

Le Sacre du printemps (The Rite of Spring)

Igor Stravinsky

Igor Stravinsky, son of an esteemed bass singer at St. Petersburg's Mariinsky Theatre, received a firm grounding in composition from Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov, with whom he studied from 1902 until Rimsky-Korsakov's death, in 1908. He achieved several notable works during those student years, but his breakthrough to fame arrived when he embarked on a string of collaborations with the ballet impresario Sergei Diaghilev, whose Ballets Russes, launched in Paris in 1909, became quickly identified with the cutting edge of the European arts scene.

Stravinsky's first Diaghilev project was modest: a pair of Chopin orchestrations for the 1909 production of *Les Sylphides*. The production was a success, although some critics complained that the troupe's choreographic and scenic novelty was not matched by its conservative musical selection. Diaghilev set about addressing this by commissioning new ballet scores, of which the very first was Stravinsky's *Firebird*, premiered in 1910. So began a collaboration that gave rise to some of the most irreplaceable items in the history of stage music: *Petrushka* (1911), *Le Sacre du printemps* (*The Rite of Spring*, 1913), *The Nightingale* (1914), *Pulcinella* (1920), *Mavra* (1922), *Reynard* (1922), *Les Noces* (*The Wedding*, 1923), *Oedipus Rex* (1927), and *Apollo* (*Apollon musagète*, 1928).

Stravinsky was therefore somewhat famous before May 29, 1913, but the events of that date — the premiere of *Le Sacre du printemps* and the concurrent riot by the Paris audience — catapulted him, and modern music, onto a path from which there was no turning back. The Théâtre des Champs-Élysées had opened less than two months before on Avenue Montaigne, a street known, then as now, for its upper-crust, essentially conservative establishments. The theater was appropriately

elegant (and remains so), although its decorative appointments were very up-to-date in 1913, enough to alarm a public accustomed to imbibing culture in neo-Renaissance surroundings. The theater's initial bout of programming was far from scurrilous (though the mid-May premiere of Debussy's *Jeux* caused anxiety through its suggestions of a *ménage à trois*). When the spring season concluded with the "saison russe" of opera and ballet, Diaghilev's productions alternated with the premiere performances of Gabriel Fauré's opera *Pénélope*, on a double-bill with a ballet setting of Debussy's *Nocturnes*, both of which tempered their adventurous ideas with an overriding lyricism.

By May 29 the audience was ready to let loose, and it had been prepared to do so by advance press reports that not only ensured a sold-out house but also primed the pumps of Parisian cultural gossip. A press release that was reprinted in several Paris newspapers on

IN SHORT

Born: June 17, 1882, in Oranienbaum, now Lomonosov, Russia

Died: April 6, 1971, in New York City

Work composed: 1911–12, with further alterations in 1913 and minor revisions in 1947

World premiere: May 29, 1913, at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris, as a ballet commissioned by Ballet Russes, with Pierre Monteux conducting

New York Philharmonic premiere: January 22, 1925, Wilhelm Furtwängler, conductor

Most recent New York Philharmonic performance: July 2, 2018, in Shanghai, China, Jaap van Zweden, conductor

Estimated duration: ca. 35 minutes

the day of the premiere tantalized through references to the “stammerings of a semi-savage humanity” and “frenetic human clusters wrenched incessantly by the most astonishing polyrhythm ever to come from the mind of a musician,” promising “a new thrill which will surely raise passionate discussions, but which will leave all true artists with an unforgettable impression.” Cognoscenti already knew how Stravinsky’s score had perplexed the enormous orchestra in the course

of its 17 rehearsals — not counting its rehearsals with the dancers. Even Diaghilev’s ballet master, Enrico Cecchetti, proclaimed,

I think the whole thing has been done by four idiots: First, M. Stravinsky, who wrote the music. Second, M. [Nicholas] Roerich, who designed the scenery and costumes. Third, M. [Vaslav] Nijinsky, who composed the dances. Fourth, M. Diaghilev, who wasted money on it.

The Work at a Glance

The initial scenario for *Le Sacre du printemps* was created jointly by Stravinsky and the scenic designer Nicholas Roerich, a controversial figure who later emigrated to New York (where his work is celebrated to this day at the Nicholas Roerich Museum on West 107th Street). This is how they described the ballet they envisioned:

Le Sacre du printemps is a musical choreographic work. It represents pagan Russia and is unified by a single idea: the mystery and great surge of creative power of Spring. The piece has no plot, but the choreographic sequence is as follows:

First Part: The Adoration Of The Earth

The Spring celebration. The pipers pipe and young men tell fortunes. The old woman enters. She knows the mystery of nature and how to predict the future. Young girls with painted faces come in from the river in single file. They dance the Spring dances. Games start. The Spring Kirovod [a stately dance]. The people divide into two opposed groups. The holy procession of wise old men. The oldest and wisest interrupts the Spring games, which come to a stop. The people pause trembling before the Great Action. The old men bless the earth. The Kiss of the Earth. The people dance passionately on the earth, sanctifying it and becoming one with it.

Second Part: The Sacrifice

At night the virgins hold mysterious games, walking in circles. One of the virgins is consecrated as the victim and is twice pointed to by fate, being caught twice in the perpetual circle of walking-in-rounds. The virgins honor her, the Chosen One, with a marital dance. They invoke the ancestors and entrust the Chosen One to the old wise men. She sacrifices herself in the presence of the old men in the Great Sacred Dance, the great sacrifice.



Ballet Russes dancers wearing Nicholas Roerich’s original costumes for Le Sacre du printemps

The balletic evening opened with *Les Sylphides* and closed with Weber's *Le Spectre de la rose* and Borodin's Dances from *Prince Igor*. But what everybody was really there to witness was the second item on the program, and they came ready to participate; some even had the foresight to arm themselves with whistles. Audible protests apparently accompanied the performance from the opening bars, but things stayed somewhat under control until halfway into the Introduction — which is to say, for about the first minute of the score. Then, to quote Stravinsky, they escalated into “demonstrations, at first isolated, which soon became general, provoking counter-demonstrations and very

quickly developing into a terrific uproar.”

Thus was history made.

Instrumentation: three flutes (one doubling piccolo), piccolo and alto flute, four oboes (one doubling English horn) and English horn, three clarinets (one doubling bass clarinet) and bass clarinet plus E-flat clarinet, four bassoons (one doubling contrabassoon) and contrabassoon, eight horns (two doubling Wagner tubas), four trumpets plus high trumpet in D and bass trumpet, three trombones, two tubas, five timpani (divided between two players), bass drum, tambourine, cymbals, antique cymbals, triangle, tam-tam, guiro, and strings.

Views and Reviews

Like the audience, the critics were divided about *Le Sacre du printemps*, but some simply floundered in a state of perplexity. Henri Quittard's assessment appeared in *Le Figaro* on May 31, 1913, two days after the premiere:

Here is a strange spectacle, of a laborious and puerile barbarity, which the audience of the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées received without respect. And we are sorry to see an artist such as M. Stravinsky involve himself in this disconcerting adventure, from whom Music, after *The Firebird* or *Petrushka*, could have expected further beautiful works. ... Can M. Stravinsky imagine

that a melody, because it is doubled a second higher or lower for fifty measures — or both at once — will gain a decisive and eloquent intensity? It seems so since it is so, and since the novelties contained in the score of *Le Sacre du printemps* are normally of this order. And since no one has the right to suspect the sincerity of an artist — especially when he has already proven that he is — what is left to do? Give up trying to understand it, and deplore such a strange aberration. ... Certainly the history of music is full of anecdotes where the ignorance of critics shines forth when they were unable to recognize creative genius when it appeared. Is the future saving up a triumphant revenge for new music as M. Stravinsky seems to understand it today? That is its own secret. But, to tell the truth, I doubt that our disgrace is very near.

PARISIANS HISS
NEW BALLET

Russian Dancer's Latest Offering, "The Consecration of Spring," a Failure.

HAS TO TURN UP LIGHTS

Manager of Theatre Takes This Means to Stop Hostile Demonstrations as Dance Goes On.

By Marconi Transatlantic Wireless Telegraph to The New York Times.

The New York Times headline June 8, 1913