

Analysis Of Stravinsky's The Rite Of Spring

Igor Stravinsky was a modern (including Neoclassical and Serialist) Russian composer who lived from 1882 to 1971. He was well known for his diverse and copious output. A composer of symphonies, operas, sacred music and concertos, his three earliest ballets brought him international acclaim. Beginning with *The Firebird* (1910) and *Petrushka* (1911), Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* (1913) was premiered by the Ballets Russes in Paris and caused a riot due to the score's completely fresh and revolutionary rhythms, structure, instrumentation and harmonies. Basically every facet of the score was treated in an entirely new way. Similarly, the dancing did the music justice in its strange contradiction of ballet technique and innovative costumes.

Perhaps the most jarring and obvious element of the *Rite of Spring*'s complete originality is its rhythmic structure. Expanding on *Petrushka*'s methods of frequently varying rhythms and unusual meters, Stravinsky pushes rhythmic structure to its utmost barriers. Not only are there frequent meter changes and unusual time signatures, but also different orchestral sections play contrary and contradictory rhythms, almost like an expanded hemiola of sorts, not limited to solely the juxtaposition of three over two. For example, at Rehearsal 7's 2nd measure (page 5 of the score) the piccolos play quintuplets over triplets in the cello and bassoon clarinets. Of course, the 2/4 overall time signature is shared between instruments throughout at least any one given measure, but these strange polyrhythms completely throw off-kilter any sense of rhythmic cohesion between sections, albeit in an artful and realized way. However, the overall time signature does indeed shift measure to measure as seen from the very beginning, which starts in 4/4 and moves to 3/4 for the second measure, and then back to 4/4 and then to 2/4. These

changes occur literally almost every measure of the first two pages of the score (up to Rehearsal 5) at which point the meter technically maintains its 2/4 identity but is further overthrown by the introduction of quintuplets, sextuplets, triplets and septuplets simultaneously overlaid on each other. Further, beyond the challenge of keeping in time playing this music, the sheer technical virtuosity involved in the extremely fast and not altogether conjunct runs of 10 notes in a single beat (as exemplified in the quintuplets of every measure of Rehearsal 9 and measure 6 of Rehearsal 8) present an even bigger responsibility to the players.

Stravinsky also accents unexpected places in measures, further destabilizing any consistent or expected ordinary rhythmic flow. For example, in Part I, “Dances of the Young Girls” (page 12, Rehearsal 13), the rhythm begins relatively straightforward, with consistent 8th note double stops in the four instrument sections. However, Stravinsky accents the unexpected when French Horns enter on the ends of beats 1 and 2, marked with sforzandos, accenting the offbeat. This off-beat emphasis likewise occurs in the other instruments, whose ends of beats 1 and 2 are marked with accents. Thus, beyond marking accents in the score, Stravinsky accents and brings attention to already apparent syncopations via orchestration techniques (i.e. introducing the French horns with aggressive sforzando offbeat chords). This technique (also reinforced by the overall dominant percussive quality of the entire orchestra) is applied throughout the whole piece, with introductions of and spotlights on prominent instruments at rhythmic offbeats.

Though one could explore to almost no end Stravinsky’s rhythmic procedures, the Rite of Spring’s importance lies also in its harmonic structure and intense chromaticism and dissonance. For example, in the opening to “Dances of the Young Girls,” a single

chord is pulsated by all the instruments (accented by the French horns as well). This very first chord is extremely dissonant from the get-go. It contains both an F-flat major triad and an E-flat Dominant 7th chord. Thus, it can also (and perhaps better) be viewed as derived somewhat from an octatonic scale. Beginning with E-flat, it contains the notes E, G, A-flat, B-flat, D-flat, all belonging to an E-flat octatonic scale. This “chord” at Rehearsal 13, comprised of E-flat, D-flat, B-flat, E, F-flat, A-flat, C-flat and F-flat, recurs throughout the whole section. Stravinsky employs similar dissonant and non-tonally functional referential chords (or rather collection of scalar notes) throughout the piece serving as an anchor of its own in an atmosphere of extreme dissonance.

Also notable is the Russian folk influence that permeates the ballet’s music (and dancing, for that matter). This is apparent in its short, extremely simple melodic fragments that join with other fragments, creating more complex larger components. However, though simple, the fragments are chromatic and often arise out of the scalar connection of notes in lower harmony. For example, also in “Dances of the Young Girls,” Rehearsal 19, Stravinsky reorders the pitches of F-G-A-flat-B-flat to comprise a string of melodic phrases. The combination of these melodic fragments can be seen in measures 5-11 of Rehearsal 28, in which Stravinsky first presents a succession of four distinct short melodic fragments and then repeats the four fragments six times, but with a different order each time. Thus, a larger melodic whole is created with a unique framework of repeated disordered melodic fragments. This new approach to melody, along with its ostinato placement (that is, one phrase repeated in the same instrument, like the flute in the example just stated) also can be seen, especially in regards to its ostinato characteristics, in the rhythmic patterns of the piece. These harmonic and rhythmic

innovations were so extreme and unabashed for the first time in Stravinsky's (and truly all composers in history's career), placing *The Rite of Spring* as one of the most iconic musical works of the 20th century.