

The Rite of Spring

IGOR STRAVINSKY

BORN 1882, Lomonosov, Russia

DIED 1971, New York, USA

FIRST PERFORMED 29 May 1913, Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, Paris, by the Ballets Russes, conducted by Pierre Monteux

DURATION 35 minutes

1 *The Adoration of the Earth*

2 *The Sacrifice*

Beethoven's Fifth, Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* and... Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*? For a piece of music once considered virtually unplayable, and a major challenge for even virtuoso orchestras, *The Rite of Spring* must now surely rank as one of classical music's best-known works.

That's probably as much to do with its reputation as anything else – for violence, dissonance and above all pounding, bludgeoning rhythm. All of which still have the power to shock, even more than a century after its creation. And, of course, for the notorious riot it caused in Paris at its premiere in 1913 – more on which later.

Seen in a vision

The Rite is the third original ballet score that Stravinsky wrote for the Ballets Russes and its canny impresario Sergei Diaghilev, following the lush exoticism of *The Firebird*, heavily indebted to his teacher Rimsky-Korsakov, and the already more modernist *Petrushka*. The two men's fruitful relationship continued, too, right through to *Les noces* of 1923 and *Apollo* of 1928.

But *The Rite* began as Stravinsky's own idea. He described a vision that came to him, as if from nowhere, of 'a solemn pagan rite: wise elders, seated in a circle, watching a young girl dance herself to death. They were



sacrificing her to propitiate the god of spring.' He discussed the idea with a friend, Russian artist Nicolas Roerich, who was enthusiastic about being involved, and the two men later presented it to Diaghilev, who set them to work immediately.

Prelude to a riot

Stravinsky already had a certain amount of celebrity prior to *The Rite's* premiere in 1913, but the famous riot at its first performance catapulted him to an international fame that would last the rest of his life. The premiere's venue – Paris' Théâtre des Champs-Élysées – had opened only a couple of months earlier in a well-to-do area of the French capital, with audiences used to high-class, conservative culture that steered well clear of anything too adventurous. The ballet's dress rehearsal – on 28 May 1913, in front of a cohort of critics as well as a large audience – passed without incident. But for *The Rite's* official premiere the following evening, the audience was well primed to be outraged.

A series of carefully choreographed press reports had appeared in newspapers in the days leading up to the premiere – designed to ensure the event sold out, as well as to stoke outrage – promising ‘stammerings of semi-savage humanity’ and ‘frenetic human clusters wrenched incessantly by the most astonishing polyrhythm ever to come from the mind of a musician’, all coalescing into ‘a new thrill that will surely raise passionate discussions, but which will leave all true artists with an unforgettable impression’.

Anyone in the know would also have been aware that the orchestral musicians were completely dumbfounded by Stravinsky's terrifyingly complex and seemingly nonsensical score, even after 17 (17!) rehearsals. Nor did it help that *The Rite* formed the second of a three-part evening, its bedfellows representing the epitome of elegance and taste: *Les sylphides* (using music by Chopin), then Weber's *Spectre de la rose* and Borodin's *Dances from Prince Igor*.

Chaos and mayhem

Things began calmly – until only about a minute into the music, when the shouting, whistling and general mayhem began to erupt. There were brawls; gentlemen challenged each other to duels. Diaghilev ineffectually attempted to restore order by turning the theatre's house lights off and on (although it's almost certain he was quietly delighted by the chaos). And throughout all this, conductor Pierre Monteux directed the orchestra through to the work's very end, with choreographer Vaslav Nijinsky in the wings screaming instructions to his dancers, who were unable to hear the music for the audience's din.

And so was history made. But despite the outrage – and in stark contrast to the appalled reaction that greeted Bartók's *Miraculous Mandarin*, which opened tonight's concert – *The Rite of Spring* was an immediate success, with several more

performances in Paris over the coming weeks, followed by an international tour.

What was it that so offended the Parisian audience at *The Rite's* premiere? Maybe the rather unpleasant story, as much as there is one, of a girl who dances herself to death to appease the god of spring. Maybe Nijinsky's deliberately awkward choreography, full of strange, jerky movements and uncomfortable poses (even Stravinsky memorably described the dancers as ‘knock-kneed and long-braided Lolitas jumping up and down’). Maybe even Roerich's neo-archaic designs, or maybe all these elements together.

Rhythm of *The Rite*

And almost certainly Stravinsky's score, with which he did nothing less than change the course of music history. In his loving embrace of unapologetic dissonance; in his brutalist musical structures butting huge, monumental sections one against another; in his remarkably vivid orchestration; and most of all in his never-before-heard rhythms – primal, battering chords struck out across the whole orchestra, or volatile, unpredictable syncopations such as in the closing ‘Sacrificial Dance’.

The rhythm of *The Rite* has an undeniably physical effect on the listener – it's hard not to be hit right in the stomach by the massive thuds of timpani and bass drum, or not to be caught up in Stravinsky's whirlwind of orchestral rhythms. Indeed, *The Rite* is often overwhelmingly complex in its superimposed layers of music, but it's often bewilderingly simple, too, as Stravinsky uses the full force of his enormous orchestra to hammer out blindingly unsophisticated ideas.

It's undeniable, and probably inevitable, that no composer writing since 1913 has been unaffected by *The Rite*. And in fact, it's even questionable whether Stravinsky himself survived *The Rite*: he never again attempted anything of its scale or daring, and just a few

years later he'd turned his back entirely on its violent excess in favour of an ironic, detached, elegant neo-classicism – of the kind heard in his *Symphony in C* and *Symphony in Three Movements* in last week's RSNO concerts.

The music and plot

The *Rite of Spring* falls into two large tableaux – 'The Adoration of the Earth' and 'The Sacrifice' – each of which has an introduction, a series of dances, and a concluding ritual. There is, Stravinsky accepted, no real narrative, and unlike the meticulous, second-by-second musical painting of events in Bartók's *The Miraculous Mandarin*, it's enough simply to wonder at the work's overwhelming power and inevitable unfolding towards death and rebirth. Stravinsky's own, brief description of *The Rite* from the autumn of 1913, when the piece was about to receive its first concert performances, tells you all you need to know about its storyline:

'The Rite of Spring is a musical choreographic work. It represents pagan Russia and is unified by a single idea: the mystery and great surge of creative power of spring. The piece has no plot, but the choreographic sequence is as follows:

First part: The Adoration of the Earth

The spring celebration. The pipers pipe and young men tell fortunes. The old woman enters. She knows the mystery of nature and how to predict the future. Young girls with painted faces come in from the river in single file. They dance the spring dances. Games start. The spring Korovod (a stately dance). The people divide into two opposed groups. The holy procession of the wise old men. The oldest and wisest interrupts the spring games, which come to a stop. The people pause trembling before the Great Action. The old men bless the earth. The Kiss of the Earth. The people dance passionately on the earth, sanctifying it and becoming one with it.

Second part: The Sacrifice

At night the virgins hold mysterious games, walking in circles. One of the virgins is consecrated as the victim and is twice pointed to by fate, being caught twice in the perpetual circle of walking-in-rounds. The virgins honour her, the Chosen One, with a marital dance. They invoke the ancestors and entrust the Chosen One to the old wise men. She sacrifices herself in the presence of the old men in the Great Sacred Dance, THE GREAT SACRIFICE.'