

## Stravinsky's "Rite" of Passage: The Quad City Symphony Performs "The Rite of Spring," March 9 and 10

Written by Frederick Morden  
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Within seconds of the new ballet's unusual musical beginning – a solo bassoon – the audience began hissing and making comments. As the music burst into unchanging pitches of repeated rhythmic patterns, the curtain opened with strangely costumed dancers stamping their feet in a pigeon-toed position. No traditional tutus and toe shoes here; they wore long-sleeved dresses, headbands, and cross-laced leggings into moccasin-type shoes.

Members of the audience, thinking they were being mocked, started throwing whatever they could grab at the dancers and orchestra. Other audience members tried to stop, or at least restrain, the angry protesters by beating them with canes, hats, and coats, or shouting them down. The uproar became so loud that the dancers were unable to hear the orchestra. Disgusted by the fracas, the composer left his seat for the backstage wings, where the choreographer was calling out the rhythmic counts for the on-stage dancers.

After roughly 40 of the worst offenders were extricated by ushers and management, order was finally restored midway through the performance, and the remainder of the ballet was presented to an attentive though stunned audience.

At the conclusion, the response was mixed: Some were outraged by the raw music and

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unconventional choreography, but others gave the performers and composer several curtain calls and were intrigued by how, with his music, Igor Stravinsky could resolve the contradiction between a modern symphony orchestra and scenes of ancient tribal rituals. And it was how he solved the problem that changed music history.

It was May 1913, and Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring: Scenes of Pagan Russia* was being debuted at the month-old Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris. The near-riot was perhaps appropriate for a piece that revolutionized musical thinking, elevated rhythm to its own art form, and stands as arguably the most important composition of the 20th Century. Now, 100 years later, the Quad City Symphony Orchestra will perform

*The Rite*

at its March concerts.

Stravinsky summarized the 33-minute *Rite* as "a musical-choreographic work ... unified by a single idea: the mystery and great surge of the creative power of spring."

The plot of the ballet was uncomplicated and direct but also unsettling. It is spring, a time to celebrate the gifts of the earth and ensure its continued fertility in the coming year by offering a sacrifice. A girl is selected and, as old wise men watch, dances herself to death.

Stravinsky created the music for this ritual by changing the traditional rules and expectations of harmony, melody, rhythm, orchestration, and form. He used Lithuanian folk melodies but altered their traditional phrase structure, the order of their notes, and their accents, along with deleting or adding notes. It's akin to changing the previous sentence to "He used Lithuanian folk melodies but a lte redt he irtradit iona lphra ses tr uct ur e, the of notes their order, and their accENTS, along with deltnng or adddinnng nnotsss."

The composer also expanded the sound of the orchestra by not only enlarging familiar instrumental families but adding unusual instruments, such as a piccolo, a bass trumpet, an alto flute, and Wagner tubas, as well as a variety of new percussion instruments. And he reassigned much of the orchestra to musical tasks that were atypical, such as changing a melodic instrument into a percussive, rhythmic one.

Stravinsky exaggerated common and new musical elements. For example, instead of one or

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two emphatic percussive musical gestures, he wrote 11 in a row. Ubiquitous rhythmic variations created sounds reminiscent of Native American tom toms, musical spasmodic convulsions, dirge-like marching, whirling wind, incessant train-chugging, and much more. In combination, they produced a lifelike throbbing of musical organisms in loud moments and a sumptuousness that was, at first, incomprehensibly beautiful when soft, composed of dense layers of asymmetrical rhythmic, moving musical parts.

In the earlier ballets *Petrushka* and *The Firebird*, Stravinsky used his innovations in harmonic-based ideas to musically depict Russian folk characters. But the miracle of musical conception in *The Rite* was how the composer created an entirely new musical structure based on rhythm that could convincingly convey an idea wholly from his imagination – a newly discovered music for a newly discovered civilization. Stravinsky's revolution here subjugated harmonic language as an agent of musical movement by making it static and unchanging, and by expanding the complexity and dominance of rhythm. At its core, *The Rite* is one big drum, an instrument that was probably appropriate for rituals of an ancient people.

In making harmonic language almost irrelevant to the structure of his musical composition, Stravinsky inspired the rhythmic language of American composers such as Aaron Copland and the Minimalist movement of composers including Philip Glass, Steve Reich, and Max Richter.

Beyond that, the compositional devices in *The Rite* that distort traditional musical elements heighten our musical sensitivity and allow us to experience his unique musical impression of a prehistoric world.

That challenging and subverting of convention is critical for evolution. What Stravinsky did with musical organization in *The Rite* can be seen in developments in other fields in the late 1800s and early 1900s, including Freud's theory of the unconscious, Picasso's Cubism, and E.E. Cummings' alteration of word definitions and syntax. By employing distortion within a familiar context so audiences don't feel *too* alienated, all of these people expanded human understanding and imagination.

Although Stravinsky lived to be 88 – he died in 1971 – and his music writing style moved from Primitivism to Neo-Classical to Serialism, music lovers' questions would, to his irritation, repeatedly return to *The Rite*, its premiere, and what led him to abandon traditional form. He finally answered the question to his friend Robert Craft, saying matter-of-factly: "I was guided by

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no system whatever in

*The Rite of Spring.* ... I had only my ear to help me. I heard and I wrote what I heard. I am the vessel through which it passed."

*The Quad City Symphony Orchestra will perform The Rite of Spring and Mussorgsky's Pictures at an Exhibition*

*at its Masterworks concerts on March 9 (at the Adler Theatre) and 10 (at Augustana College's Centennial Hall). For more information, visit [QCSymphony.com](http://QCSymphony.com).*

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