

 CD REVIEW
Igor Stravinsky

The Rite of Spring
Petrushka (1911 version)

Les Siècles/François-Xavier Roth
Musicales Actes Sud ASM15

Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps* is one of those few single works that really did change everything. Rhythmically, tonally, texturally and harmonically nothing like it had been heard (and seen) before. And possibly since. Particularly in terms of fitting balletic and instrumental form to function: a kind of concerto for orchestra where Stravinsky's innovative use of individual and collective instrumental color communicates the dynamism, drive, eroticism, movement and elementalism of the famed evocation of a Russian death wish.



There are nearly 250 recordings in the current catalog of *The Rite of Spring*. There had better be a very good reason why the relatively small-scale label, Actes Sud, should release another one – the centenary in May 2013 notwithstanding. In fact there is: this is a compelling yet entirely non-histrionic performance by Les Siècles under François-Xavier Roth which uses period instruments in a freshly-prepared edition by musicologist Louis Cyr to strip back the accretions in scoring and notation to their best assessment of how the infamous performance under Pierre Monteux must have sounded on May 29, 1913.

This recording is decidedly not, though, a historical recreation or curiosity for the sake of it. It's a vibrant, mature and persuasive account. It not only reveals nuances and shades of meaning which can otherwise be obscured by more dogmatic and bombastic performances. But also shows how momentum, force, a sense of destination and outcome can also admit of hesitation (mid way through the ninth movement, "Le Sacrifice" [tr.9], for instance), and subdued anticipation where the tension comes from understatement, not augmentation of effect.

You won't find the kind of drive-at-all-costs that many conductors prize above anything else. This version is no steam-hammer. Rather, it respects the fact that *Le Sacre* was conceived as a ballet; and so has to follow the logic of its own pace. The end result is a greater consistency than is the case in those performances where we (let alone the dancers) hardly have time to draw breath. This does communicate greater subtlety and thoughtfulness on Roth's part; and that of his players. They are more interested in the work as music in what – if you think about it – was a candle-lit theater barely 18 months before the start of the First World War. That Stravinsky was aware that any aspect of his composition would soon become iconic (remarkable though the work's instrumentation and *tempi* were) seems unlikely.

This is the essence of the success of this recording: it has stripped off not only the additional performance traditions and praxes of 100 years – and many more analyses which, however rightly, emphasize the work's place in musical history. Through expert playing and direction, Les Siècles provide the music as music. This approach must surely align with what not only Stravinsky, but also the others involved in the original production, would have wanted. If a newcomer to the music were to hear these performances for the first time, they would hear music on a scale and with a clarity which would probably surprise the seasoned listener. But they would not be disappointed. Some would say that the novice would happily return to the delicacy of the dance in a movement like the "Danse Russe" (*Petrushka*) [tr.16]... you can hear a stronger Russian tradition, Borodin certainly, than is often the case with more amorphous, monolithic and homogenized attempts to create Stravinskian spectacle.

At the same time, after listening to this performance, you realize that you have appreciated the Rite as... a rite, a ritual, something which appeals to the primal; again, an aim of Stravinsky's. The fresh instrumentation, thanks to Cyr's edition, does bring something new, invigorating – and at the same time intriguing – to the experience. Less can be more. The sonic attack, though, is not absent. This remains a thunderous work thunderously performed. Just a more precisely-targeted and thoughtful one than perhaps we have become accustomed to. We're watching the storm, not being drenched by it.

The 1911 version of *Petrushka* is equally compelling: each note, phrase, nuance of the mixtures between sections of the orchestra is audible in a fresh way. The metaphor of seeing a long grimy painting expertly cleaned and hence brighter and more vivid is not a bad one. *Petrushka's* a gentler piece of course. But Roth's conception lacks none of its bite and penetration to the very Russian tale of a puppet which/who comes to life and acquires emotions and actions of its own. There's nothing either quirky or eccentric about the performance. It flows in the same way that the *Sacre* is made to do. And the musicianship of the performers is as acute as it is imaginative. The swing, sense of humor, pathos and beauty of the orchestral writing all strike one from first note to last.

Neither of these performances should be thought of as tentative, or in any way experimental. Listen to the crisp and trenchant opening of *Petrushka* [tr.14], for example. Unassuming *pizzicati* rub semi-formal shoulders with the woodwinds and strings while the triangles, bells and other small percussion do give the impression of a chamber performance, it's true. But it's all to a purpose. That of revealing the direction in which Stravinsky took each work. Never running on the sonic spot. No lack of spontaneity.

This are live performances in which the odd cough can be heard. And, although the CD has not been released as an "event", or to promote atmosphere as such, there is a sense that Roth is primarily intent on communicating, not reproducing. In his *tempi*, for example... listen to the variations in pace which suggest so much by inviting us to feel the *rallentandi* and *accelerandi* as they surprise us during the "Glorification De L'Élué" [tr.11]. The well-produced booklet gives some of the rationale for, and history of (the preparation of), this recording. *Le Sacre* is such an important work that most people will want to own or be able to listen to multiple versions. Although this one is marketed as meeting a specific need (an approach to authenticity), it has a great deal more to recommend it in terms, particularly, of the insight which it otherwise affords into Stravinsky's world and achievement that the CD should be on your list. It is unreservedly recommended.

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