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The Rite Of Spring

WALT DISNEY'S inclusion of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* in the film *Fantasia* has aroused special interest in this composition. Disney interprets the theme mainly in terms of volcanic eruptions and the struggles of prehistoric animals, and Stravinsky has gone on record as approving of this treatment. In this article from the *Radio Times*, however, Frank Hill discusses what the music was originally intended to convey, and if you tune in to 2YA on Sunday, May 2, at 9.32 p.m., you will hear *The Rite of Spring* played by the Philharmonic Symphony Orchestra of New York conducted by Stravinsky.

WHEN the history of twentieth-century music comes to be written there is little doubt that Stravinsky will be allotted a very important place. Apart from the purely musical appeal of his works his influence over composers of every nation has been extraordinarily powerful and far-reaching. It is not an exaggeration to say that there is scarcely a leading composer of to-day who has not been in some degree, consciously or unconsciously, influenced by Stravinsky's innovations.

Perhaps of all Stravinsky's works *The Rite of Spring* has had the greatest effect on contemporary musical thought. When it was produced in Paris in 1913 as a ballet it caused a sensation—almost a riot—but a few intelligent and perceptive musicians and critics realised that here was music which was entirely new in conception and it would inevitably open out new vistas, particularly as regards rhythm and the treatment and use of orchestral sonorities.

The choreography by Nijinsky was both novel and impressive, but Stravinsky did not consider it a successful interpretation of the music. In fact, Stravinsky has been very outspoken on the subject. He said that what Nijinsky ultimately achieved "was a fruitless, laboured attempt rather than a plastic, simple, and natural equivalent of the dictates of the music. I had visualised a stage spectacle consisting of utterly simple rhythmic motions carried out by solid groups of dancers, immediately effective, without any details or complications of any sort. Nijinsky, on the contrary, could see no single number whole, and gave all his attention to points of detail—often expecting the impossible from the dancers."

In 1920 Diaghilev revived *The Rite of Spring* with a new and purely abstract choreography by Massine, but this in its turn was found unsatisfactory. It would appear, then, that the music is preferable as a symphonic work for concert performance. Indeed, Stravinsky has always been anxious that *The Rite of Spring* should be listened to as pure music and

not as programme music. In his Autobiography he says that, while finishing the score of *The Firebird*, quite suddenly and unexpectedly he conceived in his mind "a vision of a grand pagan rite: hoary elders sitting in a circle and watching the dance of a young girl who was to be sacrificed to the god of spring" but he emphasised the fact that "the idea came out of the music, and not the music out of the idea."

Edwin Evans has well suggested that it should be considered "a modern symphony in two movements."

Significance of the Rite

All that the listener needs to know when listening to the compelling and in parts strangely beautiful music of *The Rite of Spring* is the general poetic idea which it symbolises. It is remote from the romantic conception of spring, for what the composer had in mind was the worship of spring by the primitive people of pre-historic Russia.

This worship or rite was indicated as a symbol of the renewal of life and of the fertility of mankind and nature. Of this particular form of pagan ritual Sir John Fraser tells us that "the decay of vegetation during the winter was thought by pagan man to be due to the weakening of nature's fertility. The spirit, he thought, had grown old and weak, and must, therefore, be renovated by being slain and brought to life in a younger and fresher form. Thus the killing of a representative of the tree spirit in spring was regarded as a means to promote and quicken the growth of vegetation."

The Rite of Spring opens in a most striking and novel fashion with a theme on a solo bassoon in its high register. It may sound quite ordinary to-day, but in 1913 it was considered fantastic and overwhelming. Stravinsky says that from this theme "the musical material itself swells up, increases and expands. Each instrument is like a bud which pushes its way through the bark of a venerable tree. Each instrument is a part of an overwhelming whole, and all the orchestra, the entire ensemble, should have the meaning of the birth of nature."



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