

Good job—A.

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Music Historiography II

Section II

The Rite of Spring

In 1912, Igor Stravinsky began composing what would become one of the most earth-shattering scores of the 20th century. *Le Sacre du Printemps*, or *The Rite of Spring*, has gone down in history as one of the most dissonant, primitive pieces in the classical repertoire. Originally a ballet, most recognize *The Rite* as a piece of orchestral literature. Although Nijinsky's, the main choreographer for the ballet, contribution to *The Rite* has not withstood the test of time, *The Rite* itself has created a legacy. However, behind the rhythmic barbarism, melodic breakdown, and structural mayhem that many associate with the piece, lies complex rhythmic motives, melodic transformations, and structural cornerstones that forever changed the way polyphonic music was viewed.

When the piece was premiered, there was the public's response was unlike any other that the music community had ever seen, even to this day. There had never been such an outcry of rage, displeasure, and pure disgust for a piece of music. Stravinsky himself stated that- "Strange as it may seem, however, I was unprepared for the explosion myself. The reactions of the musicians who came to the orchestra rehearsals were without intimation of it and the stage spectacle did not appear likely to precipitate a riot" (Toorn P. C., 1983). The piece premiered on May 29th, 1913, at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris, France. The choreography was by

Nijinsky, a famous Russian choreographer who broke the boundaries of what was possible with dance. Rather than having the dancers use open chests, light feet, and elegance, Nijinsky instead favored the exact opposite. However, his dancing was soon forgotten, as the music overshadowed the entire ballet.

Stravinsky sensed that there was agitation in the audience from the very beginning of the performance. The dissonance, which was based around Major 7th vertical intervals, was unknown to listeners. It became so bad that Stravinsky left the floor furious. He saw the theatre director flicking the lights, trying to maintain order. He then stood behind Nijinsky and held his coattails, who was leaning out and shouting counts to the dancers, because they could not hear the orchestra.

However, there were some who enjoyed the premier of *The Rite of Spring*. Yevsey Belousov, a Russian cellist, wrote a review stating that “no such music had ever existed before” (Taruskin, 1996). Although it destroys all sense of harmony and counterpoint, it combines the “sonic chaos” with expressivity (Taruskin, 1996). He stated that the piece played with the darkness of humanity, the savage power of the youth, and primitive nature humanity is capable of. He believed that there were special qualities in the piece.

Andrew McGregor, a modern-day reviewer, reviewed the Kirov Orchestra, led by Valery Gergiev, who performed and recorded *The Rite*. McGregor loves the earthiness of the double-basses, the howling brass, and the deep, pungent winds. He is quoted for writing “this is a sacrifice you can feel happening in front of you”. (McGregor, 2002)

However, many also had negative reactions to the piece. Andrey Rimsky-Korsakov believed that Stravinsky’s prior successes, *The Firebird* and *Petrushka*, went to Stravinsky’s head and caused the composer’s artistic development to go downhill dramatically. He believed

that he was headed down dead-ends, and his compositional skills were inflated with his successes. In *The Rite of Spring*, Korsakov believed that Stravinsky only maintained rhythm, dynamics, and pitiful remnants of melodic design (Taruskin, 1996). Also, he believed that *The Rite* was nothing more than a cacophony of barbaric noises. He believed that it would never be a classic because “neither Beethoven nor Wagner strove to abolish all prior foundations of musical art. The new they created did not abolish the old, but only widened artistic perspectives and possibilities” (Taruskin, 1996). While both Korsakov and Belousov believed that Stravinsky tore all aspects of harmony and counterpoint, Belousov believed that he was doing it to emote an earthy, primitive feel, while Korsakov believed that he was simply trying to live up to his ego.

Another who had a negative view of the Rite of Spring was Leonid Sabaneyev. It has been regarded as the most stinging critique written about the piece. It was biased and full of envy from the start. Stravinsky was stealing the stage from Sabaneyev’s favorite composer, Scriabin, and Sabaneyev responded with poisoned pen. He believed that there was “no point to the ballet at all” (Taruskin, 1996). Also, that Stravinsky’s work would be “dried up” and done for once the demand for it was gone. Basically, Sabaneyev viewed *The Rite of Spring* as a fad- it would die off quickly and make no impact on the musical community.

According to William Austin in *Stravinsky-Retrospectives*, *The Rite* “veers off from *Petrushka*’s complexity and modernist loneliness; it romanticizes an exotic primitivism that Stravinsky did not adhere to. In his eyes, Stravinsky went against the grain and departed radically from contemporary forms to present a primitive form and feeling (Haimo & Johnson, 1987).

According to Toorn in *Stravinsky and The Rite of Spring*, *The Rite* never accompanied an actual plot. The whole piece was meant to depict a series of primitive dances, not to describe

them in story/narrative form. According to Toorn, Stravinsky wanted to display the ideas of staged movements/narration through the music, rather than have the music be an accompaniment to the main action. Stravinsky was also breaking the usual rules for ballet too. He said “the whole thing must be danced from beginning to end; I give not a single bar for pantomime” (Toorn P. C., 1987). Stravinsky did not give the main melodic line in *The Rite* to the strings, because they mirrored the human voice too well. Instead, he gave them to the winds, which were drier, airier, and more earthy.

In the Dover score, the forward by Boris Yarustovsky also provides an alternate, positive view of *The Rite*. He states that it exemplifies rough primitivism, ultra-originality, heightened emotions, odd rhythms, harsh contrasts, and stark colorings. He also believed that it failed as a ballet because it was 13 separate scenes than a story, and that no choreographer could handle such a task yet.

Although there have been mixed feelings and reactions to *The Rite of Spring*, it is clear that it has made an indelible mark on Western music. It exhibits the darkest, most primitive side of man, and does so where the listener is thrown back to pagan times, without the luxury of modern technology, without the scholarly attitude we now hold, or without the protection of the laws and rules of society that hold us together. Some were afraid of it, others mocked it. Some even called it a fad. Yet others knew its importance and saw that *The Rite of Spring* tore down conventional standards and replaced it with pure emotion, raw power, and an earthly sense of awe. Whether or not one believes that *The Rite of Spring* is a good piece of music, they cannot deny the importance and the significance that it has played in redefining what we call “music”.

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