

RIGHTING THE RITE

It is little known that in 1920 Igor Stravinsky began supervising programming of piano rolls for the major works he had so far composed, "in order", as he said "to create a lasting document which should be of service to those executants who would rather know and follow my intentions than stray to irresponsible interpretations of my musical text".

The most astonishing aspect of the rolls of the Rite of Spring is that the final Dance Sacrale, in which the young virgin dances herself to death, goes far faster in relation to the rest of the work than we ever hear it played now, even on Stravinsky's own recordings.

What happened? Can Stravinsky have indeed intended this to be the tempo of the section when all his scores bore a metronome mark nearly 30 points slower than what we hear on the piano roll?

The eminent American musicologist, William Malloch, first drew my attention to this remarkable information. One of the most insightful and creative thinkers about music today, Mr Malloch has explored in great depth the way in which the existing technology of the day - i.e. barrel organs, music boxes, piano rolls and metronomes - can shed light on the tempi at which pieces of music were originally played. He argues that the reason Stravinsky reduced the tempo for this section was that the music was so difficult for the players of the day and indeed for Stravinsky himself to conduct, that the composer simply wrote in the score and used in his own performances a tempo that he and his musicians could manage. All conductors since then have followed suit.

It is interesting to note that Pierre Monteux, the man who conducted the work at its stormy premiere in 1913 and therefore the musician closest to the original conception, is heard struggling to drive the Paris musicians into playing the section at very nearly the tempo of the piano roll on his 1929 recording, though the results verge on chaos. Stravinsky fares no better in his own recording of the same year at the slower tempo, underscoring the fact that this music presented an extraordinary challenge for even the best European musicians of the day at any speed!

Malloch ingeniously offers the theory that other composers who happened to be in Paris around this time were influenced by the heady effect of the Dance Sacrale and quoted it in their own works.

In Bartok's Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion, Aaron Copland's the Young Pioneers and, most strikingly, in the Finale of Prokofiev's Seventh Piano Sonata, there are passages that quote almost verbatim the Dance Sacrale, but at the tempo of the piano roll, not at the familiar slower tempo. Since all three composers, by coincidence, made piano rolls of their own works at the Pleyel studio it is inevitable

that they would have heard Stravinsky's roll of the Dance Sacrale at the fast tempo and it apparently made an indelible impression on them.

Could the dancers have danced the section at this breakneck speed? Perhaps this wasn't Stravinsky's primary concern. At one of the rehearsals for the Rite, Marie Rambert, the great Russian dancer, describes how "Hearing the way the music was being played, Stravinsky blazed up, pushed aside the fat German pianist ... and proceeded to play twice as fast as we had been doing it and twice as fast as we could possibly dance. He stamped his feet on the floor and banged his fist on the piano and sang and shouted..."

At the galvanizing speed of the piano roll, the conclusion of the work's second part matches and even surpasses the cumulative excitement of the first part, instead of being something of an anticlimax and certainly, we can readily understand how a sacrificial figure could have danced herself to death at such a tempo, whereas at the slower tempo she seems to have a chance to survive!

No one will ever know what Stravinsky would have wanted had he heard the Dance played by an orchestra at the tempo of the piano roll. It is hard to imagine that he would not have joyously embraced it as "the truth," so staggering is its effect.

Perhaps there is poetic justice that a conception that was abandoned because the most experienced musicians of the day could not realize it in 1929, is finally restored to its original power by a semi-professional orchestra 70 years later!

-Benjamin Zander

BENJAMIN ZANDER, founder and music director of the Boston Philharmonic, has become a legendary figure in Boston's teeming musical life. One of the most passionate and charismatic musicians before the public today, his inspired guidance has affected the lives of countless musicians and music lovers.

Born in London into a musical family, Mr Zander studied cello with the great Spanish virtuoso Gaspar Cassado in Florence and at the State Conservatoire in Cologne, and played widely as a recitalist and chamber musician. After completing a degree in English Literature at London University, he came to the United States on a Harkness Fellowship. Since 1967, he has been on the faculty of the New England Conservatory, teaching classes in performance and interpretation and conducting the orchestras. With the Conservatory's highly acclaimed Youth Philharmonic Orchestra he has toured in Russia, Romania, Poland, Austria, Israel and the Far East.

His audiences have come to expect performances of passion and searching intelligence that draw from the players - professionals, students and amateurs alike - a level of commitment and informed intensity that is rare in the concert world

today. In the words of the Boston Review, "Over the past twenty-five years, Zander's daring approach to the classics has injected into the community a vision of music's power to move the human spirit".

THE BOSTON PHILHARMONIC, founded in 1979, is a community orchestra in the best sense of the word. It consists of one hundred musicians, amateurs, students and young professionals brought together by their desire to further their musical training, to study and perform the great works of the orchestral repertoire and to work under the inspiring leadership of founder Benjamin Zander.

Their concerts, each prepared in weekly rehearsals over a period of two to three months are eagerly awaited by Boston's musical audiences as "some of the most important musical events in the city". (Boston Globe).

Following their sell-out performance of the Mahler Second Symphony in Carnegie Hall in 1982, John Rockwell of the New York Times wrote: "Too many professional performances today, for all their technical polish, sound devoid of soul. Perhaps enlightened amateurism is an answer."

This recording of the Rite of Spring was taped at a performance in Jordan Hall of the New England Conservatory in Boston on May 5th 1990. It marks the orchestra's and the conductor's recording debut.

Stravinsky decided that he best liked this music in concert version, deeming the story lines unessential. But he had set down the following description, and the listener may find it convenient as a guide.

In the Introduction before the curtain rises I have given to the orchestra alone the idea of that great sense of fear which weighs upon all sensitive spirits before a controlled power ... a profound mystic sensation which comes to all things at the hour when nature seeks to renew its various forms of life; it is this vague, yet profound discord which affects all at puberty...

The musical material itself swells, expands and is then diffused; each instrument is like a bud which grows on the bark of a venerable tree; it becomes part of an immense ensemble...

In the first tableau (The Fertility of the Earth) some adolescents are seen with an old, old woman, a woman whose age is not known, nor even from what century she comes, but who understands the secrets of nature and who is teaching their meaning to her sons. She runs, bowed down toward the ground, as if neither woman nor animal. These adolescents near her are the Augurs of Spring ..

During this time the adolescent girls come down to the river. They form a circle which mixes with that of the boys. The group merge; but in their rhythm one feels a straining toward the formulation of new groups; and they divide to right and left.

Now a new form has been realized, a synthesis of rhythms, and then from this a new rhythm is produced (Dance of the Youth and Maidens; Dance of Abduction; Spring Rounds).

The groups separate and begin to fight. Messengers go from one to another and struggle ... signifying, so to speak, that aspect of brute force which is also play (Games of Rival Towns). The arrival of a procession is heard. It is the Sage, the oldest man of the clan. A great fear surges through the crowd. Then the Sage, face down on the ground becoming one with the soil, gives a benediction to the earth (Entrance of the Celebrant; Kiss to the Earth). Then all cover their heads, run in spirals, and leap as though endowed with renewed energy from nature ... the (Dance to the Earth).

The second tableau, The Sacrifice, begins with a quiet and obscure play among the adolescent girls. At the opening the musical prelude (Introduction - The Pagan Night) is based in a mysterious song which accompanies the dance of the young girls. They mark within their circle the signs showing where the Glorified One will finally be enclosed never to come out again. She it is who is being consecrated to the Spring and who will thus return to Spring the vitality which Youth has taken from it (Mystic Circle of the Adolescents).

Around the Chosen One, who is immobile, the young girls dance a ritual of glorification (Dance to the Glorified One); then follows the purification of the soil and an Evocation of the Ancestors. The Ancestors group themselves around the Chosen One (Ritual Performance of the Ancestors) and she commences the Sacrificial Dance.

As she is about to fall exhausted, the Ancestors glide toward her like rapacious monsters. So that she should not touch the soil as she falls, they seize her and raise her towards the sky.

THE PIANOLA...

To the outsider, the world of player-pianos must seem complicated. There are many different recording systems, many different styles of piano, some with and some without keyboards, and the music rolls for all of them come in a variety of shapes, sizes and even colours. So to understand Stravinsky's involvement with these instruments, it will be helpful to consider first how they work, and how their rolls were manufactured.

Just as most motor cars run on petrol, nearly all player-pianos are powered by suction, despite their many dissimilarities of appearance. There are two main types of player-piano; the reproducing piano, which uses recorded music rolls with suction generated by an electric pump, and the foot-operated player-piano (commonly called 'pianola' for short) which a 'pianolist' must play, using pedals to

create dynamic levels and accents, and levers to phrase, sustain, subdue and generally bring to life a musical performance.

As a music roll passes over a metal tracker bar in the front of a player-piano, it allows air to pass through its perforations to a series of 88 tiny holes, one for each note of the piano. A hole being opened, free air causes a tiny valve to lift and channel suction to a small pneumatic motor, rather like a miniature bellows. As air is sucked out of the motor, it collapses and pushes on a lever that operates the piano key, so that the chain from perforated roll to audible music is complete.

Whereas reproducing rolls were made by means of special recording pianos, so that the actual playing of a concert pianist was captured, pianola rolls were on the whole a form of transcription from the printed score. Typically, a musical editor would place the sheet music on a small lectern in front of him and lay a blank master roll across a table at which he sat. A scale of note lengths would be decided upon, perhaps 24 perforations to the beat, and the music would be marked up and then stamped out by hand, with a hammer and several sizes of punch. From 1900 to 1930 this transcription process remained a very important means of creating music rolls in order to leave the pianist great scope for individual interpretation.

THE RITE OF SPRING...AND IGOR STRAVINSKY

Paradoxically, part of the attraction for Stravinsky of these metronomic rolls was his belief that they helped him to limit excessive freedom on the part of concert artists, and to that intent he was keen to specify roll speeds and general dynamic changes. By the early 1920s his acquaintance with the pianola (*Etude pour Pianola* - 1921) had grown into a deep involvement with the instrument and in particular with the Pleyela, manufactured by the French firm of Pleyel, Lyon et Cie. In his memoirs Stravinsky recalls the fascination he had for the arrangement of his works directly for music roll, where the limitations of ten fingers and two hands are simply irrelevant.

Working in an apartment which he rented in the Pleyel building in Paris, he was able to maintain direct control over the translation of his works on to roll, a task which he delegated in detail to Jacques Larmanjat, the head of Pleyel's musical department. In this way, over a period of about six years, Stravinsky arranged most of his major ballets especially for the Pleyela; *Petrouchka*, *Firebird*, *Les Noces*, *Pulcinella*, *Song of the Nightingale* and of course, nine rolls of the *Rite of Spring*. Although he did not physically record the rolls, which have in any case far too many notes for a human being to manage, he was able to specify the number of perforations per beat in each section of the music, giving us an exact reflection of his ideas of tempi at the time.

None of Stravinsky's Pleyela rolls has even been recorded on disc before, and on this occasion a 1912 Aeolian push-up Pianola was used, a device that fits in front of a

normal piano and plays it by means of a set of felt-covered wooden fingers. The piano was a Bosendorfer Imperial concert grand in the Great Hall of Dulwich College, London.

- Rex Lawson