

## What I Wanted to Express in *The Rite of Spring*, 1913



*The Rite of Spring / Le Sacre du Printemps* premiered in Paris at the Théâtre du Champs Elysée on 29 May 1913, running for six nights. It was produced by Sergei Diaghilev's, Ballets Russes, with music by Igor Stravinsky, choreography by Vaslav Nijinsky, and sets and costumes by Nikolai Roerich. This text began as an interview with Stravinsky by Racciotto Canudo, editor of the Paris journal, *Montjoie!*, the resulting article the composer later said was both "grandiloquent and naive" in which "I did not recognise myself". "Ce que je voulais exprimer dans *le Sacre du Printemps*" was published in *Montjoie!* in May 1913. Photograph of Igor Stravinsky in Paris, 1913.

The Parisian public gave a good reception to my *Fire Bird* [1910] and *Petrouchka* [1911]. My friends have remarked on the evolution of the inspiring idea which is the fantastic fable in the first of these two works, moving on to a wholly human generalisation in the other. I am aware that *The Rite of Spring / le Sacre du Printemps* no longer appeals to the spirit of fairy tales or to human pain and joy but in it I strive towards a greater and greater abstraction, so may it not disorient those who up to now have shown a sympathetic warmth for my work.

With *The Rite of Spring* I wanted to express the sublime arrival of the onset of nature renewing itself, the whole arising, panic, the universal sap.

In the Prelude before the curtain opens, I conveyed to my orchestra this great fear that weighs on every sensitive soul when confronted by things in power, the "thing in itself" which *can* grow, develop infinitely. The frail sound of the flute can contain this empowering value, expanding throughout the entire orchestra. It is an obscure and immense sensation that all things have at the moment when nature renews its forms, and it is the vague and profound disturbance of universal puberty. I require my orchestra itself and the melodic juxtapositions to evoke this.

The whole of the Prelude is based on a regular "mezzo-forte". The melody develops along a horizontal line which only the instrumental masses, the intense dynamism of the orchestra, can expand or diminish, not the melodic line itself.

As a result, from this melody I excluded chords that are too suggestive and representative of the human voice, with their

crescendos and diminuendos, and I put the *woodwinds* to the fore. They are clearer, not so rich in easy expression, and for this very reason are more moving, it seems to me.

Altogether, in the Prelude I wanted to express the panic fear of nature for the beauty arising, a sacred terror before the midday sun, a kind of scream of Pan. The musical material itself swells, expands, streams out. Each instrument is like a bud that sprouts on the bark of a secular tree. It is part of a magnificent whole.

And the entire orchestra, the entire whole, should convey the signification of Spring being born.

In the first Scene [*Tableau*, Picture], Adolescent boys (1 •) appear with an old, very old woman whose age or century are unknown, and who knows the secrets of nature and teaches prophesy to her sons. She runs, bent towards the earth, half woman, half animal. Beside her the Adolescents are the spring omens whose stamping marks the rhythm of Spring, the beating of the pulse of Spring.

During this time the Adolescent girls go to the river. Together they make a circle which interweaves with the circle of boys. They are not formed beings, they are unisex and double, like that of a tree. They merge, but in their rhythms one feels the cataclysm of groups that come into form. Then they separate to the left and to the right. It is form that comes into being, a synthesis of rhythms. And the thing that is formed produces a new rhythm.

The groups separate and begin to fight. Messengers go from one to the other, and they quarrel. It is the definition of forces by fighting, that is, by the game.



1 • Adolescent Boys. Costumes by Nikolai Roerich

Now one hears the arrival of a procession. It is the Saint who is coming, the Wise One, the Pontifex, the oldest of the clan. Great fear takes hold of the groups. And lying face down on the ground, arms and legs spread out, he himself becomes united with the ground. His benediction is like a signal for a rhythmic surge. Everyone covers their head and rushes around in spirals like new energies of nature. It is the Dance of the Earth.

The second Scene opens with a strange game of the Adolescent girls. At the beginning, a musical Prelude is based on the mysterious chant that accompanies the dance of the young girls. With their circles, they mark the signs in which the Elected will be enclosed at the end and who will be unable to escape. The Elected is she who Spring must Sacrifice, who must give to Spring the force which Youth took from her.

The young girls dance around the Elected who is immobile, a kind of glorification. Then it is the purification of the ground and the evocation of the Ancestors. And the Ancestors gather around the Elected who begins to dance the Sacred Dance.

When she is on the point of falling, exhausted, the Ancestors notice it and slip towards her like voracious monsters so that she does not fall and touch the ground. They lift her up and offer her to the sky.

The annual cycle of forces that are reborn and which fall into the spiral of nature is accomplished in its essential rhythms.

And I am happy to have in Mr. Nijinsky the ideal dance collaborator, and in Mr. Roerich the creator of the pictorial atmosphere for this work of faith.

Translated from the French by Patricia Railing  
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