

STRAVINSKY

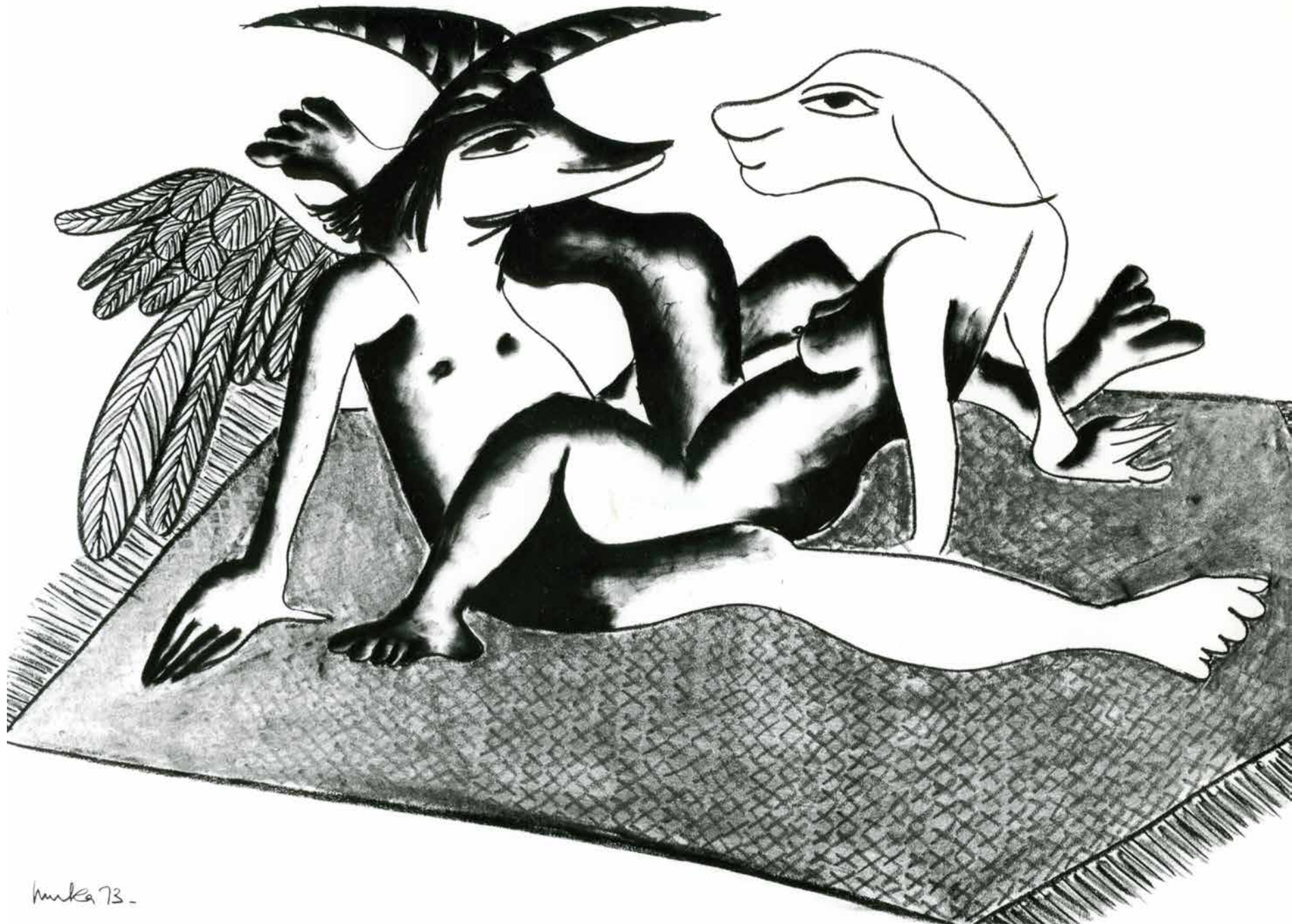
The Rite of Spring

ORIGINAL VERSIONS
FOR PIANO,
FOUR HANDS

RAVEL

Mother Goose Suite

Ronald and Rosslyn Farren-Price





Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971)

THE RITE OF SPRING

Part 1: The Adoration of the Earth

- 1** Introduction 3'29"
- 2** Dances of the Young Girls 3'06"
- 3** Ritual of Abduction 1'30"
- 4** Spring Rounds 4'17"
- 5** Ritual of the Rival Tribes 2'08"
- 6** Procession of the Sage 0'54"
- 7** The Sage 0'23"
- 8** Dance of the Earth 1'19"

Part 2: The Sacrifice

- 9** The Sacrifice: Introduction 4'54"
- 10** Mystic Circles of the Young Girls 3'17"
- 11** Glorification of the Chosen One 1'40"
- 12** Evocation of the Ancestors 0'44"
- 13** Ritual Action of the Ancestors 3'38"
- 14** Sacrificial Dance (The Chosen One) 4'54"

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

MOTHER GOOSE SUITE

- 15** Pavane of the Sleeping Beauty 1'16"
- 16** Tom Thumb 2'40"
- 17** Little Ugly, Empress of the Pagodas 3'22"
- 18** Beauty and the Beast 4'04"
- 19** The Fairy Garden 2'43"

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Of all the works in the enormous output of Igor Stravinsky, it is perhaps in **The Rite of Spring** that one can see most clearly the fundamental role of the piano in the composer's creative procedures. Stravinsky composed at the keyboard, and the direct results are such persistent characteristics as chordal designs which "fall under the fingers", bitonal and polytonal structures which often suggest a kind of black note versus white note conflict and, of course, the sheer rhythmic percussiveness so intrinsically a part of the composer's musical nature.

With these things in mind and the fact that the piano version of *The Rite* was the practical way of planning and rehearsing the original production of the ballet, it is not surprising that the four-hand piano version was published in 1913 – some eight years before full the orchestral score.

The composer himself spoke of *The Rite* thus: "I was guided by no system whatsoever in the writing of *Le sacre du printemps*. I had only my ear to help me. I heard and I wrote what I heard. I was the vessel through which the score passed ... In my brain are two elements, intervals and rhythm". And summing up

the programmatic content, Stravinsky tells us that *The Rite* is an attempt to convey "the surge of spring", "the magnificent upsurge of nature". He goes on: "I saw in imagination a solemn pagan rite; wise elders seated in a circle, watching a young girl dance herself to death. They were sacrificing her to propitiate the god of spring."

Listening to the musical realisation of these thoughts, one is aware that Stravinsky was writing with the visual creations of director Serge Diaghilev and choreographer Nijinsky in mind, both of whom deliberately avoided any spectacle of grace or beauty in the stage production, for which this monumental work was originally conceived.

Is it any wonder then that the audience reaction to *The Rite* on its first performance at the Paris Opera on 29 May 1913 was, to say the least, hostile. The traditional dissonant effect of the music may have softened to our ears but its remarkable intensity has, as in all great works of art, survived the passing of time.



1 Depicting the birth of spring, the work begins with a long breathed diatonic melody. Although the texture, dynamics and tempo moderate the impression of severity, the fundamental characteristic of conflict appears very quickly. Indications of the forces to come are realised in a melody which concentrates around the notes C and B, with an underlying intrusion of the notes C sharp and D. Within a few more bars we see the introduction of several contrapuntal lines which are tonally unrelated to one another, as well as being opposed to the principal C major tonality. The texture gradually thickens until after a climactic outburst, the opening melody returns in abbreviated form as a conclusion; this time a semi-tone lower.

2 *The Dances of the Young Girls* is the perfect illustration of Stravinsky's preoccupation with "intervals and rhythm". While the time signature remains constant, the carefully ordered placement of accents creates a marvellously exciting effect. The semitonal clash of two opposing chords – in effect E flat seventh over an F flat seventh – adds to the intensity, and one can see a vertical use of similar intervals to those

in the first bars of the work. The design of the chords is clearly pianistic, and the hammer-like persistence well suited to the keyboard.

3 In the ***Ritual of Abduction*** the main feature is again rhythmic, this time even more frenzied. Complexity increases through a constant change in time signature and a predictable conflict of tonality. Another essentially diatonic theme appears in varying keys: D major, E flat major and finally B flat major. Around the middle of the movement the sonorities increase forcefully, then die away before concluding on a series of harsh *sforzando* chords, with semitonal clashes both horizontally and vertically.

4 ***Spring Rounds*** sees a complete change of mood with the indication *sostenuto e pesante* and we can visualise four men each lifting a girl on his back, resulting in slow, deliberate and weighty movements. The *tessitura* is wide-spread with the lower part firmly stating the pulse on the first beat of each bar. The concentration is centred on a hymn-like theme given out in a variety of tone colours with the underlying chords moving in Debussyan-type parallelism.

5 With ***Ritual of the Rival Tribes*** there is a return to aggression with unsettled metre, tonal clashes and an almost constantly loud dynamic. The mood is boisterous, but amidst all the commotion yet another simple diatonic theme emerges. The idea of fierce rivalry is depicted, as musicologist Hansen suggests, “through antiphonal writing and through a particularly astringent use of polytonality”.

6 In the next movement, ***Procession of the Sage***, there is a concentration and intensification of previous material. Large-scale superimposition of various dissonances ensure the continuity of sound while the pulse is kept constant by the presence of quaver *ostinatos* which undergo subtle changes over a permanent pedal D.

7 Four bars in all, ***The Sage*** acts as a brief respite from the surrounding turmoil. The presence of the Sage, traditionally the wisest man of the time, creates an atmosphere of awe.

8 ***Dance of the Earth*** concludes part one of the ballet. It has percussive and brutal qualities which exude a primitive earthiness. The static nature of the music is deliberate. It is designed to accompany a wild, primitive dance. Again an *ostinato* figure ensures an uncomplicated rhythmic pulse.

9 The ***Introduction*** to part two sees the propitiation of the God of Spring . “The chosen one”, a young girl, is to be sacrificed. The introduction is quiet and in its *legato* line, motionless. The atmosphere on stage is trance-like. The Sage and the maidens ponder the selection of the one to be sacrificed to ensure the fertility of the earth. A static semitonal movement is again a feature.

10 The pace quickens for the first dance movement of part two, ***Mystic Circles of the Young Girls***. Thematic unity prevails as melodic ideas derived from the initial theme appear in various guises. The Russian folk style is easily discernable, set off from the inevitable background of dissonance.

11 One of the young girls is chosen for the sacrifice. With ***Glorification of the Chosen One***, there are upward musical inflections which depict vigorous unison gestures of group adoration for an idol. The indication is now *vivo*, the dynamic range is always *forte* or louder, and the rhythmic drive has returned in full force. The rhythmic element is becoming more unsettled. Dissonance takes over completely and the metre undergoes continual change.

12 ***Evocation of the Ancestors*** sees a dramatic change in the music. The calling up of the ancestors suggests a slower and more stable musical setting. Significantly, this is the most static movement so far – the lull before the climactic finale. It is both programmatically and structurally important.

13 In ***Ritual Action of the Ancestors***, there is a noticeable increase in activity and a greater variety of texture. Rhythmic fragmentation begins to disrupt the flow. There is a confined but powerful restatement of much of the important material already exposed.

14 In accordance with the action on stage, there are several high points in the final section titled ***Sacrificial Dance***. The “chosen one” dances until dead. Having fulfilled the sacrifice, she is transported to the edge of the grave amidst frenzied activity of the celebrants. Musically, there is a first climax, followed by a thinning of texture, then disintegration of the strong rhythmic element into a fragmentary-type structure. This in turn grows to a final *fortissimo* of highly complex but clearly pulsating percussiveness.



Although Maurice Ravel was noted for his brilliant orchestrations, hardly any of his works were originally conceived for the orchestra. Much of his orchestral output consists of re-arrangements of piano versions. His ***Mother Goose Suite*** was written in 1908 for two of his nieces – Mimie and Jean Godebski. Orchestrated in 1912, it was premiered as a ballet at the Paris Opera in 1915, just two years after the first production of *The Rite*.

Considering the closeness in time of the composition of *Mother Goose* and *The Rite* one can see some fascinating contrasts in the musical approach of Ravel and Stravinsky. It is in fact an early indication of the diversification of styles for which this century's music is noted. *Mother Goose Suite* is one of Ravel's first illustrations of the move away from the complexities of such other masterpieces as *Miroirs* and *Gaspard de la nuit*, to a simpler but equally exquisite style. And in this work particularly, one sees the influence of Satie in the transparent texture and the uncomplicated melodic lines.

15 The first movement, *Pavane of the Sleeping Beauty*, has a superbly delicate melody, softened by the constant use of the flattened leading note. Indeed this modal element persists even at cadential points – the likely influence of the exotic music Ravel heard (as did Debussy) at the Exposition of 1889.

16 *Tom Thumb* is equally simple in texture, but this time intervals of thirds prevail, depicting as one writer suggests, the trail of bread crumbs; “they go upwards in scales which grow longer and longer like lost children walking two by two, holding each other’s hands and groping to find the way”.

17 The march-like *Little Ugly, Empress of the Pagodas* is very oriental in essence with its predominating all-black note pentatonic scale. Here is the successful integration of Eastern musical materials with Western notation, instrumentation, tone color, and formalistic concepts.

18 Conversations of *Beauty and the Beast* is a waltz of romantic nature. Ravel himself pointed to the influence of Satie in this movement, calling it “a fourth Gymnopédie”. The harmonies are clearly Western, with the opening major sevenths and the mild pan-tonal wanderings of the progressions.

19 The finale, *The Fairy Garden*, emphasises the third and sixth degrees of the major scale, and in so doing gives the melody a characteristic modal quality. The piano’s capacity to imitate a stringed instrument is exploited with harp-like arpeggiated chords, and, finally, *fortissimo* glissandos which bring the work to a brilliant conclusion.

TONY GOULD (1977)



It is the depth of winter in Australia – the coldest May for over eighty years. And now it is June and the blackest bottom of the trough to the year.

The Rite strikes violently for the Russian spring; that which Stravinsky most loved of Russia. In a few days time Ronald and Rosslyn Farren-Price will give their four-hand of this work at the Wigmore Hall in London. Listen to this recording and you will hear that frightening force coming through in a more overpowering, terrifying form than ever a fully orchestrated version has given. The percussiveness and harsh contrasts come cleanly on the piano. This recording was made in one strenuous session. It was a long, long night, yet the performers seemed to grow stronger as hour after hour passed, strengthened by their determination and the inevitable drive forward of Stravinsky’s music to the dreadful sacrifice.

The Farren-Prices first performed *The Rite* at Melbourne University’s Melba Hall in December 1976, and at the end of the concert the excited audience rose to their feet applauding this very rare couple.

Ronald Farren-Price is an internationally respected musician who

has given recitals all over the world – Europe, USA, USSR, the Middle East and Far East. He is much venerated for his fine musicianship and his special qualities of strength and yet compassionate, delicate control of the keyboard. Born in Brisbane, he showed at a very young age a remarkable musical potential. His earliest studies culminated in winning the ABC's concerto competition, and after that he spent years of study in London, New York and Stuttgart on a scholarship given him by Claudio Arrau. Now he holds a Readership at Melbourne University's Faculty of Music.

During her student years at Melbourne University, Rosslyn was awarded the Coutts memorial prize for composition. She has been composing ever since and is very interested in contemporary works. She earned a first class honours degree and furthered her piano studies in London with Ruth Nye, Raphael de Silva and John Lill. She has had many broadcasting and television engagements with the ABC and solo appearances with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra. In recent years she has become more widely known as a recitalist, lecturer and chamber music player.

PENELOPE ALEXANDER (JUNE 1977)

Recorded on 5 January 1977 at Melba Hall, University of Melbourne, Australia.

Piano: Steinway No. 366930

Cover illustration: "Pass me the can lad; there's an end of May" by Mirka Mora, from the collection of Nada Brazell

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