

**Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971)**

*The Rite of Spring*  
*(Le Sacre du Printemps)*

**FIRST PART**  
**Adoration of the Earth**

Introduction

The August of Spring  
Dances of the Young Girls

Ritual of Abduction

Spring Rounds

Ritual of the Rival Tribes

Procession of the Sage

The Sage

Dance of the Earth

**SECOND PART**  
**The Sacrifice**

Introduction

Mystic Circle of the Young Girls

Glorification of the Chosen One

Evocation of the Ancestors

Ritual Action of the Ancestors

Sacrificial Dance (The Chosen One)

Igor Stravinsky was born on June 17, 1882 in Oranienbaum, a suburb of St. Petersburg, Russia. Music was always in his household as his father was the leading basso of the St. Petersburg Opera. But his father chose the profession of law to be the career destination for his son, a decision that Igor detested. He was moderately successful in his law studies, but was drawn more and more to his love of music. He began piano studies at the age of nine and unlike many composers of his day did not attend a formal music school or conservatory. He was largely self-taught, gaining most of his knowledge from the study of texts and scores in harmony and

counterpoint. In 1905 he began lessons with Rimsky-Korsakov, studying orchestration. Under Rimsky's guidance he produced a small number of works including a rather traditional and unpretentious Symphony in E-flat. There was little to show at this point that he would become one of, if not, the most influential composers of the twentieth century.

Fortune smiled on the young Stravinsky when two of his compositions were featured on a concert in St. Petersburg on February 6, 1909. These were the *Scherzo fantastique* and *Fireworks*. In the audience was Serge Diaghilev, the founder of the recently created Ballets Russes, who heard very interesting possibilities in the young composer's work. He hired him to prepare orchestrations of two Chopin pieces for the company which led to his first breakthrough. Diaghilev had a new ballet ready for the 1910 season of the Ballets Russes in Paris, the only problem being that he didn't have a musical score. Anatoli Liadov had been commissioned to provide it, but was so slow in responding that Diaghilev withdrew the commission and turned to the young Stravinsky in the summer of 1909 to compose it. The ballet, *The Firebird*, premiered on June 25, 1910 to great success. Diaghilev noted of Stravinsky at the time "Mark him well. He is a man on the eve of celebrity." Little did he know how true his prophecy would become. In the space of four seasons, Diaghilev and Stravinsky collaborated to produce three ballets that would reshape the genre forever. Not only did the choreography and the scenarios become progressively more radical, but the music did also. *The Firebird* was followed in 1911 by *Petrushka*, with *The Rite of Spring* making its appearance in 1913. Each served as a stepping stone to the next as Stravinsky's musical vocabulary became more imaginative, confident and revolutionary. As David Ewen has noted "Orthodox harmony has made way for dissonance, traditional tonality for polytonality. A severe often crude, melodic line brought brutal strength. Rhythm was revitalized through the use of rapidly changing meters and poly-meters. The orchestration exploited bizarre, sensational colors. This was neo-primitive art, at one and the same time elemental and sophisticated." It was "the music of the future." As to the ballet itself, Vaclav Nijinsky's choreography was extremely crude and barbaric. This was a rite from pagan Russia, after all. The costumes reflect the exact nature of the event being portrayed. There are no tutus to be found in a work like this. So the stage was set.

The *Rite of Spring* premiered on May 29, 1913 at the Théâtre de Champs Elysées in Paris. Vaclav Nijinsky was the choreographer and Nicholas Roerich provided the scenery and costumes. Pierre Monteux conducted. The first performance proved to be quite scandalous. No more than had the music begun than a restlessness commenced in the audience; catcalls, the shuffling and stomping of feet, whistling and other forms of disruption followed. As the music and the dancing grew more intense, the cacophony in the audience increased, some blows were exchanged and it all developed into quite a ruckus, if not a minor riot. It became impossible for the dancers to hear the orchestra, but the work was performed to its full conclusion. Obviously, critical response was primarily negative, but the *Rite* was not without its defenders; one either loved it or hated it. But there is no denying that with the premiere of *The Rite of Spring*, "the music of the future" had arrived.

Today, *The Rite of Spring* is most frequently encountered in the concert hall. The distinguished conductor and composer Pierre Boulez has written "As to the composition itself, it does not *depend* on the argument of a ballet; and that is why it has no need of any modification in passing from the theatre to the concert hall. One can state that the plot of the ballet blends with

the musical form into a single entity: The form of the ballet *is* its argument. This quest for coincidence between form and expression was often pursued by Stravinsky in the ensuing years; here, in *The Rite of Spring*, he stumbled upon the solution almost unaware, and rendered null and void the distinctions (however sterile they may be) between pure and ‘program’ music, that which is formal and that which is expressive. This ritual of ‘Pagan Russia’ attains by itself a dimension quite beyond its formal point of departure: It has become the ritual – and the myth – of modern music.”

As to the orchestration of *The Rite of Spring*, the score calls for an unusually large orchestra. Rather than the standard two or three instruments for each woodwind, there are five players each for flute, oboe, clarinet and bassoon, while doubling auxiliary instruments such as piccolo, alto flute and English horn. There are no less than two bass clarinets and two contrabassoons! Prominent solos requiring great virtuosity abound. The brass have an equivalent expansion, utilizing eight French horns, five trumpets, ranged from piccolo to bass, three trombones and two tubas. There are also parts for two timpanists, playing a multitude of kettledrums, plus a vast array of percussion, including bass drum, tam-tam (gong), tambourine, triangle, and cymbals. The strings are given a mostly percussive role, adding a savage quality to the dances. This unique orchestration results in a combination of color and power that continues to thrill the audience at every performance, losing none of its exotic luster after more than 100 years since its premiere.

### **Synopsis:**

#### Part I: Adoration of the Earth

After the introduction, the curtain rises to reveal young men and women in separate groups. Their surroundings are primitive and dominated by the dark forces of nature. At first the dances are light hearted but they slowly change to have more aggressive and savage movements. The young men take possession of the women and carry them offstage. A fight ensues until a wise old man makes peace. There is stunned silence, then, the men throw themselves to the ground in worship, rise again, and start an even more frenzied dance.

#### Part II: The Sacrifice

Following the introduction, the young women are standing on the stage near a fire, one of them will be chosen as a sacrifice to the earth. The chosen one stands alone and still in the middle of the stage after a mystic dance, and young members of the tribe gather around her and dance in a “crescendo of brutal excitement.” Finally the chosen one joins them and the dancing grows more and more violent until it climaxes and the chosen maiden falls exhausted and dies. The rite is over.

--*Stephen Larmore*