

Stravinsky THE RITE OF SPRING "Le Sacre du Printemps"

On the evening of May 29, 1913, Pierre Monteux made his way into the orchestra pit at the Champs-Élysées Theatre in Paris, where he was about to conduct the world premiere of a new ballet production of the celebrated Diaghilev Ballets Russes. ... *The Rite of Spring*—Pictures of Pagan Russia, in Two Parts, choreography by Vaslav Nijinsky, music by Igor Stravinsky, who *Firebird* and *Petrouchka* had previously created a sensation as performed by Nijinsky, Karavina, Fokine, and the other superb dancers of the Ballets Russes.

Rumors of Nijinsky's unconventional choreography and Stravinsky's still more unusual music had already spread like wildfire through the intellectual-musical circles of Paris, so that the audience present was a truly distinguished one. What followed after Monteux signaled the bassoonist of the orchestra to begin his eerie opening solo was wholly unexpected. As the musical texture among the spectators. As the musical texture—the introduction expanded and the harmony became more dense and dissonant, then gave way to the relentless rhythms of *Dance of the Younger* the restless murmuring broke into catcalls and hisses from those who would have none of this new kind of music and dance. Partisans of Stravinsky and Diaghilev, on the other hand, sought to suppress the opposition, and actual fighting broke out. The noise grew in a crescendo matching that of the music, so that neither orchestra nor dancers could effectively coordinate their efforts. Monteux looked to Diaghilev for guidance and received a signal to keep on playing at all cost. The house lights went on, but the altercation in the audience only continued with greater fury. The brief lull during the pause between the first and second tableaux was short-lived, for as soon as the music resumed so did the fighting. Vaslav Nijinsky was in the wings backstage, white with fury, beating the music's complex rhythms into his fists and shouting to the dancers to keep rehearsed innumerable times for this long-awaited occasion. Only near the end of the ballet, when the tremendous *Sacrificial Dance* began, did the spectators in the audience subside. So elemental was the force of Stravinsky's music, and so magnificent was Marie Piltz as the Chosen One who must dance herself to death, that there was no choice but to experience, for what it was, this final, terrifying spectacle.

Much has happened in music since that momentous premiere under Pierre Monteux's baton, and Stravinsky's score, at least, has taken its place as an epoch-making milestone in the history of music and its stylistic development. Pierre Monteux, Stravinsky himself, Eugene Kniazev, Serge Kouznetsov, and the many conductors who have since conducted *The Rite of Spring* before concert audiences in Europe and America, and grudging acceptance has become popular acclaim. What was once resented as roaring, blaring dissonance coupled with incoherent rhythmic and formal patterns has become accepted today as one of the great musical creations of the age... liberating music from the straitjacket of bourgeois rhythmic and metric patterns in the same way that Wagner, Debussy, and Schönberg have shown the way toward an unlimited use of chromatic and modal harmony in contrast to the diatonic modes that dominated musical composition during the late 18th and early 19th centuries. It is safe to say that very few composers who have grown to maturity since 1913 have been able to stem completely the tide of the stylistic influence of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, either with respect to its treatment of rhythm and meter or his brilliant mosaic manner of orchestration with its emphasis on winds and strings and its combination of and its doing away with the "orchestral pedal" so dear to

Boston Symphony Orchestra Pierre Monteux Conductor

Wagnerian orchestration.

Regarding the actual genesis of his music for *The Rite of Spring*, Stravinsky tells us in his autobiography (*Stravinsky: An Autobiography*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1937) that "One day, when I was finishing the pages of *The Firebird* in St. Petersburg, I had a fleeting vision which came to me as a complete surprise, my mind at the moment being full of other things. I saw in imagination 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 composer at once described his experience to Nicholas Roerich, the painter and explorer, and also to Diaghilev, and all were agreed as to the possibilities of such a conception for a ballet. Meanwhile, the composition of *Petrouchka* and other shorter works intervened, and it was during the winter of 1912-13 that the greater part of *The Rite of Spring* was composed at Clarens, Switzerland.

"In composing the *Rite*," Stravinsky goes on, "I had imagined a spectacular pageant as a series of rhythmic mass movements of the greatest simplicity which would have an instantaneous effect on the audience, with no superfluous details or complications such as would suggest effort. The only solo was to be the sacrificial dance at the end of the piece. ... In reading what I have written about the *Rite*," says Stravinsky, "the reader will perhaps be astonished to notice how little I have said about the music. The omission is deliberate. It is impossible, after the lapse of twenty years, to recall what were the feelings which animated me in composing it."

Fortunately, Stravinsky was not loath to discuss the music of the *Rite* or his conception of it when the experience was still fresh in his memory. He pointed out, in 1923, in an interview published in *La Revue Musicale* that "the embryo is a dance that came to me when I had completed *The Firebird*. As this theme, with that which followed, was conceived in a strong, brutal manner, I took it as a point of departure for developments. For the *Rite* is a Russian, the Russian prehistoric epoch, since I am a Russian. But note well that this idea came from the music; the music did not come from the idea. My work is architectonic, not anecdotal, objective, not descriptive construction."

In May of 1913 the composer gave what amounts to a running analysis and description of *The Rite of Spring* in an article published in *Domus*. Much of it was reproduced in translation in the *Musical Courier* of March 29, 1930, shortly before the first American stage performance of the ballet with Martha Graham dancing to the new choreography of Leonid Massine and the Phila-

delphia Orchestra playing under the direction of Leopold Stokowski. The composer's own words follow:

"In the *Introduction* the curtain rises. I have given to the orchestra alone the idea of that great sense of fear which weighs upon all sensitive spirits before a controlled power, and this develops through the entire instrumental texture. It is a profound mystic sensation which comes to all things at the hour when nature seeks to renew its various forms of life; it is this vague, yet palpable disquiet, which is the cause of all puberty. Even in my orchestration, and in the play of the melody, I desire to evoke this quality. ...

"The musical material itself—riffs, expansions and is then diffused, each instrument in a field which grows on the bark of a venerable tree; it becomes part of an immense ensemble. And the entire orchestra, the entire ensemble, must take on the meaning of a rebirth of Spring. Side 1: "In the first tableau (*The Fertility of the Earth*) some adolescents are seen with an old, old woman, a woman whose age is not known, nor even from what century comes, but who understands the secrets of nature and who is teaching their meaning to her sons. She runs, bowed down toward the ground, as if neither woman nor animal. These adolescents are the sons of the Ancestors of Spring who evoke with the pulsating beats of their dance, the very rhythm of Spring's awakening."

"During this time the adolescent girls come down to the river. They form a circle which mixes with that of the boys. The groups merge; but in their rhythm one feels a strain toward the formation of new groups; and they desire to right and left. Now a new form has been realized, a synthesis of rhythms, and then from this a new rhythm is produced (*Dance of the Youths and Maidens; Dance of Adolescents; Spring Rounds*).

"The groups separate and begin to fight. Messengers go one to another and struggle... signifying, so to speak, that aspect of brute force which is also play (*Games of Rural Towns*). The arrival of a procession is heard. It is the Sage, the oldest man of the clan. A great fear surges through the crowd. Then the Sage, face down on the ground, becoming one with the soil, gives a benediction to the earth (*Entrance of the Celebrant; Kiss to the Earth*). Then all cover their heads, run in spirals, and leap as though endowed with renewed energy from nature... the *Dance to the Earth*."

Side 2: "The second tableau (*The Sacrifice*) begins with a quiet and obscure play among the adolescent girls. At the opening the musical prelude (*Introduction—The Pagan Night*) is based on a mysterious song which accompanies the dance of the young women. At the end of their circle the signs showing where the Chosen One will finally be enclosed never to come out again. She it who is being consecrated to the Spring and who will thus transmit to Spring the vitality which she has taken from it (*Mystic Circle of the Adolescents*).

"Around the Chosen One, who is immobile, the young girls dance a ritual of glorification (*Dance of the Younger*); then follows the purification of the soil and an Evocation of the Ancestors. The Ancestors group themselves around the Chosen One (*Ritual Performance of the Ancestors*) and she commences the *Sacrificial Dance*."

"As she is about to fall exhausted, the Ancestors glide toward her like rapacious monsters. So that she should not touch the soil as she falls, they seize her and raise her towards the sky."

"Once again is fulfilled in its primordial rhythm the cycle of forces which are re-born and which fall again into the lap of nature."

Notes by DAVID HALL.

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Form 75-9545

Printed in U.S.A.

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