In the month of its centenary, Richard Alston considers what it is like to choreograph Igor Stravinsky’s The Rite of Spring

I choreographed The Rite of Spring for Marie Rambert. In 1913 it was she who assisted Vaslav Nijinsky in deciphering counts for the original Rite. So many years later, at 92, Rambert was sometimes confused about practical day-to-day issues – but never for one moment was she unclear about dance, never confused in the studio. And so I found reasons whenever I could to invite her into the studio, and one of these was for my Rite of Spring.

I don’t think my Rite was particularly successful – too demure, too orderly – but it was enthralling to dissect the music and make sense of such a dynamic score. As music The Rite of Spring is still thrillingly effective, but I do believe that as theatre it is problematic. I would go so far as to stick my neck out and say that as theatre music it is insolubly flawed.

The first part, “The Kiss of the Earth”, surges along, opening with cascades on bassoon giving way speedily to the archaic throbbing of the “Augurs of Spring”, then gears seamlessly shift for the appearance of the young girls, potential sacrificial victims. And so it goes on – the first half accumulating excitement and urgency pausing only for the lyricism of “Spring Rounds” and for a breathtaking moment of stillness as the Sage kisses the earth. From then on the music relentlessly builds to a climax and the first part crashes to a close.

In complete contrast, the second part opens with quiet murmurings and it basically stays in this sombre mood right up until the sacrificial victim is chosen. Once again, wild forces are unleashed but somehow the momentum and flow of the first half are never quite regained. When the final violent jerks of the sacrificial dance start to shudder, the music is so full of twist and spasm that the Chosen One seems numb with exhaustion right from the start – dramatically, there is nowhere to go. The very end is also so abrupt – neither a bang nor a whimper, it just stops.

The most effectively choreographed Rite I’ve seen is the powerfully iconic version by Pina Bausch but even there, the dress used to symbolise the sacrificial choice is passed interminably from one woman to another. In my production the Sage repeatedly moved along the row of young girls – “too much eeny meeny miny moe” muttered Antony Tudor when he saw the Rambert company in New York, and he was absolutely right.

Of course it is hard to deal with the idea of dancing oneself to death, to make it theatrically convincing that is. It’s a stumbling block, something the imagination can picture when listening to the savagery of the music, but to become real in front of your eyes, another thing entirely.

I think it is significant that the great choreographer and greatest admirer of Stravinsky, George Balanchine, never touched Rite. He is supposed to have said he would only consider making a dance to the four-handed piano version, but he never did.

Both Paul Taylor (whose version was worked out as a detective story!) and I worked with this piano version, and I remember thinking when Marie Rambert came to watch rehearsal that this must have been how she had originally heard the music working alongside Nijinsky. When we talked, Rambert told me she thought Nijinsky had tried too hard to choreograph every note. It didn’t help that Stravinsky thought dancers could only count in 4/4 or 6/8 time and so prepared a score for the choreographer with counts that made no sense whatever.

Some years later I had the opportunity to work with the orchestral version for a BBC documentary. A complete performance of Rite by the BBC Symphony Orchestra cut away to fragments of choreography and this time I made very different steps in response to the force of the orchestra (indeed the Rambert version had basically disappeared). The thing I remember most vividly about this programme is two Russian folk musicians playing a country waltz on fiddle and accordion. It was exactly the melody Stravinsky gave to the opening bassoons in The Rite of Spring.

“I am the vessel through which Sacre [Rite] passed”, claimed Stravinsky. We now know that there are many folk melodies quoted, but hearing this waltz made it clear how completely Stravinsky transformed his source material – whatever its inherent flaws as a piece of theatre, Rite is stupendous music.

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