



Analysis of Musical Features of Dance Drama "Sacrifice of Spring"

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Abstract. Stravinsky is one of the most influential representative composers in the history of European music since the 20th century, and his work "Rite of Spring" has caused a sensation in the European music world, and opened the prelude of Western modernist music in the 20th century. The dance drama "The Rite of Spring" is a milestone in the history of Western music, and still has great research value in contemporary times. Therefore, this paper takes the dance drama "The Rite of Spring" as the main research object, and analyzes the characteristics of its musical form structure, rhythm and tone mode, in order to further understand Stravinsky's work "the Rite of Spring".

Keywords: Stravinsky; The rite of Spring; Musical characteristics.

1 Introduction

The British Classical Music Magazine's accolade for "The Rite of Spring" as the quintessential orchestral work of the 20th century is a testament to its enduring legacy and influence. Igor Stravinsky's revolutionary ballet, composed in 1912 and first performed at the Théâtre de Paris in 1913, was a radical departure from the traditional symphonic forms of its time. It was met with initial shock and resistance due to its bold use of dissonance and rhythmic complexity, which challenged the very foundations of musical harmony and structure prevalent during the Romantic era.

The audience at the premiere was taken aback by the stark dissonance and the rhythmic intricacies that defied the conventional accent patterns. The music's raw energy and primal intensity were unsettling to ears accustomed to the melodic sweetness and harmonic predictability of earlier compositions. The initial reaction was one of confusion and, in some cases, hostility, as the avant-garde nature of the work clashed with the audience's expectations of what constituted 'music.'

However, as is often the case with pioneering art, "The Rite of Spring" gradually found its audience and appreciation grew. Over time, the very elements that initially drew criticism—those dissonant chromatic progressions and the innovative rhythmic structures—came to be celebrated as the hallmarks of a new musical language. The work's evolution from a scandalous premiere to a revered classic mirrors the broader cultural shift towards modernism in the early 20th century.

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The transformative impact of "The Rite of Spring" on the music of the 20th century cannot be overstated. It paved the way for a new generation of composers who embraced atonality, polyrhythms, and unconventional forms, thus shaping the course of modern classical music. As musicians and scholars continued to engage with Stravinsky's work, its significance and the value of Stravinsky's contribution to the musical canon became increasingly evident.

This paper aims to delve deeper into the life and creative process of Igor Stravinsky, drawing from a rich tapestry of literature and primary sources. By examining the cultural and historical context in which "The Rite of Spring" was composed, as well as the composer's personal experiences and artistic influences, we seek to gain a more nuanced understanding of this seminal work. Through a detailed analysis of the ballet's musical features—ranging from its form and structure to its rhythmic innovations and tonal language—we aim to shed light on how "The Rite of Spring" not only reflected the spirit of its time but also propelled music into uncharted territories.

In doing so, this paper contributes to the ongoing discourse on modern Western music, offering insights into how Stravinsky's "The Rite of Spring" continues to resonate with audiences and inspire musicians today. By exploring the work's enduring relevance and impact, we hope to deepen our appreciation for this masterpiece and its role in shaping the musical landscape of the 20th century and beyond.

2 A Brief Biography of the Writer

Igor Fedorovitch Stravinsky is a Russian-American composer and pianist, and a well-known representative of modernist music. Born in St. Petersburg, Russia in 1882, he studied from an early age and began to study composition with Rimsky-Korsakov in piano in 1903[8]. Since then, Stravinsky has produced many masterpieces and has become a leader in neoclassical music, and his creative period can be roughly divided into three phases:

1. The Russian Style Period (Before 1920)

In the early years of the 20th century, Igor Stravinsky's work was deeply influenced by the rich tapestry of ancient Russian religious rituals and customs. This period, often referred to as his Russian style period, is marked by a trilogy of groundbreaking dance dramas that not only showcased his unique compositional voice but also left an indelible mark on the world of music. "The Firebird" was the first of these, a ballet that introduced Stravinsky's name to the international stage with its vivid orchestration and narrative of Russian folklore. This was followed by "Petrouchka", a scintillating story brought to life through a complex interplay of characters and a sophisticated musical language that hinted at the depths of Stravinsky's innovation. The crowning achievement of this period, however, was "The Rite of Spring", a work of such daring originality that it quite literally shocked the artistic world with its raw power and revolutionary approach to rhythm and harmony.

2. The Neoclassical Style Period (1920-1951)

As the 1920s dawned, Stravinsky began to shift his focus towards a style that would come to be known as neoclassicism. This period was characterized by a depar-

ture from the emotional extravagance of Romantic music and a return to the clarity, balance, and formality reminiscent of the music of the 18th century. Yet, Stravinsky's neoclassicism was far from a mere pastiche of the past; it was a reinterpretation and reimagining of classical forms through the lens of modernism. The year 1920 saw the composition of "Pulcinella," a work that not only solidified Stravinsky's neoclassical stance but also marked the beginning of what he termed the "vintage" movement. This period also witnessed a series of compositions that played with conventions and pushed the boundaries of what music could express, with Stravinsky's distinct voice shining through even as he drew from the past.

3. The Serialist Musical Period (1951-1971)

Stravinsky's final major period is known for its adoption of serialism, a method of composition that employs a specific ordering of musical elements, most notably the twelve-tone technique. Influenced by the likes of Anton Webern, Stravinsky's music from this period demonstrated a fascination with the possibilities of this new system. His compositions, including "Agon" and "Threni", showcased a rigorous application of serial techniques, yet they were also imbued with the rhythmic vitality and the distinctive harmonic language that were hallmarks of Stravinsky's style. This period represents a culmination of Stravinsky's lifelong exploration of musical form and expression, as he integrated the strict parameters of serialism with his own creative vision, resulting in works of remarkable complexity and beauty.

Throughout these periods, Stravinsky's music continued to evolve, reflecting not only his personal artistic journey but also the broader shifts within the musical and cultural landscape of the 20th century. His willingness to experiment and push the boundaries of musical expression has left a legacy that continues to inspire and challenge musicians and listeners alike.

Igor Stravinsky's "The Rite of Spring," first performed in 1912, was a pivotal work that dramatically redefined the landscape of classical music. It boldly discarded the emotional extravagance of the Romantic era and the atmospheric subtleties of Impressionism, presenting a new musical language that was both jarring and visceral. This groundbreaking ballet, with its complex rhythms and stark dissonances, challenged the very essence of what was considered musically acceptable at the time, inciting a profound and lasting shift in the direction of 20th-century music.

The ballet's impact was immediate and far-reaching, igniting discussions and debates that extended well beyond the realm of music. It resonated with the artistic and intellectual circles who were concurrently exploring new modes of expression in painting, literature, and dance. "The Rite of Spring" became a cultural touchstone, reflecting and amplifying the spirit of modernism that sought to break with tradition and embrace the new. It inspired a wave of composers to experiment with atonality, polyrhythms, and unconventional structures, fundamentally altering the course of musical composition.

Even today, "The Rite of Spring" remains a powerful testament to Stravinsky's innovative genius and the transformative potential of art. Its influence continues to be felt in the works of contemporary composers, as well as in popular music, film scores, and dance, where its themes of renewal and the primal power of nature resonate with audiences worldwide. The ballet stands as a monument to the courage of artistic vi-

sion and the enduring ability of music to challenge, provoke, and ultimately enrich the human experience.

3 Creation Background

In the early years of studying with Rimsky-Korsakov, Stravinsky deliberately recorded various melodies rich in national customs that he encountered, many of which were from Russia, Lithuania and other countries. In the later creation of "The Rite of Spring", many melody fragments were used in the national melodies he collected in the early stage, and these melodies were different from the major and minor key music systems in European history at that time, which also made "The Rite of Spring" sound more exotic[9].

Stravinsky was then influenced by the primitivism of the 20th century and established a primitivist music that was very different from classical music. He has applied the different melodies he has collected to his works, and the dance drama "The Rite of Spring" is a good proof of this.

At the same time, in 1906, after the success of Russian painting at the Paris Salon, Diaghilev confidently began to prepare for a special concert of the Russian National Music School in Paris[6]. In the process, he communicated with Stravinsky and facilitated the adaptation and re-creation of the soundtrack for The Rite of Spring. After several years of polishing, The Rite of Spring premiered at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris in 1913[10]. At the time, the content was so advanced that it caused abuse from the audience. But with the development of the times, and the troupe performing again and again, people slowly accepted the work. Thus began the development of modern music in Europe in the 20th century[4].

4 Feature Analysis

4.1 Musical Form Structure Characteristics

In the process of creation, the traditional structure of music forms develops with rigor and square, but The Rite of Spring is different. In The Festival of Spring, Stravinsky promoted the further development of music, strengthened the dramatic contradictions and conflicts by reproducing and changing the fragments of original musical materials, and constantly integrated new musical materials into it, forming the alternations and juxtaposition of old and new materials. This technique also became the prototype of later collage music. Thus, the development of musical texture in the Rite of Spring is more concise and richer.

"The Rite of Spring" adopts the frame structure of the suite to create, and mainly describes the scene of the ancient Russian nation holding the sacrificial ceremony of the earth in the spring. The first part, "Worship of the Earth", uses 8 paragraphs to show the primitive living conditions of the ancient Russian nation[2]. The music starts from a mysterious prelude and gradually becomes manic and mysterious. The second part, "Sacrifice", mainly talks about the whole process of the sacrifice ceremony. The

manic and restless music creates a confusing musical atmosphere and depicts the inner world of the characters incisively and vividly. Finally, the girl falls down exhausted and the sound has reached its peak. From the analysis of the relationship of passages in the Rite of Spring, most of its passages do not have obvious boundaries, or a sense of closure, which is also a major difference from the traditional structure of music forms[1]. During the creation of this work, Stravinsky applied different musical materials to the various passages of the work, both adjacent and distant, according to the needs of the development of the plot of the Rite of Spring. He is a representative of the avant-garde in the 20th century, breaking the limitations of traditional music techniques by pursuing the freedom of music with new composing techniques.

4.2 Rhythm and Rhythm Characteristics

Some scholars believe that the performance of rhythm is the soul of the music of the Rite of Spring, which not only becomes the main means of musical expression, but also its expression technique is unprecedented. In The Rite of Spring, Stravinsky adopted a new rhythm structure, disorganized the stress sequence of the rhythm, and gave people a strong impact of confusion and imbalance with frequent replacement of multiple beats, which is very dynamic and innovative[3]. In the Rite of Spring, the rhythm does not follow the traditional rules of strong and weak stress, but rather the stress marks that Stravinsky has marked in the score. It can be on the second or fourth beat, giving the music an unknown mystery. This method of changing the rhythmic stress of a piece by adding stress marks is also seen in later melodies.

The frequent change of rhythm is also a unique feature of the Rite of Spring, and such frequently switched creative techniques also aggravate the irregular stress changes of the dance drama The Rite of Spring to some extent. In Dance of the Maidens, for example, fierce acoustics are achieved by repeating a complex chord over and over again. In addition, the specific rhythm changes also better render the dramatic atmosphere in the dance drama "Rite of Spring", and better express the emotion it wants to convey in front of the audience. For example, in the famous "Ring of Spring Dance", with the constant changes of the plot, the rhythm of the music has undergone five changes, such as $5/4$, $7/4$, $6/4$, $4/4$ and $3/4$ [7], to render the atmosphere and express emotions, which also develops the more use of rhythm in the creative process from the side.

4.3 Tonality Characteristics

From the point of view of tonality, Stravinsky's dance drama "Rite of Spring" did not design the main key such as the traditional music, but blurred the boundary of tonality and did not set a certain mode, which is one of the important reasons for the strong imbalance and impact of "Rite of Spring"[5]. Double tonality is another major tonality characteristic of The Rite of Spring, which is reflected in many passages. The same melodic fragments are displayed in different voices with different tonalities, which gives the work a unique charm contained in the original culture, and can also better meet the needs of the development of the plot. For example, a piece of melodic mate-

rial played by a flute in G is actually derived from the horn part in b flat minor[1]. Because the dance drama "Rite of Spring" integrates a variety of ancient Russian folk music materials, Stravinsky more uses natural major and minor, medieval mode, church mode and other modes to enrich the musical connotation of the work, and its unique artistic style also adds some interest to the work.

5 Conclusion

The early 20th century was an era brimming with transformation and challenge, where societal ideologies and cultural concepts were in an unprecedented state of flux. The advent of industrialization, urbanization, and the outbreak of world wars not only altered the ways of life but also profoundly influenced the direction of artistic creation. Within this grand context, musicians became dissatisfied with conventional musical forms and expressions, venturing towards more innovative and personalized musical languages to convey the complex emotions and thoughts of this ever-changing world.

"The Rite of Spring" was born out of this historical context. Stravinsky, through this work, shattered the shackles of classical music rules, creating an entirely new musical style. Its melodies pursued not harmony and fluidity but were rife with conflict and opposition; its rhythms, instead of adhering to traditional patterns of stress, became free and varied; its timbre shifted from warm and familiar to sharp and alien. All these innovations made "The Rite of Spring" a milestone in the history of 20th-century music.

Even today, we witness many groups continually adapting and performing "The Rite of Spring," reflecting not only the enduring charm of the work but also its profound impact on subsequent musical creations. Each adaptation is a reinterpretation of the original and a reflection and response to the current socio-cultural context.

In this process, it becomes evident that while melody is no longer the central focus of the composer, it still exists within the work in a more subtle and nuanced manner. The irregular rhythms and peculiar timbres, which may initially cause discomfort, have the power to touch our souls more directly and intensely, prompting reflection. This subversion and transcendence of traditional musical aesthetics is precisely what makes "The Rite of Spring" so captivating.

In summary, the turbulent era of the early 20th century provided a wealth of material and vast space for musical creation. As a representative work of this period, "The Rite of Spring" not only demonstrates the musicians' challenge and breakthrough of traditional rules but also embodies their profound understanding and unique expression of the spirit of the times. Its irregular rhythms, peculiar timbres, and reinterpretation of melody offer us a new aesthetic experience, allowing us to feel the impact of the music while contemplating its relationship with the era and society.

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