



## ***unlocking the novel*** **a guide to modernism and postmodernism**

### ***The Rite of Spring:***

#### **understanding and connecting Stravinsky's music to the modernist period**

After listening to the music of the pre- and post-World War I era, many connections can be drawn between the music and literature. Connections can be drawn between all of the art forms of the period. At the center of it all was Paris. At this time, Paris was a blossoming center of contemporary art where artists from many different genres intermingled. Similar themes of disillusionment and desensitization began to surface in literature, music, and the visual arts.

A few connections exist in being able to understand or decode what these artists were trying to accomplish. First, it is important to understand the history of the period. Knowing what kind of environmental and societal influences there were on the artist at the time is important. Second, understanding the history of the artist is crucial, as is knowing what kinds of events in the person's life might have influenced his or her works. Third, it might help to research the innovations that the artist has made in his or her works. Last, it is important to take time when listening to this music. One must take the time to read the book again after the first reading. In music, the same goes: the more times you listen to the piece, the more you will take away from your listening.

The rest of this page will be dedicated to understanding Stravinsky's ballet, *Le Sacre du Printemps*, or, in English, *The Rite of Spring*. It is my hope to explain some aspects this music so that the reader may find a way to decode other works of art from the same time period.

#### ***The Rite of Spring, Igor Stravinsky***

Igor Stravinsky was born June 17, 1882. His childhood was one filled with musical opportunities. His father, a fine bass singer, encouraged the young Stravinsky to visit the ballet and opera regularly. At the age of nine, Stravinsky began to study piano and harmony and would later begin his studies of composition and counterpoint. In 1902, Stravinsky met Russian nationalist composer Nicholi Rimsky-Korsakov, who took a liking to Stravinsky and offered to tutor Stravinsky. Shortly after their first meeting, Stravinsky's father died. Rimski-Korsakov would become a father-like figure to Stravinsky, as well as his teacher. In 1905, Stravinsky completed his university studies and married his cousin Katerina Nossenko.

At this point, Stravinsky was beginning to gain some attention as a composer. Sergey Diaghilev, a prominent promoter of Russian ballet in Paris, would soon recognize Stravinsky's talent and commission him to write multiple ballets for his company. Of these projects, Stravinsky's first large-scale commission, *The Firebird*, was based on the Russian fairy tale of the Firebird. After completing *The Firebird*, Stravinsky soon wrote his second ballet, *Petrushka*. It was during the period of writing *Petrushka* that Stravinsky began to conceive writing *The Rite of Spring*.

"I saw in imagination a solemn pagan rite; sage elders, seated in a circle, watched a young girl dance herself to death. They were sacrificing her to propitiate the god of spring." – Igor Stravinsky (1911)

"No one had ever heard music like it before; it seemed to violate all the most hallowed concepts of beauty, harmony, tone and expression. Never had an audience heard anything so brutal, savage, aggressive and apparently chaotic; it hit the public like a hurricane, like some uncontrollable primeval force." – Roman Vlad after witnessing the premier of *The Rite of Spring*

Home

Unlocking the  
modern novel

Unlocking the  
postmodern novel

About us

The premier of *The Rite of Spring* was a volatile event. At the premiere, the worlds of the old traditionalists clashed with the new "avant-garde." Quiet protest to the music began even in the prelude music, and as soon as the dancers appeared performing Vaslav Nijinsky's intensely provocative choreography, chaos ensued. Traditionalists protested the intensely dissonant music and what they thought were vulgar gestures of the dancers. Meanwhile, supporters of the music yelled for silence. "Shut up you Berkley Square bitches!" yelled Stravinsky's friend and composer Florent Schmitt. As the riot continued, Stravinsky left the performance and went backstage, where he found Nijinsky (the choreographer) shouting numbers to his dancers because the dancers could no longer hear the orchestra over the riot. The event was truly a clash between the old and the new. Surprisingly, the following performances of the ballet were well received, and a year later Stravinsky was carried triumphantly through the streets of Paris after a performance.

### ***Le Sacre du Printemps (The Rite of Spring)***

#### **Part One: Adoration of the Earth**

[Introduction. Lento](#)

[The Augers of Spring \(Dance of the Young Girls\)](#)

[Mock Abduction](#)

[Spring Round Dances](#)

[Games of the Rival Tribes](#)

[Procession of the Wise Elder](#)

[Adoration of the Earth](#)

Dance of the Earth

#### **Part Two: The Sacrifice**

[Introduction. Largo](#)

[Mystical Circles of the Young Girls](#)

[Glorification of the Chosen Victim](#)

[Summoning of the Ancestors](#)

[Ritual of the Ancestors](#)

[Sacrificial Dance](#)

The first step to understanding *Le Sacre du Printemps* or *The Rite of Spring* is to know that it is not about a pleasant spring morning. The ballet depicts a pagan sacrificial dance and its relationship to the beginnings of earth.

"A solo bassoon intoning a Lithuanian folk-tune at the very top of its range immediately establishes the ritualistic nature of the entire score. This section is abruptly curtailed by the stamping rhythms of the *Dance of the Young Girls*, whose irregular accents and muscular energy spill over into the breathlessly frenetic *Mock Abduction*. The appearance of the *Spring Round Dances* brings a temporary respite, although its heavy, dragging ostinati grind their way towards yet another pulverizing climax, which in turn releases the whirlwind aggressions of the *Games of the Rival Tribes*. The *Procession of the Wise Elder* is briefly intoned by four horns in unison, after which the *Dance of the Earth* brings the First Part to a highly agitated, shattering conclusion. Part Two opens impressionistically, with an extended *Introduction* whose half-lit textures eerily suggest the arrival of a new dawn over a barren landscape. The *Mystical Circles of the Young Girls* extends this material still further, the score prescribes strings divided into thirteen parts. The *Glorification of the Chosen Victim* savagely interrupts the pseudo-liturgical tone, leading to a massive timpani crescendo opening the *Summoning of the Ancestors*, which combines with the *Rituals* to force the tension to a bursting point. The final *Sacrificial Dance*, is a devastating musical portrait of obsessive self destruction which erupts with a primeval force of almost hypnotic brutality." - Julian Haylock 1993 (Taken from liner notes of recording by Leonard Bernstein and the New York Philharmonic)

*The Rite of Spring* was written over a period of two years. In the work, Stravinsky employed a number of new compositional methods. Unlike just about all composers from the past musical eras, Stravinsky abandons traditional uses of phrasing. In the past, almost all phrasing in music had centered on groupings of four. Sing "Twinkle-Twinkle Little Star" to yourself while counting in your head 1-2-3-4, 2-2-3-4, etc. As you may have noticed, it all adds up into groups of four, four small groups of four and one big one, before the tune starts over. For some reason, the human ear finds it aurally pleasing to hear things in fours. It gives the music a sense of completion and symmetry. But Stravinsky throws these groupings out the window (there are some exceptions). In the opening of "The Augers of Spring," his rhythmic groupings are 9+2+6+3+4+5+3. The fascinating part about this particular breakdown is that it adds up to 32, a very symmetrical number in music (also divisible by 4 and 16). One of the main reasons for the adding to 32 was so that the music and the choreography for the dancers would line up. The most important thing to understand with Stravinsky's use of rhythm is that it is unsymmetrical and that *he wants you to feel unsettled and disturbed*.

In addition to his use of incongruous rhythms, Stravinsky ceases to adhere to traditional rules of tonality. One aspect of tonality is that it can be viewed as the sense of motion in music that keeps the music moving from one place to the next, in a non-rhythmic sense. Once again, sing "Twinkle-Twinkle Little Star" to yourself and stop on the word "you" ("Twinkle-twinkle little star / how I wonder what you" [stop]). You might be feeling a slightly unsettling feeling. This is because the music wants to resolve itself (to the word/note "star"). Stravinsky uses these kinds of dissonance and tension throughout his music (just on a much more grandiose scale than "Twinkle-Twinkle Little Star"). Once again, Stravinsky wants you to feel these tensions and to be unsettled by them. This is not music to help you fall asleep at night.

"Where a chord is so dissonant that the ear cannot sense a possible resolution, the music stands still. Stravinsky's achievement, and it was unprecedented, was to give a crucial structural importance to rhythm instead of harmony, and to use the tension of dissonance to fuel this powerful engine further." - Michael Oliver

Two other elements to keep in mind when listening to this music: it is a ballet, and there is a sequence of events. It may help to form a mental picture in your head of what you might be thinking is going on, maybe picture in your head what you think the ballet dancers might be doing. Stravinsky's music of this period, especially those of his ballets, were objective in nature. It is objective in that they were musical representations of concrete physical things.

Stravinsky's music depicted a different picture of humanity. The use of dissonance created a more realistic representation of the actions of the ballet. This idea runs true in the works of modernist novelists. The novelists sought to create a more realistic representation of reality, in reaction to the depictions of the realist novel. They left tensions in their novels and left stories unfinished, much like Stravinsky's music. Stravinsky's drastic change in musical style also reflected the drastic changes in perspectives that society was experiencing at the time. Although I will not go into extreme detail about the many other connections between the music, literature, and visual art of the time, I will point out that each of these art forms do depict the world at that time and that they are all unified by the fact that they are portraits of their societies of the time. I do encourage the reader to look for them through study of each of these different art forms.

### **Two sites concerning Stravinsky and modernism**

[American Modernism Seen and Heard](#)  
[Classical.Net on Igor Stravinsky](#)

### **One last note on 20<sup>th</sup>-century music**

"In the world of concert music, dramatic innovations emerged during the first three decades of the

twentieth century: the emancipation from the idea of dissonance; continuity and predictability in rhythm; polytonality; atonality and twelve-tone music. However, these all had the effect of alienating the large audience for music inherited from the nineteenth century. Despite critical acclaim for these novel strategies for writing music, the twentieth century turned its back on this new music. It embraced the world of concert music as a museum designed for the art of recreation. In this century, the performance of music from the past has held center stage. . . . By comparing these American composers with their counterparts in art, rather than with their predecessors in music, a new avenue of appreciation and affection can be opened up to a vital, powerful, and too often overlooked American aesthetic legacy.” – Leon Botstein

[Return to \*unlocking the modern novel\*.](#)

"*The Rite of Spring: understanding and connecting Stravinsky's music to the modernist period*" was created by Euan Edmonds, a student at Shepherd College.