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The Compositional Process of Igor Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*

Dima Gharaibeh

Out of the many musical works that have been presented in this century, few have won the fame and notoriety of Igor Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*. Innovative in concept, rhythm, pitch, and form, the 1913 premiere of *The Rite* brought a revolution of ideas into the world of music.

After the uproar concerning Stravinsky's creation had died down, one can then ask how he accomplished such a task. This paper will address and define some of the influential compositional processes that Stravinsky applied when creating the music of *The Rite*. With easy access to his sketchbooks, letters, and other documents it becomes possible to trace Stravinsky's conception of his most innovative work. Several revealing elements are able to uncover Stravinsky's creative processes, such as early influences, manner of initially conceiving works, writing style, and its effect on the new rhythmic concepts in *The Rite*.

As with the inner workings of any artist, early influences occurring in personal life can often have long range implications. For example, Stravinsky demonstrated a strong independence and a willingness to learn for himself, rather than turn to conventional measures. Stravinsky describes himself as a lonely child, with no real friend or role model to turn to. Also, he exhibited problems with schoolwork from an early age, and never gained much from academia, unless personally interested in a subject. Even then, Stravinsky had a unique idea concerning learning processes,

"I always did, and still do, prefer to achieve my aims and to solve any problems which confront me in the course of my work solely by my own efforts, without having recourse to established processes which do, it is true, facilitate the task, but which must first be learned and remembered."¹

For Stravinsky, this particular mind-set was to have its rewards. He became a student of law, and completed his education in that disci-

pline. But his interest in music remained constant, and he received lessons in harmony and studied counterpoint on his own. In 1905 Stravinsky showed his compositions to Nicolai Rimsky-Korsakov, and began receiving weekly lessons, also developing a close relationship to the Rimsky-Korsakov family. Rimsky-Korsakov deterred Stravinsky from entering the music Conservatory, as he thought Stravinsky would not profit from such an education and would lag behind the other, more experienced students.

But a new world had been opened for Stravinsky, including an appreciation for Rimsky-Korsakov's music but also new music that was appearing from the French impressionists, such as Debussy and Ravel. Rimsky-Korsakov did not approve of these less conventional forays, but they interested Stravinsky a great deal. Stravinsky also became very friendly with a group called the Soirees of Contemporary Music, which proved to have a long-lasting influence.

As time passed the rift between Stravinsky and Rimsky-Korsakov widened as Rimsky-Korsakov held on to his more conventional ways in a changing musical environment and Stravinsky became more experimental. This became even more pronounced in later years—"Stravinsky still associates the creation of (*The Rite*) with his hatred of the Conservatory..."²

Then there are the direct influences of factors that contributed to *The Rite's* birth. Stravinsky is well-known to have dreamed or envisioned a scene where "a chosen virgin of an archaic Russian tribe dances herself to death, the culmination of rituals of propitiation to the gods of spring."³ There is even a possibility of discerning the initial origin of the dream. In 1907 Stravinsky composed "Two Melodies of Gorodetsky," using lyrics from the poet Sergei Gorodetsky. In the same volume in which the "Two Melodies" were found there is also a poem called *Staviat Iarilu*, which con-

tains images of “pagan ritual, wise elders, and the sacrifice of a virgin maiden.”⁴ This could be a the possible beginning that started the seeds of development in Stravinsky’s mind for a vision of pagan sacrifice.

Actual “Russian” melodies are also considered an influence in Stravinsky’s creation of *The Rite*. The question of whether or not Stravinsky used outside sources remains a mystery to this day; Stravinsky himself is uncommitted whether he used melodies from a direct source. In fact, later in life Stravinsky was very much opposed to the whole idea concerning his “Russian period” music—“If any of these pieces sounds like aboriginal folk music, it may be because my powers of fabrication were able to tap some unconscious “folk” memory.”⁵ But there is plausible evidence to suggest the use of outside melodies, such as the identification by Richard Taruskin of a melody from Rimsky-Korsakov’s *One Hundred Russian National Songs* as being related to page 8 of Stravinsky’s sketchbook.⁶ This sketch later becomes part of the “Ritual of Abduction” in the “Spring Rounds” section. There are also melodies from the Juzskiewicz anthology of 1,785 Lithuanian folk songs that correspond to several different pages in Stravinsky’s sketchbook. But there is more evidence that begins to outweigh even the composer’s personal views concerning the issue of borrowed folk tunes. A picture of Stravinsky at his summer home in Ustilug in 1914 appears to have him transcribing the melody of a folk singer. Admittedly this is after *The Rite*’s completion, but this picture does show a definite interest in regional music.

Some of these discoveries point to an important lesson to be remembered—primary sources abound about Stravinsky’s life and music; documents, letters, sketchbooks. But there is also a personal factor to consider—the validity of Stravinsky’s claims. Many influences may have changed his views from the time of *The Rite*’s con-

ception to his writings, such as personal relationships, political stances, and the music he admired at the time. So hopefully a combination of primary sources along with analysis and evaluation may bring a clearer picture of Stravinsky's creative mind.

In order to understand more of the influences surrounding *The Rite*, the original sketches must be delved into and analyzed, as well as a look at Stravinsky's writing processes. After a thorough examination of his sketches, one is able to surmise a great deal about Stravinsky's habits. The staves on all pages are carefully drawn in, with different colors used at times to indicate certain markings and articulation. According to the scanty dates used in the sketches and the known dates of the composition of *The Rite* it seems that Stravinsky composed almost every day regularly, "like a man with banking hours."⁷ Also, there is the most remarkable thing of all—almost every single sketch written down in the sketchbook is used in full in the final score. The initial sketches are written in with exact instrumentation and the main divergence between the sketches and final score are matters of pitch and tempo. This remarkable compositional evolution has not gone unnoticed: "one of the most striking figures not only of this collection but of all Stravinsky's sketchbooks, namely, that virtually every scrap in them has been used."⁸ Taruskin also notes the unfortunate aspect of Stravinsky's perfect sketches—

"The pages of jottings rarely lack anything that appears in the final form, nor are there many jottings that will be unfamiliar to anyone who knows the published score. In a way all this is disappointing, because we rarely can observe a true shaping process . . . this situation is clearly the result of Stravinsky's well-known working methods. The real development of material took place empirically at the keyboard, and by the time an idea was entered in the sketchbook, it had no doubt already

gone through many unrecorded stages of crystallization.”⁹

A possible further explanation regarding this unusual feature will be brought up later, in the discussion regarding rhythm.

The order of the sketches also provides some clues as to Stravinsky's compositional process. One could easily imagine that a composer might simply write out a piece from beginning to end. But Stravinsky, like many other composers, tends to germinate an idea and then grow from that point. This can be seen from the order of the sketches, which are easily identified as primary motives in the final score. One of Stravinsky's more interesting tendencies is that when he is completing initial work of one movement, a small motive of the next movement is sketched. This can be seen on page 46 of the sketch book, where the ends of the “Dance of the Earth” are interrupted by a tiny motive of the “Introduction” to Part II.

Stravinsky's order of motives, if initially confusing, does finally form a logical cohesion and is rather systematic and organized in output and initial creation. One rather odd circumstance does stand out in the sketchbook, on page 52. This is the first page marked with a date, and is also marked with the term “New style.” The handwriting on this page is an excited scrawled mess, and is the middle of the movement “The Naming and Honoring of the Chosen One.” This work is the resumption of composing after a trip to London to view a performance of *Petrushka*. Though the exact effect of the trip is not known, Stravinsky could have conceived of new material while traveling or just as he began work on that particular day.

Another peculiarity concerning the order is the trouble that Stravinsky had in completing the Introduction, which consists of the solo bassoon and is considered a more conventional, almost Debussy-like section of the work as a whole. “The Naming and Honoring of the Chosen One,” a movement with very innovative

techniques, seems to have simply jumped out of Stravinsky's mind onto the sketchbook.

Then there is the important facet of Stravinsky's personal views regarding the compositional process. Many of Stravinsky's following opinions were published years after *The Rite* was completed but this can possibly be presented as pertinent document information.

One interesting and surprising view of Stravinsky's creative process is that he stresses the word "discovery" versus "inspiration." "This appetite that is aroused in me at the mere thought of putting in order musical elements that have attracted my attention is not at all a fortuitous thing like inspiration, but as habitual and periodic, if not as constant, as a natural need."¹⁰ This brings to mind the idea that Stravinsky possibly excavates and shapes ideas that are but waiting to be found, rather than the thunderstruck enlightenment one might imagine occurring with the creation of *The Rite*.

Stravinsky then speaks of another revealing element—that the possibilities for compositional combinations are infinite. "As for myself, I experience a sort of terror when, at the moment of setting to work and finding myself before the infinitude of possibilities that present themselves, I have the feeling that everything is permissible to me."¹¹ Faced with such a large amount of material to work with, Stravinsky limits himself with musical boundaries. "I shall overcome my terror and shall be reassured by the thought that I have seven notes at my disposal, that strong and weak accents are within my reach, and that in all of these I possess solid and concrete elements which offer me a field of experience just as vast as the upsetting and dizzy infinitude that had just frightened me."¹² This "limitation" technique is easily transferable to Stravinsky's composing process—in his sketches all that is seen are the completed, post-limitation ideas. Stravinsky held strongly to this idea in both a musical and philosophical way—"If I were asked what I had

pressed to say. But I should always give an exact answer when asked what I did not want.”¹³ Stravinsky goes on to allude to another rather creative mind, Leonardo da Vinci, who is able to sum up the whole process—“Strength is born of constraint and dies in freedom.”¹⁴

Another resource that seemed to contribute greatly to Stravinsky’s compositional gifts is the manner in which he originally conceived of ideas. Though no one is able to actually determine what might have gone through Stravinsky’s mind as he wrote, several theories may be advanced. One theory, already referred to, concerns the vision that is supposedly the first inklings Stravinsky had of what was to be *The Rite*. Stravinsky alludes to many circumstances involving composition in a highly visual manner. It seems that Stravinsky employed this pictorial imagining in a variety of ways and for many other works in his life. Some examples include—“I wrote the Polka (of Eight Easy Pieces) first, as a caricature of Diaghilev, whom I saw as a circus animal trainer cracking a long whip.¹⁵ “The Octour began with a dream in which I saw myself in a small room...”¹⁶ Robert Craft asks Stravinsky, “. . . has a musical idea ever occurred to you from a purely visual experience of movement, line, or pattern?” Igor Stravinsky answers, “countless times . . .”¹⁷ These visual implications account for a great deal of interest concerning how Stravinsky’s creative mind operates. Van den Toorn suggests a sort of “trigger theory,” where a particular set of images will cause a reaction that produces the desired music.¹⁸

Therefore a presumption could be made that Stravinsky’s imagination was fueled by his powers of perception. This imagery seemed to be brought to new heights when creating *The Rite*. Not only do we have the initial dream, but once again the sketches are looked at for further evidence. Many of the sketches have headings that correspond to ongoing action of the ballet. Also, these sketch-

es are often motives starting at points of action related to the dancing. Stravinsky himself relates much imagery to corresponding themes, as seen in this letter—"The music is coming out very fresh and new. The picture of the old woman in a squirrel fur sticks in my mind. She is constantly before my eyes as I compose . . ."19

Some of the innovations that occurred in *The Rite*, then, may have stemmed from the visions Stravinsky saw in his mind of wild pagan dancers. It seems he wanted to record the movements of his pictured dancers, rather than altering the technical or theoretical nature of music. "As a record of a composer's conception of choreography it must be one of the most explicit in existence if only for the reason that the composer was attempting to translate his music into a language the choreographer could understand."²⁰ Stravinsky goes on to explain that *The Rite* is meant to be set to choreographic rhythm, and not musical rhythm.

This could be a possible link to the strange and new rhythms Stravinsky was able to conjure up in this ballet, rhythms that had never been conceived of in the Western world. Once again, it is the sketchbooks that are turned to for clues into the discovery of Stravinsky's innovations.

Early analysts criticized Stravinsky's use of irregular rhythms and lack of melodic development as turning the piece into a static abstract degeneration.²¹ This does not seem to tie in with Stravinsky's line of thinking, as seen in page 36 of the sketchbook, where he writes "music exists if there is rhythm, as life exists if there is a pulse."²²

One of the peculiarities of the rhythm in the sketchbook is that in general, there are almost no dotted rhythms. Therefore a new way of thinking might have been needed to generate the rhythmic intensity and complexity of *The Rite*.

A more detailed look is needed to support such a theory.

Stravinsky seemed to have two formulas for developing rhythms. The first formula takes a motive or “block” of music, often a single measure, that is usually metrically difficult or unorthodox. Stravinsky proceeds to take this motive and repeat it with a slight rhythmic alteration. The outcome of this is not always the incredibly complex rhythmic barring and mathematical configuring one might think. The second, altered block often uses a compositional concept where higher and lower pitches are not placed in the rhythmically expected position. Stravinsky explains this himself in a later dissertation—“A measure in four beats, for example, may be composed of two groups of two beats, or in three groups: one beat, two beats, and one beat, and so on...”²³ In one example, in a 3/4 measure, the accents do not fall in an orthodox beat pattern. In a typical 3/4 bar accents are often heard on the first and third beats. In this measure, due to the first three notes being repeated, one hears accents on the first beat and then on the and of two, giving the measure a 6/8 feel.

The two blocks of this first formula are then played against each other, thus providing a great deal of musical variation from one simple motive. The blocks fit together almost like a puzzle when the music is sectioned off properly.

The second basic type of rhythmic development occurs with the motives appearing rhythmically steady and behaving within expected accent boundaries. First one motive is heard, and then the second and third entirely different motives make their way into the texture. How does this contribute to metric irregularity? All three motives are being played out at the same time, but in a cycle unto themselves rather than in correspondence to the surrounding motives. In essence, these fragments are ignoring each other, thus producing a constantly shifting pattern. The listener is helped by the fact that these motives remain fixed pitchwise. So what is the

desired end effect? "A sense of "development" has in large part to do with the synchronization and non-synchronization of the stable or unstable periods as defined by the reiterating fragments..."²⁴

Therefore, a sense of rhythmic development and consideration would precede that of innovation in pitch and melody. A possible hypothesis regarding these rhythms might be that, given the near-completeness of the initial sketches and Stravinsky's perception of the ballet from dancing images, he may have created the music from this angle, where then the rhythm of his images may have superseded conventional rhythm characteristics. It is nearly impossible to discern how exactly Stravinsky conceived of these rhythmic ideas. There is very little documented analysis from the composer himself on the conception of ideas from *The Rite*. But the sketches can at least allow us to ponder different theories. Much of the interest concerning *The Rite* is focused on the rhythmic advancements. There is possibly room for the idea that due to Stravinsky's choreography-based perception concerning the vivid pictures his creative mind gave him, and the manner in which his initial sketches were created, as whole motives and cells available for rhythmic manipulation, that these may have been primary motivators for how *The Rite* was able to be cast.

"I wanted the whole of the composition to give the feeling of closeness between men and the earth, the community of their lines with the earth, and I sought to do this in lapidary rhythms. The whole thing must be put on in dance from beginning to end."²⁵

NOTES

¹ Igor Stravinsky, *Stravinsky: An Autobiography* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1936), 20.

² Robert Craft, "Genesis of a Masterpiece," *The Rite of Spring: Sketches 1911-1913* (London: Boosey and Hawkes, 1969), XXIV.

³ Robert Craft, "Genesis of a Masterpiece," *The Rite of Spring: Sketches 1911-1913* (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1969), XVI.

⁴ Pieter C. van den Toorn, *Stravinsky and The Rite of Spring* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 10, quoting Sergei Gorodetzky, *Iar', Lyric and Lyric-Epic Verse* (St. Petersburg, 1907).

⁵ Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Memories and Commentaries* (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1960), 92.

⁶ Richard Taruskin, "Russian Folk Melodies in *The Rite of Spring*," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 33 (1980): 512-13.

⁷ Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Dialogues and a Diary* (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1963), 57.

⁸ Robert Craft, "Commentary to the Sketches," in *The Rite of Spring: Sketches 1911-1913*, 18.

⁹ Richard Taruskin, "Russian Folk Melodies in *The Rite of Spring*," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 33 (1980): 509.

¹⁰ Igor Stravinsky, *Poetics of Music*, trans. Arthur Knodel and Ingolf Dahl (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1942), 51.

¹¹ Igor Stravinsky, *Poetics of Music*, 63.

¹² Igor Stravinsky, *Poetics of Music*, 64.

¹³ Igor Stravinsky, *Poetics of Music*, 69.

¹⁴ Igor Stravinsky, *Poetics of Music*, 76.

¹⁵ Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Dialogues and a Diary*,

72.

¹⁶ Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Dialogues and a Diary*,

70.

¹⁷ Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Memories and Commentaries* (New York: Doubleday and Co., 1960), 89.

¹⁸ Van den Toorn, *Stravinsky and The Rite of Spring*, 21.

¹⁹ Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, "Letters to Nicholas Roerich and N. F. Findeizen," in *The Rite of Spring: Sketches 1911-1913*, 30.

²⁰ Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, "Letters to Nicholas Roerich and N. F. Findeizen," *The Rite of Spring: Sketches 1911-1913*, 35.

²¹ Cecil Gray, *A Survey of Contemporary Music* (London: Oxford University Press, 1924), 140.

²² Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *The Rite of Spring: Sketches 1911-1913*, 36.

²³ Igor Stravinsky, *Poetics of Music*, 28.

²⁴ Van den Toorn, *Stravinsky and The Rite of Spring*, 100.

²⁵ Vera Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Stravinsky in Pictures and Documents* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), 92.

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