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Stravinsky: *The Rite of Spring*

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## *Preface*

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For many people the *Rite of Spring* is the first masterpiece of the twentieth century to break completely with the past. The paradox is that it is also a work more deeply rooted in tradition than any other Stravinsky composed. The music is based on a scenario devised by Stravinsky with Nikolai Roerich – artist, archaeologist and expert on folk art and customs. The seriousness with which they approached their task resulted in a work unique in Stravinsky's output for the absence of irony or theatrical artifice. The *Rite* is third in the trio of ballets which Stravinsky composed for Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes* between 1910 and 1913. The scandal attending the *Rite*'s première on 29 May 1913 became legendary: it also marked Stravinsky for life. Partly because it was so controversial, the *Rite* is surrounded by anecdote, myth and hearsay through which the historian must sift, aware that much is contradictory or otherwise unreliable. Much of the problem stems from Stravinsky himself, who tried in later years to distance the music from its dramatic origins. The story of how and why he did this is recounted in Part III of this book, 'Aftermath'.

Before Stravinsky's death in 1971, the composer's own memoirs naturally dominated discussion. Since then a radical reappraisal has gathered momentum. Heading the list of significant publications are a number by Robert Craft, who acted as Stravinsky's assistant from 1949 onwards; there are also the books devoted to the *Rite* by Allen Forte and by Pieter van den Toorn, which attempt from different viewpoints a detailed explanation of its language, or at least of its 'vocabulary'. Two events have added greatly to our knowledge of the *Rite*. The first, which took place in Stravinsky's lifetime, in 1969, was the publication of the sketches together with notes on the choreography; the other was the discovery by Lawrence Morton (in 1979) of the extent to which the *Rite*

is based on folk music borrowings. More recently Richard Taruskin, epitomising the revisionary approach of recent writings, has stressed the paradox in the *Rite*, seeing Stravinsky's most revolutionary early work as rooted in Russian traditions, a fusion of extremes of old and new. Largely this is a matter of the thoroughness with which Stravinsky and Roerich attempted an authentic embodiment of Stravinsky's initial vision of ritual sacrifice; but it concerns also Stravinsky's debt (never properly acknowledged in his own writings) to his teacher, Rimsky-Korsakov.

The *Rite* is universally viewed as an icon of modernism, dominating the twentieth century as Beethoven's Ninth Symphony did the nineteenth. For this reason it has been regularly commandeered by pressure groups. In the early days it was exploited by critics, both for and against; later by avant-garde composers, and later still by analysts and historians, so that the actual music of the *Rite* all but disappears in the welter of grinding axes. Like other writers I am interested in why the *Rite* is as it is; but unlike them my answers come largely from within the music itself.

Nonetheless, any discussion of Stravinsky's music must never forget the simple truth that the *Rite* is a dramatic work; however effective as a concert item, the form in which it is best known, the *Rite* was conceived and composed as a ballet. Stravinsky's dramatic instincts were formed in childhood, as the son of a famous father, Fyodor, who had a glittering career as a bass soloist at the Mariinsky Theatre in St Petersburg. Stravinsky *père* was admired for the psychological insight of his portrayals and his mastery of every aspect of stagecraft. Igor Stravinsky studied with Rimsky-Korsakov, the composer of no fewer than fifteen operas, and the older man became, in effect, a second father to Stravinsky after Fyodor's death in 1902. Finally, Stravinsky received a further theatrical education at the hands of the impresario Diaghilev, the artist Benois and the choreographer Fokine, with whom he worked on *Firebird* and *Petrushka*. The greatest paradox of Stravinsky's life is that, despite his strident mid-career assertion of the autonomous nature of music, Stravinsky's musical output remained essentially theatrical.

The book divides into three. The first part (Chapters 1–3) deals with the *Rite*'s inception, composition and the steps towards the first performance. The account of the rehearsals for the original production acts

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as a prelude to the second section, the detailed commentary on the music (Chapters 4–5).

The third section examines aspects of the *Rite's* history since the date of its notorious première, 29 May 1913. There is a short anthology of important texts about the *Rite* as well as interesting (or entertaining) anecdotes and a section on recordings from the earliest (in the 1920s) to the present day, including those by Stravinsky. In between, I examine the apparent repudiation by Stravinsky of his original ideas for the *Rite* and piece together something of the true picture which Stravinsky at various times in his life seems to have been at pains to conceal.

With so much about the *Rite* in print I might have set out to write a guide to the existing literature. I decided from the outset against this, and though greatly indebted to the research of others – the writings of Craft and Taruskin, in particular, have been constant companions – the approach and conclusions are very much my own. My other decision was to try to write about the music in a way that avoided what Stravinsky called ‘useless generalities’ without on the other hand overwhelming the reader with technical detail. In this I have been greatly helped by the generous provision of music examples allowed by the publisher; my thanks also to Boosey and Hawkes for the necessary permissions and for allowing me to reproduce pages from the volume of sketches.

A number of individuals gave valuable advice and encouragement, among them Philip Carleston, Eric Clarke, Edward Garden, Malcolm MacDonald, Rosamund McGuinness, George Nicholson, David Patmore and Douglas Young. I also owe a debt (greater than he can imagine) to my inspired duo-partner, Ben Frith, veteran with me of countless performances of Stravinsky's four-hand arrangement of the *Rite*. Julian Rushton, the series editor, deciphered my early drafts and his shrewd comments greatly helped me to clarify my intentions. Thanks also go to Penny Souster and her colleagues at Cambridge University Press for dealing so efficiently with what is at times quite a complicated book, and to the copy-editor, Linda Woodward, for numerous improvements and for so deftly eliminating inconsistencies and infelicities, and for answering all queries by return. My special thanks go to three people each of whom generously put their expertise at my disposal: Tim Day, of the National Sound Archive, Nigel Simeone, who loaned me a vast amount of material of which I was unaware, and Colin



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Roth who not only guided me through the intrigues of the *Ballets Russes* but applied his brilliant editorial skills to my typescript. Lastly my very special gratitude to my wife, Charlotte, both for tolerating my obsession with the subject ('living with Igor', as my children put it) and for many apparently casual comments which proved on reflection to contain searching insights.

PETER HILL, *Sheffield, January 2000*

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