

7. The Rite of Spring

Stephen Edelglass

Listen! Pitched in the very highest register of the solo bassoon, a lilting melody and haunting sound—floating, eerily detached—announces the opening section (“Introduction: Adoration of the Earth”) of Igor Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring*. We become alert to the uncanny tonal quality of the unusual, high pitch of the instrument. While the rhythmical swing of the melody engages our body to participate in listening, it also demands alertness as the lilting quality is achieved via a constantly changing rhythm within which the melody flows. The meter changes at every bar line: four quarter notes to a measure—that is, four beats to a time unit—followed by three quarter notes to a measure, back to four quarter notes and then two quarter notes to the measure. Instead of a repetitive meter to which we can unconsciously tap our feet, the melody flows within a constantly changing temporal framework. The solo melody is joined by a second bassoon, but in a more usual register, darker and more grounded. While it is easy to follow both tonal lines, the harmonics are dissonant; they do not fall within classical expectations of major and minor keys. A great range of tonality, unlimited by adhering to a single key, announces itself from the very beginning. The tonal richness is emphasized as the other wind instruments join in. Yet the music is still relatively transparent. It is possible to follow separate thematic sequences that are piled one atop the other. Low register strings join in to furnish a throbbing foundation. Finally, the “Introduction” comes to an end with a return of the beginning bassoon solo.

Raw percussive chords hammer at the listener with a primitive beat in the next section (“Dance of the Adolescents”). The rudimentary power of the percussiveness is intensified by the dissonant tonal architecture of the repeated complex of chords in which many tones are piled one above the other. The result is a mighty edifice of primitively beating sound to which the body of the listener resounds.

We need not further describe Stravinsky’s seminal score. Already we have met in it many of the fundamental qualities that distinguish twentieth-century music. Melodies are riotously free flowing, not straitjacketed by expectations of symmetry, repetition, or lyricism. Harmonies gain thrilling power through complex polytonal dissonance made possible by employing multiple musical keys simultaneously. Rhythms are immensely exciting as they are freed from rigid demands of meter. Such music requires active, wakeful, and fresh listening. It cannot be heard

or enjoyed when we bring habitual expectations to it, expectations into which we can sink as into a tub of warm water.

Regard for twentieth-century music is often predicated on understanding its intentions. Listening to *The Rite of Spring* today, we may find it difficult to imagine that there was a near riot in the audience at its first performance in 1913, the same year that Kandinsky painted his *Composition No. 13*. In fact, Pierre Montieus, the conductor at that first Paris performance of the *Rite*, told one of us that he ended the performance prematurely, with a loud chord from the brass, so that the musicians and dancers could vacate the hall and escape the tomatoes. Now, nearly a century after that first performance, listeners readily make sense of the energetic, driving, polyrhythmic and polytonal character of the music. It is invigorating, not at all alien from the rhythms of modern life. We are now capable of *hearing* Stravinsky's music.