

# **“The Rite of Spring”--Igor Stravinsky, conductor; New York Philharmonic (1940)**

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**Essay by John McFerrin (guest post)\***



*Igor Stravinsky*

The scandal prompted by the premiere of Igor Stravinsky’s “Le Sacre du Printemps” on May 29, 1913 remains one of the great legends in the history of classical music. “The Rite of Spring,” Stravinsky’s third work (following “The Firebird” of 1910 and “Petrouchka” of 1911) for the Paris-based Ballet Russe, emerged in collaboration with Sergei Diaghilev (the choreographer for the Ballet Russe) and with Nicholas Roerich (an expert in the folk-art and rituals of ancient Russia). In broad strokes, the work portrays, in both music and in dance, a series of scenarios based on spring fertility rituals in ancient pagan Russia, culminating at the end with the sacrifice of a young maiden who literally dances herself to death before a council of elders.

While the exact details of what happened at the premiere remain unclear, obfuscated by myth and hearsay, it is clear that some combination of the music, the choreography, and the very concept of the piece elicited boos and hisses from the audience. The supposed “riot” at the premiere became inextricably linked with the piece despite its historical dubiousness, and the legend of the riot has persisted in some form to the present day.

By 1940, both the composer and the reputation of “The Rite” had changed significantly from 1913. Stravinsky turned 58 that year, and by this time he had long abandoned the “Russian Period” of his 20s and 30s for the “Neoclassical Period” that characterized him from his late 30s into his early 70s. The reputation of “The Rite” began to shift with its 1914 premiere as a stand-alone work (without the accompanying ballet), and by 1940 it had become a sufficiently mainstream part of the classical repertoire that it became the centerpiece of a Disney film (1940’s “Fantasia”). It was in these circumstances, with both the composer and the piece far removed from the “scandalous” premiere, that Columbia recorded and released a 1940 recording of “The Rite of Spring” performed by the New York Philharmonic and conducted by Stravinsky himself.

“The Rite of Spring” remains one of the most frequently performed and recorded works in the classical repertoire, and the list of conductors associated with prominent “Rite” recordings reads like a “who’s who” list of major 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century conductors. These recordings, particularly those from the 1950s onward, have largely benefited from two factors that modern listeners may take for granted: ongoing improvements in recording quality, and the transition of “The Rite” from a modern avant-garde work to one more easily navigated by performers. These advances make it difficult to compare earlier performances of “The Rite” to later ones; for instance, the Stravinsky-conducted “Rite” from 1960 (with the Columbia Symphony Orchestra) may initially seem superior to modern ears, but it had many of the same advantages that had led to other strong “Rite” recordings in this era (e.g. Leonard Bernstein + NYPO, 1958, or Igor Markevitch + Philharmonia, 1959). Among the recorded versions of “The Rite” released in the era before LPs (this version was released on four 78RPM discs), this one stands out in regards to energy and unique personality in interpretation, even as it also has some aspects that may make one accustomed to more modern versions of “The Rite” raise an eyebrow. One cannot help but notice, in particular, the speed at which this version reaches completion; at roughly 30:40, this clocks in at about a minute less than Stravinsky’s 1960 rendition, and it finishes much faster than the roughly 35 minutes typically required for the piece.

When considering this rendition, a seasoned Stravinsky listener cannot help but note that this version sounds less like an interpretation from the composer who wrote “The Rite” in his early 30s, and more like the composer who had recently completed “The Symphony in C,” Stravinsky’s most contemporary major work as of this recording. Whereas “The Rite” originated as the music for a ballet and thus could be followed as a program work, “The Symphony in C” followed a traditional four-movement symphonic structure and presented music of a wholly abstract nature. The interpretative choices of this particular performance, as one might expect given its temporal proximity to “The Symphony in C,” consistently suggests a desire to de-emphasize the programmatic aspects of the piece and instead to emphasize the purely musical aspects that make “The Rite” a strong contender for the title of “Most Influential Composition of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.” This becomes obvious from the very beginning; the orchestration supporting the introduction’s iconic solo bassoon line (an adaptation of a Lithuanian folk song) sounds less like a depiction of flora and fauna returning to life with the coming of Spring, and more like the strikingly modern accumulation of sound that, in part, originally prompted Claude Debussy to offer a back-handed compliment to “The Rite” as “primitive music with every modern convenience.” Whatever this performance of “The Dance of the Adolescents” may lose in de-emphasizing the piece’s interpretative depiction of ancient ritual, it makes up for it in the sheer precision of the presentation of “The Rite’s” most revolutionary contribution to the classical music repertoire: a single bi-tonal chord (an E-flat dominant seventh chord over an E-major triad), repeated 180 times, accented in such a way as to represent the rhythmic asymmetries characteristic of the Russian language and its folk music. By the time the first half, “The Adoration of the Earth,” has completed with an especially percussion-heavy “Dance of the Earth,” one cannot help but admire the argument implicitly made by this performance, that “The Rite” deserves consideration as one of the great classical works even when removed from its original context and considered solely as an abstract work.

The performance of the second half, “The Sacrifice,” allows for greater variety in tempo than did the first, and this performance inevitably allows for greater evocation of the piece’s

programmatic aspects than did the first, while still presenting the same interpretative precision that bolstered the first half from a purely abstract perspective. A somewhat striking exception to this comes in the final minutes of “The Sacrificial Dance” that ends the piece; the performance seemingly comes close to the edge of collapse repeatedly, and in these moments, one cannot help but remember a quote from the French conductor/composer Pierre Boulez, who once remarked that, before a certain point in time, rehearsing “The Rite” was “like driving on ice” in that the performers simply didn’t know the music very well. The final minutes of this performance serve as a striking reminder of the deep difficulties the piece presented musicians in its first decades, yet in turn they also serves to emphasize just how impressively the musicians acquit themselves in the bulk of this rendition. There is indeed some truth in the statement by the classical music critic Richard Ginell that the 1940 Stravinsky/NYPO performance of “The Rite” is, to contemporary ears, akin to “a black-and-white photo viewed at a distance,” but the contents of this “photograph” should hold interest to the modern listener as something beyond merely objective importance.

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