

Listen4 listening guides

A brief guide to listening to Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*

This outline serves as a listening guide, or "road map," through a work being performed today. The intention is to help you follow along and enjoy it in more depth. We welcome you to email us with your reactions at announcements@aspenmusic.org. Now ... let the music begin!

Although Igor Stravinsky composed music in many genres, his renown is strongly tied to dance through his three most famous collaborations with Sergei Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes: *The Firebird* (1910), *Petrushka* (1911) and *The Rite of Spring* (1913). *The Rite of Spring's* début in Paris is legendary, with stories of near rioting in the aisles of the theater and excoriation of the music in the press. Even today while *The Rite* is considered one of the most groundbreaking scores of the twentieth century, it still thrills with its mysterious opening, muscular rhythms, and wild exuberance.

Later in his life Stravinsky wrote that the idea for *The Rite* came to him while composing *The Firebird*. He wrote, "I had dreamed of a scene of pagan ritual in which a chosen sacrificial virgin danced herself to death." *The Rite* is divided in two major sections—The Adoration of the Earth and The Sacrifice, within each, a series of shorter tableaux. Here are four things to listen for:

1

Introduction:

A haunting bassoon in its high register enters—perhaps the most famous bassoon solo in orchestral literature. Because it is so high, at first it can be hard to tell what the instrument is. A horn and bass clarinet join in, then the English horn. A high clarinet call and bass pizzicatos (plucked, not bowed, notes) rise, and the bassoon re-enters with its original melody.

Instrumentation:

The Rite of Spring's subtitle was "Picture of Pagan Russia in Two Parts." Stravinsky employs a very large orchestra with the full complement of strings, winds, and brass. He also uses many extra instruments in low registers, deeper sounding versions of the usual orchestral instruments: alto flute, English horn (a lower-pitched version of the oboe), bass clarinet, contrabassoon, eight horns with the 7th and 8th doubling on the lower-pitched Wagner tubas, three trombones, bass trombone, and two bass tubas. These deep-sounding instruments help to create the earthy, at times dark, atmosphere.

2

Rhythm:

Stravinsky uses many complex rhythms, and changes meters (the number of beats in the bar) frequently. But listen for the first big rhythmic outburst—he fools the ear by using accents on different beats while moving ahead in a simple time signature of two beats per bar. By the final frenzied minutes of the second part, The Sacrifice, the rhythms become increasingly fractured with the meter changes nearly every bar. One can only imagine how difficult it was for the dancers to find their place in the music in 1913!

3

4

Modernity:

One of the reasons that *The Rite of Spring* still sounds modern to audiences is the use of bi-tonality, the simultaneous use of more than one key (a key is the specific scale with which the music is written). Stravinsky had experimented with bi-tonality in his previous ballet *Petrushka*, but expanded its use in *The Rite*. In addition to bi-tonality, there are moments where the music is dissonant—notes are juxtaposed that don't seem to go together. When combined with the jagged rhythms, beating drums, and unexpected outbursts from every section of the orchestra, *The Rite of Spring* still leaves us unsettled. And that's a great thing.

—Betsy Furth