

'The Rite of Spring' Still Grist for Discussion

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By JAMES R. OESTREICH CHAPEL HILL, N.C. - It is a big weekend on the campus of the University of North Carolina here, and not only because the football Tar Heels host the archrival North Carolina State Wolfpack (to whom, ahem, they have lost in each of the last five years) on Saturday. Carolina Performing Arts' Rite of Spring at 100, a season-long celebration of Igor Stravinsky and Sergei Diaghilev's epochal ballet, which had its premiere in Paris in May 1913, reached an early climax. On Thursday evening a centennial academic conference, involving Russian specialists from the university, from around the United States and from Western Europe and Russia, convened. It runs through Sunday. And in a luxurious coda, Valery Gergiev conducts the Mariinsky Orchestra of St. Petersburg in concerts on Monday and Tuesday evenings, including the American premieres of works by Matthias Pintscher and Rodion Shchedrin and culminating in - what else? - "The Rite of Spring." (Mr. Gergiev and the orchestra move on to Carnegie Hall on Wednesday, with a program including neither of the premieres nor "The Rite.") Richard Taruskin, a music historian at the University of California, Berkeley, and the author of the magisterial two-volume "Stravinsky and the Russian Traditions" (University of California Press), gave the conference's keynote address on Thursday, an elaboration of an article he wrote for The New York Times in September. Among other things, he discussed what makes "The Rite," or any individual work, a suitable topic for "a yearlong orgy" of performance and study. "The Rite" has the distinction, he suggested, of bridging the longstanding gulf between contemporary composition and the standard concert repertory; of being equally at home in the classroom and in the concert hall. "The only other piece we could have a conference like this about," he said, is Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. Both, he noted, have cast enormous shadows and had enormous influence, and both have engendered an undercurrent of resistance. Discussing the music of "The Rite," Mr. Taruskin pointed to its ability to confound expectations. In that respect and others, the concert that followed in Memorial Hall, with Vladimir Tarnopolski conducting the

Studio for New Music Ensemble from Moscow, carried Stravinsky's banner forward. The program offered five chamber works scarcely known in the West, dating from 1926 to 1980, and the main quality they shared was unpredictability. That is not a trait much valued by totalitarian regimes. and the composers represented - Alfred Schnittke, Aleksei Zhivotov, Aleksandr Mosolov, Nikolai Sidelnikov and Sergei Slonimsky - did not always have an easy time of it, but the works here were full of good spirits and vivid imagination. Friday's scholarly sessions were largely devoted to dance aspects of the "The Rite," ending with a brief roundtable. It offered much light but little heat, and at the end of the day, Stephen Walsh, a noted Stravinsky biographer, bemoaned the lack of argumentativeness. "It would be nice to sense some disagreement," he said. If this was indeed a problem, it may be self-correcting. Mr. Walsh presents a paper on Saturday, to which Mr. Taruskin, who has occasionally taken issue with him, can be expected to respond, and on Sunday the two appear on a panel with others likely to take issue with both.