

Igor Stravinsky

“Le Sacre du printemps,” Pictures from pagan Russia

IGOR FEDOROVICH STRAVINSKY was born at Oranienbaum, Russia (now Lomonosov in the Northwest Petersburg Region of Russia) on June 18, 1882, and died in New York City on April 6, 1971. “Le Sacre du printemps” (“The Rite of Spring”) was formally commissioned by Sergei Diaghilev on August 8, 1911, and Stravinsky began composing almost immediately. He finished Part I by early January 1912 and completed the sketch score on November 17 “with an unbearable toothache.” The work was produced in Paris by Diaghilev’s Russian Ballet with Pierre Monteux conducting on May 29, 1913. Monteux would later lead the first Boston Symphony performances, on January 25 and 26, 1924, also leading the BSO in the first New York performance that January 31 and repeating it there with the BSO that March.

THE SCORE OF “LE SACRE DU PRINTEMPS” calls for two piccolos, two flutes, and alto flute in G, four oboes (one doubling second English horn), English horn, three clarinets (one doubling second bass clarinet), high clarinet in E-flat, bass clarinet, three bassoons (one doubling second contrabassoon), contrabassoon, eight horns (two doubling Wagner tubas), four trumpets, high trumpet in D, bass trumpet, three trombones, two tubas, five timpani (divided between two players), bass drum, tambourine, cymbals, antique cymbals, triangle, tam-tam, rape guero, and strings.

Almost singlehandedly responsible for revealing the riches of Russian art, music, theater, and ballet to the world at large, Sergei Diaghilev was without question the most influential impresario of the twentieth century. Having first arranged a Russian art exhibit in Paris in 1906, he followed up with a series of concerts of Russian music and then Mussorgsky’s powerful opera, *Boris Godunov*. In a particularly bold move, in 1909 he traveled to Paris with a complete troupe of set designers, costumers, choreographers, dancers, and composers to introduce the French to Russian ballet. The artistic world would never be quite the same.

Although not a performing artist himself, Diaghilev had the uncanny ability to find and nurture artistic talent. Indeed, his ballet troupe included such luminaries as choreographers Mikhail Fokine and Vaslav Nijinsky, set designers Leon Bakst and Alexandre Benois, and the 27-year-old composer, Igor Stravinsky. Diaghilev had first come in contact with Stravinsky in 1909, when he attended the premiere of two of the composer’s most dazzling orchestral works, *Scherzo fantastique* and *Fireworks*. Recognizing an original voice, Diaghilev immediately invited the composer to join his company. Thus began one of the most fruitful artistic collaborations of the last century.

Stravinsky’s first ballet for Diaghilev was *The Firebird (L’Oiseau de feu)*, based on a Russian fairy story and choreographed by Mikhail Fokine. Collaborating closely with all the other artists involved in the project, he completed the score in a mere seven months. Narrative, choreography, set design, and costumes all developed in tandem with the music, establishing a collaborative pattern that would be repeated again and again throughout Stravinsky’s career. *Firebird* garnered rave reviews when it was premiered in Paris in June 1910 and added Stravinsky’s name to the vocabulary of the Parisian artistic community.

The musical language of *Firebird* is firmly rooted in 19th-century melodic and harmonic practice, but there are moments where we catch a glimpse of procedures that Stravinsky would employ in his later scores. Particularly notable are his use of exotic scales to represent the story’s magical dimension and his subtle handling of syncopation and cross-accents. In addition, Stravinsky required what he himself called a “wastefully large” orchestra (including an independent stage band, three harps, and a huge percussion section) to create brilliant, often breathtaking effects. Little wonder that *Firebird* remains one of Stravinsky’s most popular scores today.

Stravinsky’s next ballet for Diaghilev, *Petrushka* (1911), was a collaboration with Alexandre Benois. As Stravinsky explained, “in composing the music, I had in my mind a distinct picture of a puppet, suddenly endowed with life.” Stravinsky’s sensitivity to the coordination of music and choreography, already evident in *Firebird*, became even more finely tuned just as the movements and emotions of the characters found perfect expression in the music. The orchestra is leaner than before, but Stravinsky compensated with unusual combinations of instruments, including the piano, a newcomer to the symphony orchestra. In the first tableau, Stravinsky depicts the bustle of a pre-Lenten Russian fair by juxtaposing colorful blocks of musical material, often abruptly shifting from one to another. Stravinsky once said that “the success of *Petrushka* was good for me in that it gave me the absolute conviction of

my ear.” It was, however, with the next ballet, *Le Sacre du printemps*, that Stravinsky’s place as the foremost composer of his day was secured.

While Paris eagerly awaited his next ballet, Stravinsky took two years to prepare the work, his most daring score to date. As with *Petrushka*, the impetus for composition was a visual image. In 1911, Stravinsky had a fleeting vision of a young girl dancing herself to death while surrounded by village elders in a pagan Russian ritual. He then turned to his friend, Nikolai Roerich, a painter and noted scholar in ancient Russian rites, and together they worked at a depiction of the ancient ritual that had attracted Stravinsky so profoundly. Having grown up in St. Petersburg, Stravinsky remembered the cracking of the ice over the rivers when spring arrived and the din that reverberated throughout the city. For him, the coming of spring was a violent occurrence: it seemed “to begin in an hour and was like the whole earth cracking.”

Roerich and Stravinsky divided the ballet into two parts, each beginning with an introduction. The action of the ballet was meant to depict the actual ritual of sacrifice; to this end, Stravinsky included no mime in the work, only dance. Each half contained a climactic set piece, thereby providing the ballet with two dramatic high points, and allowing for innovative and daring choreography. Vaslav Nijinsky, the star dancer in the Ballets Russes, and well known to Parisian audiences for his controversial roles (most notably the faun in Debussy’s *Prélude à l’Après midi d’un faune*), was asked to choreograph the ballet. After intensive rehearsals, at which both choreographer and composer were present, the piece was ready.

The premiere on May 29, 1913, led by Pierre Monteux at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, precipitated one of the most infamous riots in the history of Western music. During the introduction, even before the curtain rose, members of the audience began to hiss and shout. The strange orchestration and unusual harmonies, with the bassoon in its highest register and unresolved chords supporting the opening melodic line, both contributed to the tension in the theater. At first there were only isolated outbursts of laughter and mild protests, but as the curtain rose revealing a completely new approach to costuming and choreography, the commotion intensified. Once the caterwauling began, it never stopped.

Opposing factions in the audience began to bicker, some calling for the ballet to cease and others for silence so it could continue. Diaghilev attempted to stop the commotion by flicking the lights off and on, managing only to create an even more charged atmosphere. Because of the deafening noise, Nijinsky was forced to scream the count to the dancers while standing on a chair behind the curtain. When violence broke out the police were called in. Stravinsky stormed out of the theater after the performance, furious that his work had not been given a thorough hearing. The next day the riot made the front pages of the Parisian newspapers.

What caused such a ruckus and why did the new ballet make such a violent impression? Some scholars have suggested that Diaghilev actually instigated the riot through the strategic placement of paid “protestors” in hopes of receiving good press coverage. Even this, however, does not fully explain the audience’s violent reaction to the work.

Perhaps the audience was subjected to too much novelty at once, for it was not just the score that displayed an unfamiliar idiom, but also the scenario, the choreography, and even the costumes. In an attempt to depict prehistoric people, Nijinsky introduced gestures as alien to classical ballet as Stravinsky’s harmonies were to traditional musical practice. The dancers often stood knock-kneed with toes turned and stomped around flat-footed, leading the outraged audience to think that the art of ballet itself was under siege.

Stravinsky’s music drew heavily on folk song, though in later years he often tried to downplay his dependence upon it. Recent research on the *Rite* has uncovered much of this original folk material, though it is sometimes difficult to ascertain exactly what he borrowed. In general, Stravinsky treated the preexistent folk music as raw material, excising and utilizing gestures, melodic fragments, and patterns as he saw fit and, in the process, transforming the original into something entirely new for the ballet. Stravinsky’s real interest in these tunes lay in their potential for rhythmic manipulation, a very different procedure from that in *Petrushka*.

What is particularly revolutionary in the *Rite*, then, is not Stravinsky’s borrowing of folk song, but his transformation of it. There is an unprecedented use of dissonance in the piece, even though Stravinsky himself said that the use of nine-note chords was not particularly new. The accents and displaced rhythms that he superimposed on these chords, however, made for something genuinely unique. At times, he builds unstable rhythmic cells to

which others are gradually added, resulting in a shifting sense of meter. Other composers had used similar techniques, but none with the energy and violence of Stravinsky, who fires these rhythmic cells at the audience in explosive combinations.

The *Rite* was performed in London several weeks after the notorious premiere and was revived in 1920 with new choreography by Massine. Unfortunately, Nijinsky's choreography does not survive, though in 1987 the Joffrey Ballet attempted to reconstruct the original from reminiscences of living witnesses and performers, period photographs, and notations in the score itself—an exercise that received mixed reviews.

By the 1930s, the *Rite* was often performed as a concert piece and has since remained a staple of the orchestral repertory, maintaining its power and savage beauty despite the absence of dancers. Time has not dulled its cutting-edge quality. Indeed, the *Rite* sounds new, even to our 21st-century ears. What was originally interpreted in 1913 as an attack on art in fact represented a daring vision of what art could say and how it could say it.