Program Notes: The Rite Of Spring

Overture to Tannhäuser (1845)

Richard Wagner was born in Leipzig, Germany, on May 22, 1813, and died in Venice, Italy, on February 13, 1883.

The first performance of Tannhäuser took place at the Hofoper in Dresden, Germany, on October 19, 1845, with the composer conducting. The Overture to Tannhäuser is scored for piccolo, two flutes, two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, castanets, cymbals, tambourine, triangle and strings.

Duration: 14 minutes

Yet already the morning dawns: from the far distance the pilgrims’ chorus is heard again. As it draws ever nearer and day repulses night, those lingering moans, which had seemed like laments of the damned, are transfigured into a murmur of joy so that at last, when the sun rises in splendor, and the joyous pilgrims’ chorus proclaims salvation to all the world and to all living things, the joyous murmur grows and swells to the mightiest, noblest rejoicing. Redeemed from the curse of ungodly shame, the Venusberg itself joins its exultant voice to the godly chant.

Three Pieces for Cello and Orchestra: Declaration, Prayer and Freylach (2013)

Lucas Richman was born in Los Angeles, California, on January 31, 1964.

I wrote Prayer in 1989 for cellist, David Low, who had been Artistic Director of the Brandeis-Bardin Institute (Simi Valley, California) at the time. David had asked me to perform with him for a concert at the Institute, so I decided to write a special piece for the occasion. There is clearly a Jewish element in Prayer, evident in the harmonic language (the minor key and certain pitch intervals are steeply rooted in Eastern European Jewish culture) and the rise and fall of the melody (reminiscent of cantorial music). In addition, a brief allusion to the traditional Israeli folk song, Mayim, Mayim, is heard towards the end of the piece.

A second movement, Freylach, was subsequently added and orchestrated, transforming the melody from Prayer into a folk dance and virtuoso showcase for the soloist. Prayer and Freylach received its orchestral world premiere in December, 1999, by the Los Angeles Jewish Symphony with David Low, soloist, and Noreen Green, conductor.

I had always felt that there should be one more movement for this set that could serve as a prelude to the Prayer and Freylach. As there are melodic similarities between the original two movements, it
occurred to me that this new movement should also exhibit melodic material that would foreshadow that which was to come. This new prelude, Declaration, gained its name from the solo cello’s enunciation of “Sh’ma Yisrael,” the watchword of the Jewish faith. Claiming its origins from the Ten Commandments as delivered by Moses, the “Sh’ma” announced the firm arrival of monotheism:

“Sh’ma Yisrael, Adonai Eloheinu, Adonai Echad. Hear, O Israel, The Lord our God, the Lord is One.”

This weekend’s performances represent the world premiere of these three pieces as a set.

—Lucas Richman

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Le sacre du printemps (1913, rev. 1947)

Igor Stravinsky was born in Lomonosov, Russia, on June 17, 1882, and died in New York on April 6, 1971. The first performance of Le sacre du printemps took place in Paris at the Théâtre des Champs-Elysées on May 29, 1913, with Pierre Monteux conducting. Le sacre du printemps is scored for two piccolos, three flutes, alto flute, four oboes, two English horns, three clarinets, E-flat clarinet, two bass clarinets, four bassoons, two Wagner tubas, piccolo trumpet, four trumpets, bass trumpet, three trombones, two tubas, timpani, antique cymbals, bass drum, cymbals, güíro, tam-tam, tambourine, triangle and strings.

Duration: 33 minutes

Stravinsky’s The Rite of Spring, one of the landmarks of 20th-century music, was the final work in a trilogy—along with The Firebird (1910) and Pétrouchka (1911)—composed for Sergei Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes. It was during completion of The Firebird that Stravinsky received his inspiration for The Rite of Spring:

I had a fleeting vision which came to me as a complete surprise, my mind at the moment being full of other things. 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.

However, Stravinsky realized that composing The Rite of Spring would be “a long and difficult task,” and he first looked for a project that would “refresh” him. And so, Stravinsky composed Pétrouchka, which received its first performance in Paris on June 13, 1911. After the premiere, Stravinsky returned to Russia to begin work on The Rite of Spring. There, Stravinsky and his friend Nicholas Roerich met to create the ballet’s scenario. Roerich in turn forwarded the synopsis to Diaghilev.

With the scenario completed, Stravinsky began composition and finally completed The Rite of Spring on March 29, 1913. Diaghilev chose Vaslav Nijinsky—the lead dancer of the Ballets Russes—to choreograph the premiere. Nijinsky, a brilliant dancer who had offered perhaps his crowning performance as Pétrouchka, was described as Stravinsky as “one of the most beautiful visions that ever appeared on the stage.” However, Stravinsky added that Nijinsky’s “ignorance of the most elementary notations of music was flagrant.” Stravinsky’s lack of confidence in Nijinsky’s musical abilities was seconded by the great French maestro, Pierre Monteux, who conducted the premieres of Pétrouchka and The Rite of String. Monteux commented that Nijinsky’s intelligence “was mainly to be found in his feet, legs and arms.”

Paris: May 29, 1913

The dress rehearsal for The Rite of Spring took place without incident. However, the May 29, 1913 premiere at the Théâtre des Champs-Elysées was quite another story. Members of the audience began jeering during the very first bars of the prelude. Matters only worsened when the curtain rose on, according to Stravinsky, “knock-kneed and long-braided Lolitas jumping up and down.”
These demonstrations, at first isolated, soon became general, provoking counter-demonstrations and very quickly developing into a terrific uproar. During the whole performance I was at Nijinsky’s side in the wings. He was standing on a chair, screaming “sixteen, seventeen, eighteen”—they had their own method of counting to keep time. Naturally, the poor dancers could hear nothing by reasons of the row in the auditorium and the sound of their own dance steps. I had to hold Nijinsky by his clothes, for he was furious, and ready to dash on the stage at any moment and create a scandal. Diaghileff kept ordering the electricians to turn the lights on or off, hoping in that way to put a stop to the noise.

Others present during one of the most infamous moments in music history attested to physical altercations between audience members. Throughout the performance, Monteux, according to Stravinsky, “stood there apparently impervious and nerveless as a crocodile. It is still almost incredible to me that he actually brought the orchestra to the end.”

Stravinsky was inclined to blame the production and Nijinsky’s choreography as the reasons for the scandalous premiere. The composer received his vindication when, on April 5, 1914, Monteux led a Paris concert performance of The Rite of Spring. The concert was a triumph, providing the composer “intense and lasting satisfaction.” To this day, however, Stravinsky’s The Rite of Spring maintains its unrivaled elemental power, and the capacity to stir, and even shock, audiences.

**The Rite of Spring**

*Part I—The Adoration of the Earth*

*Introduction. Lento, tempo rubato*

*The Augurs of Spring, Dances of the Young Girls. Tempo giusto*

*Ritual of Abduction. Presto*

*Spring Rounds. Tranquillo; Sostenuto e pesante; Vivo; Tranquillo*

*Ritual of the Rival Tribes. Molto allegro*

*Procession of the Sage*

*The Sage. Lento*

*Dance of the Earth. Prestissimo*

*Part II—The Sacrifice*

*Introduction. Largo*

*Mystic Circles of the Young Girls. Andante con moto*

*Glorification of the Chosen One. Vivo*

*Evocation of the Ancestors. Listesso movimento*

*Ritual Action of the Ancestors*

*Sacrificial Dance (The Chosen One)*

*Notes on the Program by Ken Meltze*