The Rite of Spring

This weekend we're afforded the opportunity to experience two seldom-heard works: Dvořák's piano concerto and Lili Boulanger's dark-night-of-the-soul set to music, *D'un soir triste*. Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* — a watershed in the history of Western classical music — comprises the second half.

ILI BOULANGER

Born 21 August 1893; Paris, France
Died 15 March 1918; Mézy-sur-Seine, France

D'un soir triste

Composed: 1918
First performance: 6 March 1921; Paris, France (chamber work),
9 May 1992; San Francisco, California (orchestral work)
Last MSO performance: MSO premiere
Instrumentation: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, English horn, 2 clarinets, bass clarinet, 2 bassoons, contrabassoon, 4 horns, 3 trumpets, 3 trombones, tuba, timpani, percussion (bass drum, suspended cymbals, tam tam), harp, celeste, strings
Approximate duration: 9 minutes

Lili Boulanger was the younger sister of the noted teacher, conductor, and composer Nadia Boulanger (1887-1979). As a child, she accompanied Nadia to classes at the Paris Conservatoire. She later studied organ with Louis Vierne. Lili also sang and played piano, violin, cello, and harp. The first woman to receive the Prix de Rome — in 1913, for her cantata *Faust et Hélène* — her composing life was brief but productive. Her most important works are her psalm settings and other large-scale choral pieces. Fauré admired and promoted her music.

D'un soir triste (On a Sad Evening) was written in the final months of her life (often beset by illness, she died at the early age of 24), along with a shorter companion piece, *D'un matin de printemps* (On a Morning in Spring). The former exists in three versions: for cello and piano, for piano trio, and for orchestra. Elegiac in its mood, D'un soir triste is thick-textured, with sometimes austere harmonies. At one point, the bass drum suggests a funeral procession. There's an intense emotional climax, and passages of high drama alternate with moments of romantic reverie.

Recommended recording: Yan Pascal Tortelier, BBC Philharmonic (Chandos)

ANTONÍN DVOŘÁK

Born 8 September 1841; Nelahozeves, Czech Republic
Died 1 May 1904; Prague, Czech Republic

Concerto in G minor for Piano and Orchestra, Opus 33

Composed: 1876
First performance: 24 March 1878; Prague, Czech Republic
Last MSO performance: MSO premiere
Instrumentation: 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets, 2 bassoons, 2 horns, 2 trumpets, timpani, strings
Approximate duration: 34 minutes

Dvořák's Op. 33 was the first of three concertos that he completed; his violin concerto followed three years later (1879), and the sublime cello concerto was composed in 1894-95. The piano concerto adheres to the traditional three movements, but its overall conception goes against the practice of other Romantic-era concertos — those of Chopin and Liszt, for example — that serve as a vehicle for virtuoso display by the soloist. Instead, the piano is incorporated into the overall fabric of the composition, sharing with the orchestra in the presentation and development of the thematic material.

The large-scale first movement — with opening and closing themes of noble solemnity and a carefree second theme in B-flat major, one that evokes the spirit of the composer's *Slavonic Dances* — is rife with contrasts. Cast in sonata-allegro form, its development section is one of the longest in Dvořák's output. The solo cadenza is one of the few external characteristics of the concertante style that the Czech master included in this work. (Neither the violin concerto nor the cello concerto boasts a cadenza.)

The gentle D-major Andante sostenuto is true chamber music, as the pianist both dialogues with and accompanies various woodwind soloists. A livelier middle section provides further distinction. The closing Allegro con fuoco ("fast, with fire") combines elements of sonata form and rondo. It encompasses three themes, the first two characterized by strong rhythmic ideas: the first is toccata-like, the second almost dance-like. The lyrical cast of the third theme creates a compelling foil for the first two.

Though Dvořák was a pianist, he eschewed the limelight, preferring to play chamber music and accompany singers. Karel Slavkovsky, who had requested the concerto in the first place, gave its premiere, with Adolph Čech conducting.

Recommended recording: Sviatoslav Richter; Carlos Kleiber, Bavarian State Orchestra (EMI)

IGOR STRAVINSKY

Born 17 June 1882; Lomonosov, Russia
Died 6 April 1971; New York, New York

Le Sacre du printemps (The Rite of Spring)

Composed: 1911-12
First performance: 29 May 1913; Paris, France
Last MSO performance: January 2012; Edo de Waart, conductor
Instrumentation: 3 flutes (3rd doubling piccolo), piccolo, alto flute,4 oboes (4th doubling English horn), English horn, 3 clarinets (3rd doubling bass clarinet), E-flat clarinet, bass clarinet, 4 bassoons (4th doubling contrabassoon), contrabassoon, 8 horns (7th and 8th doubling Wagner tuba), 4 trumpets (4th doubling bass trumpet), piccolo trumpet, 3 trombones, 2 tubas, 2 timpani, percussion (crotale, bass drum, cymbals, guiro, tambourine, triangle, tam tam), strings
Approximate duration: 33 minutes

Stravinsky was in St. Petersburg in the spring of 1910, putting the finishing touches on *The Firebird*, when he received his inspiration for *The Rite of Spring*. He later wrote: "I had a fleeting vision, which came as a complete surprise... I saw in my imagination a solemn pagan rite: sage elders, seated in a circle, watching a young girl dance herself to death. They were sacrificing her to propitiate the god of Spring."

The Firebird had been commissioned by the Ballet Russe impresario Sergei Diaghilev for his company's 1910 season in Paris. Its great success would alter the course of Stravinsky's life. The following year, *Petroushka* — begun as a concert piece for piano and orchestra, but converted to a ballet score at the urging of Diaghilev — was just as popular with the public and critics as The Firebird had been.

Following The *Firebird's* 13 June 1911 premiere in Paris, Stravinsky began work on *The Rite of Spring* in earnest; by early 1912 the first half of the score was almost complete. It was obvious, however, that the work would not be ready for the summer, so its production was postponed a year. This allowed the composer to work more deliberately on the rest of the ballet.

The premiere of *The Rite of Spring* — 29 May 1913; Theatre des Champs-Elysees, Paris — is enshrined in all the music history textbooks because of the scandal it caused, surely one of cultural history's most cherished riots. Apparently, the audience was just as infuriated by Vaslav Nijinsky's choreography — the composer later derided Nijinsky's dancing maidens as "knock- kneed and long-braided Lolitas" — as they were by Stravinsky's music. The master was relieved when, at performances in Paris and London that summer, those in attendance behaved with the usual decorum, but the first-night kerfuffle had been a traumatic experience for him, putting him in the hospital for two weeks.

What was it about this work that triggered such visceral reaction?

Was it the rhythm? It has been said that *The Rite of Spring* frequently treats the orchestra like a giant percussion instrument. That is nowhere more apparent than the famous passage in the Augurs of Spring, when a single massive chord (an E-flat-seventh chord atop F-flat major chord) is repeated over and over, its accents shifting unpredictably. In another audacious treatment of rhythm, Stravinsky often superimposes multiple ostinatos (repeated melodic fragments) with different rhythmic values and unequal total durations. A further important rhythmic feature is apparent in passages whose time signatures change almost continuously, a characteristic that can strike fear in the hearts of even the most seasoned conductors. This is especially evident in the opening bars of the Sacrificial Dance, where the meter changes in almost every measure; it begins 3/16, 2/16, 3/16, 3/16, 2/8, 2/16, 3/16.

Was it the melody? The harmony? Frequently, *The Rite* utilizes short, simple motives that Stravinsky sometimes drew — say the scholars — from Russian and Lithuanian folk music. These are combined to create larger units and, though normally diatonic in themselves, usually are treated chromatically. Chromaticism and dissonance often contribute to the harshness of the piece, as illustrated by the previously mentioned chord in the Augurs of Spring; the same chord, though, operates as an integrated sonority and provides a pitch reference, both melodically and harmonically.

Though we may not know for certain what set off that Parisian audience 105 years ago, we do know that *The Rite of Spring* remains undiminished in its ability to rouse — and even electrify — us today. Leonard Bernstein called it "the most important work of the 20th century." Pierre Boulez took that a step further, writing: "*The Rite of Spring* serves as a point of reference to all who seek to establish the birth certificate of what is still called 'contemporary' music. A kind of manifesto work, somewhat in the same way and probably for the same reasons as Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon*, it has not ceased to engender, first, polemics, then, praise, and, finally, the necessary clarification."

Recommended recording: Leonard Bernstein, New York Philharmonic (Sony Classical)

Program notes by J. Mark Baker.