

An evaluation of the contrasting sections of Stravinsky's '*The Rite of Spring*: 'Introduction' and 'Augures'

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Igor Stravinsky's "The Rite of Spring" is a large-scale ballet which when first premiered caught the 20th Century audience by great surprise. While part of this was to do with Stravinsky's unique orchestration and extremely dissonant harmonies, his choice (or rather lack of choice at times) of rhythm, metre and melody were particularly prominent in portraying both the slow, dreamy aspects of the work on one hand, but also the brutal and barbaric aspects on the other hand. It is especially the first two sections of the ballet – 'introduction' and 'augures' – that could not be more different, making the 20th Century listener (and even the current listener to an extent) feel edgy right from the beginning.

Stravinsky immediately rids us of any sense of pulse or metre by making his first note a paused note. Not only this but the use of decorated auxiliary notes after that sound like irregular subdivisions of the beat and the 'tempo rubato' marking confirms that there is no clear pulse and the opening simply sounds free and dreamy. This opening is very similar rhythmically to the solo flute opening of Debussy's 'Prelude l'après midi d'un faune' in the sense that there is no clear pulse right from the start due to the use of tied notes as well as a rubato tempo, creating a gentle and blurry rhythmic feel.

On the other hand, in the 'Augures', Stravinsky evokes in us a completely different regular and simple 2/4 metre. He creates an incessant, percussive quaver ostinato in the strings at the beginning and this helps to establish a much clearer pulse which very gradually deteriorates through the section. One may make the comparison to a much earlier work: Vivaldi's 'The Hunt from four seasons, Autumn'. This piece is similarly trying to describe a fast paced event (be it not as a ballet), and Vivaldi establishes a strong sense of the triple metre with frequent block chords in the harpsichord and dotted rhythms in the strings which create the effect of horses galloping.

Furthermore, Stravinsky uses octave displacement in the melodic lines to create some heterophony but also to disrupt the regularity of the pulse, making us feel uneasy. For instance, octave displacement is used in the irregular subdivisions of the flute melody which naturally creates an emphasis on the extremely high flute note in the middle of the bar. Jerry Goldsmith's 'Hunt for Planet of the Apes' is a useful comparison to make, since he also used octave displacement in the melodic lines to reinforce the randomness of the chase.

Goldsmith also composed very memorable leitmotifs, a common example being the theme from Star Trek, which cleverly made use of careful melodic contour. In the 'Introduction' of 'The Rite of Spring', Stravinsky also places careful detail in the melodic contour of the opening bassoon line to both deter us from any clear pulse but also to create a sort of cyclical melody which we cannot determine the beginning or end of. This particular melody is resembling of a Lithuanian folk-tune and uses the aeolian mode, to create the

tribal and primitive feel, unlike the brutal relentlessness felt in the second section. In a similar way, Gustav Holst uses a short, cyclical Arabic folk motif for the basis of his piece 'Beni Mora', which has some resemblance to African sounds.

Despite the rigid 2/4 feel at the beginning of 'Augures', Stravinsky does try to sway us away from the pulse creating a sort of instability in what would otherwise be a regular feel. The use of offbeat accents in the strings as well as syncopated entries from the horn section generate an uncomfortable edge to the metre. However, this is not to say that the pulse becomes completely unclear and unlike the 'Introduction' there is some vague sense of pulse remaining throughout this section – this is further supported by the contrasting tempos of the 'Introduction' and the 'Augures'.

On the other hand, in the 'Introduction' there is a greater use of irregular subdivisions, including triplets, quintuplets and sextuplets, which create cross-rhythms at times, making us feel lost rhythmically. In addition to this, later in the section there are colourful sextuplet arpeggiatic passages played by open harmonics on the viola. This is completely alike the beginning of Stravinsky's previous ballet, 'Firebird', which also begins with an arpeggiatic, open harmonic string line. However, the 'Danse Infernale' section of 'Firebird' is completely similar to the 'Augures' with constant quaver movement and a fast tempo. This suggests that perhaps Stravinsky's use of extreme contrast in the two sections of 'The Rite of Spring' was inspired from his previous work and taken further.

In the 'Augures', Stravinsky takes short melodic cells and transforms them into ostinatos. For instance, the use of the staccato quaver theme which oscillates between a minor 3rd and perfect 4th. This idea gets thrown around the orchestra and eventually is used as an ostinato and maintains a constant quaver movement towards the end of the section. A vaguely similar ostinato idea of oscillating quavers is used in Rachel Portman's 'The Duchess' also.

However, melodic ideas in the 'Introduction' tend to remain more as themes which arise now and again and are not used for a rhythmic purpose in an ostinato. For example, the opening bassoon melody, or the second melodic theme played by the solo cor anglais. An important connection can be made to Leonard Bernstein's 'On the Waterfront', which consists of soft woodwind and brass melodic themes. Though, while 'Rite of Spring' uses folksy tunes in order to portray the tribes of Europe, in 'On the Waterfront', the jazzy, bluesy motifs characterise the New York clubs and bars.

Overall, in Stravinsky's 'Rite of Spring', it is clear that the first two sections are extremely different and these differences are conveyed through the use of rhythm, metre and tempo.