Igor Stravinsky owed much of his early fame to ballet scores he created for Serge Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes: Firebird (premiered in 1910), Petrushka (1911), and The Rite of Spring (1913). Numerous other Diaghilev collaborations followed, of which Pulcinella (1920) has proved the most endearing. In his book Expositions and Developments (co-authored with Robert Craft), Stravinsky recalled what Diaghilev proposed: “I want you to look at some delightful 18th-century music with the idea of orchestrating it for a ballet.”

The impresario had recently scored a success with a ballet, choreographed by Léonide Massine, titled The Good-Humored Ladies, its plot derived from comedies by the 18th-century playwright Carlo Goldoni, its music “updated” and orchestrated from harpsichord sonatas by Domenico Scarlatti. Hoping to duplicate that triumph, Diaghilev (again collaborating with Massine) directed Stravinsky to the Neapolitan composer Giovanni Battista Pergolesi (1710–36). Stravinsky initially found the idea off-putting, since the only Pergolesi pieces he knew were the Stabat Mater and the opera La serva padrona, neither of which he liked. Nonetheless, he dug into available editions of the composer’s works, as well as some manuscripts supplied by Diaghilev himself, and came up with movements that might serve the project.

These were fitted to a story involving the commedia dell’arte character Pulcinella, specifically a scenario found in an old Italian source called Four Identical Pulcinellas. A hero of that traditional genre, which was popular in Pergolesi’s Naples, Pulcinella is variously depicted as wily while playing dumb or actually incompetent without realizing it — and, in any case, he is a shameless self-promoter. Here, young girls in town pursue him romantically and their boyfriends plot to kill him. The boyfriends disguise themselves as Pulcinella to gain the girls’ affections, and the real Pulcinella escapes the boyfriends’ blows by changing places with a double — whom the boyfriends believe (mistakenly) they have managed to kill. The real Pulcinella materializes as a magician and appears to bring his pummeled double back to life. The official plot summary sorts out the confusion: “Just as the young men, thinking they are finally rid of him, come to find their fiancées, the real Pulcinella appears and arranges all their marriages.”

Stravinsky crafted settings (for small orchestra and three vocal soloists) that maintained the original melodies and bass lines practically unaltered from the original musical sources, but nevertheless transposed the music to 1920 by way of modernist

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In Short

**Born:** June 17, 1882, in Oranienbaum (now called Lomonosov) in the Northwest St. Petersburg region of Russia  
**Died:** April 6, 1971, in New York City  
**Work composed:** the complete Pulcinella ballet, summer 1919–April 24, 1920; the suite assembled, probably in 1922; revised slightly in 1949  
**World premiere:** the ballet, on May 15, 1920, at the Paris Opéra, danced by the Ballets Russes, with Ernest Ansermet, conductor; the suite, on December 22, 1922, at Boston’s Symphony Hall, by the Boston Symphony Orchestra, Pierre Monteux, conductor  
**New York Philharmonic premiere:** January 8, 1925, conducted by Igor Stravinsky in his first appearance in the United States  
**Most recent New York Philharmonic performance:** July 25, 2021, Jaap van Zweden, conductor, at the Bravo! Vail Music Festival in Colorado  
**Estimated duration:** ca. 24 minutes
Stravinsky’s US Debut

Go to the New York Philharmonic Leon Levy Digital Archives and pull up the program for the Philharmonic’s first performance of the Suite from "Pulcinella," in 1925, and your eyes will notice a special insertion: “Mr. Stravinsky’s First Appearance in America.”

In 1923 Arthur Judson, Manager of the New York Philharmonic, invited Stravinsky, who had made his conducting debut only a year before, to come to North America. They negotiated a ten-week tour for the winter of 1925 that would mark his US debut with the New York Philharmonic, followed by stops in Boston, Philadelphia, Cleveland, Cincinnati, and Chicago.

The contract guaranteed that Stravinsky would conduct at least ten concerts, receiving $1,200 for each. Clarence H. Mackay, Chairman of the Board of the New York Philharmonic, personally guaranteed the $12,000 total. On December 27, 1924, Stravinsky left Le Havre on the SS Paris. He arrived in New York on January 4 and was already rehearsing with the Philharmonic on the morning of the 5th, with the first concert on the 8th.

In addition to the Suite from "Pulcinella," the concert featured his "Firebird" Suite, "The Song of the Nightingale," "Fireworks," and "Scherzo fantastique." The audience applauded them whole-heartedly, but the critics, accustomed to veteran maestros like Monteux and Stokowski, criticized Stravinsky’s conducting. Lawrence Gilman of the Herald Tribune wrote that “in finesse and clarity, in tonal balance, in nuance, [the performance] left something to be desired.” The New York Times’s Olin Downes noted that few composers are the best interpreters of their own works, adding, “one of the least eloquent interpreters of Stravinsky is Stravinsky.”

On January 25, 1925, Stravinsky and New York Philharmonic musicians gave a chamber concert at Aeolian Hall featuring Stravinsky’s recent compositions in the neoclassical style. It included two US Premieres: the concert version of "Rag-time" (for 11 instruments) and the Octet for Winds.

— The Editors
harmonies, rhythms, and asymmetrical elongations or diminutions of phrase lengths. Fifteen years after the piece was introduced, he underscored the work’s uniqueness in a memo he wrote to the Société des Auteurs to support his claim of French copyright for the music:

The ballet is an original composition that completely transforms the elements borrowed from Pergolesi. *Pulcinella* is not a harmonization or orchestration — which terms constitute the usual meaning of “arrangement” — but a true composition in its own right, the borrowed material having been developed in an original way.

In fact, in the century since the work was composed musicologists have determined that many of the pieces Stravinsky chose had been misattributed to Pergolesi, although he and Diaghilev had no reason to suspect that when they developed the work. Of the movements that appear in the orchestral suite, the *Serenata* is from Pergolesi’s opera *Il flaminio*, the *Vivo* is from his Sinfonia for Cello and Basso, and the *Minuetto* is from his opera *Lo frate ‘nnam-morato*. The *Sinfonia* (Overture), *Scherzino*, the *first Allegro*, *Andantino*, and concluding *Allegro assai* originated in trio sonatas by Domenico Gallo (1730–68); the *Tarantella* is by Unico Wilhelm van Wassenaer (1692–1766); and the *Toccata* and *Gavotta* are from a harpsichord suite by Carlo Ignazio Monza (1680–1739).

The premiere production of the ballet *Pulcinella* included sets by Pablo Picasso, and Massine danced the title role himself. Stravinsky characterized it as “one of those productions where everything harmonizes, where all the elements — subject, music, dancing, and artistic setting — form a coherent and homogenous whole.” In 1922 (apparently), he created a concert suite of 11 movements — several are joined into attached spans — out of his ballet score, with instruments replacing the vocal lines that had figured in the original *Serenata* and *Minuetto* sections.

**Instrumentation:** two flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes, two bassoons, two horns, trumpet, trombone, and strings, including a featured solo string quintet comprising two violins, viola, cello, and bass.

— J.M.K.

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**Imitation as Homage**

Although Stravinsky viewed *Pulcinella* as a standalone project, he later realized that his prolonged exposure to the 18th-century music he recomposed for the ballet actually played an important part in ushering him into the neoclassical phase of his career. We read in *Expositions and Developments* (co-authored by Stravinsky and Robert Craft):

*Pulcinella* was my discovery of the past, the epiphany through which the whole of my late work became possible. It was a backward look, of course — the first of many love affairs in that direction — but it was a look in the mirror, too. No critic understood this at the time, and I was therefore attacked for being a pasticheur, chided for composing “simple” music, blamed for deserting “modernism,” accused of renouncing my “true Russian heritage.” People who had never heard of, or cared about, the originals cried “sacrilege”: “The classics are ours. Leave the classics alone.” To them all my answer was and is the same: You “respect,” but I love.

Stravinsky in the 1920s