

“THE RITE OF SPRING”
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Sermon

The Russian composer Igor Stravinsky wrote “The Rite of Spring” in 1912; it premiered in 1913. It was a stunning, revolutionary piece of music. It was so different from anything that came before it that it turned the music world upside down. It still inspires strong reactions. I remember hearing it as a kid, and being captivated by it. I loved it!

What was so revolutionary about it? Well, the piece had a lot of dissonance—something that we’re used to today but which was almost unheard of in 1913. It also had very unusual rhythms (anticipating jazz among other styles), strange accents, and on the whole was not necessarily pretty to listen to. Maybe most unusual was its raw energy—the piece had a pulsating, instinctual, primitive feel to it—and in this way it prefigured rock and roll.¹

It’s the energy that I find most fascinating and compelling. This is why I loved the piece the first time I heard it. The raw energy of it makes it perfect match for the spring—a time of incredible energy. You can almost feel the energy as the flowers start poking up above the ground and day by day noticeably grow taller until they burst forth in all their magnificent beauty.² You can feel it in the buds coming forth on the trees until one day the leaves unfurl in their brilliant green splendor. You can even feel it in the animals—in the chatter of the birds, for example. What’s most remarkable about the spring is the contrast with what comes before: just about everything in nature seems gray and dead during the winter. Then life springs forth; what had been brown and gray suddenly is green and bright. What a miracle! Earlier composers writing odes to spring captured the lyrical beauty of the season, but none had captured the raw power of spring like Stravinsky.

I want to play the beginning few minutes of the piece for you. The opening part is called “The Adoration of the Earth.” Several generations here will consciously or unconsciously conjure up dinosaurs and volcanoes in our minds as we listen—in Stravinsky’s view the unfortunate result of Walt Disney’s use of the music in *Fantasia*. After concluding that Disney would find copyright loopholes to use his music whether he wanted him to or not, Stravinsky reluctantly sold Disney the rights to “The Rite of

¹ Our pianist played some snippets from the piece to illustrate these qualities.

² A member of the Fellowship shared a line from Dylan Thomas that captures this well: “The force that through the green fuse drives the flower.” <http://www.bigeye.com/theforce.htm>

Spring” for \$5000. He hated what Disney did to the music, and he found the animation “imbecilic.”

A year ago on NPR, the conductor Marin Alsop shared some of the images that come to her mind as she hears the opening section. These images came to her from her experience of moving to the country after growing up in New York City. They are more in tune with what Stravinsky had in mind than dinosaurs:

In the early mornings, I would wake up to a chubby groundhog shaking the dew off his fur. This, for me, has become the English horn solo in the opening section, strutting obliviously around the yard.

I never knew how noisy bird life could be in the countryside, and the E-flat clarinet has come to remind me of all those insistent, unrelenting morning twitters. The alto flute, however, is a more graceful, slower-moving bird from the nearby lake that swings by now and then.

The bass clarinets conjure up bubbling, vomiting goop, and I’ve found that asking the musicians to “vomit” up their parts elicits the perfect interpretive results.

When I hear the two contrabassoons, I imagine a pair of enormous beetles munching their way through giant leaves. And the piccolo trumpet soars like a prehistoric flying creature, as my present experiences meld into my imagined ones, all in just the first three minutes of the music.

Let’s listen to the first few minutes...³

When I think of classical music concerts, I conjure up in my mind polite audiences listening attentively—even passively—to the music. This was decidedly NOT the case with the debut of “The Rite of Spring.” It was far more like a Sex Pistols or a Who concert than a typical classical music concert.

Let me paint a picture of the wild premiere. The year was 1913. The place: Paris. The world was just months away from the wrenching cataclysm that would become known first as the Great War, and then as World War One. The revolution in Stravinsky’s native Russia was just a few years off. The world of visual art had already been rocked by first the Impressionists and then the Cubists—everything in that world had been turned upside down. But the music world had remained largely untouched by new and radical ideas—until the premier of the “Rite of Spring.”

The piece was so demanding that the orchestra practiced more than 130 times for the premiere. So did the ballet—Stravinsky wrote the piece to be a ballet.

The first few minutes of the premiere went fine—not a surprise since, as we heard a moment ago, the piece has a fairly docile beginning. But soon enough the music began to disturb some people. These folks started to boo and shout out nasty remarks to the performers. A few people who liked the music started shouting back. The arguments got louder until finally fistfights broke out. Before long, there was a full-fledged riot in the concert hall. As all this was going on, the man who commissioned the piece madly

³ <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyID=9041627>.

flicked the lights on and off and in effort to quiet things down. Enraged by the rude reception, Stravinsky retreated from the auditorium and went backstage for the remainder of the piece. Somehow through it all the orchestra and the dancers managed to continue performing. The dancers could barely even hear the orchestra because of all the commotion, so the choreographer had to shout their cues to them. What a scene!

The American writer Carl Van Vechten wrote an eyewitness account of the concert. He described a man behind him who loved the music (at least what he could hear of it). This man was so taken with the music that he unconsciously began beating rhythmically on top of Van Vechten's head with his fist. Van Vechten was also so taken with the music that for some time he didn't notice the rhythmic pounding on his head. Finally he noticed and turned around. The guy behind was surprised by what he was doing and quickly apologized.

After the concert was over and the audience—still arguing and fighting—spilled into the streets outside the concert hall, the man who commissioned the piece and had madly flicked the lights on and off sighed contentedly: “This is exactly what I wanted.” He immediately recognized how much publicity the riotous response would generate. Stravinsky was not so happy—he believed that the audience should have waited until the end of the piece to express its disapproval. Mostly harsh reviews flooded the newspapers after the concert—words like “hideous” and “filth” and “refuse” were commonly thrown about.

Interestingly, it did not take long for the public to change its tune. Just a year later, another audience in Paris leapt to their feet at the end of the piece and gave it a rousing standing ovation. Many of them then rushed backstage, hoisted Stravinsky on their shoulders as a hero, and carried him joyously out into the street. The revolution Stravinsky ignited had taken hold.

Let's listen to another section. You'll hear in this some of what set some of the crowd off.

Part of the revolutionary nature of “The Rite of Spring” was its content. Stravinsky drew not on Christian themes and stories but instead on ancient Russian folk stories and fertility rites to evoke the spring. The work was unapologetically pagan. In fact, he described his work as “pantheistic.”

This makes me think of the Sword Dance that we did at our Winter Solstice service in December. That dance is also based on an ancient pagan story. Do you remember at the end of it how the sword dancers ceremonially kill Winter, and then from that lifeless body on the ground Spring jumps up and comes to life? Stravinsky envisioned the same sort of thing in “The Rite of Spring.” The piece includes a human sacrifice—again showing mythically that winter must die before spring can be reborn. I think he turned to the pagan stories because no other stories better capture the miracle of the change in seasons—and especially this most amazing transition from winter to spring. Pagan traditions are so in rhythm with the cycle of the seasons.

And even though Stravinsky meant his piece to embody pagan stories and rituals, the initial reception his piece received and its turning upside the musical world remind me of the spirit of Easter. The Jesus of the gospel story was like Stravinsky: he's a revolutionary. He turns things upside down. He says that the first shall be last and the

last shall be first. By this he means that the poor, the sick, the outcast, the downtrodden should come first. His message is so shocking and so revolutionary that the authorities come down hard on him and his followers. They arrest Jesus, convict him in a phony trial, and execute him as a criminal. They assume his death would be the end of the story. But then something amazing happens—it isn't the end of the story. His followers keep on believing in him and his message. It is as if he hadn't been killed at all. Like Spring bouncing up at the end of the Sword Dance, Jesus' message of peace and justice and love lives on. It is no coincidence that Easter occurs at this time of year. It draws on the traditions and the images and the energy of the season.

And so: Happy spring! Have a happy—and revolutionary—Easter!

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