

# “ ULTIMATE EVOLUTION OF THE BALLET MUSIC A GENERAL ANALYSIS ON THE RITE OF SPRING A BALLET WORK BY IGOR STRAVINSKY”

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## ABSTRACT

*Igor Stravinsky was the leading composer in the first decades of 20th Century. With his contribution to musical literature by his innovative technical usages as asymmetric rhythmic patterns, dry sound, dissonance usage, new harmonization techniques, direct expression and a different dimension on orchestration, Stravinsky redefined the understanding of music in an esthetical manner thorough his career.*

*Le Sacre du Printemps, in English title the Rite of Spring is one of his works with whom he had been taken into consideration by classical music community in 1913. It is the work that he has built his musical brand with. In this work, the musical techniques which he used in the work in order to create a primitive scene will be discussed in a surface level. The impact that Stravinsky created will be shown by examples.*

**Key Words:** *Primitivism, Stravinsky, Le Sacre du Printemps, the Rite of Spring, Ballet Music, Music of Twentieth Century*

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## INTRODUCTION

### ULTIMATE EVOLUTION OF BALLET MUSIC

As it is very well-known, Igor Stravinsky was the composer who had reached his zenith in his career with his one of the first ballet works named *Le Sacre du Printemps* as we know within the English title, *The Rite of Spring*. His success with *Firebird Ballet* in Russia brought him the chance of living in France and work with Diaghilev who was the manager of “Les Ballet Russes” a company of Russian dancers. Although Stravinsky was a young half-baked composer by being Korsakov’s private student, he surprisingly succeeded to introduce the Paris audience with untouched Russian heritage. While he was writing his *Petruchka*, his second ballet, with the collaboration of Nikolai Roerich an artist and expert on the ancient Slavs, he came up with the “idea of a pagan ritual in prehistoric Russia where a young girl is chosen to dance herself to death as a sacrifice to the God of spring” (Palisca & Burkholder, 2006:928).



Picture 1: Drawings by Valentine Hugo (Taruskin, 2009)

## 1. Birth of Sacre

The tour that had been placed in 1910 to the Russia's rustic areas would be the conceiving point of the Rite. As well as the reputed bassoon theme in the very first moment of the work, many different melodic materials and the color of folksongs were derived from that tour and a folksong booklet that was a kind of Lithuanian wedding songs anthology (Taruskin, 2009).

The image shows a musical score for the first four bars of the "Introduction" of Igor Stravinsky's "The Rite of Spring". The score is for Clarineti (A), Clarinetto basso (B), Fagotti, and Corni (F). The tempo is marked "Lento - so tempo rubato". The bassoon part is marked "solo ad lib." and "mp". The woodwinds are marked "colla parte". The score shows the beginning of the piece with a key signature of one flat and a 2/4 time signature.

Picture 2: Igor Stravinsky, the Rite of Spring. The bassoon theme in the first four bars of the "Introduction"

They completed the scenario by referencing a 11th C. Kievan manuscript which belongs to Kievan Rus State that was dwelled between 9th and 12th C in Russia (Taruskin, 2009:171). The aim of the work was not to tell its story, as all previous ballets, but to show a real ritual on stage, "invoking the spirit of primitive life as a balm for the ills of modern urban society" (Palisca & Burkholder, 2006: 928). The idea of "having no story" (Boucouchiev, 1987:60) gives the composer to not make any interpretation of the situation just giving the idea to the audience and make himself as an observer of the ritual that will be emphasized later on.

## 2. Main Features of the Rite of Spring

### 2.1. Primitivism

Owing to the fact that subject is a primitive tribe rite; Stravinsky surrounded the whole work with such materials that whistle up the violence of natural life. Taruskin, a music-historian, explains that the work should be called as more than primitive; peasant, savages, raw emotion, plain speech, as biologist; which gives the idea of skeptical of humane ideals; birth, death, procreation, survival. Percussive dissonance usage, polyrhythmic structure of the work and unpredictable accents, rests and attacks would be seen as most important figures based on that biologist primitivism.



Picture 3: Painting by Henri Rousseau - *In a Tropical Forest. Struggle between Tiger and Bull* -1909

After the première which was a grand scandal in 1913, Jacques Rivère a music critic re-titled the Rite as “biological ballet” in which the collective, anonymous body of dancers were criticized as “the dance not just belong to the most primitive man, it is also the dance before there was man”(Taruskin, 2009:188).



Picture 4: Igor Stravinsky, *the Rite of Spring*, Vaslav Nijinsky's Choreography

## 2.2. Folkloric Material Usage

As mentioned above, it is so important to re-touch on the disposal of folkloric melodies. Usage of blocks and juxtaposing them in rapid shifts, he uses many different folk songs in the Rite. (Picture 5 and 6)

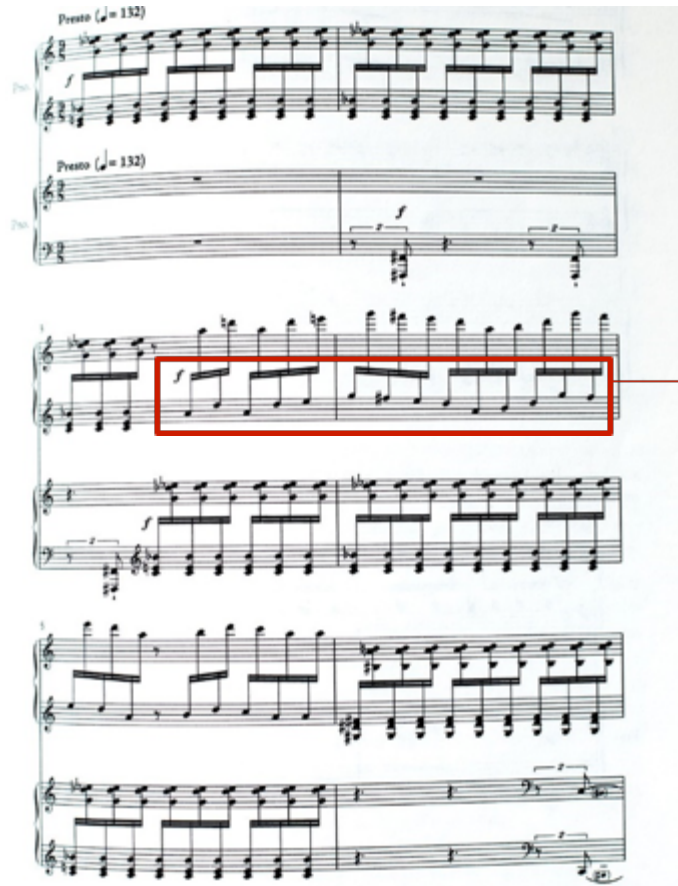
No. 142



Tè - vu - žè - li ma - nu! Sen - gal - vè - li ma - nu!

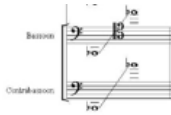
Lejs k ma - nę, tè - ve - li i dva - rą stu - žy - ti.

Picture 5: *Tevuselu Manu!* (Anton Juskiewicz, *Melodje ludowe litewskie*, no. 142) (Taruskin, 2009)



Picture 6: Igor Stravinsky, *the Rite of Spring* (piano four-hands arrangement), "Ritual of Abduction" bars from 1 to 10 (Taruskin, 2009)

In order to project the way of peasant' s songs, he also re-build the orchestration techniques, in which the time is not has any equivalence, unexpected articulations and reflection of un-trained peasant voices by using unusual pitches are seen. In the very beginning of the work the theme settled up on bassoon' s highest register. (Picture 7a and 7b)



Picture 7a: the register of the bassoon

**Fagotti**



Picture 7b: Igor Stravinsky, the Rite of Spring. The pitch usage in bassoon theme. "Introduction", bars from 1 to 3. (Taruskin, 2009)

Moreover, with the usage of percussive dissonance, he evoked the brutality and inhumanity of primitive religion as he imagined it and by using a well-suited technique of harmonization of Russian folksongs, which is the usage of octatonic scales (Picture 8), not done before except Korsakov, he achieved the ideal of neo-nationalism by founding a huge harmonic treatment.



Picture 8: Tetrachordal partition of a octatonic scale (Taruskin, 2009)

### 2.3. Explicit Expression

As an extension of primitivism and violence sub-title, and mentioned above, one of the most important features of the Rite is its way of submitting (Boucourechliev, 1987:61). Stravinsky also gave the fight of defending his aim that expresses having no plot and no organization at the Rite. It means the all work is served as an imitation of a real religious activity. More than having special characters like in romantic Russian ballets, Stravinsky focused on the social aspects and social identities in a pagan rite. His anti-romantic style and shocking musical language with percussive dissonance, polyrhythm and ostinato usage changed all the atmosphere of ballet, as the audience understands till the Rite.



*Picture 9: Swan Lake Ballet by Tchaikovsky – American Ballet Theatre –Photography by Tristram Kenton*



*Picture 10: The Rite of Spring – A performance by Thurust Company -2010*

### **3. Technical Perspectives**

#### **3.1. No Motivic Development**

Starting from very beginning of the work, after introduction, he uses distinct thematic blocks which have no motivic developments. In that point, the usage of quotation peak its climax. He even juxtaposes more than two different, contrasting ideas of blocks or stratificates them by putting them at the same time. (Picture 11)

A

18 Tempo giusto *d. so* (I. II senza sord.)

Cor. V. VI. VII. VIII *f sempre*

V. II II *pp (non div.) sempre simile*

V. Ia *tutti (non div.) sempre stacc. sempre simile*

V. c. *tutti (non div.) sempre stacc. sempre simile*

C. b. *pp (non div.) sempre stacc. sempre simile*

C. Ing. *rit. solo*

Fac. *rit.*

Cor.

Archi *rit. p. come sopra.*

17

Picc. *Flatterunge*

Fl. *Flatterunge*

Fl. c. a. (B) *Flatterunge*

Ob. *I. II ad III*

C. Ing. *Flatterunge*

Picc. (D) *Flatterunge*

Cl. (B) *Flatterunge*

Fac. *Flatterunge*

Cor. *IV*

Tr. ba picc. (D) *IV senza sord.*

Tr. ba (C) *I. II. III. IV*

Archi *rit. f. meno f.*

B

16

Picc.

Ob.

C. Ing. *rit.*

Cl. picc. (D) *rit.*

Cl. (B)

Cor.

Tr. ba (C) *rit.*

Archi *rit.*

B

Ob. *rit.*

C. Ing. *rit.*

Cl. picc. (D) *rit.*

Cl. (B) *rit.*

Fac. *rit.*

Cor. *IV senza sord.*

Tr. ba picc. (D) *IV senza sord.*

Tr. ba (C) *III*

Archi *rit.*

C

C

18

Picc.

Fl.

Fl. c. a. (B) *I. II ad III*

Ob. *rit.*

C. Ing. *rit.*

Cl. picc. (D) *rit.*

Cl. (B) *rit.*

Fac. *rit.*

Cor. *IV senza sord.*

Tr. ba picc. (D) *IV senza sord.*

Tr. ba (C) *III*

Archi *rit.*

A



Picture 11: Igor Stravinsky, *the Rite of Spring*, “Dance of Adolescent Girls” A motive analysis in order to show how block musical materials have been used. Bars from 1 to 71.

As can be seen in Picture 11, in the “Dance of the Adolescent Girls”, he started the piece with a chord on A flat scale in constant eighth-noted string accompaniment with horns unpredictable accents and pulses which directly destroy the idea of meter as a 8 bar block idea (A). In bar 9, English horn and two bassoons break up the primitive sense of eighth-noted chords with a contrast, grotesque, 4 bar common Slavic folk melody (B). Later on, in bar 13, he returns to use first block idea (A) in strings again and in bar 17 with stratification, the English horn’s solo gets on the first block. From bar 23 to 34 he introduces a new block (C), which is more dispersed, like a fanfare. Then, it backs to block A from bar 35 to 71 as a background and build new motivic materials (D) on it.

It is possible to see that, he has ripe motives, which do not need to be added up. Each motivic block has its own-characteristics and the ordering them in a purpose forms the developmental spirit of the Rite.

## 3.2. Intensity of Music

### 3.2.1. Dry sound

“Frequent staccatos and detached playing produce a dry sound, quite far from the lush orchestral sounds of most Romantic composers” (Palisca & Burkholder, 2006:929). In the Rite, what Stravinsky creates is a new musical language. It is not wrong to say that, his new contribution to ballet music made a stroke effect that entirely canalize the later on composition to use that orchestral neologies. The character of his musical language will be analyzed in a surface manner later.

It is also important to emphasize the pulsation that he uses to increase the efficiency of articulation and primitive atmosphere. It gives the sense to audience as if the audience in a forest without any defense and at any moment they can experience any issue which break through wildness. Even he gradually increases the intensity by building up layers of activity, he never touch the sonorous color of Romantic era.

### 3.2.2. Rhythmic Types

In the Rite’s creation process, Stravinsky uses two different types of rhythmic patterns, which are elaborated in order to reflect the unsymmetrical wild living. Toorn, who is an expert on Stravinsky a Russian Music, divides these two distinct rhythm patterns as; one is “the immobile, unchanging ostinato or vamp, sometimes quite literally hypnotic, as when the Elders charm the Chosen One to perform her dance of death, the other type is the rhythm of irregularly spaced downbeats, requiring a correspondingly varied metric barring in the notation”. “Stravinsky contrived to have his two metric types which can be call as the passive ostinato and the active shifting stress, coexist within a single texture” (Taruskin, 2009:183). As can be seen in picture 12, in the middle section of the glorification dance, while a variable downbeat pattern in the violins’ and violas in pizzicato, the lower strings, lower winds and percussion play a rigid figure of four eighth- notes’ duration.



Picture 12: Igor Stravinsky, *the Rite of Spring*, “Glorification Dance”. Bars from 114 to 115. (Taruskin, 2009)

There was no precedent for this technique before Stravinsky, which means, it is entirely his new productive materials used at first in the Rite. In a way it is possible to see that technique as stratification of rhythms.

### 3.2.3. Dissonance

As mentioned before in several times, the percussive dissonance usage is one of the building stone as well as the rhythmic devices, or the cells of dry sound (staccatos, articulations). As an example, at the very beginning of the Dance of Adolescent Girls, strings and horns play the chords which include the all seven notes of an A flat harmonic minor scale. (Picture 13)

Picture 13: Igor Stravinsky, *the Rite of Spring*, “Dance of Adolescent Girls”. Bars 1 to 3.

“The dissonance is intense, but there is no expectation of resolution; the chord is simply a musical object, one of many that Stravinsky juxtaposes through-out the piece and the striking dissonance evokes a primal feeling” (Palisca & Burkholder, 2006: 928). After the première, one of the Russian critics claimed that in the piece there was no even any triad. Therefore as his one of elements of musical language that he creates through the Rite, it is the thing what makes this piece more violent is the dissonance usage.

### 3.3. Harmonization Techniques

#### 3.3.1. Octatonic Scale, Tetrachord Usage and *the Rite Chord*

Most probably, it was the best way to harmonize the Slavic melodies building on an Octatonic system which consist of one whole and one half notes in an order. It is possible to partition the Octatonic scale into four minor tetra chords with starting pitches arrayed along a similar cycle which means a minor tetrachord consist of the first four notes of the minor scale. “The reason why this partition of the Octatonic scale has a special affinity for Russian folklore is that many Russian folk melodies are confined to the notes of a minor tetrachord” (Taruskin, 2009). (Picture 14 and 15)



Picture 14 same as Picture 8: Tetrachordal partition of an octatonic scale (Taruskin, 2009)



Picture 15: A tetrachordal Russian Folk Melody, *Oy vir vir kolodez*, from the singing of Agregena Glinkina, Smolensk, Russia (Taruskin, 2009)

Stravinsky, in the Ritual Action of the Ancestors, uses two tetrachords whose root-notes are set apart from each other with a triton, which means he divided the Octatonic scale into two equal pieces. In that way he can easily use one of the tetrachords in the melody, either the other tetrachord is used in the accompaniment. (Picture16)



Picture 16: Igor Stravinsky, *the Rite of Spring*, from "Ritual Action of the Ancestors" (Taruskin, 2009)

While in the melody he uses the tetra-chord; G#, A#, B and C#, in the accompaniment the rest of the Octatonic scale is used as, D, E, F, G.

"From the opposition of these two different scales, Stravinsky educed a three-note harmonic skeleton or source chord consisting of the outer notes of tetrachord accompaniment. This harmony pervades *The Rite* from beginning to the end, giving rise in the process to some of the most famously dissonant chords on its musical surface..." (Taruskin).

The chord named as The Rite Chord by Toorn and as an example it consist of with a triton upon a perfect four interval which produces the major seventh dissonancy interval. *The Rite Chord* is everywhere of the whole work. (Picture 17, 18 and 19)



Picture 17: *The Rite Chord*, “Dance of the Adolescent Girls” (Taruskin, 2009)



Picture 18: *The Rite Chord*, sketch for the “Glorification of the Chosen One” (Taruskin, 2009)



Picture 19: *The Rite Chord*, preparatory measure before “Glorification of the Chosen One” (Taruskin, 2009)

There is also whole tone usage is seen. At the very end of the tableaux 1, in the Dance of Earth, bassoons and contrabasses make end the episode with directing from lower octave F# to upper F# with using whole tone scale. (Picture 20)



Picture 20: Igor Stravinsky, *the Rite of the Spring*, “Dance of the Earth,” end – line of the bassoons

### 3.4. Orchestration

#### 3.4.1. Soloists

As orchestration, his uncommon choosing of instrumentation creates a brand. As we know from the very well-known opening melody in the bassoon, he reverses the idea of soloists. After bassoon’ s springful melody, the bass clarinet answers bassoon’ s melody. Later on, in an order, Stravinsky introduces the audience with new soloists that are English horn, E flat clarinet, Piccolo Trumpet, Alto Flute and Timpani. It would be seen as a revolutionist idea which is directly refuses the heritage of German Romantic instrumentation.

### 3.4.2. Timbre

Because of Stravinsky's maximalist approach, which aims to success needed to be topped, he managed the instrumentation in to a kind of untrained village voices. Opening melody of bassoon is given in the higher register of the instrument. Also it is the first piece where timpani's C<sup>4</sup> is used which is its highest pitch. He again reversed the ideal instrumentation borders of Romantic heritage into full capacity used orchestration. Thus, he was able to get any color of music that he imagines.

## CONCLUSION

In the beginning of Stravinsky's composing career, with the techniques he used in Firebird, Petrushka and The Rite of Spring which could be seen as composer's development period, Stravinsky tried to find an original way to express his musical understanding throughout Ballet Music. The Rite of Spring which was designed by Stravinsky, Roerich, Diaghlev and the premier ballet of Les Ballet Russes, Nijinsky, is not only a revolutionary ballet music; behind it, it was a great work of an historical research. The Kievan's pagan tribes are re-created within a perfect design which also needed a great imaginary.

“In the path of Debussy's staggering impact on understanding the traditional tonal music, Stravinsky became the representative of the primitivism in music by using barber harmony and rhythmic structures on The Rite” (Eren, 2014:219). The usage of quotations from Russian folk songs and their abstract patterns, the octatonic scales and dissonant chords which are used in order to support the melodies, asymmetric rhythmic patterns, the dominant usage of wind instruments as possibly seen in Debussy's music, dry sound, direct expression and a different dimension on orchestration by searching primitive timbres, are the features of this work which lead it come into prominence in the first decades of 20th Century.

Throughout his first ballet works, he has defined his originality in musical language manner. With the works after the Rite of Spring, he has combined some of the 20th Century musical techniques such as Neo-classism, Twelve Tone Technique or Serialism, with his musical approach. Besides the ballet music, he has also given different kind of works like symphony, chamber music, sacred music, experimental theatre music and concertos. It is possible to say for each of them that his innovative touches to the forms and components of the music were the reason what he wanted to bring those new aspects. For the Rite of Spring, it is the renovation of classical Ballet Music concept.

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*1 In this work, scientific value of pitches are defined with the system that is accepted in 1939 by Acoustical Society of America. The middle C in piano is accepted as C<sub>4</sub>.*

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