

OSM

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The Rite of Spring with Kent Nagano

Celebration of the Earth, rituals of life and death, sacred and profane in their multiple manifestations mark the three musical works of tonight's concert. They are beyond cultural borders, mixing the styles in an unusual way. The orchestral theater, a genre almost totally new is invention of the contemporary composer Tan Dun (1957). The next one is the revolutionary Stravinsky's ballet suite, famous for the biggest scandal in modern musical history, and finally, a cycle of symphonic songs, Mahler's musical testament. The link between them is in the oriental inspiration, visible in the poems, present in the music, even without words.

Tan Dun, *Orchestral theater I, « Xun »* (1990)

Commissioned by BBC, first performance in London, 1990.

Is it a shamanistic incantation or imaginary ritual? *Orchestral Theatre I*, the first piece of the cycle with the same name, subtitled "Xun", opens the concert. The composer explains: "The idea of an "orchestra theatre" gradually came to me as a way of bringing the isolated performing arts back to people, back to the audience."

Composer and conductor, Tan Dun (1957) has made a strong mark on the contemporary music scene with a repertoire of amazing diversity, erasing the barriers between classical, popular, eastern, western, multimedia and avant-garde musical trends. In Tan Dun's words: "My purpose is to find my own language. The music of the future. It does not fit the 20th century, but opens the door to the 21st."

No challenge is too high for this imaginative Chinese musician, widely recognized for his exuberant inventions, as well as in his orchestral compositions and in the realm of opera. The instruments of ceramics, stone and paper, integrated in the orchestra, participate in the opera *Tea* (2002); while the amplified bowls of water instead of traditional percussions play in the *Water Passion after St Matthew* (2000). There is also the use of rustle of the crumpling paper instruments for *Paper Concerto* (2003). One might imagine a child playing whatever it could, inventing music out of everything - and it wouldn't be far from the truth.

Born in the village of Si Mao, in the province of Hunan, Tan Dun worked in rice-fields on government communes during the Cultural Revolution. As a child, he was fascinated by shamanistic rituals and ceremonies, accompanied with music, often improvised with natural objects such as stones and water, or simply banging on pots and pans. With peasants in the village, he created his own musical group, starting to learn to play the traditional Chinese string instrument, *erhu*. After escaping from the commune, he went to the China Conservatory of Music, in Beijing, where he followed classical training and discovered a range of

contemporary repertoire with his teacher, Toru Takemitsu. Later on, in 1985, Tan Dun moved to New York, to Columbia University, where he was in touch with the contemporary experimental composers, John Cage, Philip Glass, Steve Reich.

The originality of his compositions comes from the blending of the disparate influences he gathered on his path: traditional Chinese instruments from his upbringing in Hunan, associated with classical orchestra, organic instruments and multimedia technology. Tan Dun's music is a convergence of East and West, an encounter of the oriental spirituality and the avant-garde, from the known to the unknown. It is evident that the variety of sound material can be joined in an amazing and unique personal style.

The large audience discovered his music at the movie theater in 2000, owing to the Oscar Award-winning score for Ang Lee's film, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. Last year, Tan Dun's original compositions were chosen as the official music for the award ceremonies of the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games. A winner of today's most prestigious honors, he has been played in most famous concert halls and opera houses, from Tokyo to Munich, from BBC Proms to Los Angeles. The world is the limit....

Orchestral Theatre I, "Xun", the first piece of the *Theatre* series, uses a large orchestra with eleven "xun", a sort of ocarina, borrowed from the Chinese tradition; their timbre colors the ritual-like composition.

The piece opens with mysterious sounds, the orchestra members' voices join the instruments, shouting, humming, yelling, singing. The music flows as a wave: an improvisatory, free melody, supported by intense rhythmic pulsations. There is a suggestion of dramatic conflict in the music, reminiscent of Chinese Opera, but with no story or characters for the stage. Music alone is the actor in this abstract play.

Tan Dun recalls: "As I wrote this piece in New York, a lot of things were running through my mind: the faces of Peking Opera actresses, sacrifice, human noise in Tien An Men Square - all these images appeared to me as hallucination, jumbled together on a huge stage." Tan Dun explores the new orchestral sonorities, inventing new techniques, inspired by Chinese instruments: the harp played as the "zheng", ancestor of koto; the piccolo used as a bamboo flute, the strings treated as percussions.

This was the true challenge for the composer:

How, or if, a classical orchestra could sound not classical? Could it convey the sense of another culture, a ritual of instruments and vocalization? Could this, which is common in Chinese theater and folk celebration, be done with a western orchestra? What would primitive sounds be like with western harmony? Why must harp be only harp, and koto only koto, forever separate?

For the first-time listener, it would be an amazing and mysterious experience.

Igor Stravinsky, *The Rite of Spring, Scenes of Pagan Russia* (1913)

First performance : 29 May 1913, Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, Paris

The ritual dimension underlines many of Stravinsky's works: *Les Noces*, *Oedipus Rex*, *Agon*, *Threni*. *The Rite of Spring* is chronologically the first and most important among them, owing to its powerful boldness and wide influence on 20th century music.

Success came early to Stravinsky. His first works followed the nationalistic trends of his fellow countrymen, Mussorgsky and Rimski-Korsakov. Invited by the famous ballet troupe the *Ballets Russes* to compose some works for their Paris stage, he moved there for the premiere of *The Firebird* (1910). A year later, he produced *Petrushka* (1911), followed by *The Rite of Spring, Pictures from Pagan Russia*.

From the start, the title gives the pitch. The ballet score includes numerous indications, describing fertility rituals of ancient pagan tribes, and the music reaches its highest point in the last Sacrificial Dance. The composition of tremendous power evokes the celebration of prehistoric pagan tribes from Central Asia, as imagined by the composer.

“I saw in imagination a solemn pagan rite: sage elders, seated in a circle, watched a young girl dance herself to death. They were sacrificing her to propitiate the god of spring”, according to Stravinsky's autobiography, *Chronicle of my life*. The music of *The Rite* is a radical breakdown of European music traditions; it seems to go back to the primitive, magical origins of music, in the times when sound and rhythm linked men with the forces of the nature.

At the turn of the last century, a movement in painting followed a similar orientation: primitivism, as it was named, rallied artists attracted by the raw, instinctive vitality of traditional cultures, unconcerned with subjective and narrative painting, sometimes deliberately primitive and shocking.

At its first performance in Paris, May 29th, 1913, at the Theatre des Champs-Elysées, the revolutionary score caused a huge scandal, a near riot; the audience was infuriated, persuaded that it was “a blasphemous attempt to destroy music as an art.” In the following days, the critics were harsh:

M. Stravinsky's music is disconcerting and unpleasant. No doubt, it sought to approach barbarescent choreography. It is unfortunate that the composer of *The Firebird* allowed himself such errors, wanting to produce primitive, prehistoric effects. His music is almost noise,

destroying any link with tonality.
A work eminently amusical.

(A. Bochot, *L'Écho de Paris*, May 30th, 1913)

The most essential characteristic of *The Rite of Spring* is that it is the most dissonant and the most discordant composition yet written. Never was the system and the cult of the wrong note practiced with so much industry, zeal and fury.

(P. Lalo, *Le Temps*, Paris, June 3rd, 1913).

The same kind of reaction in London, a year later:

The music of *Le sacre du Printemps* baffles verbal description. To say that much of it is hideous as sound is a mild description. There is certainly an impelling rhythm traceable. It practically has no relation to music at all, as most of us understand the word.

(*Musical Time*, London, August 1, 1913)

Each of these critics contains a part of truth. Composed for a symphonic orchestra of colossal dimensions, the score is dominated by the percussive use of dissonant blocs. The long episodes of consecutive intervals moving a semitone apart blur any sense of harmonic progression. Melody and harmony are reduced to rhythm. Syncopations, insistent pulse, rhythmic ostinato reinforce the dancing energy. The instrumentation is exploited for its hypnotic power, not far from unbridled Dionysian festivities.

Nijinsky's suggestive choreography, overtly erotic, startled its first-night audience. The scandal marked musical history. Nevertheless, the open-minded critics recognized its originality:

The score of the *Rite of Spring* is natural, spontaneous, flows from the source. The idea and its orchestral form are united, lively and deep forces mark the rhythm of this dance suite : piercing, rude and powerful. Insisting repetitive rhythms are exalting. Life and joy burst everywhere in the *Rite of Spring* : we are in the midst of life, in the heart of music.

(Florent Schmitt, *La France*, June 4th, 1913)

Soon after, the work became a touchstone of the new tonal language, and recognized as a masterpiece of 20th century music.

Part One: The Adoration of the Earth

1. Introduction
2. The Augurs of Spring –Dances of the Young Girls
(*Les augures printaniers, Danses des adolescentes*)
3. Ritual of Abduction (*Jeu du rapt*)
4. Spring Rounds (Round Dance) (*Rondes printanières*)

5. Ritual of the Rival Tribes (*Jeu des cités rivales*)
6. Procession of the Sage (*Cortège du sage*)
7. The Sage (*Adoration of the Earth*)
8. Dance of the Earth (*Danse de la terre*)

Part Two : The Sacrifice

1. Introduction
2. Mystic Circles of the Young Girls (*Cercles mystérieux des adolescentes*)
3. The Glorification of the Chosen One (*Glorification de l'Élue*)
4. Evocation of the Ancestors (*Évocation des ancêtres*)
5. Ritual Action of the Ancestors (*Action rituelle des ancêtres*)
6. Sacrificial Dance (The Chosen One) (*Danse sacrée (l'Élue)*)

Here is a short account of the program according to the notes of the premiere in Paris :

Part One: The Adoration of the Earth

Spring. The earth is covered with flowers. The earth is covered with grass. An immense joy is spreading over the earth. Men dance and consult the oracle according to ritual. The forefather (The oldest) of the wise men participates in the celebration of spring. He will be united with the Earth, abundant and magnificent. All of the men are stamping the earth in ecstasy.

Part Two : The Sacrifice

After day, midnight. On the hills, the sacred stones. The young girls play mythical games, searching for the sacred path. Then follows the celebration of the Chosen Virgin, designated to be offered to the Gods. The Wise men are revered witnesses. They are contemplating the sacrifice, dedicated to Iarilo, the magnificent, the flamboyant.

The Rite of Spring has no real story. There is no personal feeling either; the individual is encompassed in the collectivity, participating in the “ceremonies of ancestral Russia”, as Stravinsky put it the evening before the premiere. Inspired by the archaic shamanistic rituals, real or imaginary, the work is symbolic. It represents a search for a new vitality, badly needed in music, as well as in waning western civilization. Like primitive sacrificial music, Stravinsky’s *Rite* is liberated from our consciousness of Time.

Gustav Mahler, *The Song of the Earth*(1911)

First performance : 20 November, 1911, the Tonhalle in Munich, with Bruno Walter conducting.

The title is slightly enigmatic, so is the work. Could it be a symphony which doesn't dare to claim its name? After eight symphonies, Mahler, superstitious, avoided the fateful number nine, in order not to challenge destiny. He chose the middle way, a synthesis of cycle of lieder and symphony.

Stravinsky. Mahler. Is their encounter in tonight's concert just a coincidence? The two works are almost contemporaries; each one in its own way brings a promise for the future. They stay at a huge distance between each other, in spirit and in music.

The Rite of Spring is deeply rooted in the earth; it is a celebration of the rebirth of spring by the exalted tribal dance. *The song of the Earth* is a poignant meditation on human destiny, man as pilgrim in this world, his attachment to it and final withdrawal. Torn between beauties of the nature and nostalgia for ephemeral life, it is the last song of a man facing death with serenity.

In both compositions, there is drunkenness, sensuality and celebration of the eternal return of spring. On the other hand, the distance is vast between two Asiatic worlds: the primitive, original of the *Rite*, and the refined, civilized one of the *Song*, with a touch of romantic sensibility. A huge gap separates their emotionality: personal, soul-stirring in the Mahler's work; collective, dry, barbaric and without feeling, in Stravinsky. Death brings them together by the promise of the eternal renewal of Nature. *Ewig...Ewig...*

Mahler had selected a mosaic of poems from the collection *The Chinese Flute*, centuries old poetry of the T'ang dynasty (8th century). Using free verse translations, the composer adapted its style, adding a number of lines of his own invention, mostly in the last strophes. The final version preserves the subtlety of the oriental imagery and verses, with a shade of romantic spirit.

The Song of the Earth is made up of two parts of equal length. The five shorter lieder are the first part, preparing for the last one, *The Farewell*, which constitutes the second part. Two vocal soloists – a tenor and an alto (or baritone) with the orchestra - reflect two contrasting sides of the same personality. Their alternative songs create harmony of contrasts, a central feature of the poetry as well as of Mahler's world-view: night and day, drunkenness and contemplation, autumn and spring, youth and death. Is it a romantic reminiscence of Yin and Yang? Or the dualistic nature of the will, Dionysian, antipode of Apollonian, which inhabit the music as well as the human spirit? Two larger outer movements are the pillars of the work; in between, the lieder follow a search for the meaning of life through dream and reality, in the bitter-sweet festivities of youth, in the light of oriental wisdom.

How Mahler transformed this poetry in music is magnificent. First of all, he did it by the synthesis of song and symphony, the intimate lieder and the large orchestral form. It was the ideal he was searching for since the *Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen* (Songs of a Wayfarer – c. 1885) and the symphonies with voices, which

prepared the path. The structure of the work is in many respects close to his symphonies, especially the *Third* (1896), whose final *Adagio* could be linked to *The Farewell of the Song of the Earth*. Both of them are dealing with the transience of earthly beauty, the relationship between Nature and the soul, and serene departure from the world. The work is impregnated with pentatonic sonorities, a thematic web links the songs in a coherent unity. Suspended dissonances, chromaticism and subtle instrumentation weaken the links with traditional tonality.

1. The Drinking Song of Earth's Sorrow

The raucous nocturnal drinking of the opening movement is a blend of the sonata form and the strophic song, manifest in the refrain "Dunkel ist das Leben..." heard trice, each time in a slightly different shape. Mahler used modulations, each one raised by semitone, in order to increase the expressive intensity of each strophe. The tenor sings in the extreme range, on the border of the scream, accentuated by the orchestra; the poem depicts a monkey howling on the gravestones as an omen of death. An episode evokes a Viennese waltz, distorted, alluding to the vanity of the pleasures of life. The refrain is a pure reminiscence of Wagner.

2. The Lonely one in Autumn

At the turn of the seasons, the poetic depiction of autumn landscape in transition toward winter. It is a metaphor of the wistful meditation on the passing of life. The same figure, as in the first song, but the look is different. The violin ostinato and the solo oboe line create the veiled, damped sonority, as well as the effect of *clair-obscur*. The Chinese heptatonic scale (close to Lydian mode on F) brings the subtle touch of the exotic; while the vocal line draws the arabesques, as "an artist had strewn jade dust" over the whole. There are two main ideas - autumn and recollection of summer - developing in dialogue, according to the rondo scheme. The poem and the music are reminiscent of certain lines of the *Kindertotenlieder* (Songs on the Death of Children): "My heart is tired. My little lamp blown out.", and the last question: "Sun of love, will you never shine again?" receives its answer without words, through the violin ostinato.

3. Of Youth

Together with the following three, the lied *Of Youth* is a kind of aphorism, Chinese-style paintings drawn with a stroke of the brush. The lightest and shortest of all, it stands as the scherzo in symphony, with its delicate and wistful charm. The dramatic tenor in the first song turns to the lyrical, seductive voice. The poem describes carefree youths, chatting, playing, living on the surface of life, as the arching bridge over the pond. The oriental atmosphere is suggested by the pentatonic and whole-tone scales; and the flute playing arabesques in its high range. At the end, the music dissolves as a mirage. The overall shape is symmetrical, in arch form, according to the verses; the piece concludes just as it began.

4. Of Beauty

A charming pastoral scene in the country – young girls pick flowers on the river bank – before a group of the young men irrupt onto the place on horseback. The contrasting, animated scene accentuates the feminine and masculine polarities. In the musical frenzy, percussions and brass instruments bring shining colors to this “horse music”, with a quote of Tchaikovsky’s *1812 Overture*. But shortly after, the cavalcade disappears, the memories return, the tender and ardent longings remain. Sensuality, desire, touches of eroticism in the poem inspired the music. The lied is free tripartite form, with orchestral interludes between the strophes, and a subtle concluding epilogue, illuminating the gravity of the other songs. The last sounds of harp, glockenspiel, flute and clarinet vanish into space.

5. The Drunkard in Spring

The second drinking song of the cycle is a parody of Dionysus’ festivities of spring, with only one worshipper of the god of wine. Living in the denial of reality, the drunkard is disturbed by the bird song, a messenger of spring. For a moment, he comes back to reality (with a quotation of the *Kindertotenlieder*), before emptying the next cup of wine, and sinking again into a deep ethylic dream. It is the flipside of the first song, heard through the melodic lines and pentatonic horn calls. Its poem and music announce *The Farewell*.

6. The Farewell

Strokes of the gong punctuate the farewell from life. The last movement is an allegory of life and death, the composer’s spiritual and musical fulfillment. “It is the most personal thing I have yet created”, as Mahler wrote to Bruno Walter.

The structure of the finale is simple. It is based on two poetic parts - an imaginary dialogue between two poets. Musical effects are created through ostinato motifs, harmonies of the pentatonic scale, chromatic escape from the tonality, consecutive tritons, and a translucent sonority of the orchestra with the voice hovering over, as coming from the Otherworld: “O Beauty! O eternal love-and-life drunken world!”

“Why must it be so?” Question and answer come in the second part, brought by the long awaited friend: the archetypal figure of Death, as a pale rider from the Scriptures. It is the serene acceptance of natural and divine law, illuminated by the promise of the eternal return of spring. The music blurs metric and tonal marks, it fades in the reverberating sounds of gong and tam-tam, the voice ending in the near-silence. *Ewig...Ewig...*

Dujka Smoje

