

Stravinsky The Rite Of Spring

Igor Markevitch
Philharmonia Orchestra

Igor Markevitch was a leading conductor, known for brilliant performances, especially of twentieth century music. He was also a composer who attracted some interest in his own day. His parents left Kiev when he was two years old. Markevitch was brought up in Vevey, Switzerland. He took piano lessons from his father and then with Paul Loyonnet and also started to compose. The pianist Alfred Cortot saw some of his piano compositions and recommended that the boy study in Paris. In 1925 he enrolled in Cortot's piano class at the École Normale de Musique. He studied harmony, counterpoint, and composition with Nadia Boulanger. The ballet impresario Serge Diaghilev commissioned him to write a piano concerto and a ballet. The concerto premiered in London in 1929, but Diaghilev's death in August of that year caused Markevitch to stop work on the ballet, instead recycling materials from it into a cantata, premiered with great success in Paris on June 4, 1930. Later that year, another new work, a Concerto Grosso, received even greater acclaim. The ballet, Rébus, was first staged in December 1931, and was hailed as a great composition. The next ballet, L'envol d'Icare (June 1933), was once again highly praised. But after this Markevitch began to receive criticism for his use of unrelieved dissonance and his novel use of instruments.

Meanwhile, Markevitch had begun to conduct, debuting on the podium with the Amsterdam Concertgebouw Orchestra in 1930. He studied conducting with Hermann Scherchen in 1935. His composing activities dropped off as he increased his conducting. He spent World War II in Italy, having acquired Italian citizenship. In 1944 he was appointed music director of the Maggio Musicale Orchestra in Florence. He began conducting full time, coming into demand as a guest conductor, and held a variety of directorships or principal conducting appointments with the Stockholm Symphony Orchestra (1952-1955), the Montreal Symphony Orchestra (1956-1960), the Havana Philharmonic Orchestra (1957-1958), the Concerts Lamoureux of Paris (1957-1961), the Spanish Radio and Television Orchestra (1965-1969), the Monte Carlo Orchestra (1967), and the orchestra of the Accademia di Santa Cecilia in Rome (1967-1972). His American debut was with the Boston Symphony Orchestra in 1955. He also began giving conducting master classes, especially in Monte Carlo, from 1969.

He was known for his performance of the Russian repertory and twentieth century music. He had a quick temper, reflected in his music in sharp emotional shifts, yet the music was meticulously prepared and nearly always followed the composer's directions with exceptional care. In the late '90s, his recordings came back into demand in re-release, and even his compositions were finding a small but interested market and were praised anew for their originality.



While lynching the composer -- which the anonymous author in the Boston Herald of February 9, 1924 appears to advocate in his last couplet -- seems a bit excessive as a pan, one must remember that such vituperations only added to the air of succès de scandale that had surrounded Rite since its Paris premiere some ten years earlier. Certainly, the impact of this legendary event (as well as similarly "colorful" receptions to the work elsewhere) expedited its recognition as an all-around seminal occurrence and achievement in the social history and art of the twentieth century. In understanding early reactions to Rite, it is worth considering that while Stravinsky was at a relatively early stage in his career, a cadre of older, well-known, more traditionally aligned composers -- Strauss, Saint-Saëns, Sibelius, Elgar, and yes, Rachmaninov -- remained active and retained a good deal of currency with audiences. At the same time, the scenario adopted by the Rite collaborators -- Stravinsky, folklorist and artist Roerich, choreographer Nijinsky, impresario Diaghilev -- was far from the usual genteel, sentimental, and romantic themes that had theretofore dominated ballet. This collection of "Scenes from Pagan Russia" (the work's subtitle) concerns itself with an exploration of nature, both human and that of the earth itself, through the rituals of renewal -- ultimately, human sacrifice -- of an earlier, "primitive" society.

The titles of the ballet's two main sections, "A Kiss of the Earth" and "The Exalted Sacrifice," as well as those of their internal divisions, make clear both the ritualistic, sacred, and inviolable progression of events reenacted via music and choreography, and the elements of that progression. Stravinsky skillfully sustains and continually heightens a

sense of brutal inevitability over the span of the whole work while encapsulating more specific elements in individual scenes. The Introduction raises the curtain on the earth itself, the distinctive bassoon solo plaintively establishing a hushed, reverent mood. More complex colors -- which Stravinsky achieves through extreme instrumental ranges (as in the above instance), special playing techniques, and endlessly changing combinations drawn from his greatly expanded orchestra -- gradually emerge and expand, only to be cut off subito by a remnant of the original bassoon theme. "The Augurs of Spring" begins with one of the most famous chords in music history, a crunching bitonal sonority hammered relentlessly in a constant 2/4 meter metrically undermined by unpredictably shifting accents.

Comparable instances of such rhythmic and harmonic harshness abound throughout the work, these elements assuming, along with instrumental color, both individual and collective roles in a manner analogous to those of the characters. Like the musical elements Stravinsky uses in their portrayal, the girls, youths, and elders function together within the identity of their society, at the same time assuming and asserting individual roles in relation to one another. The action forges ahead in an increasingly frenzied trajectory, finding culmination -- in a sort of primal equivalent of cold logic -- in the charged, uncompromising sacrificial dance which ends both the ballet and the cycle of its ritual.

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1 Part I - Adoration of the Earth 15:42

2 Part II - Sacrifice 16:18

Recorded by Angel Records 1960



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