

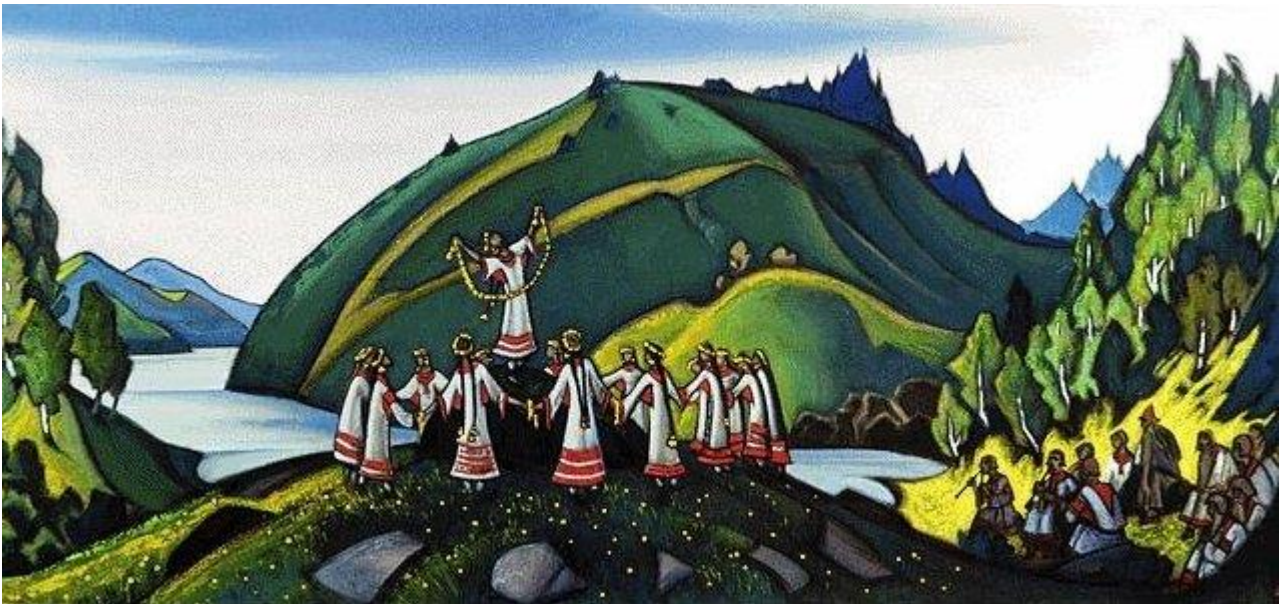
Igor Stravinsky *The Rite of Spring*

New Directions

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Historical Context

- Written by Igor Stravinsky, Russian composer, in the years 1911-1913 (still in Tsarist Russia, before the Russian revolution of 1917).
- Stravinsky was partly taught by Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, a key figure in 19th-century Russian music, who wrote several operas on fairy tale and magical themes. Stravinsky used folk songs in the *Rite* in much the same way as Rimsky-Korsakov, and also combined dissonant chords in a similar manner.
- The *Rite* was originally a ballet commissioned by the Ballets Russes, a Russian dance company who performed in Paris.
- As a ballet, the *Rite* was the product of a team of artists, rather than just Stravinsky on his own – but he did compose the music all by himself. Later in life, he sought to downplay the role of his collaborators.



The Rite of Spring design by Nicholas Roerich, 1945

Key Ideas

- The *Rite* was intended to be provocative: musically, it is extremely dissonant and difficult to play. How easy is to clap along to or follow the beat?
- It's often said that in the *Rite*, Stravinsky prioritised rhythm over melody, though that's not always the case. Can you pick out memorable melodies by ear?
- While it is often very dissonant, there are still lots of 'tonal' melodies – listen to R48, 'Spring Rounds', for instance.
- In its original ballet plot, the *Rite* depicts an ancient tribe gathering to sacrifice a young girl. How is violence depicted in the piece?

Things to Listen For

- The bassoon solo that begins the piece. It's extremely high in the instrument's range, so it doesn't recognisably sound like a bassoon (maybe more like a saxophone?)
- The shifting accents in the infamous 'Augurs of Spring (Dances of the Young Girls' passage, from R13.
- R103 – the bar before 'The Naming and Honouring of the chosen one' – 4 timpani, bass drum, and all strings play a dissonant chord repeatedly in a single bar of one of the most unusual time signatures ever seen – 11/4!
- The 'Sacrificial Dance', from R142, with constantly changing time signatures. Can you imagine trying to dance to this?

Legacy and Reception

- The *Rite* is often considered the first really significant piece of the 20th century, partly because of how popular it has been with composers who followed. Robert Craft used the provocative phrase: 'the *Rite* was the bull that inseminated an entire movement'.
- At first, however, it was a failure – the ballet was not well received. However, Stravinsky revised the piece to be a concert work (orchestra only, no dancing), and it became instantly famous.
- Above all, the *Rite* changed perceptions about how to use the orchestra. If we reject ideas of the 'beautiful', the orchestra can be used to evoke brutal and terrifying images.
- Musicologist Richard Taruskin has pointed out the *Rite* is extremely popular with audiences, performers, and scholars (a rare combination!), and has argued that the only other work to achieve this is Beethoven's Ninth Symphony.
- Composers who were closely influenced by the *Rite* include Steve Reich, Galina Ustvolskaya, and Harrison Birtwistle.

Other Resources

- The original ballet (with designs by Nikolai Roerich and choreography by Vaslav Nijinsky) is considered lost, but there is a reconstruction by the Joffrey Ballet on YouTube.
- 'A conversation with Igor Stravinsky' (1957). A 30-minute interview (in English), in which Stravinsky discusses lessons with Rimsky-Korsakov (12:32) and the composition of his early ballets, including the *Rite* (15:25). See YouTube links online.
- 'Keeping Score' (San Francisco Symphony Orchestra). A full-length documentary of the *Rite*, including a full performance under Michael Tilson Thomas.

Further Listening

- *Les Noces* (1913-1923) – another of Stravinsky's ballets, also containing lots of Russian folk songs.
- *The Iron Foundry* (1926-1927) – Alexander Mosolov. A Soviet-Russian composer, Mosolov sought to depict the sounds of a factory in this short piece.
- *The Unanswered Question* (1908/1930-1935) – Charles Ives. Ives used dissonance and consonance in a very different way to Stravinsky, but what do they have in common?
- *Threnody to the Victims of Hiroshima* (1961) – Krzysztof Penderecki. A piece from much later in the 20th-century: how had ideas about dissonance changed by this point?

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