Oxford Music Online

Grove Music Online

Stravinsky, Igor, §3: The early Diaghilev ballets, 1910–14

article url: http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com:80/subscriber/article/grove/music/52818pg3

Stravinsky, Igor, §3: The early Diaghilev ballets, 1910–14

3. The early Diaghilev ballets, 1910–14.

Igor and Katya, now with two children, had been living for a year in a flat in the Angliysky Prospekt, and it was here, between December 1909 and early May 1910, that the bulk of *The Firebird* was composed. In February the composer broke off for long enough to make arrangements of Grieg's piano piece *Kobold* op.71 no.3 for a charity ball in which a young dance protégé of Diaghilev's called Vaclav Nizhinsky was making his solo début. The piano score of *The Firebird* was then completed on 21 March/3 April, the orchestral score on 5/18 May, and the 45-minute ballet had its first performance in the Russian season at the Opéra in Paris on 25 June.

The spectacular success of this first of a long line of Diaghilev ballet commissions barely disguises now the fact that the music was both derivative and to some extent formulaic. It was true that, at orchestral rehearsals, Stravinsky had to explain the music to the bewildered players, and that, at the first rehearsal, the sonorities were so unexpected that dancers missed their entrances. But this was mainly because of the actual orchestration, in which a huge force was handled with the same wizardry and dexterity that had already been seen in St Petersburg as masks for a lack of musical substance. As music drama, *The Firebird* broke little new ground. The scenario, cobbled together by a committee of Diaghilev's collaborators with Fokine at their head, was an old-fashioned sequence of dances linked by *pas d'action*, much like *Coppélia* or *Swan Lake*. As for the music, Stravinsky had borrowed the old Rimsky-Korsakov idea of depicting evil or magic in structured chromatics, good or human in diatonics or folksong. His Firebird cavorts to flickering, Skryabinesque harmonies and gasping rhythmic phrases, while the human princesses dance to music which Glazunov himself would not have disowned, and the hero Prince Ivan and his bride are portrayed in Borodinesque settings of ‘authentic’ folk tunes. The demon Kashchey's dance is infectiously rhythmic; but its phrasing is routine. Of course, Stravinsky's mastery of these varied resources was and remains astonishing (and not only in view of his limited experience). But it might not have portended any outstanding innovative genius.

The success, all the same, was sensational. Overnight Stravinsky became a household name. Socially he was lionized. He was befriended by the Parisian great and good, by Diaghilev's aristocratic backers, by composers like Debussy, Ravel and Satie, by writers like Claudel, Proust, Gide and D'Annunzio, and even by the venerable Sarah Bernhardt. It was all very different from the provincial St Petersburg of his experience, with its coteries of Rimsky-Korsakov hangers-on and its so-called ‘Contemporaries’ evenings. The whole point of the Ballets Russes was that it was a fusion of art forms, and through it Stravinsky was automatically brought into contact with intellectual and aesthetic spheres not restricted by the academicisms and petty politics of a dying musical tradition. He in turn was accepted (including by the Parisian critics) as an equal in this sophisticated and vigorous milieu. In the *Nouvelle*

Revue Française, Henri Ghéon called *The Firebird* 'the most exquisite marvel of equilibrium we have ever imagined between sounds, movements and forms'. The fact that this was a general aesthetic, rather than a specifically musical, judgement was, for the moment, of secondary importance.

Whether or not because of his sudden leap to fame, Stravinsky decided to stay for the time being in the West with his family. He spent the remaining summer months in Brittany, composing the two curious Verlaine songs op.9 for his brother Gury (his first ever settings of a foreign language), and tinkering with a new idea for a ballet on a prehistoric subject which he and the painter Nikolay Roerich had already discussed in the spring. But by the time they had all moved in early September to Lausanne (where Katya was to have their third child), he was at work on some completely new pieces for piano and orchestra which soon, perhaps at Diaghilev's behest, became the basis for a whole ballet about the Russian fairground puppet Petrushka. The exact chronology of this change remains controversial. Diaghilev probably manoeuvred Stravinsky into a collaboration with Alexandre Benois (with whom he was making up a recent quarrel) in order to upstage the difficult and arrogant Fokine, who was still, at this point, involved in the new prehistoric ballet – a project, moreover, from which Diaghilev was being excluded. The *Petrushka* subject had certainly been devised, and a good deal of the music written, by the time Benois was directly involved in mid-December 1910. Soon afterwards, Stravinsky paid a flying visit to St Petersburg, and the scenario was worked out in detail. He then returned to Beaulieu, in the south of France, where the family was wintering, and there composed much of the rest of the score. But the extraordinary ending, in which the ghost of the murdered puppet appears above the showman's booth and makes a rude gesture at him, only replaced the original idea of a carnival ending at the last minute. Stravinsky thought up and composed this conclusion in May in Rome, where the company was performing and rehearsing for the Paris season. *Petrushka* finally received its first performance conducted by Pierre Monteux, with choreography by (ironically) Fokine, designs by Benois, and the incomparable Nizhinsky in the title role, at the Théâtre du Châtelet on 13 June 1911.

With the Parisian public *Petrushka* was as great a success as *The Firebird*, and with musician colleagues like Debussy and Schmitt still greater, though the press, wary as ever of challenges to its *idées reçues*, was more guarded. Once again, it was the integration of elements – music, dance and design – that dazzled balletomanes. But the real source of the work's power was the music. Debussy was fascinated by the 'sonorous magic' of the conjuring-trick scene, where the puppets come to life 'by a spell of which … you seem to be the sole inventor' (letter of 10 April 1912). But there was also a certain boldness, an aggressive self-confidence, which he could also not but envy: 'neither caution, nor pretension', as he wrote to Robert Godet (18 December 1911). 'It's childlike and untamed. Yet the execution is extremely delicate'.

This time Stravinsky went straight to Ustilug after the performances, and there began once more to think about the Roerich ballet. But there was still no detailed scenario. This was eventually thrashed out on a visit to Princess Tenisheva's estate at Talashkino (near Smolensk), where Roerich was at work on the interior painting of the chapel. Meanwhile, Stravinsky marked time by setting a series of poems by Konstantin Bal′ mont: first a pair of miniatures for voice and piano, *Nezabudochka tsvetochek′* ('The Forget-Me-Not') and *Golub′* ('The Dove'), which can be seen as studies for certain melodic treatments in the ballet, then secondly a choral-orchestral setting of the symbolist poem *Zvezdolikiy* ('Star-Face', but usually known as 'The King of the Stars'). This strange work, distinguished by astonishing chordal sonorities, was finished in short score by the end of September (the full score had to wait until the following summer). Only then, still in Ustilug, did Stravinsky start work on *Vesna svyashchennaya* ('The Rite of Spring'), as the prehistoric ballet would eventually be called. Intensive work continued at Clarens, on Lake Geneva, where the family was once again spending the winter. By the end of February 1912 the first part was complete in orchestral score, and Stravinsky seems still to have been unworried by the need to finish in time for the Paris season. The subsequent postponement until 1913 probably had more to do with Diaghilev's intention to have the ballet choreographed not by the detested (and in any case overworked) Fokine, but by Nizhinsky, who was fully occupied with Debussy's *L'après-midi d'un faune* for the 1912 season, and as yet too inexperienced to be trusted with the hugely complex new work.

At all events, Stravinsky eased up. In the summer, at Ustilug, he completed the full score of *The King of the Stars*; he made an excursion with Diaghilev to Bayreuth, where he saw *Die Meistersinger* and probably *Parsifal* (an experience he certainly found less disagreeable than he later pretended in his autobiography); and late in October he made a brief visit to St Petersburg – his last, as it would transpire, for almost exactly half a century. *The Rite of Spring* was eventually composed to the end at Clarens in November, after which he went to Berlin for the Ballets Russes season, met Schoenberg and attended a performance of *Pierrot Lunaire* (12 December). In January 1913 he completed the exquisite *Three Japanese Lyrics*, whose instrumentation for small mixed ensemble perhaps shows the passing influence of Schoenberg's masterpiece. In February he was in London with the company, his first visit to Britain (though *The Firebird* had preceded him the previous June). In March, at Clarens, he added the part two introduction to *The Rite of Spring* and worked with Ravel on the score of Musorgsky's *Khovanshchina*, which Diaghilev was putting on in June and for which, in particular, Stravinsky was providing the final chorus Musorgsky had never written. The momentous first performance of *The Rite*, conducted by Monteux and with Maria Piltz as the Chosen One who must sacrifice her life in order to renew the fertility of the soil, at last took place on 29 May in the new Théâtre des Champs-Elysées in Paris.

The riot which attended the première has been much chronicled. It was a typically Parisian affair, targeted as much at Nizhinsky (whose choreography of Debussy's *Jeux* two weeks earlier had been disliked) and even at the theatre's manager, Gabriel Astruc, as at the music, which in fact was largely inaudible. The open, cinema-like design of the new theatre tended to encourage a certain social fractiousness, as perhaps did the hot weather and the presence of a less-than-committed touristic element in the audience. The open dress rehearsal the previous day had passed off without incident before an audience that was actually more typical for the Ballets Russes: a mixture of society – *le tout Paris* – and seriously interested musicians, balletomanes, artists and literati.

Yet the music might well have merited a riot. Certainly it was to remain the most notoriously violent score of a time when huge, noisy orchestras and harsh dissonance were more or less commonplace appurtenances of the new music. The primitive imagery of Russian symbolism, of the kind exploited by Roerich, had always carried a certain revolutionary tone, a note of challenge to ossified social structures. But behind all the racket, behind the wilfully discordant harmonies and convulsive metric irregularities lay a genuinely innovatory kind of musical thinking whose point would not become clear until Stravinsky himself began to deconstruct it in subsequent works. Already *Petrushka* had begun to isolate and manipulate fragments of folk melodies (including tradesmen's cries and factory songs), and to combine them in variable patterns which tended to dissolve regular harmony and metre. *The Rite of Spring* merely intensified these procedures by transferring them to a situation where disruption within a fixed, immobile context was actually part of the plot. Both scores make heavy use of ostinato patterns, and both take the idea of a variable-length melodic figure or cell as the determinant of metre. But whereas in *Petrushka* these changing metres are mostly incidents within a prevailing regularity, in *The Rite* they take over the entire rhythmic structure, and even invade the regular ostinato patterns in the form of thrown accents, often drastically emphasized. Because *The Rite* is also more polyphonic than *Petrushka*, there is at the same time a conflicting accentual relationship of the different lines (which is why Stravinsky sometimes found it hard to know where to put the barlines – a problem reflected in the many changes the score underwent in different editions down the years).

Harmonically both works use the idea of modal ‘fields’. In *Petrushka* such fields are defined either by the conventional mode of the folksongs, or by the octatonic scale, particularly as articulated by triads an augmented fourth apart, for instance the C major/F♯ major superimposition, which serves as the ‘Petrushka’ motif, and which Stravinsky explores (and perhaps discovered) as a white-note/black-note separation of the pianist's hands. Octatony is also important in *The Rite of Spring* (along with other, less rational chromatic modes); but here there is a consistent opposition between the melody – often Dorian-mode folksong fragments – and the remainder of the harmonic field, which typically sets up chromatic interferences with it.

Stravinsky engineers these interferences by joining together Dorian tunes a diminished or augmented octave (major 7th or minor 9th) apart, as on the very first page. At other times, such intervals serve as constructs in their own right, derived from – or defining – the harmonic field, as in the 'Spring Auguries' or the 'Sacrifical Dance'. They seem a natural expression of the harsh and terrible events the ballet enacts. Yet, curiously, Stravinsky never lost his taste for such chords. What one might call the mistuned octave remained for him an emblematic sonority regardless of dramatic or narrative context, and usually, in fact, without violent or barbaric connotations.

Five days after the première, Stravinsky was admitted to hospital with acute enteritis, which soon emerged as full-blown typhoid fever. He stayed in the Villa Borghese nursing home for more than five weeks, missing all six performances of *Khovanshchina* (only the last two or three of which, however, included his final chorus), the last three of *The Rite* and its ensuing London première (11 July). Instead, he went straight back to Ustilug in mid-July, and there embarked, in collaboration with Stepan Mitusov, on a completion of *The Nightingale*, to a fat commission from the newly formed Moscow Free Theatre. It was to be their last summer at the family home. Yet Stravinsky may already have begun to sense that Russia was finished as far as he was concerned artistically. His first two ballets, performed in suite form in both St Petersburg and Moscow, had been greeted by a distinctly mixed press and a deafening silence on the part of his own closest friends (notably the Rimsky-Korsakovs and Steinberg); and now Andrey Rimsky-Korsakov, Vladimir's older brother and recently an even closer friend of Stravinsky's, had published a poisonous review of *The Rite of Spring* in *Russkaya Molva*. The fact that it was apparently partly motivated by fury at Stravinsky's role in the *Khovanshchina* reworking, which had superseded their father's version, will hardly have eased the pain it caused. Paris, by contrast, made handsome amends for its hooliganish first reaction to *The Rite* when Monteux conducted two separate concert performances in the Casino in April 1914, and after the first of these, on 5 April, Stravinsky was mobbed by delirious admirers.

So when the Free Theatre collapsed in May 1914, leaving Diaghilev with the world première of *The Nightingale* (spectacularly designed by Benois) in Paris later that month, the composer was not greatly disturbed, though he lost money because of the charge. More worrying was his wife's health. In January, after the birth of their fourth child, she had had a severe attack of tuberculosis, which had necessitated a move to Leysin, high in the Alps east of Lake Geneva. And it was here that Stravinsky completed *The Nightingale*, somehow managing to paper over the development his style had undergone since 1909. The change of scene from the forest to the Chinese Imperial court does to some extent justify the drastic contrast between the leafy, moonlit textures of the pre-*Firebird* first act and the brittle artifice of the Draughts Chorus and the Chinese March, and above all the subtly dissonant colourings of the scene with Death. Here at Leysin Stravinsky was visited by Jean Cocteau, who hoped, vainly, to secure his collaboration on a theatre project about the biblical David. The only, oblique, outcome of these discussions may have been the tiny string quartet pieces written that summer. But meanwhile sickness was gripping Europe itself. In July, Stravinsky made a hasty visit to Ustilug and Kiev to consult lawyers about his Ukrainian property, and to collect materials he needed for the ballet he was now planning to write about a Russian peasant wedding. It was the last time he set foot on Ukrainian soil.