

THE RITE OF SPRING – IGOR STRAVINSKY

A REHEARSAL GUIDE

Stravinsky's Rite of Spring is surely one of the great masterpieces of the symphonic literature. This guide may be more appropriate for advanced student orchestras than professional orchestras, but hopefully there will be food for thought for conductors of all calibers of orchestras.

My primary goal is to make the piece less daunting for the musician by showing phrase lengths, indicating grouping, and making the difficult passages routine through repetition. For example, while the constantly changing rhythms of the sacrificial dance at first may seem overwhelming, understanding the phrasing makes it logical and natural to play.

In this spirit, after initially explaining the phrase structure of the passages containing these changing rhythms, I start each rehearsal with #104-#111, #117-#121, #142-#149, #186-#192, and #192 to the end. I call these my "Rite of Spring calisthenics." I also find it helpful to rehearse initially the beginning to #12 with just the winds, and #79 to #102 with just the strings to avoid a lot of sitting around for the players who are not involved with these sections. If I am really strapped for time, I will give the winds a 15 minute break and work with the strings, and then give the strings a 15 minute break and work with the winds, eliminating my break time.

In addition, I find a brief explanation with musical examples for those audience members not acquainted the piece to be very helpful. Although the Rite of Spring is almost 100 years old, it can still be difficult for those not used to the jarring dissonances and erratic rhythm.

I tell the audience of the riot that took place at first performance of the ballet performed by the Ballet Russe in Paris in 1913, with Vaslav Nijinsky as choreographer, Sergei Diaghilev as impresario, Pierre Monteux as conductor, and of the dozens of rehearsals needed by both the dancers and orchestra. I then have the bassoon play the opening 3 measures, explaining that this melody was taken from a book of Lithuanian folk songs that influenced Stravinsky. I also mention that this melody is typical of the melodies used for the Rite, encompassing a narrow range of notes.

Next we illustrate #13 to #14; perhaps this is the passage that set off the riot.

I then have the English horn play from #15 to #18 to demonstrate a typical ostinato found in the Rite. After about 20 seconds, the audience gets the idea!

Then we demonstrate the lovely melody in the Spring Rounds played by the flutes and violas from #51 to #53, followed by the somewhat grotesque version of the same melody at #53 for 4 measures. I allude to Walt Disney's Fantasia, and ask the audience to remember the brontosaurus and other dinosaurs that roamed the earth in that section of the Disney classic.

These remarks help prepare the audience to what they are about to hear, and assist the audience in experiencing what took place nearly 100 years ago at that first performance.

I prefer to gesture to the principal bassoon to start on his own, rather than to beat the first measure. Note that the second part of the first measure is an augmentation of the first part. I then bring in the second horn in the second measure in tempo. I find it helpful to rehearse the clarinets and bass clarinets by themselves to ensure continuity, so that the lines are played without pause. I give the English horn just a little bit of time going into the last measure before #3.

Note that the dynamic for the bassoon at *Piú mosso* is only *poco piú forte*, not *forte*; young bassoonists may have a tendency to play much louder at that point. In the introduction, rhythmic accuracy is of paramount importance. I find it helpful to tell the players that they often overlap, and that the goal is to sound like one player, for example the flutes at #5 and at one measure before #7.

To insure evenness and continuity, I prefer that the first bass clarinet player play both lines at #6. At the pickup to 5 after #6, the English horn player needs to realize that the rhythm is the same as the flutes, and that 9 after #6, the rhythm is different. The English horn player needs to blend with the flutes, and not dominate. At #8, I prefer that the bassoons slur beginning with each grace note, in other words, the first bassoon slurs two eighth notes and then four eighth notes, and the second bassoon slur four eighth notes at a time. At #7 for the bass clarinets, #8 for the clarinets, and #10 for the bassoons, I like to hear the second note clipped to ensure the grouping.

In general, the alto flute player needs to play loud all the time, since the instrument doesn't project very well, and is often given a solo role, as at #9. The piccolo clarinet part, 3 measures after #9, is to be played in a declamatory fashion. The 6th bass is an important member of the ensemble at #10; the player needs to be aware of the importance of accuracy at this point, which also applies to the solo cello at #7. Note that at one measure before #11, the oboe and piccolo trumpet are doubled, but that they share the line after that point. Regrettably, the oboe is almost inaudible, while the piccolo trumpet is heard easily. I like to rehearse the oboe and trumpet alone so that they are aware how the line is intertwined between the two instruments.

At #12, everything comes to a crashing halt, with the exception of the solo bassoon. The effect is for his sound to be heard as having emerged from the texture, rather than a fresh attack at this point. The violins, at the fourth measure of #12, are, of course, an anticipation of #13, and need to be very definite rhythmically and not too soft dynamically. Be sure that the violas entrance, including the harmonic of the first solo viola, is not late, nor the entrance of the clarinets and horns.

Needless to say, #13 needs to be played with ferocity and at the frog. The horns will need no encouragement to attack the note with equal vigor. Lower horns at 3 measures after #13 (F flat chord) need to be encouraged to play out so they can come close to matching the more easily

projected upper four horns (E Flat 7). At the second measure of #15, I have the trumpet play with minimal diminuendo, and the violins three measures later with essentially no diminuendo. At #16, the basses and cellos need to be equal in volume. Note that at 4 measures after #16, the 4th horn is essentially the 6th trumpet. #17 is another place where the 2 flutes need to sound like one player. At one measure before #18, the last note of the triplets in the trumpets, 4th horn, and violins has to line up exactly together, and on the third beat of the triplet.

First violins must take care to play their first note after the pizzicato exactly in time. At #19, bassoons must be attentive not to rush. Strings starting at 4 measures after #19, and in subsequent similar passages, need to be sure to stay forte also for unaccented notes. At #23, violas need to produce a lot of sound with their harmonics. At #27, the ensemble must be as soft as possible for the alto flute solo. Again at #28, as earlier, basses and cellos should match their volume.

At 5 measures after #28, the expression and volume of the trumpets and solo cellos can raise and fall with the arc of the phrase. Note that at 3 measures after #29, the low horns sustain full value while the high horns play only for a quarter note. #30 is most effective when played off the string with crescendo to forte with each indication; each crescendo can start softly. The wedge accents for clarinets require the notes to be played with heavy accents and very short duration.

At #31, the second violins and violas should explore the various ways to execute this pizzicato, and choose the most effective one. Also at #31, contrabassoon and fourth horn need to play with heavy accents and small spaces between the notes for optimum energy and attack. One contrabassoon can work if only one is available. I prefer that second violins and violas play full valued 16th notes on the string at #32, until 5 after #32, at which point extremely short and pointed 16th notes are appropriate. At #33, adding more violinists to the inside part helps to bring out the melody. The same can occur at #35 by adding more second violins to the inside part. Of course the timpanist needs to play with a very hard stick and as dry as possible. At #36, I ask the horns to hold their last note just a bit on the note after their glissando; in the third measure after #36, the A diminished chord is more clearly heard.

When arriving at #37, the violins and violas must play with great fury, but subside a bit in the 3rd measure so that the melody instruments can be heard clearly. Timpani and bass drum must be exactly together, not too loud, and very dry. At #38, hopefully the oboes and English horn can cut through the texture. At #39, the third trombone followed by the first and second trombone must be equal in sound. I combine the 4/8 and 5/8 measures to make one 9/8 measure. The woodwinds and violins at #39 are basically an affect. Trumpets, however, at #40 must play very even 16th notes. As at #39, the brass at #41 must be as equal in sound as possible. At #42, the section violin parts are very difficult; I instruct the players to use very little bow, accenting the first note of each group and clipping the second. At #43, note that the woodwinds are fortissimo and the brass are only forte, allowing the woodwind color to predominate and the texture as whole to be less heavy. At #44, each crescendo can be started softly for the most dramatic

effect. After #46, I recommend that both trumpet parts be combined and played by the third trumpet player for greater clarity and ensemble. After #47, the second violins and cellos play the same rhythm, only with altered accents. Care must be taken not to rush the $\frac{3}{4}$ measures.

Intonation at #48 can be problematic between the piccolo clarinet and bass clarinet. The breath can come after the third measure. If the first flutist has difficulty holding the e flat trill, the third flutist can take over briefly in the fourth measure after #48 if need be on beats 3, 4, and 5.

The metronome marking at #49 seems a little on the fast side for *sostenuto e pesante*. The downbows need to be played very long, and the pizzicato offbeats must not be allowed to rush. At 3 measures after #50, the violas can play upbow, downbow, upbow rather than all downbow, in order to allow the melody to connect in a more cantabile manner. Note that this melody was first heard 6 measures before #29 in the trumpets and solo cellos. At 4 measures after #53, 8 measures after #53, and 2 measures before #54, I like to stretch the glissando eighth notes. The cutoff at #54 is also the downbeat of #54. The first violins can change to an upbow on their dotted half notes, but this change must be done quickly so that they don't fall behind.

As at #48, intonation at 3 measures after #56 between the piccolo clarinet and alto flute may need attention. The passage is identical to the one at #48 for two measures; from the third measure, the passage is transposed one step higher.

At #57, the two timpani parts are played by one player. Care must be taken that the timpani doesn't cover the tubas. At 3 measures after #57, note that the melody line jumps between the unison first and second horns and unison third and fourth horns. I wish I could explain why Stravinsky used this technique, but I don't know. This phenomenon also occurs at #58. Note that #59 is essentially a $\frac{1}{4}$ measure plus a $\frac{4}{4}$ measure. Care must be taken that the woodwinds are well balanced, most notably that the first oboe after #60 isn't covered by the piccolo clarinet. 3 measures before #61 is also a $\frac{1}{4}$ - $\frac{4}{4}$ measure. At #61, basses and cellos should be equal in volume. At 5 measures after #61, I like to slur in the D in the outside first violins and the B in the inside violins, which then allows for another upbow at the end the measure; this bowing delineates the second phrase very well. At #62, I prefer long quarter notes until the 8th notes begin in the third measure, which are then effective if played short and marked. All quarter notes in the winds and brass with wedges for their articulation must be played *secco* and with great force.

At one measure before #64, I ask the trumpets to play each flutter tongue accented and separate. At #64, use of Wagner tubas is desirable, but horns will do if they are not available. Use of full bow at #64 makes for a very dramatic and forceful sound. At #66, bassoons are essentially inaudible unless played substantially louder than the piano dynamic that is marked.

The difficult cross rhythms starting at #67 in the timpani and percussion must be played with extreme precision. At the Lento before #72, if only one contrabassoon is available, perhaps that player can play the second part, with the 4th bassoon player playing the eighth notes an octave

lower. At the passages beginning at #72, all quarter notes and eighth notes can be played equally short, with the groups of 5 played slightly slower than the triplets.

Starting at 4 measures after #73 to #75, all horns playing triplets somehow need to play loud enough to be heard. Perhaps the assistant horn player can join in an effort to cut through. While #75 is fiendishly difficult for the cellos, they should be encouraged to play their downbeats and moving line with clarity and strength. At 4 measures before #76, second violins should play on the G string to maximize their sound. I'd also suggest having the horns play alone at least once from #75 to the end of the first part. Although not written, I have both the tubas play slightly longer on their last note to bring out the half step dissonance.

After the intensity and excitement of the last section of the first part, everyone needs to take a deep breath and calm down before continuing. The atmosphere of the second part evokes the mysterious sounds of the night. In this section, the string players playing harmonics must find a way to project, especially at #83, when the harmonics of the solo violin are doubled by the alto flute. Strings must play very quietly during this duet. Note the extreme high register of the first oboe in this section; producing these notes quietly is very difficult. At #84, the strings minus the four solo violas must play a real pianississimo. The five solo cellos at #85 can play somewhat expressively. At 4 measures before #87, the solo violas and cellos must play with perfect precision.

At #87, I have the front four stands of second violins play the second and third lines of the divisi, and the back three stands play the first line, with each line played by an individual stand of players. For me, this arrangement allows for greater clarity, and it is helpful for the front stands of the second violins to be nearer to the first two stands of cellos. Note that at #87, the flutes are to play harmonics. All the flutes finger low C, and overblow to reach the proper harmonic.

The tempo at #89 is somewhat faster, and then recedes to Tempo primo at #90. #90 is made up of one bar phrases. #91 again demonstrates the limited range of the melodies used by Stravinsky in the Rite, which contributes to its primitive sound. The rhythmic accompaniment at #91 needs to be extremely clear, especially the pizzicato in the section cellos.

The passage at #93 needs little explanation – care must be taken to insure that the alto flute is audible. At #95, the strings need to step aside for the solo woodwinds, and then the second violins and outside cellos need to come through at #96.

At #97, I do a very short pause in place of the quarter rest, and then change #97 to a 4/4 measure. The effect is exactly the same, and this change makes the first horn and pizzicato on a downbeat, and easier to negotiate. Care must be taken at #97 that the tempo is not too slow.

At two measures before #100, I ask the first violins to play on the A string. At 3 measures before #101 and at #101, the oboes and solo cellos must be well balanced – both groups equally present.

At one measure before #101, the muted horns must be well in tune, made much more difficult by the fact that they are stopped.

After the accelerando, at one measure before #104, notice that the strings are fortissimo, while the timpani and bass drum are only forte; this hopefully assures that the strings are also audible.

At #104, the question arises as to whether the groupings of the 5/8 measures are 2+3 or 3+2. I believe that the answer is both. The conductor can show both the 3rd and the 4th beat.

The 9/8 measure at 1 measure before #105, and in all subsequent places in this section, can be beat in 3, or in 4 plus an 1/8th note. I prefer the latter, and ask the cello basses and bass drum to accent the pickup and the downbeat to #105. I explain to the orchestra that the 7/8 measure is the same as the 5/8 measure, except that the first beat is repeated. To be consistent with the 9/8 measures, I do the 6/8 measures in this section, starting with #109, in 3.

Care must be taken after the 9/8 and 6/8 measures that especially the flutes, who play grace notes, but also the oboes, horns, violins, and violas, don't enter early on the second beat.

The 7/4 measures in this section are essentially ¼ plus 3/2; the note on the "and" of the first beat is a pickup to the first beat of the 3/2. The 3/8 measures at #111 are 1/8 plus 2/8, and may be conducted as such.

Starting at #114, I conduct a very clear 5 beat pattern for the 5/4 measures, and an equally clear subdivided 3/2 for the 6/4 measures. I ask the violinists to bring out B flat, C, D flat, B flat, D flat, C whenever they have that snippet of melody. The traditional slight broadening of the tempo 2 measures before #117 makes the 5/8 measure one before #117 sound less abrupt.

I have changed the 4th beat of the 5/8 measure one before #117 to a concert C for everyone. The concert D in the 3rd horn and violas sounds like a terrible mistake to me, essentially a missed note in the horn.

#121 continues in the same tempo, but in quarter notes and half notes instead of eighth notes and quarter notes. Note that the brass are only forte, while the woodwinds are fortissimo.

I combine the two ¾ measures at two measures before #124 to make one 3/2 measure. This grouping enables the strings to play squarely on the first and second beats, and also facilitates their entrance at #124. I do the same grouping for the bassoons at two measures before #127. #128 can be done approximately 2 times slower. Whatever length is decided upon for the horns, it must be consistent. I suggest a slightly held 8th note. Balancing the English horn and alto flute is problematic, as the former is in an extremely low register which is hard to control in soft dynamics, and the latter is also low, making it even more difficult than usual to project. At #131, the third flute can help the alto flute by taking over from the alto flute here and there, so that the alto flute player can catch a breath and the line can continue uninterrupted.

At #132, the part of the bass trumpet can be assumed by the trombone or bass trombone if a bass trumpet is not available. At one and two measures before #134, the violins and violas can bring out just a bit each time their note changes. At #134, trumpet 3, bass trumpet, and trombones should take care not to cover the horns. At #134, it can be helpful to rehearse the first violins, flutes 1 and 2 and piccolo, and then a measure later add the piccolo trumpet, trumpets 1 and 2, and violas.

At 2 measures before #136, for each of the three notes of the triplet and the next downbeat, the ponticello and heavy downbows in the second violins and cellos are very effective, as well as in the first violins and violas the second measure after #137. At #135, the oboes and English horn can produce a particularly nasty and nasal sound. At #139, the 4th trumpet can take the bass trumpet part if that instrument is not available. I suggest that the first bass clarinet play both parts at 3 measures after #141.

The problem at one measure before #142 is mitigated if that measure is conducted in 4 as a 4/8 measure, and the bass clarinet plays 16th notes starting on the “and” of the third beat. The string entrance at #142 is much easier when the previous 2/4 bar is grouped in this fashion.

I was recently told that when bass clarinetist Dan Leeson played the Rite under Stravinsky, he showed him that at two measures before #142 it was possible to play the Eb and Db an octave lower with the extension that increases the range of the instrument. Stravinsky preferred this version if the bass clarinet had the extension.

In order for young musicians to see and groups and play phrases rather than be confronted by rapidly changing time signatures, I have the musicians play one phrase at a time and pause. I divide the phrases as follows:

1. 2nd measure of #142 – play 4 measures
2. #143 – play 4 measures (essentially a repeat)
3. 1 measure before #144 – play 3 (one 3/16 measure, then something new)
4. 3 measures after #144 – play 3 measures (same as first example, except that the 2/8 measure is the same as 2/16 – 3/16, with one less beat)
5. #145 – play 2 measures
6. 3 measures after #145 – play 3 measures (same as example 4)
7. 1 measure before #146 – play 5 measures (an extra 3/16 measure, followed by a 3 measure phrase and a 3/8 extension to that phrase)
8. #147 – play 4 measures (a variation of the previous 4 measures)

9. 1 measure before #148 – play 4 measures (I call this the “tag”, the phrase that ends this section. The trumpets and trombones join in with the flutes and clarinets. Care must be taken that no one plays on the downbeat of 1 measure before #149)

The 8th notes at the 3/16 measures can be played either short or full value. I request them to play full value, in contrast to 1 measure after #180, in which 16th notes are written, for which I request an extremely short sound. Also, I think that it helps young musicians’ rhythmic sense to play full value at #142. Basses must play very short and very forcefully when playing on the downbeats by themselves.

Starting at #149, needless to say, each musician must be certain not to play in a rest. I have bracketed in each part the consecutive notes that are played without rest. In other words, at #149, there are 2 notes bracketed, at 3 measures after #149, the notes bracketed, etc. This technique has proven to be helpful in avoiding playing in the rests. #154 is particularly dangerous, as everyone is playing forte, and #159 as well, since more people are playing. At 3 measures after #155, the second beat seems to want to drag at least one unsuspecting string player into the rest on the second beat, and #159 has a myriad of potential pitfalls.

At 1 measure before #162, instead of utilizing a solo violin, having all the outside players play the solo adds more sound to that line. Repeating the final G sharp for the first violins at #165 is difficult. The effect I think is basically that the 4 notes without that G sharp is what is heard.

At #167, I add a very brief pause after that measure, so that it matches #142, and also allows the musicians a split second to refocus their thoughts before continuing. This section is exactly the same as #142, except ½ step lower.

At #174, trombones can exaggerate their glissandos. At 3 measures after #174, the low horns must play extremely marked and fortissimo to be able to be heard.

#180 is essentially a 2/4 measure in the previous tempo. As noted earlier, the following passage is written with 16th notes as opposed to 8th notes, necessitating all notes to be played short. Note that at #181, the bass trombone plays without the first and second trombone; all play at #174. Trumpets and bass trumpet can play marcato and tenuto on their quarter notes. The conductor has to make sure that the 2/4 at #177 measure is very clear, so that everyone has their bearings after several measures of cacophonous counterpoint.

At #186, I again have the musicians play one phrase at a time and pause as follows:

1. #186 – 4 measures and pause (2 measure phrase with extension)
2. #187 – 2 measures and pause
3. 3 measures after #187 – same as example 1
4. 3 measures after #188 – 1 measure (“false alarm”)

5. #189 - 3 measures and pause
6. 4 measures after #189 - 2 measures and pause (same as 5, except 2nd measure omitted)
7. #190 - 2 measures and pause (same as #186, but change of instrumentation, and higher register)
8. 3 measures after #190 - 2 measures and pause (same as previous 2 measures)
9. #191 - 4 measures and pause (extended version)

I tell the orchestra to think of #192 to the end as a waltz, with the 2/16 measures interrupting the natural flow of 3/16 measures. I have heard that some conductors ask for all the *meno forte* measures between #192 and #197 to be played *pizzicato*.

Care must be taken to be sure that no one plays on the downbeat of the second measure after #197.

I like to rehearse once from #192 to the end very slowly, in 3, so that it's clear that the bass instruments play while the treble instruments rest, and vice versa. There are some exceptions - 3 measures after #194, beat 3; 3 measures after #197, beat 3; 3 measures after #198, beat 3; #199, beat 3; #200, beat 3; and 3 measures after #200, beat 3. Despite these exceptions, I feel that it's a worthwhile exercise.

Note that the English horn and first violins hold until beat 3 in the second measure after #201, so that there is no break before the flutes enter.

For the pickup to the last measure, the conductor may choose to subdivide the 3rd beat, with the grace notes played on the 3rd 16th note. The bizarre indication for the cellos to tune their A string down one half step is better handled by *divisi*. Note that the notes in the last chord in the basses spells "DEAD".

The timpanist and bass drum player are important contributors to any performance of the Rite. Their rock solid sense of rhythm is vital to a successful performance. Their crescendo from 3 measures after #198, when they play in duple rhythm until #201, can sweep the entire orchestra to the exhilarating conclusion.

In conclusion, I hope that this article might prove to be of use in preparing to rehearse the Rite of Spring. My goal is always to be sure that the musicians are well rehearsed - secure and confident in their abilities for a fine performance.