

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Stravinsky and 'Rite,' Rigorously Rethought



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Members of the Studio for New Music Ensemble, from the Moscow Tchaikovsky Conservatory, performing at the "Reassessing 'The Rite'" conference at the University of North Carolina.

By JAMES R. OESTREICH
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CHAPEL HILL, N.C. — Stravinsky a sadist? Maybe, but only in the kindest sense. Stravinsky a Fascist? No, but a sympathizer perhaps.

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Those and many other issues were discussed here at the University of North Carolina over the weekend. As Mark Katz, the chairman of the music department, told graduate students in his seminar on music technology on Monday afternoon — while they prepared to discuss the composer's passing infatuation with the pianola, or player-piano — for a few days the university had become "the center of the Stravinsky universe."

The occasion was an academic conference, "Reassessing 'The Rite,'" part of Carolina Performing Arts' " 'Rite of Spring' at 100", a season-long celebration of the centennial of that ballet, which had its premiere in Paris on May 29, 1913. Scholars from around the United States, Western Europe and Russia [convened on Thursday](#), and mostly stayed until Sunday, when travel concerns raised by

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Hurricane Sandy forced a slightly premature close. (This area remained on the edge of the storm, as it passed by the Carolina coast and veered inland, bringing moderate wind and rain.)

Not that Stravinsky was the only subject of discussion. As Richard Taruskin, a music historian at the University of California, Berkeley, [said of that riotous premiere](#) in his keynote address on Thursday, “it was not Stravinsky’s music that did the shocking.” It was the ungainly choreography of Vaslav Nijinsky.

And the ruckus — not without recent precedent in Paris theaters, as Annegret Fauser, a music professor at the University of North Carolina, established — was fomented partly by the marketing hype of the presenter, Sergei Diaghilev, for his Ballets Russes production.

So there were talks not only on the music, but also on the dance and theatrical aspects of the work and even on its role in French fashion. Particularly fascinating were the many filmed glimpses into what the original staging might have looked like, by way of Millicent Hodson and Kenneth Archer’s reconstruction, which was presented first by the Joffrey Ballet in 1987 and has since been adopted by other companies. (The Rite at 100 will present the Joffrey production here in March.)

Ms. Hodson, a choreographer and graphic artist, herself gave a talk with rich video illustrations, stressing her contention that the scenario’s sacrificial virgin dies from exhaustion — in effect, dancing herself to death — rather than from attack by members of her community. Others argued variously for either murder or suicide, drawing implications for how the work’s larger message should be construed with respect to personal identity or social or political system.

That notion of Stravinsky’s sadism was raised by Pieter van den Toorn, a music professor at the University of California, Santa Barbara, and the author of “Stravinsky and ‘The Rite of Spring,’ ” who seemed to mean it as a compliment. Analyzing the physicality of “The Rite,” he was trying to locate what it is that makes Stravinsky’s music so viscerally compelling, and one of the things he pointed to was the glee Stravinsky took in disrupting a steady pulse, which is, after all, a part of the human condition (except for those of us who have dealt with heart arrhythmias) and of human comfort (especially for those of us freed of arrhythmias). And yet that disruption can inject life, surprise, a giddy imbalance, even explosiveness, into music: in short, enjoyment.

“It’s a touch of sadism,” Mr. van den Toorn said. “Maybe that is the art itself of Stravinsky.”

On the evidence here, Stravinsky scholars seem to be a congenial bunch these days (in contrast with, say, Shostakovich scholars). Mr. Taruskin, who has had serious disagreements with Mr. van den Toorn over the years, dedicated a recent book to him, as “Public Adversary, Private Pal.” Mr. van den Toorn reciprocated with an in-joke, using initials, P.A., P.P.



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The strongest argument came at the very end, when Tamara Levitz, a musicology professor at the University of California, Los Angeles, suggested that Mr. Taruskin had called Stravinsky a Fascist. She, on the other hand, thought that Stravinsky, who was always playing to a public, was merely cozing up to the likes of Mussolini and Franco for the sake of convenience.

“I don’t think Stravinsky was a Fascist,” Mr. Taruskin said. “But he identified himself with authoritarian regimes.”

Well, no one will mistake a musicological conference for the Ultimate Fighting Championship. Or for a stand-up comedy club, though Michael Beckerman, the chairman of the musicology department at New York University, who loves to play the class clown, had the group in stitches with his little self-made e-book, “Mike’s Little Book About Stravinsky,” haplessly trying to tie the composer to Mr. Beckerman’s specialty, Czech music.

It was hard to imagine, at the end of the conference, that there could be much more to say about “The Rite,” but present, still largely unformed plans are to resume the discussions in Moscow on May 12. That conference may extend beyond a single day, said Severine Neff, a Schoenberg scholar at the University of North Carolina, who spent five years organizing the conference here (having met with little enthusiasm for a centennial conference on Schoenberg’s “Pierrot Lunaire”).

Meanwhile, insatiable Stravinskians can busy themselves with [“Reflections on ‘The Rite.’”](#) an entertaining blog on the “‘Rite of Spring’ at 100’s” Web site (theriteofspringat100.org), organized by William Robin, one of Mr. Katz’s graduate students and an occasional contributor to The New York Times.

The conference carried a sense of gratification delayed or denied. Although many snippets were heard, some of them repeatedly, “The Rite” was never heard complete.

For that you had to wait for the concerts by Valery Gergiev and the Mariinsky Orchestra after the conference, on Monday and Tuesday. (Most of the visiting scholars did not.) And even then, “The Rite” came only at the end, concluding Tuesday’s concert. (More on the concerts later this week.)

There was considerable question on Sunday whether Hurricane Sandy would even let Mr. Gergiev and the orchestra get here after its concert in Newark. The question then became whether they would get back to New York for their [concert in Carnegie Hall](#) on Wednesday, which the hall has now canceled.

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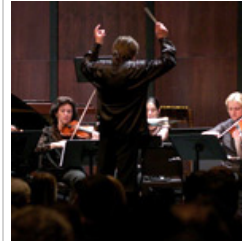


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