

Philharmonia Orchestra Stravinsky's Rite of Spring

Paul Rissmann

Igor Stravinsky is one most remarkable musicians, not just of the 20th Century - but of all time and he is particularly impressive - because he actually trained as a lawyer.

His big break came at the turn of the 20th century when he received a commission from Serge Diaghilev who was promoting an ace troupe of dancers in Paris. Diaghilev needed a young Russian composer to create new works for the dancers of the ballet Russe and Stravinsky became their golden boy, creating musical masterpieces such as *The Firebird* and *Petrushka*.

His 3rd commission was for *The Rite of Spring*, and this has gained the reputation as the most talked about pieces of music because of its disastrous first performance.

The events of 23rd May 1913 - are now legendary, because a riot broke out during the premiere. And overnight *The Rite of Spring* became known as the most scandalous piece of orchestral music ever written. The fusion of cutting edge choreography from Nijinsky, combined with an adventurous score from Stravinsky, proved just to be too much for conservative French audiences. This in turn, angered the trendy avant-garde audience, and well, tempers flared.

Nigel Simeone explains...

Nigel Simeone

People were ripping up the furniture, or trying to, they were certainly hitting each other over the head with the programmes. They were shouting at each other, they were tearing at each others clothes, its an unimaginable thing and what seems now to have been established that this was, to some extent, a bit of spin-doctoring by Diaghilev, he wanted a scandal out of this performance and he got it by the way he sat the students next to the aristocrats and so on, kind of set them off against each other. So the really pro-modern people were right next to the ultra traditionalists who thought Swan Lake was quite new enough for them when they went for an evening at the ballet.

Paul Rissmann

With all that publicity *The Rite of Spring* quickly established itself as a 20th century orchestral showpiece of unprecedented imagination and power and almost 100 years later, it still provides a fresh and exhilarating listening experience.

For such complex music, the narrative is very straightforward, though equally as shocking, it tells of an ancient pagan tribe celebrating the coming of Spring by having a sacrificial virgin dance herself to death. The ballet is divided into 2 Parts. Part 1 is called The Adoration of the Earth. This is where we meet the ancient tribe, they dance and play games. Part 2, the Sacrifice, is where all the gruesome stuff takes place.

Stravinsky's score is bursting with musical innovation. Every single component of music was redefined by *The Rite of Spring*. So, let's take a closer look.

The first thing you notice when attending a live performance of *The Rite of Spring* is the sheer size of the orchestra - it requires over 100 players.

Stravinsky dramatically increased the size of the woodwind and the brass sections to include more unusual instruments like the Alto Flute, Wagner Tuba and the Bass Trumpet and in its day *The Rite of Spring* was considered to be impossibly difficult. Here's conductor Charles Dutoit...

Charles Dutoit

They wrote things, which, at the time, were extremely difficult for the musicians. They are still but the technique has improved so much, when I think of the beginning of *The Rite of Spring* I would have loved to have been there in 1913 and hear this French Bassoonist playing.....with that thing.....must have been quite something.

Paul Rissmann

With such a huge orchestra on stage it's so surprising the Stravinsky decided to start with the sound of just one instrument, the Bassoon.

This music has become the most famous Bassoon solo in the orchestral repertoire, but at the first performance the audience weren't even sure what instrument was playing. In fact it even baffled fellow composer Camille Saint-Saens who's quoted as saying: *'If that is a bassoon then I am a baboon!'* Stravinsky aimed to create the sound of a primitive wind instrument by having the bassoon play very high, at the top of its register and he took this Lithuanian Folk Melody as his inspiration.

Stravinsky took this melody and he decorated it with extra notes, grace notes and he twisted it through multiple time signatures so the music sounded completely different, much freer.

This style of playing is adopted by the other woodwind instruments. Stravinsky throws them together, with their sounds overlapping into highly organised chaos. He describes this as: *"... the awakening of nature, the scratching, gnawing, wiggling of the birds and beasts."*

The Rite of Spring is most famous for its rhythmical innovations. The original choreography aimed to fuse music and movement together as much as possible. But Stravinsky's irregular and unpredictable music, provided not only a physical test for the dancers, but a mathematical challenge as well.

As the score continues, the rhythmical complexity dramatically increases and Stravinsky starts to change time signature, almost every bar. This makes the music almost impossible to 2nd guess, and created an entirely new style of music for the orchestra to play - and a whole new level of control from the conductor.

Charles Dutoit

When I saw the pocket score of The Rite Of Spring in front of me, it was just like today, for me reading Chinese, you know. I could not imagine how one could read the small size, and all very black, with small notes.

Paul Rissmann

When Stravinsky's harmonies were first unleashed, they were so fresh, so modern that musicologists believed the note choice to be totally random. But that is absolutely not the case as Stravinsky's harmonies are intricately constructed.

One of the most innovative harmonies in the score is the 'Augurs' chord – Peter Hill tells us more...

Peter Hill

That chord, sort of punched out by the Strings playing the down bows, with accents put in by the horns, that's got this dominant 7th Bb in it, against the chord of E Major, so it's two perfectly ordinary chords, if you like, but it's the way they're put together that gives you that biting dissonance.

Paul Rissmann

So we have two perfectly ordinary chords that when combined make a sound full of tension. The stunning new textures Stravinsky created at the turn of the 20th century have influenced every composer who followed him. Even today, especially in movie soundtracks, the influence of *The Rite* can never be ignored. For instance, in this next extract, at the beginning of Part 2, is this an ancient tribal land or have we just landed in galaxy far far away?

For me, the music is most exciting when Stravinsky introduces the sound layer upon layer. It turns the orchestra almost into a machine, as mechanical rhythms lock together and propel you forward at an exhilarating speed.

The Rite of Spring is the ultimate concert experience. The music is so radical,, so adventurous and so colourful that Stravinsky redefined the possibilities of orchestral sound and every piece of music that followed has been judged has been judged by Stravinsky's new standards.

Let's just hope the audience tonight behave themselves...