

Stravinsky - Le Sacre Du Printemps & Symphony in Three Movements (1990)

Written by bluesever

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Some of those in attendance to see the Ballets Russes at the Théâtre des Champs-élysées on May 29, 1913, would already have been familiar with the young Russian composer Igor Stravinsky through his 1910 ballet *L'Oiseau de feu* (The Firebird). But if they expected his newest work to proceed in the same familiar and pleasing vein as his first, they were in for a surprise. From the moment the premiere performance of Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du printemps* (Rite of Spring) began on this night in 1913, it was clear that even an audience of sophisticated Parisians was totally unprepared for something so avant-garde.

From the first notes of the overture, sounded by a bassoon playing well outside its normal register, Stravinsky's haunting music set the audience on edge. It was the combination of that music with the jarring choreography of the great Vaslav Nijinsky, however, that caused the uproar that followed. "The curtain rose on a group of knock-kneed and long-braided Lolitas jumping up and down," Stravinsky later remarked of the brutal opening scene of *Le Sacre du printemps*, which depicts a virgin sacrifice in an ancient pagan Russia. Catcalls began to issue from the audience as they took in the bizarre scene playing out before them. The noise became

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great enough that the orchestra could not be heard from the stage, causing Nijinsky to climb atop a chair in the wings shouting out instructions to his dancers onstage. While Stravinsky sat fuming as his music was drowned out by jeers, whistles and—if one witness is to be believed—members of the audience barking like dogs, Serge Diaghelev, impresario of the Ballets Russes, frantically switched the house lights on and off in a futile effort to restore order. It was, in other words a scene that bore a closer resemblance to the Marx Brothers' *A Night At The Opera* than it did to a typical night at the Ballets Russes.

In retrospect, Stravinsky's score can be seen as paving the way for 20th-century modern composition, and it sounds no more daring to today's listeners than the average dramatic film scores. Yet no present-day listener—and certainly no listener who first encountered it as part of the soundtrack to Disney's animated *Fantasia* (1940)—can possibly appreciate how shocking the dissonance, droning and asymmetrical rhythms of *Le Sacre du printemps* sounded to its premiere audience on this night in 1913. --- history.com

In World War II, men perfected machinery of mass-destruction to match their basest brutality. Amidst ever more appalling horrors, Man responded with Music to match his highest aspirations. Composed in the haven of the USA, Stravinsky's response to “specific cinematographic impressions of the war” earned some disdain, as though he had no right to reflect these reflected experiences. Yet this stricture never applies elsewhere - otherwise there wouldn't be, say, a single Requiem - and anyway he did encounter the Brown Shirts in Munich during the early Thirties. Etched into his memory, this frightening incident became “the root of [his] indignation”, enshrined in this Symphony.

Nevertheless, Stravinsky remained a confirmed objectivist, insisting that, “. . . [it] is not programmatic. Composers combine notes. That is all. How and in what form the things of the world are impressed upon their music is not for them to say.” So, should we hear it simply as “pure” music? Well, instead of soul-searching we do find a certain cinematographic detachment, resulting from unremitting concentration on musical processes. Yet there is also something about the relentless drive, obvious in the outer movements and even lurking within the stately-sounding Andante, something that attracts, fascinates - and curdles the blood. Should we perhaps reverse Stravinsky's creative process, into a recreative process: absorb it as “pure” music, and then look within to find what it has said about the “things of the world”?

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The style is, roughly, Le Sacre viewed through the glass of Stravinsky's subsequent stylistic forays, notably "Neo-Baroque" and "Greek Classical", an endlessly involving amalgam of polyphony, linear development, rhythmic transformation, cool elegance - and hair-raising violence (considering the modest forces, this last recalls the explosive qualities of Beethoven). There isn't a melody within earshot, yet Stravinsky performs such manipulative miracles with rudimentary motivic cells that you scarcely notice - until these gel into one of those inimitable "Russian folk-tunes". And everywhere there's that trademark Stravinsky sound, the product not just of his unique ear for sonority, but also of the very specific "attacks" he notates - a prime example being the long, stabbing crescendo near the beginning, still electrifying me after years of familiarity.

Stravinsky's doubts about the work's status ("Three Symphonic Movements would be [more exact]") probably stem from the disparate provenance of its parts. He originally drafted the first movement for a piano concerto while the second, with its prominent harp, was intended to (but ultimately didn't) accompany a vision of the Virgin Mary in the film Song of Bernadette. However, with uncommon perspicacity, he added a third movement closely related to the first, binding them through that common thread of "reaction to events" and the creation of an obbligato relationship between piano and harp by converging them at the finale's "turning point". The result is, frankly, more of a symphony than many that claim the title. ---
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