Igor Stravinsky – The Rite of Spring

Born June 17, 1882, Oranienbaum, Russia.
Died April 6, 1971, New York City.

The Rite of Spring ( Scenes of Pagan Russian in Two Parts)

Stravinsky began The Rite of Spring in 1911 and completed the score the following year. The ballet was first performed on May 29, 1913, in Paris. The score calls for two piccolos, three flutes and alto flute, four oboes and two english horns, three clarinets, E-flat clarinet and two bass clarinets, four bassoons and two contrabassoons, eight horns, two Wagner tubas, four trumpets, high trumpet and bass trumpet, three trombones and two tubas, timpani, bass drum, tambourine, cymbals, antique cymbals, triangle, tam-tam, güiro (a scraped gourd), and strings. Performance time is approximately thirty-five minutes.

The Chicago Symphony Orchestra’s first subscription concert performances of Stravinsky’s The Rite of Spring were given at Orchestra Hall on November 7 and 8, 1924, with Frederick Stock conducting. Our most recent subscription concert performances were given on January 25, 26, and 27, 2007, with Esa-Pekka Salonen conducting. The Orchestra first performed this work at the Ravinia Festival on July 21, 1962, with Robert Craft conducting, and most recently on June 30, 2002, with Christoph Eschenbach conducting.

In 1911 Stravinsky began the score that would create the biggest scandal in the history of music. He was already famous, just as Diaghilev had predicted—during rehearsals for The Firebird he pointed to Stravinsky and said, “Mark him well; he is a man on the eve of celebrity.” But Le sacre du printemps, or The Rite of Spring as we have come to call it, put him at the very forefront of the avant-garde and spread his name to corners of the world where news of the latest styles in French ballet rarely traveled. (Although when the score was suggested to Walt Disney for his film Fantasia, he asked “The Sock?”, clearly never having heard of Le sacre.)

First, a word about the title. Stravinsky called his ballet Vesna svyashchennaya, Russian for “holy spring.” The painter Léon Bakst was the one who suggested Le sacre du printemps during rehearsals. The standard English version, The Rite of Spring, first used by Diaghilev for a London revival in 1921, was quickly sanctioned by a public tired of trying to get the French pronunciation right.
May 29, 1913, the night *The Rite of Spring* opened at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, is one of the dates historians cite as the start of the modern age, like 1907, the year Picasso painted *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*, or 1922, when *The Waste Land* and *Ulysses* were published. As Pierre Boulez has written,

> The *Rite of Spring* serves as a point of reference to all who seek to establish the birth certificate of what is still called “contemporary” music. A kind of manifesto work, somewhat in the same way and probably for the same reasons as Picasso’s *Demoiselles d’Avignon*, it has not ceased to engender, first, polemics, then, praise, and, finally, the necessary clarification.

The premiere is engraved in all the music history textbooks first of all because of the outrage it provoked—in time it has become the most notorious scandal in music and one of cultural history’s most cherished riots. The principal players, in addition to Stravinsky, were Sergei Diaghilev, the impresario; Pierre Monteux, the conductor; and Vaslav Nijinsky, the dancer who was making his debut as a choreographer.

The scene has often been retold: the audience grew restless and noisy almost as soon as the music began, and when the dancing started, it erupted. “I have never again been that angry,” Stravinsky later wrote. “The music was so familiar to me; I loved it, and I could not understand why people who had not heard it wanted to protest in advance.” There were catcalls and fistfights; one fight victim called out for a dentist. According to the artist Valentine Hugo, who was there (and made the four books of drawings that helped the Joffrey Ballet reconstruct the original production in 1987), the entire theater “seemed to be shaken by an earthquake.” Diaghilev flipped the house lights off and on to quiet the crowd. Nijinsky, recognizing imminent disaster, stood on a chair in the wings shouting numbers, directions, and general encouragement to his dancers. And all the while Pierre Monteux continued conducting. “He stood there apparently impervious and as nerveless as a crocodile,” Stravinsky remembered. “It is still almost incredible to me that he actually brought the orchestra through to the end.”

The spectacle of the premiere has always overshadowed the fact that at the dress rehearsal, before an invited audience which included Debussy and Ravel, and at the subsequent performances, *The Rite of Spring* didn’t cause any commotion. And most reports of opening night fail to point out that, despite the revolutionary nature of Stravinsky’s music, it was the dancing that provoked the audience. (After the opening moments, it would have been difficult even to hear the orchestra. “One literally could not, throughout the whole performance, hear the sound of music,” Gertrude Stein later commented, with characteristic poetic license because, after all, she wasn’t actually there.) As Stravinsky was fond of remembering, after the first concert performance almost a year later, the crowd cheered and he was carried aloft through the theater and into the Place de la Trinité.

It’s impossible today to imagine the shock of a musical score that, like Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony (written just over a century earlier), has had its freshness and daring dimmed by familiarity. When it was played in Chicago for the first time in 1924, its notoriety had certainly preceded it, and the orchestra did everything in its power to lead audiences safely through it, including the onstage use of cue cards, lettered like movie subtitles, to announce the subdivisions of the score. (“Dissonant, barbaric, complex, rhythmically new,” the *Herald & Examiner* critic reported, “it crowds impressions and sensations upon the listener which, because of their complete novelty, cannot be assimilated at first hearing.”)
The most audacious of the musical innovations are certainly rhythmic. In the Augers of Spring, the famous section near the very beginning, a single massive chord repeated again and again, like a fast pulse, is shot through with irregularly spaced, unpredictable accents. It was murder on Nijinsky's dancers, just as it is for listeners today who must prove their musicality by beating time. That section, at least, Stravinsky could notate in a conventional 2/4, with accents landing wherever they fell. But the final sacrificial dance was so new in its rhythmic conception that he couldn’t even find a way to put it on paper at first—even though he could play it at the piano. He eventually juggled bar lines and time signatures to correspond to what his hands wanted; the meter changes in nearly every measure (it begins 3/16, 2/16, 3/16, 3/16, 2/8, 2/16, 3/16).

There are many celebrated passages. Stravinsky layers different strict, ticking ostinato patterns—the orchestra sounds like a clock shop gone mad—to create a tension unknown in music. There is that famous pounding chord itself, the heartbeat of the Augers of Spring, a prophetic mixture of two unrelated tonalities, with an F-flat chord on the bottom and an E-flat seventh chord on top. It’s tempting to regard The Rite of Spring as an anthology of brilliant effects, from the opening solo for very high bassoon (quoted in all the textbooks on orchestration) to the giant whoosh with which the furious final dance collapses. But it’s the cumulative sweep of rhythmic energy that gives the score a life all its own. The Rite of Spring is as tight and shrewdly paced as a Hitchcock thriller; it still leaves audiences gasping almost a hundred years after it was written.

A few words about the genesis of the music. Stravinsky claimed his first “fleeting vision” of this piece came to him in the spring of 1910, as he was finishing The Firebird. "I saw in my imagination," he later recalled, "a solemn pagan rite: sage elders, seated in a circle, watched a young girl dance herself to death. They were sacrificing her to propitiate the god of spring." The scenario was planned in collaboration with the Russian painter and archeologist Nikolai Roerich, in the summer of 1910, before a note was written.

Stravinsky began to compose the music in Clarens, Switzerland, in the fall of 1911, at a small upright piano wedged into a room just eight feet square. It was in that room—with the piano, mercifully, muted for composing—that he hit upon the pounding chords of the Augers of Spring. Part 1 was finished early in January 1912, and he played through it for Pierre Monteux. “Before he got very far,” the conductor remembers, “I was convinced he was raving mad.” Early in June, Stravinsky persuaded Debussy to play through the four-hand arrangement of the score with him at a party. It was hardly typical party music, and when they were done, one guest recalls, “We were dumbfounded, overwhelmed by this hurricane which had come from the depths of the ages and which had taken life by the roots.” Stravinsky completed the entire score in sketch on November 17, "with an unbearable toothache." Rehearsals for the ballet lasted six months; Stravinsky uncharacteristically stayed away until the very end. Despite the dancers’ difficulties with the music’s uncountable rhythms, rehearsals went on without incident. Stravinsky walked into the theater on May 29 unprepared for what would soon follow.

For the Record
The Orchestra recorded Stravinsky’s The Rite of Spring in 1968 with Seiji Ozawa conducting for RCA, in 1974 with Sir Georg Solti conducting for London, and in 2000 with Daniel Barenboim conducting for Teldec.
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