



Jean Cocteau, cartoon of Stravinsky, 1913

William Fried, piano
University of California, San Diego
Conrad Prebys Concert Hall
8pm, April 8, 2010

The Rite of Spring.....Igor Stravinsky
(arr. for solo piano by William Fried)

I. A kiss of the Earth

Introduction

The Augurs of Spring, Dances of the Young Girls

The Ritual of Abduction

Spring Rounds

Ritual of the Two Rival Tribes

Procession of the Oldest and Wisest One

A Kiss of the Earth

The Dancing Out of the Earth

II. The Exalted Sacrifice

Introduction

Mystic Circle of the Young Girls

The Naming and Honoring of the Chosen One

Invocation of the Ancestors

Ritual Action of the Ancestors

Sacrificial Dance

Intermission

Territoires de l'Oubli.....Tristan Murail

Igor Stravinsky: The Rite of Spring

Stravinsky once dreamed of a young girl dancing herself to death for an audience of tribal elders. The scene would become the climax of his most iconic work.

Stravinsky began working on *Vesna svyashchennaya* (literally: “Holy Spring”) in 1910, collecting Russian folk tunes and song arrangements, melodies he proceeded to cut up, reassemble, combine, and make his own. For help fleshing out his scenario, Stravinsky turned to Nikolai Roerich, a Russian painter and folklore guru, who provided knowledge of Slavic antiquity from sources as varied as Alexander Afanasyev’s three-volume *The Slav’s Poetic Attitudes Toward Nature*, the 11th-12th Century monk Nestor’s *Primary Chronicle*, and Herodotus’ description of the Scythians (in book IV of *The Persian Wars*). The result was a ballet score steeped in the tradition of ancient Russia. All save one scene: the climactic sacrifice, uncorroborated by any source, remained Stravinsky’s invention.

The drama of *The Rite* is organized around two acts. In the first, we are treated to a series of scenes likely co-opted from the summer solstice festival Kupala: a crone performing auguries for young men, a game of wife-abduction, a competition between rival teams... All of which is interrupted by the entrance of “The Oldest and Wisest One,” a patriarch who bestows his “kiss upon the earth,” after which the people begin a wild stomping dance.

The second act begins with maidens performing midnight rituals on a sacred hillock. In a prototype of musical chairs, one of the girls is singled out as “The Chosen One,” and glorified by the others in dance. The elders enter to witness her sacrifice, whereupon the victim dances her final, fatal dance.

The story of *The Rite's* premiere has since become the *succès de scandale par excellence*. The riot accompanying the lavish ballet production at the Théâtre des Champs Élysées came complete with undercurrents of class warfare and savage press (“massacre of spring” was a common refrain). Such a propitious start did not go unnoticed. Several years later, the painter Jean Cocteau presented his own ballet scenario, *Parades*, featuring music by the eccentric Erik Satie, Diaghilev’s ballet troupe, Massine’s choreography, and Pablo Picasso’s set design. Cocteau’s intention was to once again create a scandal, but at the last he decided not to leave such things to chance: Cocteau hired people to attend the premiere, and riot.

My interest in attempting a solo version of *The Rite* began several years ago, during a preparation of Stravinsky’s two-piano version with fellow NEC classmate (and UCSD alumnus) Yvonne Lee, coached by Georgian pianist Alexander Korsantia (at the time NEC’s newest piano faculty). Korsantia in particular stressed the importance of judiciously supplementing Stravinsky’s four-hand/two-piano version with material from the orchestra score. My thanks to both for what was an enjoyable and stimulating collaboration. Also many thanks to Anthony Burr (whose transcription 201 course was the impetus for me to begin the solo piece in earnest) and Aleck Karis for their helpful advice, patience, and insight.

The version performed tonight is the result of several years work transcribing the orchestral score into a playable solo piano piece. Primary sources were Stravinsky’s 1913 orchestral score and subsequent rewrites, and the composer’s four-hand/two piano reduction (likely conceived to facilitate ballet rehearsals); with additional background from Taruskin’s authoritative book on Stravinsky (and various essays on Russian music), and published proceedings from the International Stravinsky Symposium (held at UCSD in 1982).

Previous solo versions of the Rite, notably Vladimir Leytchkiss' published by G. Schirmer and various others uploaded to youtube, did not figure into the current transcription. Presented with the option of modifying an existing work or starting from scratch, I chose the latter.

Despite its fast approaching centennial, the Rite once again feels surprisingly modern. Not so much in Stravinsky's dissonant harmonies and violent, jagged rhythms: though once shocking and dissonant even in an era of shocking and dissonant scores, that threshold has long since passed, and Stravinsky's technical innovations assimilated into canon. More modern by far are deeper thematic and structural elements. Formal ideas based on non sequitur and absence of transition, anticipating the short attention span of mass media culture. A new kind of theater — rather than depict a pagan ritual, the ballet became the pagan ritual — blurring the lines separating reality and fiction. And finally, the notion that beneath all the technical sophistication, mankind's potential for savagery might not exist far below the surface. The sacrificial victim might well stand in for civilization itself.

Tristan Murail: Territoires de l'oubli

The title *Territoires de l'oubli* has been subjected to a number of translations, ranging from attempts at the literal ("territories of the forgotten") to the fanciful ("lands of oblivion"). There may not be a wholly satisfactory translation in English, owing to the use of the French verb *oublier* (to forget) as a noun. My own preference would be for something along the lines of "places of forgetting," so perhaps the melodramatic "lands of oblivion" is not so bad after all. In any case, the musical journey suggested is to places outside of memory: an odd titular invocation, considering the piece's complex relationship to notions of memory.

Composed in 1977, *Territoires de l'oubli* exists among the music of the "spectralist" school, in reference to the movement of mostly French composers, centered at IRCAM in the 1970s, with particular interest in the study of physical characteristics of sound (the "harmonic spectrum") and their implications for composition. In *Territoires de l'oubli*, exploration of the harmonic spectrum is achieved through the exploitation of the resonant possibilities of the piano in their most basic form: the damper pedal, depressed at the outset of the half-hour piece, is neither released nor cleared until the end. "The work is written for the resonances," writes the composer, "and not for the attacks," which he dismisses as an "inevitable [if necessary] secondary phenomenon, as 'scars' of the continuum."

It is in this context that the title's repudiation of memory seems so strange, for the piece is full of memory. With sonic decay uninterrupted by actions of the damper pedal, the signature imprint of each note, each sound, exists indefinitely as it decays uninhibited. Is this not a form of memory? Then there is the historical context: in his prefatory notes, the composer laments that "nowadays the piano is usually classified among the percussion instruments, probably because contemporary composers have strongly desired to destroy the powerful romantic and impressionistic image of the instrument." Implied is an appeal to the past: the idiomatic construction of piano as resonating body is not a new one at all, but an older one, hearkening perhaps to the instrument's golden age. Is this not too an appeal to memory?

Yet despite the title's problematic nature (or perhaps because of it), it may be fair to say that the piece is well named. Conditional to the dampers' absence is the absolute necessity of incremental change: there are no dramatic "events," as traditionally conceived, only a gradually evolving panorama of resonance. What is left for us to remember? Even the most elementary "events," the initial attacks

of notes, are of secondary importance. Such a paradigm might baffle even the most sophisticated memory techniques of the ancients.

It should come as no surprise, then, the difficulty inherent in memorizing such a work. Compounding this difficulty is the composer's use of an array of novel notational representations. As a onetime colleague pointed out to me, this too might be in keeping with the title's repudiation of memory, since it suggests that the pianist must "forget" traditional approaches of learning to successfully navigate the new notation. Overlapping temporal mechanisms create surprising results, sometimes multiplying their effects or working one against the other. At times it appears as though the composer is prescribing a practice routine rather than a specific result. Though the caveat "la notation ne peut rendre compte du fait..." [even though the notation cannot show this...] appears only once in the score, it could well apply to much of the work.

As for the effect on the listener, that remains, as always, the province of the individual. For my part, there is something incredibly meditative and solitary about the experience. This might be why I chose to program it after such an extravagantly dramatic work as *The Rite of Spring*. For the main character of that dramaturgy at least, forced across a metaphorical Styx at the end, the next stage might well be a lonely sojourn through lands unknown.

Notes by William Fried

