



STRAVINSKY

The Rite of Spring for Two Pianos (1913)

Igor Stravinsky was already famous in France when he wrote his revolutionary ballet *The Rite of Spring* (*Le Sacre du Printemps*) but after the premiere in 1913 he became infamous around the world.

It was a warm day for the premiere in early summer in Paris, and some buzz about *The Rite* was already in the air as perhaps the most ambitious undertaking the Ballets Russes dance troupe had ever undertaken. That company was led by the impresario and longtime Stravinsky collaborator Sergei Diaghilev who had produced Stravinsky's first two ballets, *The Firebird* and *Petroushka*, that had cemented his status as a major young composer on the scene. *The Rite of Spring* took their work together to a new level with brutally stark costumes and sets (this is a work of the "primitivism" movement) and a musical composition that broke every convention of melody, harmony, and rhythm, not to mention subject matter.

The subtitle of *The Rite* is *Scenes from Pagan Russia*, and we are brought into the world of a prehistoric Slavic tribe where the spring season demands a virgin sacrifice to arrive and relieve an unforgiving winter. The music reflects the cruelty of the weather, tribal life, and sacrifice as a young girl is compelled to dance herself to death for the good of the village. But as much as the subject dwells on the "primitive," the music is a highly sophisticated quilt of traditional Slavic folk melodies accompanied by deeply dissonant harmonies, and all sustained within a complex web of contrasting and

irregular rhythms. Stravinsky combined his greatest compositional influences of Rimsky Korsakov and Debussy with his own treatment of Russian folk elements to create a work that was entirely new and absolutely unique — a “seed piece” that would influence generations of twentieth and twenty-first century composers as much as Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony did composers of the nineteenth century.

It was all a bit too much for the Parisian audience at the premiere. The performance itself was tentative, and despite six months of rehearsals, the choreographer Nijinsky supposedly had to shout numbers out to the dancers from offstage to keep count. From the opening of the piece the audience was restless, but by just a few minutes in it had become truly agitated, to the extent that Stravinsky had to be escorted from the hall fearing for his safety. Though stories of a “riot” breaking out at the premiere are probably apocryphal (or at least hyperbolic), it was quite a scene, full of yelling, singing, and other noisy interruptions from the crowd. The composer was crowned the *infant terrible* of classical music overnight.

Stravinsky’s original arrangement of *The Rite* was for piano four-hands, and early on after completing the piece he performed it at a party with none other than Claude Debussy taking the lower part. Though we don’t hear the splendor of a fully orchestrated score in this version (and the orchestration itself is a feat of twentieth century technique), we do experience Stravinsky’s crunchy harmonies, tuneful melodies, and visceral rhythms with great clarity.

Even over a century after its premiere, *The Rite of Spring* grips us as the work of a daring young composer ready to change the music world forever.