Part I

Prelude

1

Origins

> The idea of *Le Sacre du printemps* came to me while I was still composing *The Firebird*. I had dreamed a scene of pagan ritual in which a chosen sacrificial virgin danced herself to death. This vision was not accompanied by concrete musical ideas, however . . .[1]

So runs Stravinsky's last and best-known account of his first inspiration for the *Rite*. There are, however, at least four others from earlier in his life, each of which has features which are unique. One of the earliest of these directly contradicts the legend of the *Rite*'s conception which Stravinsky later chose to foster. It comes in an article by Stravinsky written to coincide with the *Rite*'s first revival, in 1920, in a new production with supposedly abstract choreography by Massine. Hence Stravinsky was at pains to stress that the pagan setting of the original production had been secondary to purely musical ideas. Since these were in a 'strong and brutal manner, as a point of departure I used the very image evoked by the music. Being a Russian, for me this image took form as the epoch of prehistoric Russia. But bear in mind that the idea came from the music and not the music from the idea'.[2]

The earliest of Stravinsky's accounts, dating from 1912, is the simplest:[3] a 'first thought' which 'came to me as I was finishing *The Firebird*, spring 1910'. What the 'thought' was Stravinsky does not say, but in 1931 in the biography by André Schæffner, based largely on conversations with Stravinsky, this had become a 'dream' – 'A ballet unfolded, consisting of a single dance, danced to the point of exhaustion, of a young girl before a group of elders of fabulous age, desiccated almost to petrifaction.'[4] Four years later, in Stravinsky's autobiography, the dream is a 'fleeting vision' – 'I saw in imagination a solemn pagan rite: sage elders, seated in a circle, watched a young girl dance herself

to death. They were sacrificing her to propitiate the god of spring.'[5]

Thought, vision, dream – it hardly matters, though it is worth noting how often in Stravinsky's life he had such premonitions (*L'Histoire du Soldat* and the Octet are notable examples).[6] The discrepancies suggest that Stravinsky's memoirs need to be treated with caution.[7] Nonetheless the progression between the second and third of these accounts may well describe the evolution of Stravinsky's ideas in 1910 – the dancer's exhaustion becomes her death, this in turn leads to the idea of human sacrifice, and so to a setting in pagan prehistory. And the best evidence that, details apart, this is the true version of events – that the idea of the ballet did indeed come to Stravinsky before the music – is the fact that he at once turned for help to Nikolai Roerich, Russia's leading expert in folk art and ancient ritual. As Stravinsky put it in his first account of the ballet's conception, 'who else could help me, who else knows the secret of our ancestors' close feeling for the earth?'[8]

Stravinsky moved fast. Already only two months later, by the time he left for Paris in May to attend rehearsals of *The Firebird*, he and Roerich had met, had decided on a title – 'The Great Sacrifice' – and a libretto was in existence together with a sheet of musical sketches. So much is clear from the earliest letter in the Stravinsky–Roerich correspondence to have survived.[9] It was written in haste from Stravinsky's home at Ustilug whence he had returned, a week after *The Firebird*'s première (25 June 1910), in order to bring his family to Paris so that his wife, Catherine, could enjoy at first hand the ballet's triumph (the Paris run had been extended after planned performances in London had been cancelled on the death of Edward VII on 6 May).[10] Stravinsky's letter has a faintly deferential tone. Its main purpose seems to have been to reassure Roerich of Stravinsky's credentials by dwelling on the details of *The Firebird*'s reception – before this triumph Stravinsky's standing as a composer had been negligible.

The correspondence makes clear the value Stravinsky placed on Roerich's participation. Roerich was a rare blend of scholar with artist and visionary. He began his career as an archaeologist, training as a painter at the St Petersburg Academy, and his subsequent prolific output was rooted in his studies in anthropology and archaeology. Benois remembered him as 'utterly absorbed in dreams of prehistoric, patriarchal and religious life – of the days when the vast, limitless plains

of Russia and the shores of her lakes and rivers were peopled with the forefathers of the present inhabitants. Roerich's mystic, spiritual experiences made him strangely susceptible to the charm of the ancient world. He felt in it something primordial and weird, something that is intimately linked with nature – with that Northern nature he adored, the inspiration of his finest pictures'.[11] *The Forefathers* was painted in 1911, precisely at the time of Roerich's collaboration with Stravinsky. The picture might almost be a sketch for the opening of the *Rite*, whose early pages quiver with the sound of *dudki* (pipes). Here, Orpheus-like, primitive man charms with his piping a circle of wild beasts, in this case bears, reflecting the Slavic tradition that bears were man's forefathers.[12]

One reason for Stravinsky's approach to Roerich must have been the success of his famously austere designs[13] for Act 2 of Borodin's *Prince Igor*, produced as part of Diaghilev's *Saison Russe* in Paris in 1909. Although Stravinsky cannot have seen the production he must have been aware of the sensation they created – 'an empty, desolate landscape, in which are pitched the beehive tents of the Polovtsi, and the smoke of their camp-fires rises against a tawny sky. The Parisian audience have the strange sensation of being transported to the ends of the earth'.[14]

Roerich must have received the approach from Stravinsky with a strong sense of destiny. The previous year Roerich had published 'Joy in Art', a lengthy essay whose climax Richard Taruskin calls 'a lyrical Neolithic fantasy'.[15] A passage from this describes the springtime festivities – 'A holiday. Let it be the one with which the victory of the springtime sun was always celebrated. When all went out into the woods for long stretches of time to admire the fragrance of the trees: when they made fragrant wreaths out of the early greenery, and adorned themselves with them. When swift dances were danced . . . When horns and pipes of bone and wood were played . . .'[16]

The resemblance to the *Rite* gives some support to Roerich's later claim that the idea for the *Rite* was entirely his and had nothing to do with Stravinsky. According to this version of events, it was Diaghilev who had the idea of teaming Roerich with his new discovery, Stravinsky.[17] Roerich then offered Stravinsky two ready-made scenarios – 'A Game of Chess' and 'The Great Sacrifice' – Stravinsky choosing the latter.[18] However, the correspondence between Stravinsky and Roerich, in which it is clear that the new ballet was for the time being to

be a secret from Diaghilev, proves otherwise.[19] When, in the aftermath of the success of *The Firebird*, Diaghilev approached Stravinsky with the idea of a ballet based on Poe's *The Mask of the Red Death*, Stravinsky had to admit that he had another project in view. Diaghilev, scenting disloyalty, was so enraged that Stravinsky was forced to admit the details of the new ballet; fortunately, Diaghilev's reaction to the proposal was one of delight.[20] The likely explanation for the discrepancies between the accounts by Roerich and Stravinsky is that the composer's vision of human sacrifice was indeed the spark, while the details of the festivities to which the sacrifice would be the climax came from Roerich.[21]

Having revealed his plans for the new ballet to Diaghilev and received his encouragement, Stravinsky was impatient to begin work. Writing to Roerich from La Baule in Brittany, Stravinsky reveals that he has started making sketches for the music even while still waiting to receive from Roerich the two versions of the ballet's libretto. He asks, 'Have you done anything for it yet?' a reference to Roerich's projected designs for the sets and costumes.[22]

In the event 'our child' (as Stravinsky called the ballet in his letters to Roerich) had to wait another year for, as Stravinsky describes in his autobiography, he was unexpectedly side-tracked. 'Before tackling the *Sacre du Printemps*, which would be a long and difficult task, I wanted to refresh myself by composing an orchestral piece in which the piano would play the most important part . . . I had in mind a distinct picture of a puppet, suddenly endowed with life, exasperating the patience of the orchestra with diabolical cascades of arpeggios.'[23] Initially conceived as a *Pièce Burlesque*,[24] the idea rapidly took shape in Stravinsky's mind for a dramatic work, with the maverick piano part representing the Russian folk puppet, Petrushka. Thus it was that when Diaghilev and Nijinsky visited Stravinsky in Lausanne at the end of September 1910 expecting to hear work in progress on the *Rite*, they heard instead Stravinsky play this new composition, which he called 'Petrushka's Cry'.[25]

For almost exactly a year – the year of *Petrushka* – the Stravinsky–Roerich correspondence ceases, their only contact being a message via Benois (in a letter dated 3 November 1910) with an apology for interrupting their work and an excuse – 'I'd never be able to have "The Great Sacrifice" ready by April, which was the deadline Diaghilev set . . .'[26] But

by July the following year Stravinsky, now back in Russia at his home in Ustilug, was impatient to recommence. 'I feel it is imperative that we see each other to decide about every detail – especially every question of staging . . .'[27] Roerich, however, was hard at work with another project. He had designed (in neo-Russian style) the church on the estate of his patron Princess Tenisheva at Talashkino (near Smolensk) and was now executing interior and exterior murals and mosaics – the painting discussed earlier (*The Forefathers*) is a study for the mosaic over the church's main entrance. So there was nothing for it but to go to Talashkino, a trip which proved unexpectedly hazardous as well as inconvenient: in order to expedite the journey Stravinsky travelled the section from Brest-Litovsk to Smolensk in a cattle car in which he found himself penned in with a none-too-friendly bull.[28]

There is something so apt about Talashkino as the birthplace of the *Rite* that the place and its formidable owner deserve a digression. The Princess was a passionate admirer of Russian folk art, and had founded a wood-carving workshop on the lines of the museum and workshops at Abramtsevo founded in the 1870s by the railway tycoon Savva Mamontov.[29] Despite or perhaps because of their common interest, relations between the two were strained: the Princess regarded the products of Abramtsevo as unimaginative. Moreover the Princess harboured a grudge: as a singer she had been rejected in 1885 on auditioning for Mamontov's opera company.[30] Nonetheless the two had agreed jointly to sponsor Diaghilev's *World of Art* magazine (the first issue appeared in 1898) on the understanding, largely unfulfilled, that the magazine would emphasise crafts and industrial design.[31] Relations between the Princess and Diaghilev, always uneasy, finally foundered in 1903 when she failed to persuade Diaghilev to appoint Roerich as editor in place of Benois. The magazine closed the following year.

In the propitious surroundings of Talashkino work on the *Rite* prospered and within a few days, as Stravinsky later recalled, the plan of action and titles of the dances had been decided. Roerich began work on the designs, sketching backdrops and seeking inspiration in the Princess's collection for his costume designs.[32] No documents have survived from the meeting, but a few months before the première Stravinsky enclosed a summary of the libretto in a letter to Nikolai Findeyzen, editor of the *Russian Musical Gazette*.

> In a few days we worked out the libretto which – roughly – follows. 'The name of the *First Part* is *The Kiss of the Earth*. It contains the ancient Slavic games, "The Joy of Spring." Orchestral introduction: a swarm of spring pipes [*dudki*]. Then after the curtain rises, fortunetelling; Khorovod (ritual games of dancing in a ring); a Khorovod game ending in exhaustion; Khorovod games between two villages. All of this is interrupted by the procession of "The Old Wise Man", who kisses the earth. The first part ends in a frenzied dance of the people drunk with spring.
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> *Part Two*. The secret night-games of the maidens on the sacred hill. One of them is consecrated for the sacrificial offering. She enters a stone labyrinth while the other maidens glorify her in a wild, martial dance. Then the "Old Wise Men" arrive, and the chosen one is left alone with them. She dances her last "Sacred Dance", The Great Offering, which is the title of the *Second Part*. The Old Wise Men witness this last dance, which ends with the death of the chosen one.'[33]

The next account by Stravinsky was the much more detailed résumé published in the avant-garde journal *Montjoie!* on the very day of the *Rite*'s first performance, 29 May 1913. This fascinating document – hotly disputed by Stravinsky who condemned it as a travesty despite overwhelming evidence that he was its author – adds many vivid details.[34] The first scene features a woman of immense age 'who knows the secrets of nature and who teaches her sons Divination . . . The adolescent boys beside her are the Augurs of Spring who mark with their steps, on the spot, the rhythm of spring'. The games become war-like as the groups 'separate and enter into combat, messengers going from one to another, quarrelling'. In Part II the stone labyrinth is replaced by the marking out of a circle within which the Chosen One will be confined. Finally as she dances her Sacrificial Dance the Ancestors perceive her exhaustion and 'glide towards her like rapacious monsters, so that she may not touch the ground in falling; they raise her and hold her towards the sky . . .'[35]

Finally there is the programme note written by Stravinsky at the request of the conductor Koussevitzky for the first Russian concert performance of the *Rite* (18 February 1914). In this we learn two further details which are clearly reflected in Stravinsky's score. Besides the old woman and the adolescent boys the first scene is overlooked by celebrants seated on hills who blow *dudki*. Later the choosing of the maiden

is made more specific than in earlier accounts – 'Fate points to her twice: twice she is caught in one of the circles without an exit'[36] – fateful moments pinpointed by the stinging tocsins[37] for muted horns and trumpets which interrupt the maidens' round dance.

2

Sketches

We turn now to the sketches for the *Rite*, one of the most extraordinary documents in musical history, and sufficiently complete for us to reconstruct, almost step by step, the act of composition.[1]

The sketches have passed through the hands of a number of owners. Originally they belonged to Misia Sert who had been given them by Stravinsky. She in turn presented them to Diaghilev who hoped to sell them to raise money in order to finance the *Rite*'s second production, in 1920, and to this end asked Stravinsky to autograph them: hence the inscription on the first sheet – 'Seriozhe Diaghilev, these sketches of the 'Spring' from his great friend Igor, Paris, Oct. 1920.' They were subsequently owned by Boris Kochno,[2] and were then acquired in 1963 by André Meyer.

In 1969 the sketches were published by Boosey and Hawkes in a handsome facsimile.[3] The quality of reproduction is such that one can distinguish clearly between pen and pencil, and thanks to the use of colour, between emendations in neat red ink or scrawled blue pencil. Throughout, Stravinsky's handwriting is marvellously expressive, ranging from the strong clear hand of his fair copies to feverish scribbles, such as the page on which he records the first inspiration for the 'Glorification of the Chosen One', the slashes of his pencil stabbing out the rhythms of the music (Ex. 2.1).

As one would expect, the sketches give a fascinating insight into Stravinsky's working methods at the time. Even more valuably they reveal a conception which in some respects is startlingly different from the finished score. The shadowy presence of these other possibilities is like an X-ray of a familiar painting, so familiar that the finished work seems inevitable: we simply accept and do not notice the *Rite*'s oddities. How often, for example, do listeners wonder why towards the end of

Ex. 2.1 Glorification of the Chosen One (Sketches, p. 52)

'Augurs of Spring' (fig. 28 + 5) we hear what will become the tune of 'Spring Rounds'? It is clear from the sketches that Stravinsky intended 'Spring Rounds' (rather than 'Ritual of Abduction', as in the finished score) to follow 'Augurs': the addition of the broad melody from 'Spring