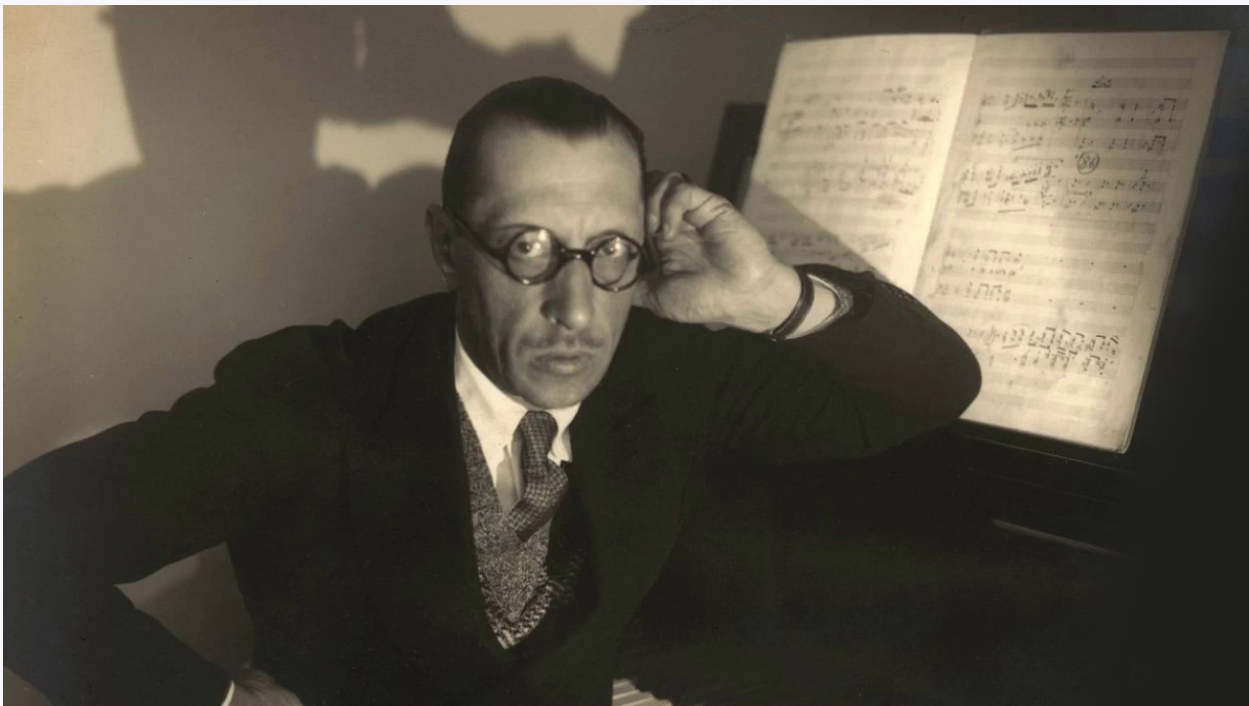




Classics Concert Insights Lecture

Moris Senegor, music aficionado

IGOR STRAVINSKY RITE OF SPRING (1913)



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“What Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony was to the 19th century, so Igor Stravinsky’s The Rite of Spring was to the 20th. The single most influential piece of music composed in its time, the game changer, the one work of its century that no later composer could avoid.” (Robert Greenberg)

REMINDER ON MUSICAL HISTORY:

- Middle Ages and Renaissance.
- Baroque (1600-1750): Bach, Handel, Vivaldi.
- Classical (1750-1827): Haydn, Mozart, Schubert, early Beethoven.
- Romantic (1827-1900): Late Beethoven, Brahms, Tchaikovsky, Dvořák, Mahler, Rimsky-Korsakov.
- Twentieth Century: **Stravinsky**, Shostakovich, Prokofiev, Copland, Bartok.

STRAVINSKY BIOGRAPHY (1882-1971):

- Born in Oranienbaum, Russia. Raised in St. Petersburg.
- Father, Theodore was a renowned operatic baritone in St. Petersburg, mother an accomplished pianist.
- Piano lessons beginning at age nine. At seventeen he decided he wanted to be a composer. Father did not see sufficient talent in him and sent him to law school.
- Met Valdimir Rimsky-Korsakov, son of Nicolai, in law school (1901), and was introduced to the great composer who suggested he acquire foundation in music.
- Upon death of his father, studied harmony and counterpoint 1902-1905.
- Private tutelage with Rimsky-Korsakov (1905-08), who became like a second father.
- Moved to Paris 1910. Became French citizen (1934), and American citizen (1945).
- Long association with Sergei Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes; The Firebird (1910), Petruschka (1911), Rite of Spring (1913), Pulcinella (1920)
- Rite of Spring premiere, May 29 1913. Provoked riot in the audience.
- Considered by Time Magazine one of the 100 most influential people of the 20th Century
- After his “Russian Phase” which was marked by the above works, his career spanned numerous other phases.

HISTORY OF THE RITE:

- The industrialization of Russia gave rise to anxiety and forebodings, prompting intellectuals and artists to seek spiritual wholeness in primeval men.
- Stravinsky conceived of The Rite in 1910, while composing The Firebird. In a now famous 1931 anecdote, he recounted that he had a dream of a solemn pagan rite, “*sage elders, seated in a circle, watching a young girl dance herself to death. They were sacrificing her to propitiate the god of Spring.*”
- “(Stravinsky’s dream) was by no means unusual...for a creative artist to have in St. Petersburg in 1910. In that environment one could even call it conventional.” Taruskin
- The project was originally named “The Great Sacrifice.” Stravinsky sought help from Roerich who is credited with the scenario for the Rite.
- NOTE: Stravinsky’s “dream” was only a fraction of the scenario (The Sacrificial Dance). Roerich provided the rest.
- Stravinsky and Roerich collaborated in the summer of 1911 at Talashinko and finalized the scenario. They sought ethnological authenticity in the rituals and costumes for the ballet.
- NOTE: There is no known account of human sacrifice among pagan Slavs.
- Stravinsky drew from Russian folk sources for his melodies, but significantly altered them. With the exception of the bassoon melody the opens the piece, he did not divulge any sources. Inquiry on this subject became an elaborate scholarly endeavor.
- The ballet, choreographed by Vaslav Nijinsky and conducted by Pierre Monteux, had a scandalous premiere at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées on May 29, 1913. A riot broke out in the audience.
- The riot may have been orchestrated by Diaghilev himself to attract publicity.
- The ballet was performed only seven times and disappeared.
- Stravinsky, sensitive to criticism, was appalled by the poor reception of the premiere, and attempted – successfully – to disassociate his music from the ballet.
- On April 5, 1914 Monteux conducted The Rite as a free standing concert work, also in Paris. This was a smashing success and The Rite became a staple of the concert repertoire.
- The ballet was revived in 1920 with new choreography by Massine. On this occasion Stravinsky began a campaign to malign Nijinsky as the cause of the failed premiere.
- Nijinsky’s version was resurrected by the Joffrey Ballet in 1987 and is a frequently staged work by dance companies.

CHARACTERS INVOLVED IN THE BIRTH OF THE RITE:

- IGOR STRAVINSKY: Composer
- NICHOLAS ROERICH (1874-1947):
 - Painter, ethnographer, Russia's acknowledged specialist in pagan, pantheistic antiquity, an expert on ancient Slavs.
 - Roerich provided décor for Diaghilev's stages beginning in 1909. He provided the scenario, sets and costumes for *The Rite*.
 - Stravinsky's score is dedicated to Roerich.
 - Even though, in later years, Stravinsky tried to downplay the role of Roerich in the creation of *The Rite*, subsequent scholars have credited Roerich with every aspect of the scenario and the necessary ethnographic research.
- SERGE DIAGHILEV (1872-1929): Impresario, Producer of Ballets Russes. Discovered the unknown young composer Stravinsky, and gave him his first commission, *The Firebird*. It was followed by *Petruschka* and *The Rite of Spring*.
- VASLAV NIJINSKY (1889-1950): Choreographer, Ballets Russes.
 - Began his career as a dancer. Joined Ballets Russes in 1909 (age 19) and became their star male dancer.
 - Nijinsky and Diaghilev became lovers.
 - Beginning in 1912 he choreographed numerous successful ballets.
 - In September 1913 he married Romola de Pulszky, causing a break in his relationship with Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes.
 - His dancing career ended in 1917 amid early symptoms of schizophrenia.
 - Became incapacitated and was confined to various mental institutions for the next 30 years.
 - Nijinsky was not present in the conception of *The Rite*. He choreographed the ballet after the scenario and music were complete.
 - Stravinsky had no respect for Nijinsky. He considered the choreographer musically incompetent.
 - He blamed the failure of the premiere on Nijinsky's complex choreography. He particularly objected to his slowing of the tempo to fit the dance moves.

SCENARIO:

“The Rite of Spring is unified by a single idea: the mystery and great surge of creative power of spring.” Stravinsky

There are various versions of the narrative for *The Rite*. The following is the earliest surviving one from Nicholas Roerich:

“The first part which bears the name “The Kiss of the Earth, is made up of ancient Slavonic rituals – the joy of spring. The orchestral introduction is a swarm of spring pipes; later, after the

curtain goes up, there are auguries, khorovod rituals, a game of abduction, a khorovod game of cities, and all of this is interrupted by a procession of the “Oldest and Wisest,” the elder who bestows a kiss upon the earth. A wild stomping dance upon the earth, the people drunk with spring, brings the first part to its conclusion.

In the second part, the maidens at night perform their secret rituals upon a sacred hillock. One of the maidens is doomed by fate to be sacrificed. She wanders into a stone labyrinth from which there is no exit, whereupon all the remaining maidens glorify the Chosen One in a boisterous martial dance. Then the elders enter. The doomed one, left alone, face-to-face with the elders, dances her last Holy Dance – The Great Sacrifice.....The elders are witness to her last dance, which ends in the death of the doomed one.”

MUSICAL LANGUAGE OF THE RITE:

- RHYTHM AS A THEME: Music characterized mainly by rhythm, with little or no melodic or harmonic motion. *“There is music wherever there is rhythm, as there is life wherever there’s a pulse.”* (Stravinsky)
- OSTINATI AND PEDALS:
 - Ostinato: A repeating musical pattern many times in succession.
 - Pedal (Drone): A sustained repeated note, usually in the bass. The name derived from the pedals of an organ which create such a sound.
 - Ostinati and pedal accompaniments were a feature of Russian folk music.
- UNUSUAL ORCHESTRATION:
 - Stravinsky employs unusual instruments or unusual sounds from usual instruments to create evocative sound effects.
 - The orchestra is frequently divided into a variety of smaller ensembles many of which contain unconventional groupings of instruments, creating unique sounds.
- MELODIC FRAGMENTS:
 - Most melodies are either simply motives or fragmentary collections of pitches, *“small repeating melodic cells ...varied by embellishment.”* (Walsh).
 - Full melodies are rare and when present, do not rise up to the lush, fully developed sounds typical of Romantic Era Russian composers.
- COMPLEX TEXTURES, FREQUENT PILE-UPS:
 - *“Agitated, multi-layered, internally battling textures,”* (Hill) are characteristic of the score.
 - During the course of many sections thin textures (few lines of music) gradually thicken (multiple lines), in pile-ups that create tremendous walls of sound.
- DISSONANCE: Pitches that clash with each other, chords that form unstable tone configurations that seek resolution.

- TONAL AMBIGUITY; USE OF NOVEL PITCH GROUPINGS:
 - Stravinsky departs from traditional Western harmonies.
 - Many passages in *The Rite* are harmonically uncertain.
 - Stravinsky uses ancient pitch collections as the basis of harmony (Dorian, Aeolian modes) to create an “old” sound within what actually is cutting edge, modern music.
- ABRUPT TRANSITIONS AND ENDINGS:
 - Stravinsky does away with Western cadence traditions. This goes along with his abandonment of traditional tonality.
 - Thus the music seems to lack punctuation marks. Many transitions and endings seem abrupt to the listener, some shockingly so.

Stravinsky takes “*dissonant, irregularly formed musical ‘objects’ of very brief extent and releases their latent energy by firing them off at one another like so many particles in an atomic accelerator.*” (Walsh)

OVERALL ORGANIZATION:

- Ballet music in 14 sections, organized within two larger parts, 8 in Part I, 6 in Part II.
- Each part begins with an instrumental introduction.
- Program Music: each section has a label that refers to the scene it accompanies.

“*The music needs to be experienced in the way it was originally meant – as a ballet, a dramatic narrative rather than the ‘abstraction’ Stravinsky later preferred.*” (Hill)

PART I: ADORATION OF THE EARTH

This part consists of various tableaux of pagan Slavic rites conducted at the foot of a sacred hill, in a lush plain. The sections within do not have a running narrative, but rather stand by themselves as individual scenes.

INTRODUCTION:

BALLET:

An overture with curtains closed. The music evokes the awakening of nature in springtime with a build-up of different sounds.

MUSIC: Slightly over 3 minutes. Woodwind dominated music in three sections, A – B – A

A:

- Opens with a famous solo bassoon melody, derived from a Lithuanian folk tune. The bassoon is in an unusually high register. It sets up a mysterious mood.

- English horn, clarinets and flute provide accompaniment or quiet countersubjects that converse with the bassoon.
- Mood remains peaceful, the different instruments evoking a sense of awakening.

B:

- More woodwinds gradually enter, some providing pedal accompaniments, others playing birdcall-like melodies.
- The music gradually rises in fits and spurts. The texture, initially simple, thickens with simultaneous calls from the different instruments.
- Stravinsky utilizes exotic instruments such as an Eb clarinet (much shorter than the usual, emits a high pitch sound), alto flute (longer than usual flute, with a curved end), and bass clarinet (long with a small, saxophone-like end piece).
- These, along with the high-pitched bassoon create an aura of otherworldly mystery.
- Despite the rising noise, the music is static with pedal accompaniments and various melodic fragments that erupt and fade.
- The section ends in a crescendo with all these instruments combining their birdcalls and other sounds in a big, dissonant pile-up, evoking a full awakening of spring.

A:

- Back to quiet, peaceful music. The solo bassoon briefly reprises its melody.
- As the curtain opens, a quiet, two-note, clock-like ostinato appears over woodwind trills, foreshadowing the main ostinato of the next dance.
- Dancers on stage are still, with a crooked old woman in the foreground while music transitions into the next scene.
- In the concert hall, this music is a transitional respite before massive musical energy is abruptly unleashed in the next dance.

AUGURIES OF SPRING (DANCE OF THE ADOLESCENTS):

BALLET:

This tableau is of an old woman, a soothsayer dressed in squirrel skins, instructing and leading the youth in ritual dances welcoming the spring. The dancers are dressed in historically correct, ancient Slavic costumes.

It is in two parts, the first featuring male dancers led by the old woman, the second, female dancers. In the end they all dance. This division roughly corresponds to the two sections of music.

The curtain has opened to a scene of four stationary groups of mostly male dancers, one upright, the others huddled close to the earth, with the crooked old soothsayer in the foreground.

The powerful, irregularly accented beat of the music brings the upright group to life. Four male dancers begin a foot-stomping circle dance. The old woman dances around the huddled groups and, as the music leaps, so does she, with surprising energy, bringing another male group to life. She then leads the first group in a stomping dance to the irregular beats. The two groups join with the old woman in the lead.

During the quieter ostinato phase of the music with occasional melodies in solo instruments, unison stomping stops and more individual dances appear. A group of female dancers enters the stage and perform a variety of folk dances to the new tunes that erupt from the orchestra. As the music rises, another group of females, previously huddled, joins them. Eventually the males also join in, the entire tribe now alive and dancing while the music rises in a crescendo toward a loud wall of sound. The groups remain segregated.

MUSIC: Slightly over 3 minutes. In two sections.

SECTION 1:

➤ THE (IN)FAMOUS POUNDING CHORD:

- Music begins in strings with insistent, thumping repetition of a single, loud, dissonant, bitonal chord (Eb dominant 7th chord over an E major triad).
- This chord is not typical of any in traditional Western harmony.
- “*The dissonance of the ‘Augurs’ chord is naked, brutal and repeated with insistence unprecedented in art-music before the Rite.*” (Hill)
- There is no melody. Rather, the chord is repeated, drum-like, 212 times in the first half of the movement.
- What gives the music an exciting, savage character is the uneven, asymmetric accenting of this chord.
- For example, the first 32 repetitions have the following accent pattern: 1,2,3,4 – 1,2,3,4 – 1,2,3,4 – 1,2,3,4 – 1,2,3,4 – 1,2,3,4 – 1,2,3,4
- NOTE: This is revolutionary music. In traditional Western music, dramatic variation is created by contrasting melodies or key areas. In this passage, dramatic variation is created mainly by rhythmic asymmetry, a feature that permeates the rest of the work.

➤ OSTINATO: In English horn. A clock-like, two-note, pizzicato pattern that keeps repeating. It resembles a fast beating human pulse. Heard over a chattering bassoon.

➤ POUNDING CHORD:

- Returns *come sopra* (as before); the first 24 beats with the following accent pattern: 1,2,3,4 – 1,2,3,4 – 1,2,3,4 – 1,2,3,4
- The next 24 beats non-accented. Dissonant melodic fragments appear in different wind instruments over the pounding, evoking springtime sounds.

➤ OSTINATO: Returns with dissonant, fragmentary proclamations in winds.

- POUNDING CHORD:
 - Returns in strings, 32 beats: 1,2,3,4 – 1,2,3,4 – 1,2,3,4 – 1,2,3,4 – 1,2,3,4 – 1,2,3,4 – 1,2,3,4
- THEME I:
 - A brief new bassoon melody appears, over the pounding chord. Finally, a melody! This is the main theme of the movement.
 - NOTE: The pounding chord is unaccented when associated with any melody or melodic fragment. It is irregularly accented only when naked.
 - Naked, irregularly accented chord alternates with Theme I on horn and bassoon.
 - NOTE: Theme I is a brief melody that goes nowhere, a typical feature of the melodies in The Rite.
- CONCLUDING GESTURE: A dissonant, falling melodic fragment with loud drumbeats, brings this section to a close.

SECTION 2:

- OSTINATO:
 - The two-note ostinato beats fast, first quietly in English horn, then louder in trumpet.
- THEME II:
 - French horn proclaims a brief new melody over the ostinato (now in strings); answered by flute.
 - The texture of the music thickens: melodies, ostinato, pedals in bassoon & strings.
 - Brief, birdcall-like melodies over the ostinato in high woodwinds.
 - Theme II, now in alto flute, ushers in the female dancers.
 - Theme II repeated.
- THEME III:
 - A new, loud melody in trumpets. This tune is a premonition of the main tune in the middle section of Spring Rounds.
 - The music is much louder, the texture yet thicker. Numerous lines of music are piled up: the new melody layered with Theme II and various birdcalls in woodwinds, the ostinato (now highlighted by the tympani) and a continuing pedal in bassoon.
 - NOTE: Such pile-up of music is prevalent in The Rite.
- OSTINATO:
 - Music goes back to a quiet ostinato in strings, altered so that we hear the pulses in quicker pairs.

- Theme II appears in piccolo and flute, above orchestral ostinato in which bassoon, contrabassoon and low strings provide syncopated accents.
- FINAL, MASSIVE WALL OF SOUND:
 - Massive crescendo on Theme II motives creates a thick textured wall of sound that includes the melody above orchestral ostinato, and syncopated accents on bassoon, contrabassoon and low strings.
 - All the dancers, male and female, dance to the music in large groups.

MOCK ABDUCTION:

BALLET:

Male and female dancers carry out a mating ritual in the form of mock abduction dances.

A group of male dancers jump up and down to drumbeats, behind a line of females who dance with rejecting gestures. Another group of females engages in folk dances that arouse a huddled group of males, and re-enact the same rejection scene. Females flee in unison, while fanfares erupt in music. Males and females join together, dancing in pairs – the abduction. A single bewildered female is left alone mid-stage, among all the dancers. She goads the females to separate and reject again. The male and female groups face each other as a new theme appears. Now only a few individual pairs join each other in dance while the others observe.

Dancers halt as the energy of the music dissipates to flute trills, transitioning into the next scene.

MUSIC: Slightly over 1 minute.

This is a brief, energetic, thickly textured section, full of fanfares, asymmetrically accented rhythms and, at the end, pounding chords.

- Loud chord in brass, punctuated by drumbeats, ushers in the dance.
- A fanfare tune on trumpets and high winds, above chattering strings and the held brass chord.
- More drumbeats and dissonant roulades are followed by a new, accented fanfare on French horn that alternates with motives of the trumpet fanfare. Music is multi-layered, noisy, animated and dissonant.
- More loud drumbeats and dissonant roulades lead to a new melody in horns. Male and female dancers face each other in segregated groups. The music remains busy and meters become irregular (2/8, 6/8, 3/4, 6/8, 2/8, 6/8, 3/4, 2/4).
- Fanfares in horn, trumpet and other winds return amid dissonant proclamations from various instruments. Music maintains its frenzied energy.

- A series of powerful, irregularly accented chords cuts through the ostinato-like version of the trumpet fanfare, now in strings. “*These brutal chords hold the fanfare...in a vice like grip.*” (Hill)
- Music abruptly calms, “*the furious energy....(now) concentrated in flute trills,*” (Hill), as it transitions to the next movement.

SPRING ROUNDS:

BALLET:

Begins with slow, stately folk dances (khorovod) performed by male and female ensembles, with frequent bending motions, arms sweeping the floor or hands slapping the floor, a reference to the tribe’s oneness with the earth. Later, in a loud, dissonant section, the dancers repeatedly gesture up, faces and arms upturned in reverence to Yarilo, their sun God. In the fast, dissonant section of music, they perform fast, foot stomping dances, reminiscent of the Dance of the Adolescents. The slow opening music returns, and so do the dances that started the movement.

MUSIC: Approximately 3.5 minutes; sectional A – B – A.

A:

- This is the first slow movement in the work.
- Eb & bass clarinets deliver a tranquil tune with a flute trill in pedal accompaniment.
- The rhythm of the tune is smooth despite changing meters in each measure, the melody full of grace notes (typical of Stravinsky’s composition), the harmony, an ancient pitch collection (Aeolian mode) that gives the music a primitive sound.

B:

- A somber four-note ground bass begins what sounds like a slow processional.
- A brief melody in oboe and bassoon alternates with the ground bass.
- The ground bass is taken up and extended by horns and strings, now as a more developed main melody. This is the same tune as Theme III from The Dance of the Adolescents.
- Music remains slow and ponderous as the oboe/bassoon melody returns and alternates with the ground bass.
- The smooth rhythm and soothing melodies lull the listener into a peaceful state for the first time since the music began, making the coming “ambush” all the more jolting.
- “*Anchored to a ground bass, the big tune drifts as though sleep-walking...Stillness is again the prelude to another ambush.*” (Hill)
- Suddenly and unexpectedly a tam-tam crash ushers in a fortissimo version of the main melody, its mood uneasy. The dancers gesture up, to Yarilo.

- Tune breaks down into its elemental chords, getting louder and more dissonant as though the calm processional has derailed, in a “*grotesque bray reinforced by trumpets and trombones.*” (Hill) It slows down and halts in a loud, leading gesture.
- Suddenly new, more energetic music erupts, made of brief rising-falling figurations in strings and various woodwinds. The rhythm is asymmetrically metered.
- The new music abruptly sucks the listener back into the novel Stravinskian world of The Rite. It feels like we’re in a new movement. The dancers engage in fast folk dances.
- This new music ends brusquely. A calm, birdcall-like trill emerges in high woodwinds.

A: DA CAPO

- The quiet, Aeolian mode tune returns in Eb clarinet and alto flute, over a pedal trill in flute and clarinets, surprising the listener with a realization that we’re still in the Spring Rounds movement.
- The tune is a brief reprise. In yet another jolting transition, after a single statement of the melody, the music moves on to the next section.

NOTE: I can imagine rioting audience members at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées momentarily placated by the more “conventional” sound of the Spring Rounds until Stravinsky, as if rudely joking, alters the music into a “*ghastly caricature*” (Hill) and then, in a final punch line, delivers a teasing, tiny bit of the earlier sound. Onward with the riot!

GAMES OF RIVAL CLANS:

BALLET:

The two tribes engage in dances of mock rivalry, the men mimicking wrestling and hand combat. Later, they all join together in folk dances as a group. Everyone pauses as the procession of the Wise Elder begins.

MUSIC: Slightly less than 2 minutes. Music based on another ancient pitch collection: Dorian Scale. In two sections that alternate, A & B.

A:

- Opens with brief trombone and tuba motives and loud percussion beats.
- Brief horn fanfares alternate with loud, dissonant, clownish versions of the same fanfare.

B:

- A new, unaccompanied tune appears in oboes and clarinets, echoed by flute.
- Answered clownishly by the “A” tune.
- The new “B” tune is repeated in trumpets, then strings and clarinets.

A':

- Music assumes a march-like character, still animated.
- The "A" tune returns in melodic fragments, in horns. Unison, dissonant proclamations in woodwinds break up each statement.
- The texture is thicker, with clarinets and strings maintaining steady ostinati, each of their own. This is another example of progressive pile-up of music, typical of Stravinsky.
- Crescendo on the "A" tune with loud unison tremolos in flutter-tonguing high woodwinds. Music reaches its loudest, most energetic level, with the thickest texture, the various ostinati still beating in clarinets and strings.

B':

- The "B" tune begins loud in strings and clarinets.
- Simultaneous with this, a brand new, march-like melody arises in the depths of the orchestra. The tune is on tuba accompanied by a slow, steady beat on bass drum.
- This new tune represents the procession of the Wise Elder who has yet to arrive on stage. The tune is buried under the loud, animated main theme representing the ongoing games of the tribes.
- The "B" tune is abruptly cut off by a dissonant gesture in high woodwinds. "*B scatters in confusion.*" (Hill)
- Now the Wise Elder theme is naked and exposed, and louder. The dancers stop in anticipation of the coming procession.

PROCESSION OF THE WISE ELDER:

BALLET:

The Wise Elder (aka The Sage, The Wisest & Oldest) is a very old man with long white hair and a waist long white beard dressed in a ceremonial white gown. He is gaunt and frail. He marches into the middle of the dancing tribe – now stone-still in deference – lurching and limping, supported by several tribal men. As the music rises to a frenzy, he stands in the midst of the men, while a group of men perform a reverent circle-dance around him, and others, all men, stand in one place and writhe in epileptic gestures.

MUSIC: Less than 1 minute.

- Stravinsky layers four different ostinati (in bassoons, horns and strings) each with their own melody and rhythmic pattern beneath the marching tuba (The Wise Elder) and its bass drum accompaniment (3 beats apart in 4/4 meter – thus a cross-rhythm), as well as a descant (fixed melody, often encountered in Medieval music) on high horns with its own steady melody.

- This music sounds simple and yet it is complex – polymetric and polymelodic.
- It sounds old and yet it is modern.
- In the second half of the march a tutti eruption creates a terrific wall of sound.
- “*The competing rhythms slot into place, as each motif spins through regular cycles of fours, eights and sixteens (the march itself).*” (Hill)
- The massive climax comes to an abrupt halt as the Wise Elder bends down for a ritual kiss of the earth.

THE KISS OF THE EARTH (THE OLDEST AND WISEST ONE):

BALLET:

The Wise Elder bends down to the ground, aided by his escort, and kisses the earth. He then rises and looks up to the sky, raising his arm toward Yarilo.

MUSIC: Approximately 40 seconds. Four bars.

- “*Between the disciplined fury of Procession of The Sage and the whirling vortices of Dance of The Earth comes the solemn moment when the Wise Elder kisses the earth.*” (Hill)
- This is the most silent section of The Rite, its silence highly dramatic in and of itself.
- First three measures: Muted basses, tympani and contrabassoon beat a two note rhythm while bassoons maintain a quiet pedal. The Wise Elder kisses the earth.
- Last measure: “*a glassy chord (string harmonics).*” (Hill) The Wise Elder raises his arms imploringly, toward the sun.

DANCE OF THE EARTH:

BALLET:

With the Wise Elder stationary in their midst, the tribe erupts into a wild dance, each individual performing their own moves, feet stomping, arms flailing, bodies thrown to the ground. At the midpoint of the dance, when the music begins a steady crescendo with the horns and violas playing triplets, the tribe engages a circle dance around the Wise Elder. As the crescendo reaches its massive climax they close in on him, forming a tight circle. At the abrupt finale they all raise their arms up.

NOTE: This finale presages the end of The Rite, also abrupt, where a group of Elders close in on the dead body of the sacrificed maiden and lift her in the air.

MUSIC: Slightly over 1 minute. In two sections.

SECTION 1:

- The solemn silence of the Kiss is shattered by a bass drum roll and lighting-like chords in brass and winds, striking in asymmetrically accented rhythms highlighted by tam-tam crashes.
- The tympani and bass drum maintain continuous rolls – each with its own rhythm. Strings maintain a bass ostinato.
- The music is loud, dissonant and wild, conveying a sense of ferocious savagery.

SECTION 2:

- In a measure marked *piano subito* (suddenly soft), the striking chords abruptly end.
- The texture of the music simplifies to asymmetrically accented triplets in horns and violas, with tympani and bass drum beating on, and an ostinato in cellos.
- The music is about to mount another pile up in a massive crescendo.
- More lines of music enter in different instruments, with varying meters. This “*is the first foretaste of the great metrical storms of Part II.*” (Hill)
- The music rises to a colossal climax with numerous fanfares in brass. As the dancers close in on the Wise Elder, his march theme appears within the thick texture while the music is sliced by loud, asymmetric chords.
- Music abruptly stops, with no warning. “*A blunt, brutal amputation.*” (Hill)

PART II: THE SACRIFICE

This part has a narrative running through the five dances that comprise it. It takes place at nighttime, beginning with a dance of young maidens who select a victim to be sacrificed, the Chosen One, and pay ritualistic homage to her in a Glorification dance. This is followed by a summoning of the elders who perform a ritual circle-dance around the victim. The Chosen One then dances herself to death in front of the elders in a final Sacrificial Dance.

INTRODUCTION:

BALLET:

The day has turned into night and the lively celebrations of the tribe convert to a solemn, mysterious, ominous occasion. A comparatively lengthy instrumental introduction (slightly over 4 minutes), a nocturne, sets up the mood for the dances to come.

MUSIC:

SECTION 1: OSTINATO – EMERGENCE OF MAIN THEME

- Begins quietly (ppp) with a two-note ostinato in flutes and clarinets and pedal accompaniment in horns. Music sounds mysterious.
- Amid rises and falls in ostinato based music a new theme emerges, at first just three notes, later more developed. This will blossom into a fuller melody and become the main theme of the next movement, Mystic Circles.
- The full theme, easily audible and fully outlined in two phrases, stated in alto flute with violin solo in harmonics, the latter giving the music an eerie, mysterious sound.
- NOTE: As in the Introduction to Part I, Stravinsky employs exotic instruments or common instruments playing outside their familiar range, to create an otherworldly sound.
- Theme, first phrase only, stated by a small viola ensemble. Texture is thin, accompaniment scant. Therefore theme is easily audible.
- Pause.

SECTION 2: THE “PUSH MOTIVE”

- A brief, two note motive quietly repeated in trumpets. It is derived from the ostinato.
- This is a kernel of the “push motive” (Hill) that will be the main idea of this section and a prominent feature of Mystic Circles. It will reappear in subsequent sections as well.
- It receives a single, quiet, short-long response from five cellos.
- A quiet, chorale-like melody based on the main theme in horns.
- A quiet trumpet duet: the push motive and a countermelody. Texture is bare; just those two lines of music.
- Strings give a brief response, a short-short-long repeated-note motive. Music remains bare and quiet.
- Trumpets repeat their duet featuring the push motive. The music is quiet and static. “*The stillness and remoteness make the duet an exercise in suspense.*” (Hill)
- Rising arpeggios erupt in Eb clarinet and violin harmonics. They sound like birdcalls. They alternate with the push motive, now on horn and clarinets. Texture thickens, with a pedal in higher harmonics in flutes and basses, and figurations in other strings.

TRANSITION - SUMMARY

- A transitional passage summarizes the two main musical ideas of the introduction.
- Main theme from Section 1 in horns with an eerie flute pedal.
- Curtain opens, revealing a group of young girls in a tight circle. Four push motives. Music smoothly transitions – without any break – into the main theme, now of Mystic Circles.

MYSTIC CIRCLES OF THE YOUNG GIRLS:

BALLET:

Young maidens perform a nighttime ritual dance within a round light beam in an otherwise darkened stage. They select a Chosen One from their midst to be sacrificed.

MUSIC: Slightly over 3 minutes.

- Theme in small viola ensemble, with an “*oddly metronomic counterpoint in the cellos*” (Hill), as dancers perform a khorovod, going around in a tight circle.
- An abrupt chord in brass cuts off the theme; followed by a shivering tremolo in clarinet. Circle dance ends.
- Violins play an eerie tune *flautando*, a flute-like sound effect created by bowing near the fingerboard. Atop this, a new-sounding melody appears, *cantabile*, in alto flute. This is actually a variation of the main theme. Dancers perform individual moves in pairs.
- The new variation is repeated in various instrument groups, with continued, eerie *flautando* string accompaniment. “*Somnambulistic repetitions of the melody.*” (Hill)
- Pause.
- Quiet metronome-like ticking in violas and cellos ushers in a new sound. Atop this, flutes play yet another variant of the push motive. Dancers repeatedly move in and out of the circle to the rhythm of the music.
- Texture thickens as English horn, French horns and trumpets join in on the push-motive. Music remains quiet and anticipatory.
- The main theme returns in horns with an accompaniment also in horns. The rest of the orchestra is silent. The effect is that of an odd horn fanfare.
- Dancers return to their earlier circle dance, but now “*In a deadly game of pass-the-parcel; if the music stops on you, you are it, the Chosen One.*” (Hill)
- Main theme repeated.
- Music cut off by a high-pitched two-note idea in stopped horns. A dancer falls.
- Pause. The dancer quickly gets up and returns to the circle.
- Main theme resumes quietly, but now texture is thicker, with a creepy accompaniment in woodwinds and string ensembles. Circle dance resumes.
- Again, high pitched, two-note idea this time in trumpets. Dancer falls again.
- Pause. As fallen dancer gets up she is pushed into the center of the circle. This is the decisive moment: the sacrificial maiden has been chosen.
- A surprising, abrupt, crescendo-accelerando passage on the two-note horn idea dissipates into a shriek-like dissonance in flutter-tonguing winds, a gesture that Stravinsky later called an “*orchestral hemorrhage.*” (Hill)

- The Chosen One attempts to escape the tight circle of maidens but is repeatedly pushed back to the center by her fellow maidens.
- Brutal, terrifying beats on tympani, bass drum and strings shatter the silence and solemnity of the nocturne as music prepares for the next scene, Glorification. The Chosen One freezes as her circle of maidens begins the Glorification dance.

NOTES:

- The Introduction and Mystic Circles are a continuum. Lasting around 8 minutes – an eternity in the world of The Rite – they lull the listener into a slow, solemn, mysterious nocturnal world, making the next movement all the more ferocious and shocking.
- In Mystic Circles, Stravinsky uses the orchestra as source of numerous chamber ensembles. Unlike most other movements, the texture here is sparse and there are no pile-ups of music. This contributes to the solitary, nocturnal aura of the scene.
- Stravinsky's use of unusual instruments or unusual sounds from usual instruments (harmonics and *flautando* strings, tremolo in clarinet, stopped and muted horns, flutter tonguing winds) continues and contributes to the otherworldly character of the music.

GLORIFICATION OF THE CHOSEN ONE:

BALLET:

The young maidens perform a wild ritualistic dance around their Chosen One who stays frozen, like a statue, head held up high, in the center of the light circle. At the end they all fall to the ground in deference, like spokes of a wheel, facing the Chosen One at the center.

MUSIC: Approximately 1.5 minutes. In three sections A – B – A

- A:
 - The main idea of this section is a sharply jabbing, rising-falling melody, a vamp (melody that repeats) that recurs at irregular intervals. It is wild and dissonant. The dancers jump up and down in synch with it.
 - The vamp alternates with ferocious drumbeats at irregular intervals, in sections sharply demarcated by fierce dissonances in full orchestra and later, by dissonant brass fanfares.
 - A subgroup of maidens forms a tight circle around the Chosen One and, during drumbeats, performs a primitive dance around her, jumping during the vamp.
 - The music sounds barbaric, with a fast pulse that reflects both the savagery of the maidens and the internal panic of the Chosen One.

- During the brass fanfares the entire group exits the light circle, bowing to the Chosen One still frozen in the center.

➤ B:

- In the middle section the music quiets into a pure pulse in strings and winds, beating fast, with savage drumbeats at a different interval.
- Dancers return to the light circle and perform another feral circle dance around the Chosen One.
- Music gets louder, sharply sliced by dissonant interjections in woodwinds. The circle dance continues with wider arcing limb gestures.
- In a measure marked *molto allargando* the tempo broadens and the speed of the pulse decelerates. The circle dance slows to a near halt. This marks the end of the middle section.

➤ A:

- The vamp returns and the tempo picks up with a ferocity that equals the beginning of the movement. The vamp alternates, as before, with drumbeats and dissonant spikes in full orchestra. Dancers jump up and down as before.
- It is a brief da capo that comes to an abrupt stop.
- Pause. Dancers fall to the ground in unison, facing the Chosen One in a spoke-like formation.

NOTE:

This “*ferociously exultant ... Amazonian dance,*” (Hill) parallels Part I, Dance of the Adolescents, in that it is shocking, “savage” music after comparatively peaceful introductory material.

EVOCATION OF THE ANCESTORS:

BALLET:

The Chosen One remains frozen in the center of the light circle while her maidens repeatedly fall to the ground amid the fanfares and drumrolls of this brief introduction to the next section. At first they create another spoke-like arrangement when they fall, but facing away from the center. Then they move out of the light circle and perform their falls in comparative darkness. The falls represent ritualistic reverence to the maiden who will be sacrificed. At the end of the scene a group of elders appear behind the light circle, ready for their own ritual to come.

MUSIC: Approximately 45 seconds

- In the relative silence after the abrupt conclusion of the fierce Glorification dance, loud drumbeats sound, from which a pedal emerges in bass clarinet and low strings.
- This pedal will persist throughout the brief section.
- The section features frequent shifts in meter: 3/2 in drumbeats and drumrolls, 2/2-3/4-2/4-2/2-3/4-3/2 in fanfares.
- Drumbeat/ drumroll and fanfare passages alternate throughout, including a striking soft version of the fanfare in the bassoons.
- The last measure is a transition to the distinct rhythm of the next movement as the elders start their dance.

RITUAL ACTION OF THE ANCESTORS:

BALLET:

This is a prelude to the climactic Sacrificial Dance. The tribe's elders perform a ritualistic dance around the Chosen One before witnessing her death dance.

MUSIC: Slightly over 3 minutes. In four mini-sections.

Contrary to the asymmetric accents and metric dislocations of the prior two main sections, this music features a smooth duple rhythm with clock-like regularity. It feels like a pulse, but, in keeping with the stately stature of the elders, the pulse is slow, not frenzied. Stravinsky returns to big pile-ups of music, absent in the prior two main sections.

- Section 1: Beat established and music assembled in fragments.
 - Begins with a quiet, slow, regular beat in low horns, percussion and strings.
 - With the maidens seated outside the light circle in two groups and the Chosen One frozen in the center, elders dressed in bear skin and male adolescents begin a slow, shuffling dance mostly outside the light circle.
 - Atop this, the English horn plays a gesture "*rasping chromatically upwards.*" (Hill) The last note of this gesture is sustained, with periodic "rasps" that repeat at regular intervals.
 - Alto flute enters, alternating with the English horn in vaguely exotic but similar gesture, reminiscent of "*Rimskian orientalism*" (Hill), also sustaining its notes of arrival.
 - Male dancers divide into three groups all outside the circle, the elders stationary behind the maiden, the others performing a shuffling group dance on each side.
 - A diminuendo brings music to near silence with a faint echo of the flute melody in clarinet, and two measures with barely audible beat that foreshadow the end of the movement.
- Section 2: Full melodies.

- The beat is now an ostinato in bassoon, ticking like a clock, while an ostinato-like melody appears atop in alto flute.
 - This alto flute ostinato melody remains a constant in Section 2.
 - Texture thickens and a new melody appears in muted trumpet and trombone, in counterpoint with the ongoing alto flute ostinato melody.
 - Strings, English horn and French horn provide additional ostinati while the bassoon ticks on. A pile-up is under way.
 - The flute ostinato melody is doubled, with a regular flute joining the alto flute an octave higher. Violins provide dissonant coloring, countermelodies and ostinato, while the other ostinati continue.
 - Stravinsky is setting up another ambush as the listener is lulled by the steady, slow rhythm and relatively quiet music.
- Section 3: Colossal climaxes.
- Suddenly and unexpectedly a fortissimo climax is “*shatteringly unleashed.*” (Hill) in the brass, as multi-layered ostinato continue.
 - Elders wearing bear skin begin dancing and induce the other males to enter the light circle and form a ring around the Chosen One.
 - The main melody is the one presented in Section 2 by muted brass, now unrestrained and unmuted.
 - The climax ends as abruptly as it started, after a single statement of the melody.
 - In an intermezzo before a second, bigger climax, the “ticking-clock” disappears. The music hiccups through “*a sort of grunt followed by a despairing bellow,*” then a “*falling slither.*” (Hill)
 - The maidens join the men and perform a round dance in an outer circle.
 - The grunts come at irregular intervals and are followed by other fragments of music, also irregularly accented.
 - NOTE: This section is reminiscent of Spring Rounds in Part I where, for a brief time, the regular rhythm also broke down amid a massive climax.
 - Another colossal climax on the same melody, now more elaborate, longer and thicker in texture, with loud tam-tam crashes. The ticking beat and various ostinati resume.
 - Male and female adolescents perform a clock-wise processional dance at the periphery of the light circle, while the elders dance in a tight inner circle around the Chosen One.
 - This second climax is a massive wall of sound, while the stage is full of crowded activity. The “*high horns (play with) barbaric splendor, matching their role in the Procession of the Sage.*” (Hill)
- Section 4: Da capo. Back to the beginning and dissolution of the music.

- The climax abruptly ends. Music quiets down to just the beat along with the English horn and alto flute melodies from Section 1.
- All the dancers dance outside the light circle in a slow, clock-wise shuffle.
- The alto flute line is taken up by clarinet and extended in “*tentative, fluttering oscillations.*” (Hill)
- Music diminishes in volume and the texture thins, eventually to a bare bass clarinet and barely audible beat.
- The adolescents exit, leaving six bear skin clad elders on stage. They kneel down in a circle, preparing to witness the sacrifice.
- The beat pauses. Bass clarinet attempts another line of its melody but also pauses, as if uncertain of what to do next.
- In an *Oh hell, let’s be done with it*, gesture the clarinet plays a comical downward staccato line in a low register, ending the movement.
- This quiet ending is in shocking contrast to the eruption that will follow in the final movement, the Sacrificial Dance.

SACRIFICIAL DANCE:

BALLET:

Having spent the last three major sections frozen in the center of the light circle, the Chosen One comes to life and dances herself to death. Her moves are frenzied, often featuring jagged jumps to equally spiky music. In the middle section the adolescents and elders dance in a circle around her, eventually leaving solely the elders, who in the last section, observe as she resumes her agitated dance and becomes more fatigued. When she dies, they swoop in and lift her body over their heads.

MUSIC: About 4.5 minutes. Asymmetric A-B-A structure, second A much longer.

A: Death Dance.

- Begins with a single, dissonant chord that disrupts the quiet ending of Ritual Action.
- The Death Dance theme is made of “*rhythmically jagged slashes...a series of syncopations desperately seeking a downbeat.*” (Hill)
- This theme was so novel that Stravinsky had trouble notating it.
- NOTE: As in the Dance of the Adolescents (Part I), rhythm and rhythmic manipulation is the most important element of the Death Dance, as opposed to melody or harmony.
- The asymmetric rhythm of the dissonant, spiky music in full orchestra is highlighted with drumbeats, also asymmetric.
- The meter alternates repeatedly at irregular intervals (3/16, 2/16, 3/16, 2/8, 3/16x2, 5/16, 2/8, 3/16, 2/8).

- The sacrificial maiden dances energetically, repeatedly jumping up and down, her body elongated, quivering.
- The music abruptly ends on a syncopated, rising motive, after about 25 seconds. When it returns it will be slightly over 2.5 minutes, nearly 60% of the movement.

B:

- Music suddenly slows and quiets to ominous, staccato beats in bassoon, horn and strings. This will be an ostinato, in alternating 2/8 and 3/8 meters. *“Rhythmic cells...(that) explore every permutation of their pattern.”* (Hill)
- Elders, joined by male adolescents, close in on the sacrificial maiden and begin a slow circle dance around her while she remains still, her legs shivering with fear.
- Loud, jagged, dissonant trombone and trumpet fanfares appear above the ostinato at irregular intervals.
- The ostinato climaxes via a slow crescendo, brass fanfares blaring at unexpected intervals.
- During these fanfares and crescendo, the maiden dances in place with various ritualistic moves, while the men circle around her to the beat of the ostinato.
- In a mini da capo, the music resumes the quiet staccato ostinato. The adolescents exit, leaving six bear skin clad elders on stage with the maiden.
- Volume rises with a loud, buzzing, dissonant line of fast notes in violin. Maiden dances a circle of slow pirouettes within the perimeter of elders who dance in a counter-circle.
- Music abruptly stops. So do the dancers.

A:

Depicting the final sacrificial dance of the Chosen One, this section is the wildest patch of The Rite, filled with barbaric fury and energy. The dance is in three sections, the first two ending with increasing expressions of fatigue from which the maiden recovers, dancing yet more feverishly. After the third, she literally drops dead.

- Death Dance:
 - The main theme resumes. Asymmetrically accented, jagged slashes of music, irregularly highlighted with drumbeats, meter constantly changing.
 - The maiden returns to her spiky, jumping dance.
- First fatigue episode:
 - Loud brass proclamations and fanfares over wild drumbeats.
 - Maiden falters, repeatedly falls and punches the ground with her fists. During repeated fanfares she massages a cramped leg.
 - Horns establish a new idea derived from the push motive of the Introduction.

- Two groups of male adolescents, flanking the circle in the dark, behind the circle of elders, dance to this music along with the maiden. She tries to recover her energy.
- Brief pause. Dancers stop.
- Death Dance:
 - Jagged music resumes. The maiden, having regained energy, recommences her jumping.
 - It doesn't last long.
- Second fatigue episode:
 - A massive wall of dissonant sound, with prominent trumpets and drumbeats. Fast and agitated.
 - The maiden dances in one place, her body rising and falling, fast and contorted, loose like a rag-doll.
 - She then goes around in circles, close to the kneeling elders, unsteady on her feet, her body clumsily rotating. She looks about to die.
 - The wall of sound suddenly stops. The maiden regains her poise at center.
- Death Dance:
 - The dance of death resumes, but with a quieter fury, devoid of horn/trumpet calls, in its now familiar, asymmetric rhythm.
 - This happens over an ostinato on the pitches of A and C by the low bass instruments, soon joined by tympani.
 - The maiden, having miraculously recovered from her faltering dance, returns to her jumps with surprising agility.
 - Soon however, she falters again as the music loses its energy, the irregular beats slower, softer. She again briefly becomes a rag doll.
 - A new set of irregular horn calls, faster and louder, inject energy into her, causing her to rush the edge of the circle and resume her high jumps.
- Death:
 - Just when it seems like the maiden can maintain her energetic dance forever, the music suddenly fizzles into rising chromatic scales in the flutes. It is as if someone blew out a candle.
 - At the flute ascent the maiden stops, her arms and head uplifted to the sky.
 - Pause. She falls to the ground, dead. Her arms and legs rise slightly while a wavy upward gesture in piccolo, flute and strings announces her soul rising out of her body.
 - Elders swoop in close to the dead body.
 - A quick, shrill, upward flourish in piccolo, flute and strings is followed immediately by an abrupt, loud, extremely dissonant chord with savage drumbeat, as the elders lift the dead maiden above their shoulders.

CONCLUDING COMMENTS:

“The Rite was Stravinsky’s Eroica.” (Taruskin)

The Rite is *“a classic of modernism.”* (Walsh)

“Ironically Stravinsky went too far forward by trying to go back.” (Michael Tilson Thomas)

“The genius of Stravinsky could not have received a more striking confirmation than in the incomprehension of the audience and its malicious hostility.” (Schmitt)

“The Rite, Russian as no music before it had ever been, made the Russian universal – which is to say, it Russianized the musical universe - and thus transcended the Russian.” (Taruskin)

“The huge, wrenching irony of it all is that with and through The Rite...Stravinsky left Russia for good.” (Taruskin)

BOSTON HERALD POEM (1924):

Who wrote this fiendish “Rite of Spring”?

What right had he to write this thing?

Against our helpless ears to fling,

It’s crash, crash, cling, clang, bing, bang, bing?

And then, to call it “Rite of Spring,”

The season when on joyous wing,

The birds harmonious carols sing,

And harmonies in everything.

He who could write “The Rite of Spring,”

If I be right, by right should swing.