

Translation of a musical critique about The Rite of Spring

There is hardly need to use exhaustive preliminaries to introduce Mr Igor Stravinsky, the triumphant victor of the Firebird and Petrushka, the most adored Russian composer in France today. In 1910, there was a brilliant beginning, in its entirety – or almost- of his production, ballets, melodies, orchestral pieces, were listened to and applauded.

And, as such, we were waiting, with legitimate impatience, the Rite of Spring, his third theatrical work: and here it is, and our wait was not in vain: the harmonious triad of ballets, conjuring up through their most striking aspects, the most characteristic of the diverse periods of the legendary or real life of Russia, is henceforth complete, I would go as far as to say perfect. The Firebird, was the old Russian legend, the well-known, popular tale, that lulls and charms children and adults alike, that faithfully reflects, through its childish and fanciful charm, the imagination of the race. Petrushka showed us, through all its imagery, the bustling life of a celebratory day in a town in Russia. The Rite of Spring evokes little-known prehistoric times, primitive rites of a far distant paganism.

It is worth noting, firstly, that it is a ballet without a subject, without dramatic framework, like the type, for example, of those that occasionally fit in between operas, but that we never imagined could be presented as complete works themselves: a ballet that is to the intrigue ballet, regardless whether it may be Giselle or Scheherazade, what “pure” music is to “programme” music. The “subject” and the structure is to be found in the synthetic arrangement as well as in the musical arrangement.



Attempting to narrate the Rite of Spring would, as such, be futile. Suffice it to say that what we first perceive there, during a spring night, are adolescents learning new incantations from an old fortune teller, incantations that are to be chanted every year; then she breaks into dance and symbolic games with the young girls, who are heading back to the river.

The adults, heads of the family, then appear, escorting the Sage, of the wise old men from their troupe, who is their high priest, who blesses Mother Earth and seeks out omens.

The second part is entitled "The Sacrifice". One of the young girls is selected by fate through the figures of a dance as the "Chosen One". She is then glorified by her companions through a heroic and warlike dance before presiding over ceremonies where the earth is purified and ancestors are invoked. Then she dances, to honour spring, a never-ending dance, madly, until she drops down dead from exhaustion.

And that's it... but it is pretext enough for the most exquisite choreographic displays. Because all this imaginary paganism is particularly moving and grandiose: no one, I presume, would wish to challenge the positively epic character. Mr Roerich, the admirable painter, already distinguished among us by the decor and the costumes of Prince Igor, and Mr Stravinsky have managed, through working together, through divination, I would readily say, to restore or create – whichever one it may be, one is just as exquisite as the other – the atmosphere of a period that is, definitely, one of the least known of the history of primitive humanity.



I wish to talk at length about the music, yet I hardly dare to in such a small space, and nothing but just following the impression of a first contact. This brief experience, however, is a means for acknowledging that the score of the Rite of Spring marks the beginning of a new stage in Mr Stravinsky's activity, and helps us to clearly recognize in him, not just the grandson of Glinka and of Borodin (if we recall in the latter's second symphony, in some of Ruslan and Lyudmila's passages, the same spirit of pagan national epic), but also a true man of his times and perhaps even a prophet. Music, today, evolves with disconcerting suddenness; and I can understand somewhat that it is accepted that, as my eminent colleague Mr Gaston Carraud wrote, following the premiere of Mr Arnold Schönberg's work in Paris, "the current trend is not just simple progression, by extension, of the fundamental laws of music, but an essential upheaval of music itself": and, yet, I cannot accept that nothing happens, in art, other than through normal evolution.

In this same issue, actually, I have the opportunity to mention the audacity, of young Hungarians, as regards rhythmic rupture and dissonance. Now, this Mr Stravinsky, I reiterate, is decidedly the contemporary of Bartoks, Kodalys as well as of Mr Schönberg and even Mr Debussy and Mr Ravel (I do not mention Mr Richard Strauss, whose only apparent originality consists of just the perverted uses of methods that are totally threadbare – supposing we have the liberty to mix metaphors in such a way). He proves to be, given the associations of notes, the choice of illustrations, surprisingly audacious. Admittedly, this could already be noticed in *Petrushka*, but not exactly to the same level. And, then, descriptive preoccupations, research for effects of exterior imagery occasionally created the particular justification.



In the Rite of Spring, where there is no narrative framework, where the music is not contingent on anything, whereas the dance and the pantomime depend totally on the music, the case is quite different: and sounds and rhythms have been chosen for inner reasons. Evolution, revolution, I have no idea: but I do know that this music, in order to shake up certain habits, speaks eloquently to the ear and the sensitivity that it breathes, that it imposes as necessary in its details as well as in its entirety; in one word, the score of the Rite of Spring, just like its predecessors, is “an opus”.

I also know that it is in the normal course of things that exceptional methods, created most often for a special descriptive or dramatic reason, fall under the idiom of “pure” music, where they may disconcert for a while, but only for a while. And, by admiring, as is appropriate, Mr Stravinsky’s fertile invention and prodigious artistic perceptions, I believe there is no worry to have whatsoever as regards the future of the Rite of Spring.

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