

Avatar of Modernity

The Rite of Spring

Reconsidered

edited by
Hermann Danuser and
Heidy Zimmermann

A Publication of the Paul Sacher Foundation

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Igor Stravinsky
The Rite of Spring

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Table of Contents

Felix Meyer	Preface	7
Hermann Danuser and Heidy Zimmermann	Multifarious Rites of Passage – An Introduction	9
<hr/>		
	I A Team’s Work	
Lynn Garafola	Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes: A New Kind of Company	25
Paul Griffiths and Edmund Griffiths	The Shaman, the Sage, and the Sacrificial Victim – and Nicholas Roerich’s Part in It All	42
Esteban Buch	The Scandal at <i>Le Sacre</i> : Games of Distinction and Dreams of Barbarism	59
<hr/>		
	II Revolutionary Potential	
Tobias Bleek	“... de la musique sauvage avec tout le confort moderne!” The Orchestral Design of <i>Le Sacre du printemps</i>	81
Andreas Meyer	Disrupted Structures: Rhythm, Melody, Harmony	102
Claudia Jeschke	“... retrouver la source de variété ...”: Nijinsky’s Choreographic Textures	130
<hr/>		
	III Reflections on and of <i>Le Sacre</i>	
Stephen Walsh	Remembering <i>The Rite of Spring</i> or “Ce que je n’ai pas voulu exprimer dans <i>Le Sacre du printemps</i> ”	155
David Schiff	Everyone’s Rite (1939–1946)	174
Jonathan Cross	Rewriting <i>The Rite</i> : Creative Responses to <i>Le Sacre du printemps</i>	198

<hr/>	IV	Toward Histories of Interpretation	
Stephanie Jordan		<i>Le Sacre du printemps</i> : Milestones in Dance	221
Svetlana Savenko		<i>Vesna svyashchennaya</i> in Its Homeland: Reception of <i>The Rite</i> in Russia and the Soviet Union	240
Arne Stollberg		“ <i>sim not dim</i> ”: <i>Exécution</i> and <i>Interprétation</i> in Recordings of <i>The Rite</i> since 1929	263
Jonathan W. Bernard		<i>Le Sacre</i> Analyzed	284
Robert Piencikowski		Boulez’s <i>Rite</i>	306
<hr/>	V	Cultural, Historical, and Musical Contexts	
Jan Assmann		The Cultural Memory of <i>Le Sacre du printemps</i>	319
Herfried Münkler		Mythic Sacrifices and Real Corpses: <i>Le Sacre du printemps</i> and the Great War	336
John E. Bowlt		Kingdom of Mystery: The Artistic Ideas of Nicholas Roerich	356
Richard Taruskin		How <i>The Rite</i> Became Possible	380
<hr/>		Plates	
		Plates 1–38	403
<hr/>		Appendices	
		Chronology (1910–1922), compiled and annotated by Felix Meyer	443
		Bibliography	470
		Credits	489
		Contributors	490
		Index	492
		Synopsis of Section Titles	

Preface

Igor Stravinsky's ballet *Le Sacre du printemps* – or *The Rite of Spring*, as it is known in English – burst upon the scene with a furious éclat. Celebrated by its admirers as a courageous and visionary step into uncharted artistic territory, demonized by its detractors as an insult to good artistic breeding, the work, with its violent and archaic subject matter, the twitching and pounding physical gestures of Vaslav Nijinsky's choreography, and the raw power of its music, left audiences so divided that the première, given at Paris's Théâtre des Champs-Élysées on 29 May 1913, ended in pandemonium. But unlike other trail-blazing *succès de scandale* of the pre-war period, it soon mutated into a more or less unanimously acclaimed staple of the repertoire, leaving behind deep traces on the history of music and dance that are still felt today. Not only did it enter the specialized “modernist canon,” it also found its way into the consciousness of a broad public, as is evident from its ubiquitous presence in journalism and scholarship and the sheer number of its performances: in recent years *The Rite* has received from 250 to 300 performances annually as a ballet and another 250 to 350 as a concert piece, thereby out-running even such fabled warhorses of the music industry as Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto. And just how widely its impact has been felt outside the precincts of High Culture can be seen in the numberless listeners otherwise averse to classical music who continue to hear Stravinsky's score (or at least parts of it) in Walt Disney's legendary animated film *Fantasia*, which has been reissued in many readaptations since its original release in 1940.

Not the least of the reasons for the remarkable ascent of *The Rite* to the situation of a much admired twentieth-century icon are the very wide range of receptive postures it permits and the physical, sensual immediacy caused by the electrifying jolt of its rhythms. But no less important were a few stubbornly upheld priorities in the intellectual debate; there is no overestimating the importance of the fact that music scholars, bolstered by appropriate statements from Stravinsky himself, have looked primarily at the “abstract” structural qualities of the music and largely ignored the unsettling subject matter of the ballet: the depiction of an eternal cycle of sacrificial death and rebirth, a cycle at loggerheads with the notion of civilized progress. It is thus no accident that *The Rite*

first achieved fame mainly as a concert piece, though its far less prestigious “second” career on the ballet stage has never been seriously endangered or even shown signs of faltering. These and similar narrowings of perspective have long accompanied and characterized the work’s reception. Only recently have they been offset by several major publications in musicology and theater history that treat the work, not just as a static “object” (a musical score), but equally as a flexible “event” (a performance), thereby incorporating previously underplayed aspects of ideology critique, reception history, and performance theory. Thanks to them we are gradually acquiring a far more varied and multifaceted picture of *The Rite* than was possible twenty years ago.

The Paul Sacher Foundation, which has housed Stravinsky’s posthumous papers since 1983 and made them available for research purposes, wishes to contribute to the heated ongoing scholarly debate on *The Rite* by devoting a three-part publication to the work on the centennial of its première. One part of this project is the present volume of essays, in which leading figures from the worlds of musicology, theater history, and cultural studies describe the current state of this debate and offer perspectives for future research. In parallel, the Foundation is also presenting two pivotal music manuscripts on *The Rite* in annotated facsimile editions: the autograph fair copy in full score, and the partly autograph engraver’s copy of the version for piano four hands. The autograph full score is not only highly revealing for its many departures from the later published version, it is also noteworthy for its virtually spectacular calligraphic beauty. The Foundation acquired it in 1974, nearly a decade before the Stravinsky estate was transferred to Basel. Since then, though a much-admired “gem” in the Foundation’s collections, it has awaited detailed scholarly scrutiny. In contrast, the manuscript of the piano version was previously entirely unknown; it is located in the private collection of the composer’s grandson, John Stravinsky, and is presented to the public for the first time in our publication.

The Paul Sacher Foundation is deeply grateful to the authors, editors, institutions, and individuals involved in our volume and the two facsimile editions. We owe a special debt of thanks to John Stravinsky and the publishing house of Boosey & Hawkes, in particular Janis Susskind (Managing Director), who welcomed the project with open arms from the very beginning and gave it their unstinting support. It is our hope that the three volumes will be greeted with interest both by the musically minded public and by the world of learning, and that in a centennial year filled to overflowing with performances and festivities, and well beyond it, they will stimulate a deeper study of this seminal work in the modern history of music and the dance.

Felix Meyer
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