that world, and has a parallel record of artistic achievement and influence. In addition, similarities in their musical thinking and their spiritual response to fame and success will be discussed. The parallels in their musical and spiritual development are fascinating, and as this paper will show, give the listener a new perspective on hearing the music of both U2 and Stravinsky.

I. The Music: Textures, Timbres, and the Minimalist Connection

Texture and Timbre in the Early Works

Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971) initially made his mark on the musical world with a series of ballets in the early 20th century. These works, written for Serge Diaghilev's Ballets Russe, caused a stir in the Parisian musical scene, and Igor Stravinsky became an overnight musical phenomenon.¹

The first of these ballets, *The Firebird* (1910), showed Stravinsky's complete assimilation of the styles and techniques of contemporary composers such as Claude Debussy, and predecessors such as Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov. The work was completely modern, if not radical, and revealed that the young Stravinsky was part of an artistic movement that was breaking with the Germanic traditions of the 19th century. One of the prominent features of this new French Impressionistic and Russian Nationalistic music was the prominence of instrumental color, or timbre, in the identity of the music. This music could not be explained completely through harmonic, melodic, and tonal theories—orchestration and color were rising to prominence.

Petroushka (1911) continued the path begun in *The Firebird* with astonishing vigor. Music historian Alex Ross writes that it is “a score of exhilarating immediacy: phrases jump in from nowhere, snap in the air, stop on a dime, taper off with a languid

¹ Ross, Alex. “The Rest is Noise,” p. 89.

shrug.”² The way that musical events unexpectedly cut from one to another can be dizzying to the listener, but it is the way that Stravinsky builds individual events that concerns this discussion of new textural directions. Stravinsky’s groundbreaking approach is to add one ostinato on top of another, in a repetitive scheme that, unlike 19th century music, is clearly non-developmental.³ Prior to Stravinsky most classical music articulated progress through harmonies that seemed to pull to each other, through various devices of voice-leading, and harmonic resolution. In *Petroushka*, Stravinsky achieved a “static harmonic field”⁴ that broke with tradition without being excessively dissonant.

The opening of *Petroushka* consists of a swirling ostinato, played by horns and clarinets, that accompanies a pseudo-fanfare in the flute. The key signature, as well as the dominant-tonic motion of the flute seem to suggest a d minor tonality, but this music, and indeed the bulk of *Petroushka* is not functionally tonal music.⁵ The swirling wind texture is made up of four pitches--D,E,G, and A—that cannot be described with any traditional chord name. Much has been written about this [0,2,5,7] pitch class set and the various levels of ambiguity and familiarity that it communicates to the listener.⁶ Our discussion, however, is not concerned with harmonic identity as much as with how Stravinsky treats his texture. Stravinsky is radical in the things that he doesn’t do, as much as in what he does. Harmonies don’t progress, they repeat and endure. He eschews the 19th century tradition of music in which chords change to support melody or activate modulations. Rather, his orchestra churns, swirls, and chimes in ways that impress the listener as a new avenue of expression.

Critics and young musicians took note of the hints of Stravinsky’s genius in these early ballets, particularly in the area of rhythm and in the use of ostinatos to build up sparkling and propulsive textures. The ballets hinted that texture and instrumental timbre could become primary ingredients for musical expression and that Stravinsky had the talent to lead the way.

Example 1 shows the opening of *Petroushka*. Note the continuous wind ostinato.

Example 1: *Petroushka*

Measures 1-4

Flute *f*

Horns/Clarinets (at concert pitch) *mp*

* Stravinsky notated these as tremolos in the original score.

² Ibid.

³ Watkins, Glenn. “Soundings: Music in the Twentieth-Century,” p. 209.

⁴ Morgan, Robert. P. “Twentieth-Century Music,” p. 94.

⁵ Lester, Joel. “Analytical Approaches to Twentieth-Century Music,” p. 131.

⁶ Ibid., see pgs. 93, 109-11, and 124-127.

U2's first album, *Boy* (1980) made an impression on the musical world that parallels the impact of Stravinsky's first ballets. Here was a band that clearly came out of the UK punk scene,⁷ that had mastered the basics of songwriting and recording in a post-punk style that would later be labeled "alternative" rock. At the same time, the seeds of something new were evident, for those who listened closely, even on this occasionally naive recording. In early 1980, the *New Musical Express* noted U2's potential, saying, "They are limitedly radical. They are not yet great; but they could be."⁸

The hints of new directions are of course a composite of many factors, from U2's thundering rhythm section to Bono's soaring vocals, but musically, it was the Edge's guitar timbres and textures that most showed the promise of the future. Edge's guitar sound, "among the most distinctive in rock music,"⁹ is evident even at this early stage of the band's career. It is primarily as a guitar colorist that the Edge points the way to new avenues of expression, and a way to break with both the progressive rock and punk rock tendencies of the 1970's. Rock journalist Joe Bosso describes Edge's guitar timbres as "Chimerical and chiming, echoey and evocative," as well as a "whole new language for the instrument, one of harmonic squalls and ringing ostinatos."¹⁰ Bosso also contends that as early as *Boy*, U2's creative guitar textures are already in "full bloom," cascading and layering to create unprecedented rock'n'roll textures.

The very opening of *Boy* is a case-in-point. The first track, *I Will Follow*, opens with the Edge playing a minimalistic ostinato, that fills musical space with its ringing, delayed timbres and constant motion, rather than through any type of riff or chord progression. In this way, Edge breaks with the pattern of rock guitarists, who typically strummed full chords, or power-chord riffs to establish a song's forward momentum. The pitches used to open *I Will Follow* are harmonically ambiguous—a root plus 5th, and then a root plus 4th—neither major nor minor, and, like Bono's lyrical *Boy/Man* ambiguity that fills the album, suggest musical uncertainty and openness. Like Stravinsky's approach in *Petroushka*, Edge's materials are compatible with the materials of traditional music, but the way they are used is innovative and would ultimately influence generations of musicians to come.

Example 2 shows the opening guitar figure of *I Will Follow*. Note that Edge's pitches [0,2,7] are a subset of Stravinsky's [0,2,5,7] set, shown in Example 1.

⁷ Bordowitz, Hank and Swenson, John. "The U2 reader," p. 1.

⁸ Morley, Paul. "U2 Can Make It in the Rock Business," *New Musical Express*, March 1980, p. 6.

⁹ Bosso, Joe. "Memory Man," *Guitar World*, September 2005, p. 60.

¹⁰ Ibid.

Example 2: *I Will Follow*, opening guitar ostinato

Guitar

(w/ echo effect)

E, A, B = Pitch Class set [0,2,7]

Whereas Igor Stravinsky’s timbral and textural palette in his early ballets is drawn from novel combinations and uses of orchestral instruments, U2 set itself apart through extensive electronic processing of the basic guitar timbre, particularly through the use of delay, or echo pedals. U2’s use of echo has been widely documented, but it is significant that the Edge recognizes its appeal as a textural tool, not a special effect. “I was drawn to the textural qualities of the echo,” he says, “it was very useful to be able to create multiple rhythms.”¹¹ This last statement begs comparison to the many places in the early Stravinsky ballets, where gigantic textures of polyrhythmic and polymetrical patterns converge. Although the means are markedly divergent, the results—stacks of exhilarating rhythms and timbres—are curiously similar.

Pre-compositional Sonic Images

Edge’s guitar techniques have been widely discussed and analyzed, and the band recalls that this basic sound—open strings used as drones, delay effects, and diatonic rather than blues oriented patterns—was the foundation for their song-writing process.¹² In other words their sound preceded and inspired their songs. This is particularly instructive when comparing them to Igor Stravinsky, whose compositional process was similarly inspired by timbral resources. Sometimes, like Edge, Stravinsky would immerse himself in the sound of a particular instrument or effect. Stravinsky biographer Stephen Walsh recounts how Stravinsky once acquired a cimbalom¹³ and its sound and melodic-rhythmic technique came to dominate his instrumental thinking for half a decade.¹⁴ Walsh goes on to claim that the composer often conceived of pieces first as “images of sonority,”¹⁵ and his compositional process as “searching for the right

¹¹ Ibid, p. 61.

¹² Stokes, Niall. “U2 Into the Heart: the Stories Behind Every Song,” p. 17.

¹³ A hammered dulcimer common in Eastern European peasant music, that produces a strident, percussive timbre.

¹⁴ Walsh, Stephen. “Stravinsky: A Creative Spring,” p. 248. The influence of the cimbalom can be heard in works such as *Renard*, *Les Noces*, and *Ragtime*.

¹⁵ Walsh. “The Music of Stravinsky, p. 75.

sound.”¹⁶ These sonic images led Stravinsky to use orchestral instruments in unprecedented ways, much like Edge’s fascination with guitar effects led to a new timbral vocabulary. This ability to take a raw sonority and turn it into musical substance is one mark of musical genius in the musical styles and contexts of the last 100 years.¹⁷

Another sonic image that inspired both Stravinsky and Edge is that of bells. In many works, but particularly in *Les Noces*, Stravinsky sought to recreate the effect of ringing bells.¹⁸ Bells have also served U2 as a pre-compositional timbral inspiration. From the bell-like harmonies in *I Will Follow* to Bono’s on-stage admonition, “Make those bells ring, Edge,”¹⁹ we find the band placing a value on resonance, and on textures made up of overlapping, sustained sounds.

These similarities in compositional approach reveal a principle that can be applied to many other great modern (and post-modern) musicians. The timbre or “sonic image,” often precedes the musical substance. This is a clear departure from 19th century music where the musical substance (chiefly melody and harmony) was conceived first, and the sound (orchestration, voicing, etc.) was a secondary stage. In rock music, common practice has been to compose the song with voice and guitar or piano (again, chiefly melody and harmony), and later in the recording studio find the sounds and textures that effectively “orchestrate” the song. U2 has of course used this approach, but not particularly early on. The band’s distinctive echo-based, bell-like sound world was formed before they approached songwriting in the traditional way.

Masterpieces: *The Rite of Spring* and *The Joshua Tree*

The premiere of *The Rite of Spring* in 1913 is infamous for the riot that ensued, and has become one of the most analyzed and discussed works of the 20th century.²⁰ The ballet certainly made Igor Stravinsky one of the most widely recognized and imitated composers of his age.²¹ The rhythmic complexity of the work, and the shocking subject matter were too much for many in the refined Parisian audience. Certainly the music has endured due to its brutal rhythmic force, but also due to its completely modern sense of form and musical discourse. If the early ballets hinted at Stravinsky’s potential and quest to lead his generation of composers in new avenues, *The Rite of Spring* immortalized his revolutionary musical ideas and sealed his influence on all subsequent 20th century composers. Even older, well-established composers, such as Claude Debussy credited

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 51.

¹⁷ Walsh, “Stravinsky: A Creative Spring,” p. 137.

¹⁸ Walsh, “The Music of Stravinsky,” p. 83.

¹⁹ Tollefsen, Chris. “The Ancient Quarrel Between Philosophy and Poetry,” in U2 and Philosophy, p. 198.

²⁰ Watkins, p. 214.

²¹ Morgan, p. 95.

the younger Stravinsky with “enlarging the possibilities of sound,”²² through this epochal work.

Theorist and historian Eric Salzman writes that the ballet, “Unfolds by the complete and explosive rhythmic release of confined and volatile musical energies.”²³ Salzman clarifies his ideas by stating that *The Rite* takes shape not through traditional line or counterpoint, but through the “juxtaposition of static levels of sound and statement.”²⁴

The emphasis on the static is extremely important in understanding the ways in which *The Rite of Spring* was radical and why it was widely influential. Certainly on the surface, the rhythmic violence is what gives the work its initial impact, but rhythmic force is not the lone legacy of the ballet. The static sections, where blocks of sound and layers of motionless ostinatos²⁵ churn in place without progression, set the work apart from all predecessors.

The Rite of Spring's most famous passage, where the so-called *Sacre* chord is first heard illustrates this in a powerful way. This “vast, granite, immobile”²⁶ and dissonant polychord is scored in a unique timbre combination—strings, with eight horns doubling only on accented notes. These instrumental colors had been used by other composers for the warmest, most lyrical, and most beautiful passages, but Stravinsky combines them to create the impression of a gigantic, prehistoric drum. In one section this chord is repeated 280 times without changing. Rather than follow voice-leading implications, or try to find contrasting harmonies, Stravinsky repeats the chord, creating unprecedented stasis. Salzman calls Stravinsky's approach an “additive” process and adds that Stravinsky uses “static ostinatos in repetitive, alternating cycles which gain vitality and even a sense of motion by being constantly re-interpreted in shifting accent, rhythm, and meter.”²⁷

With *The Joshua Tree* (1987), U2 also sealed their importance and influence on late-20th century popular music. The album was an international success, having three top-40 hits in the United States alone. The band's new popularity was enhanced by a growing reputation for exciting live concerts, and gigantic stadium shows.

The Joshua Tree's reputation has been centered in its strong songwriting and creative textures, rather than in any kind of overwhelming radicalism. Nevertheless there are moments of aggression and violence. *Bullet the Blue Sky*, the album's fourth track, is one of the most aggressive songs of U2's career, and features each band member contributing in an angry and powerful way. From Bono's growling vocals, to Larry's pounding drums, the song is one that tries to stretch rock's ability to express the vehement. Edge's guitar entrance features a dissonant four-note harmony that defies traditional chord names. Although not as dissonant as Stravinsky's *Sacre* chord, this harmony impacts the listener in a similar manner. The chord sets a tense, distraught tone that will be explored in the song. This type of harmony is not common in rock music and

²² Watkins, p. 218.

²³ Salzman, Eric. “Twentieth-Century Music: An Introduction,” p. 29.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 45.

²⁶ Hill, Peter. “Stravinsky: The Rite of Spring,” p. 44.


²⁷ Salzman, p. 45.

shows U2 exploring noise and dissonance as expressive devices, much like Stravinsky's approach in *The Rite of Spring*.

Ex. 3 shows the opening tetrachord of *Bullet the Blue Sky*. Note that it forms the same [0,2,5,7] pitch class set that was discussed in relation to Stravinsky's *Petroushka*.

Ex. 3 *Bullet the Blue Sky*

Guitar



(w/ distortion and feedback)

Ab, Bb, Db, Eb = Pitch Class set [0,2,5,7]

Static textures also play an important role in *The Joshua Tree*. A notable example of this is the opening of *Where the Streets Have No Name*. A theorist might describe the song's introduction as "tonality by assertion", rather than progression. The chiming, delayed guitar part establishes relationships between certain tones that remain constant throughout the song. This notion of tonality by assertion, of repeating a pattern to establish the tonal meaning of the work, is exactly the manner in which Stravinsky's approach to diatonicism is described by Salzman.²⁸ The song does feature chord changes, but they establish a very slow harmonic rhythm that is anchored by static pedal points in both the high and low registers of the texture. This gives the listener the impression of stasis, and makes harmonic progression a less important part of the musical substance.

Is There A Musical Connection?

The noted similarities in various parameters between U2 and Igor Stravinsky invite the question of whether there is any Stravinskian influence on the music of U2 and other rock musicians. Certainly, there is no direct provable connection. None of the members of U2 are trained classical musicians, and there is no evidence that they are aware of Stravinsky's early 20th century achievements. That being said, it has been pointed out that Stravinsky's music, among many other musical and cultural factors, is

²⁸ Ibid., p. 50.

indeed an influence on the repetitive structures common in all popular music of the last 40 years.

Susan McClary, writing on the prevalence of static repetition in all corners of pop music states that, “My convoluted genealogy would have to include Stravinsky’s primitivism.”²⁹ The point is not that rock musicians such as U2 are directly influenced by Stravinsky’s ostinatos, but rather that Stravinsky encouraged a musical culture in which static patterns could be explored. This openness to new ways of building up musical texture influenced all subsequent musicians, and has become a common phenomenon in rock music.

Minimalism, a highly repetitive development in classical music that came to the fore in the 1960’s and 1970’s, forms an interesting intermediate stage between certain ostinato-driven repetitive passages in Stravinsky and the chiming repetitions of bands like U2. Historian Glenn Watkins writes that the “sense of fluctuating stasis,” in all minimal music can be traced to many places, including static sections in Stravinsky works.³⁰ The echoes of minimalism, in turn, can be heard in the music of many rock musicians, including the progressive experiments of Pink Floyd and The Talking Heads, among others.³¹ In addition, important popular musicians, such as David Bowie and U2 producer Brian Eno often attended performances³² or worked with³³ the leading minimalist composers of the 1970’s. David Byrne, of Talking Heads fame, has collaborated in both directions, producing rock music with Brian Eno, and working with minimalist Phillip Glass in musical theater.³⁴ Eno, Bowie, and Byrne have taken a number of elements from minimalism, including Stravinskian ostinatos and an interest in manipulating musical texture through electronics.³⁵ Some have even argued that classical minimalism is a foundational element in all pop music of the 1980’s and 1990’s, particularly in any styles labeled as “techno”---styles which U2 explored with varying degrees of success in the 1990’s.³⁶

Brian Eno, whose importance in the U2 story cannot be underestimated, once described minimalism as a “drift away from narrative and towards landscape, from performed event to sonic space.”³⁷ Eno, in turn, encouraged U2 to explore minimalistic approaches to song structure. “Working with Eno,” the Edge recalls, “the idea was keep this two-chord mantra going, keep it going, keep it going, as long as we could stand it.”³⁸

²⁹ McClary, Susan. “Rap, Minimalism, and Structures of Time in Late Twentieth-Century Culture,” in *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, p. 295.

³⁰ Watkins, p. 576.

³¹ Simms, Bryan R., “Music of the Twentieth Century,” p. 421.

³² Ross, p. 475.

³³ Adams, John. “Hallelujah Junction,” p. 75. Post-minimalist composer John Adams reveals that his first commercial recording, made in the 1970’s, was produced by Brian Eno.

³⁴ Morgan, p. 418.

³⁵ Simms, p. 420.

³⁶ Sherburne, Phillip. “Digital Discipline: Minimalism in House and Techno,” in *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, p. 312,

³⁷ Ross, p. 475.

³⁸ Bosso, p. 66.

Edge's remarks refer to the song *Bad*, but could easily fit the repetitive approach to many U2 songs. Minimalism's infiltration of popular music had its most chart-topping success with the music of bands like U2.³⁹

II. Stylistic Borrowings and Multi-media Art Forms

Every Poet is A Thief

The Rite of Spring, in spite of its radical approach to rhythm, and its embrace of static ostinati, was not the end of the line for Igor Stravinsky's artistic development. The next few decades were filled with musical developments of many sorts, including an important neo-classical phase. When other classical composers were trying to remove every vestige of the past, pushing through atonality toward the avant-garde, the experimental, and the ultra-modern, Stravinsky's neo-classical compositions posed something of an artistic risk. This period produced works that were peppered with the influences of the past. The gestures of Hadyn and Mozart, the counterpoint of Bach, and the formal and motivic development of Beethoven, emerged with a completely Stravinskian, mid-20th century twist.

Stravinsky's neo-classical works should not be thought of as copies, or in modern pop terminology as "covers" or "remixes." They are original, fresh works of art, cast in the outward gestures of pre-existing styles. Stravinsky's ability to do this while keeping his own voice was not limited to the sounds of the classical past. His output also includes flirtations with jazz, rag-time, tango, and many other repertoires. At the end of his life, Stravinsky even adopted the serial techniques of his primary rival, Arnold Schoenberg, again with his own distinctive results. Composers of the 19th century had come to bear a burden of originality, where each new work was expected to forge ahead stylistically and the influence of other styles and composers wasn't supposed to be obvious. Stravinsky, of course, went in just the opposite direction. His genius was that every stylistic option, and every historical precedent was allowed to influence, inspire, and emerge in a new way.

U2 also went through a period of rediscovery of the past. This period, although brief, saw the band exploring the blues, Elvis, Dylan, and the Beatles, among others. The product of this exploration can be heard in the uneven, but passionate album and film *Rattle and Hum*. Much like Stravinsky's classical models, U2 seems to be both paying tribute to, and seeking inspiration from the greats of classic rock. One of the great ironies of this approach is U2's failure to play other's songs and styles with authenticity. In spite of the high level of expressive musicianship in the band, and the sincere performances, U2 cannot escape sounding like U2—and this is further evidence of their unique creative voice.

³⁹ Ross, p. 542.

U2's exploration of pre-existing styles did not end with *Rattle and Hum*. The band's trilogy of albums in the 1990's (*Achtung Baby*, *Zooropa*, and *Pop*) saw them incorporating a host of sounds and techniques from a number of contemporary sources—including industrial guitar sounds, dance-club beats, DJ-remixes, and many other “techno” influences. Many long-time fans felt U2 were losing what made them great, while many techno purists saw U2 as posers, who had run out of original ideas. Hindsight, however, shows these explorations to be sincere, highly original, and full of musical substance. As one example, in a song such as *Discotheque*, the surface strongly connotes dance-club and techno music which is distinctly unlike U2's sound of the 1980's. On the flip side, Edge's signature guitar playing, the formal arch of the song, and the probing lyrics reveal a work that could only have been done by U2. In another well-documented example, *The Wanderer* shows U2 borrowing, perhaps even distorting the clichés of country music. A stereotypical country bass-line is reworked with a distinctly non-country synth patch, while the prophetic voice of Johnny Cash sings Bono's soul-searching lyrics.

The stylistic connotations and references that appear in the work of both Igor Stravinsky and U2 show musical thinking that is characterized by an insatiable curiosity and a rare lack of prejudice about the many stylistic options for the art of music.

Multi-media: the 20th century *Gesamtkunstwerk*

Although both U2 and Stravinsky are primarily known as musicians, each has exceptional theatrical abilities. Stravinsky's innovations were often collaborations with other artists (choreographers, costume and set designers). Similarly, U2's approach to the multi-art rock experience is visual and collaborative. Photography, film, and stagecraft enhance the power of their music.

Music has, of course, had a long and productive relationship with other art forms—ballet, poetry, and drama to name a few. Nevertheless, since the 19th century, music and other art forms have become increasingly enjoined. In much modern music, it is almost assumed that a visual spectacle will accompany the music. This assumption comes from both sides—the composers realize this before the music is written, and the audience expects a show, whether that show be dance, lights, video clips, or the on-stage antics of a rock band.

The compositional process of *The Firebird*, *Petroushka*, and *The Rite of Spring* must be understood as originating from a multimedia conception. As music theorist Robert Morgan contends, this music “was conceived as an integral part of a complete artistic conception that also encompassed drama, dance, staging, and set design.”⁴⁰ He goes on to state that Stravinsky worked closely with experts in all other artistic fields on these ballet productions. Morgan argues that this was not just routine coordination between the composer and other parties in a ballet production, but inspired Stravinsky to

⁴⁰ Morgan, p. 91.

a “new conception of musical structure.”⁴¹ In other words, Stravinsky’s work was so integrated with that of other artists, that the results were unprecedented. Stravinsky’s practice can be seen as related to Richard Wagner’s conception of the “Gesamtkunstwerk,” or complete art work,⁴² but Stravinsky achieved a more rounded artistic balance and collaborative atmosphere than his 19th century predecessors.

Stravinsky’s partnerships with visual artists, choreographers, and literary figures such as Picasso, Nijinsky, and Cocteau are impressive. The artistic equilibrium he achieved is also noteworthy—he valued the input of other artistic minds as vital to the overall impact of his music, and in many cases as a source of inspiration for his musical inventions.⁴³

U2 is of course well known for the integrative spectacle of their concerts. Video images, elaborate staging, a variety of costumes and characters, and many other theatrical devices are part of their concert identity. Their tours are highly anticipated entertainment events, each casting a unique theatrical shadow on the live music industry. Their music can stand alone, of course, much like recorded performances of Stravinsky’s scores, but there is an assumption that the songs will always be staged. When the band writes songs, and releases recordings, they know they will eventually present these songs on stage, in a form of musical theater. Like Stravinsky, they work with a host of stage-designers, videographers, and other experts to create their elaborate shows. There is even a book dedicated to this collaborative aspect, appropriately entitled, “U2 Show.”⁴⁴

Certainly U2’s theatrical extravagance is a more recent phenomenon, particularly because early in their career they didn’t have the resources for large-scale spectacle. But from the beginning, Bono noted the theatrical aspect of his art. “Rock’n’roll is always married into theater, poetry, lots of mediums,” he said in 1982.⁴⁵ U2 recognized that they weren’t simply music makers, they knew that their art was also visual, theatrical, and literary.

This theatrical and visual commonality between the careers of Stravinsky and U2 can give us a perspective on the musical values of the 20th century. As technology and taste have made multi-media approaches more common and even expected of creative artists, music has ceased to be a self-contained art form. The absolute music of the classical era has given way to the multisensory rock concert experience. Even the act of buying a record, CD, or digital download is a visual and literary experience as fans read lyric sheets and study album art. In this multi-media context, it is important to note, that the music of truly exceptional talents can stand alone without the trappings of theatrical enhancements. These artists embrace collaboration and incorporate other art forms, but also compose music that is masterful on its own.

⁴¹ Ibid., 92.

⁴² Walsh, “Stravinsky: A Creative Spring,” p. 128.

⁴³ Ibid., p. 142

⁴⁴ Scrimgeour, Diana. “U2 Show,” Riverhead Books, 2004. The book showcases all aspects of U2’s touring spectacle, showing them to be at the forefront of a new kind of technological, multi-art theater that resonates with and critiques popular culture.

⁴⁵ Cook, Richard. “A Dreamboat Named Desire,” in NME, February 1982.

III. Spiritual Perspectives: Temptation and Prayer

All of This Can Be Yours

The temptation of Christ, as told in the Gospels, climaxes as Satan offers him everything that can corrupt a man. “All of this,” whether it be power, riches, fame, or success represents an immediate, physical, and unquestionably enjoyable temptation. But the ramifications for Jesus, and for all of humanity, are devastating in the spiritual domain. Christians believe that although Jesus represents a spiritual “every-man,” tempted in every possible way, those that follow must still live in a world in which the tensions between the flesh and the spirit play-out continually. In a sense, all Faustian legends relate back to this temptation of Christ. The way that U2 and Stravinsky both explore the temptations and tensions between celebrity and faith serve as a further commonality in their work.

Stravinsky’s spiritual journey is instructive. As a young composer, he was catapulted to fame and influence through the success of his early ballets. He grew accustomed to seeing his name in print, to hearing the applause of adoring audiences, and being feted by Parisian socialites. Stravinsky’s reflections on the temptations of success are expressed in two key works--*The Soldier’s Tale* (1918) and *The Rake’s Progress* (1951).

The Soldier’s Tale, an ingenious composition for chamber ensemble and narrator (with dance, acting, and staging often added) tells the story of a young soldier, who sells his eternal soul to the devil, in return for riches and success in the business world. Stravinsky’s music references many styles and trends of his era, notably jazz, and shows his ability to recast forms of the past (for example the Lutheran chorale) in new, seemingly out-of-focus ways that heighten the effect of the work’s moral message. One wonders if Stravinsky’s own fame and success prompted his cautionary tale.

Over three decades later, Stravinsky returned to a similar theme in the opera *The Rake’s Progress*. The entire opera is an exercise in neo-classicism, where the gestures and approaches of the past are heard with a distinctly modern twist. The story concerns a young man who deserts true love, in order to pursue riches and city life. In the end his closest adviser turns out to be the devil and he reduced to nothing, financially and spiritually devastated.

Stravinsky never renounced the life of a famous artist—he seemed to enjoy the spoils of success, while always mindful of spiritual realities. This brings to mind the tone and emphases of U2’s work in the 1990’s. From Bono’s lyrics to the various on-stage personae he used, the band was at once criticizing and enjoying the temptations of the rock star life. Bono seemed to be saying that since the spirit and the flesh are in constant battle, let’s just enjoy the fight.

Numerous U2 songs tackle these issues, but a glance at the lyrics to *Vertigo* reveal a direct reference to the temptation of Christ. The devil’s words echo in the song, “All of

this can be yours,” in the context of a world of moral choices that can be dizzying, that produces a sense of spiritual vertigo. The protagonist can no longer stand the music, or the nightclub, although he knows that he can own it...but at what price?

Bono’s most notorious foray into these issues is his on-stage character MacPhisto. A reference to Mephistopheles of Faust fame, Bono’s devil parody in MacPhisto has been described as “The alter-ego for Bono and every other bloated rock star, every poor lost showbiz, fame-addicted entertainer.”⁴⁶ It also shows an affinity for C.S. Lewis’s *The Screwtape Letters*. Lewis’s approach is to fight the devil by getting inside his head, and see the world through the eyes of hell. Much like the devil in Stravinsky’s *Soldier’s Tale*, Bono’s MacPhisto is entertaining, powerful stage-craft and a bone-chilling experience for those who believe in the reality of spiritual evil.

I Waited Patiently for the Lord

The above description of so many devil-themed works could suggest an unhealthy infatuation with evil, but a careful study of both Stravinsky’s and U2’s catalogues reveals a clear spiritual balance. Many works are prayers, asking God for help, and others are songs of praise.

In works such as the *Symphony of Psalms*, *Requiem Canticles*, and *Threni*, Stravinsky seems to step back from self-gratifying celebrity, and focus on worship. In the *Symphony of Psalms* (1930), he sets a number of psalm texts as serious prayers. It is noteworthy that the second movement uses the same text (Psalm 40 in Protestant Bibles and 39 in Eastern Orthodox numbering) as the well-known U2 song “40.” Ex. 4 quotes the portion of Psalm 40 that is set by both U2 and Stravinsky,

Ex. 4 Psalm 40:1-3

“I waited patiently for the Lord, he inclined and heard my cry.
He lifted me up out of the pit, out of the miry clay.
He set my feet upon a rock, and made my footsteps firm.
He put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise to our God.
Many will see and fear and put their trust in the Lord.”

In addition to “40,” many other U2 songs feature prayerful, psalm-like lyrics, notably the victorious *Yahweh*, and others such as *Wake Up Dead Man*, and *Love Rescue Me*, that are prayers that question and complain in a manner that is often found in the psalms. We sense with both U2 and Stravinsky that these are genuine, honest prayers. There is no trite Bible-bashing, and no ritualistic formulas.

⁴⁶ Martin, Gavin. “Dandy’s Inferno,” *New Musical Express*, May 1993.

IV. Conclusion

The 21st century presents the listener with a dizzying number of musical options—traditional repertoires and new styles intermingle increasingly. And yet, even though a huge range of genres is part of our musical culture, many listeners persist with the assumption that these musical styles have little in common or even have irreconcilable differences. There have been of course, many attempts at various kinds of musical fusion, but this discussion has focused on artists who are clearly linked with a particular tradition, as opposed to those who consciously attempt to fuse disparate styles. In other words, Stravinsky never worked outside the parameters of classical music, and U2 have never been anything but a rock band, but nevertheless this paper has explored a resemblance in their respective artistic achievements, their approaches to dealing with fame, and their spiritual journeys.

This paper has also explored a number of fortuitous similarities in their compositional processes and musical values, particularly a manner of thinking about music that values timbral exploration and textural sophistication as much the traditional emphasis on melody and harmony. The reader is encouraged to explore this and other music with a renewed interest in listening to and understanding the craft of timbre and texture that both Stravinsky and U2 display.

Masterful creative artists, of any genre or era, take the art of music seriously and personally. Each composition is crafted to the best of their ability and reflects their creative impulses. Each work is also a human document that expresses who they as a person, including the spiritual domain. For both Igor Stravinsky and the four members of U2, music was, and continues to be a fundamental means of personal expression and an inevitable vocation. All of our discussions of shared pitch-class sets and pre-compositional sonic images should not obscure the fact the greatest artists create out of a deep love for music and a desire to contribute to the musical profession. Both U2 and Stravinsky have left us with a large body of work that is broadly influential, deeply human in meaning, and at times, exquisitely beautiful. The spiritual substance of their output is also part of their lasting legacy. Works that artfully speak to spiritual concerns such as joy, sadness, good, evil, longing, and praise will long outlive the musicians themselves.