

philharmonia orchestra

STRAVINSKY: THE RITE OF SPRING

Part I: The Adoration of the Earth

Introduction

The Augurs of Spring (Dances of the Young Girls)

Ritual of Abduction

Spring Rounds (Round Dance)

Ritual of the Rival Tribes

Procession of the Sage

The Sage (Adoration of the Earth)

Dance of the Earth

Part II: The Sacrifice

Introduction

Mystic Circles of the Young Girls

The Glorification of the Chosen One

Evocation of the Ancestors

Ritual Action of the Ancestors

Sacrificial Dance (The Chosen One)

The violent Russian spring that seemed to begin in an hour and was like the whole earth cracking - that was the most wonderful event of every year of my childhood.

The Rite of Spring, third (after *Firebird* and *Petrushka*) of Stravinsky's scores for the Ballets Russes, was given its first performance in Paris on 29 May 1913, a date made famous by one of the most notorious riots of musical history. The *Rite* has become an icon of modernism, for many people the work with which 20th-century music definitively begins, thanks to the brutal, exhilarating dissonances and to the complex rhythms from whose

ruthless momentum the work derives its unique power. This is especially so in the concluding 'Sacrificial Dance' which employs a wholly original scheme of rhythmic dislocation (significantly Stravinsky could at first play the music before he could find a way to write it down) rising to a climax of orgiastic power all the more overwhelming for its implacable discipline.

Stravinsky began composing in the late summer of 1911 after a meeting with Roerich to settle the details of the ballet's scenario. The work's two halves represent day and night. Originally, the ancient Slavic games of Part 1 were planned to have a continuous musical acceleration, with 'Spring Rounds' placed second (and played much quicker) and the 'Ritual of Abduction' as the penultimate section, just before the solemn blessing by the Sage, which releases the 'Dance of the Earth' – 'the frenzied dance of the people drunk with spring'. Stravinsky's earliest account, written in December 1912, continues by describing the 'secret night-games' on which the curtain rises in Part 2, after the sinister nocturnal prelude. The victim is chosen by lot and she enters 'a stone labyrinth while the maidens glorify her in a wild, martial dance'.

Stravinsky left his home at Ustilug for Switzerland in late September 1912, but not before copying a number of Lithuanian folk melodies which are found in Part 1, notably the opening bassoon solo. The bulk of the *Rite* was composed in a tiny room at Clarens, Stravinsky pounding the music into shape on a muted upright piano. The postponement of the premiere (scheduled for the 1912 season) gave Stravinsky the chance to rethink the ending. The sacrifice itself was to have been the music now known as the 'Ritual Action of the Ancestors', with its mesmerising gyrations threatened by two huge tutti, the stuttering bass clarinets at the end depicting death by exhaustion. The new finale ('Sacrificial Dance'), composed with frantic haste in the autumn of 1912, contains in its most extreme form the *Rite's* most famous innovation, a dislocation of pulse and metre caused by the juxtaposition of rhythmic 'cells' that are lengthened and shortened unpredictably. These complexities gave Diaghilev's Ballets Russes dancers endless trouble, and the young Marie Rambert, who had trained in Dalcrozian eurhythmics, had to be drafted in to give the company extra coaching. She remembered Stravinsky's furious energy at rehearsals when he 'blazed up, pushed aside the fat German pianist... and proceeded to play twice as fast as we had been doing and twice as fast as we could possibly dance'.

The scandal of the premiere (on 29 May 1913 at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées) was no fault of the dancers, however, nor of the musicians under the imperturbable Pierre Monteux. The

battle lines were drawn (as Jean Cocteau remembered) between the 'smart audience in tails and tulle, diamonds and ospreys' and 'the suits and *bandeaux* of the aesthetic crowd. The latter would applaud novelty simply to show their contempt for the people in the boxes.' The former were riled not so much by the music (which became inaudible in the commotion) as by the primitivisms of Nijinsky's choreography, the curtain rising according to Stravinsky on rows of 'knock-kneed Lolitas'.

Despite its indelible impact on the music of the twentieth century, a quarter of a century passed before a serious analysis appeared in print, Messiaen's 'Le rythme chez Igor Strawinsky' (1939). In *Technique de mon langage musical* (1944) Messiaen's very first example is from the 'Sacrificial Dance' where he notes the similarities with his own language in the opposition of two 'personnages rythmiques', the one immobile, the other varied by 'added notes'. Equally if not more important to Messiaen was the music that opens the *Rite*, in Stravinsky's words 'the awakening of nature, the scratching, gnawing, wiggling of birds and beasts', its medleys of calls and cries the ancestors of Messiaen's birdsong polyphonies.

The *Rite* became a cornerstone of Messiaen's teaching, with a meticulous dissection of its rhythms that finds arithmetical connections in what to the ear may sound arbitrary. Messiaen's approach influenced his students of the post-war generation, among them Pierre Boulez whose classic article on the *Rite* appeared in 1953. Messiaen's analytical teaching was published posthumously in the *Traité*. For the most part the section on the *Rite* is characteristically objective, but at the end Messiaen allows himself to peer into the abyss, quoting *Macbeth* in the translation by his father Pierre: 'La vie n'est qu'une ombre qui passe, un pauvre acteur qui se pavane et s'agite durant son heure sur la scène et qu'ensuite on n'entends plus; c'est une histoire dite par un idiot, pleine de fracas et de furie qui ne signifie rien.'