

Scream of Pan: *The Rite of Spring*

Brian McClinton

THE *Rite of Spring* (in French, *Le Sacre du Printemps*) was the last of three ballets by Igor Stravinsky for Sergei Diaghilev's itinerant company the *Ballets Russes*, established to stage exotic and provocative ballet in order to revive the stagnant art form. Its two predecessors, *The Firebird* in 1910 and *Petrouchka* in 1911 achieved great acclaim. By then the 29-year old Stravinsky was the toast of Paris.

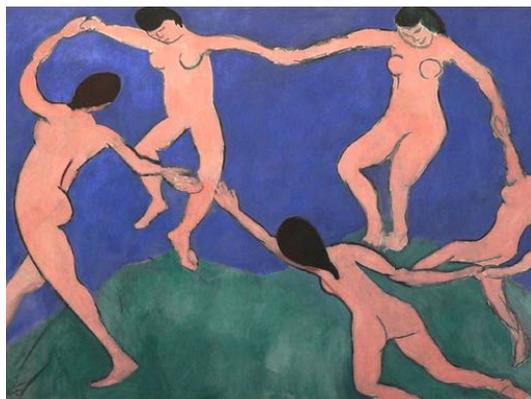


Igor Stravinsky

The Rite was written for the 1913 season of the *Ballets Russes*. The original choreography was by Vaslav Nijinsky, with stage designs and costumes by Nikolai Roerich. The first performance, at the newly-opened Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, on 29th May 1913, caused a near-riot. As Stravinsky said, “when the curtain opened on the group of knock-kneed and long-braided Lolitas jumping up and down, the storm broke”. Instead of the usual fluff of nutcrackers, sleeping beauties and swan lakes, brutal savagery was the order of the day as pagans were seen sacrificing a maiden to propitiate the gods of spring. Moreover, the orchestra, which was normally associated with refined ‘high culture’, was now being dragged down to this carnal, bestial level. If the choreography and its weird antics were the main source of the trouble, the music may also have played a part.

There were boos, catcalls and screams of abuse. Fist-fights among the audience broke out, and by the interval the police had arrived and forcibly removed 40 of the offending protestors, though they later left and the show went on. Suspicions linger that it was a publicity stunt, orchestrated by the wily Diaghilev who told Stravinsky in a restaurant afterwards that it was “exactly what I wanted”. Stravinsky, though, was furious because his music had been largely drowned out by the din.

Yet by the next year it triumphed in a performance under Pierre Monteux, the original conductor, and again under Ernest Ansermet in the 1920s. Monteux, incidentally, said that he detested the music and called Stravinsky ‘that crazy Russian’; while 40 years later Stravinsky refused to attend a London performance conducted by Monteux on the grounds that he had no intention of hearing his music being ‘murdered by that frightful butcher’.



The *Rite* became one of the most important works in the annals of art. Robert Craft, Stravinsky's assistant, said that it was ‘the prize bull that inseminated the whole modern movement’. It redefined 20th-century music, just as Beethoven's *Eroica* had transformed music a century before. Indeed, there are similarities. Both were composed, early in a century, by a man in his early thirties. Both challenged the musical establishment of the day and

raised the curtain on a new way of writing and hearing music. Both are characterised by an astonishing rhythmic vitality. And both grant us access to a heightened spiritual experience of being alive by composers who were indifferent, or hostile to, religion.

Subtitled ‘Pictures of Pagan Russia in two parts’ – *Adoration of the Earth* and *The Sacrifice* – the music does not depict a narrative as such but a series of episodes. Stravinsky himself said that it was “architectonic, not anecdotal”. Basically it relates various primitive rituals celebrating the advent of spring, culminating in the selection by ‘old wise men’ of a young girl – the Chosen One – as a sacrificial victim who dances herself to death. The music is a mixture of plaintive Lithuanian folk tunes and dissonant visceral explosiveness, again similar to Beethoven, not only in the *Eroica* first movement but also, say, in the first and last movements of the 7th symphony, described by Wagner as ‘the apotheosis of the dance’. Stravinsky, too, wanted to bring music back to its dance origins.

In an interview in a Paris journal Stravinsky is quoted as saying that in the *Rite* he “wanted to express the sublime arrival of the onset of nature renewing itself, the whole arising, panic, the universal sap”. In the Prelude, he says, he wanted to convey ‘a sacred terror before the midday sun, a kind of scream of Pan’. Each instrument is like a bud that sprouts on the bark of a secular tree, and the entire orchestra should convey the significance of spring being born.

Nature is red in tooth and claw, and humans, in trying to live with and tame it, can be cruel too. Yet this is only part of reality. Stravinsky also successfully conveys in a secular musical form the mystery of creation and especially the power, exhilaration and energy that both nature and humans possess. □