

Nadia Boulanger's Interpretation of *The Rite of Spring*: "A Work Apart"

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Abstract

Nadia Boulanger, one of the most authoritative advocates for Igor Stravinsky during his lifetime, was hesitant to emphasize The Rite of Spring as significant in the greater context of his career. As with many of Stravinsky's works, Boulanger maintained a complex relationship with The Rite of Spring. Present for its premiere, it was she who helped Stravinsky reorchestrate the work's "Danse Sacrale" movement in 1943, and in September 1969, when Stravinsky published The Rite's sketchbooks, he sent Boulanger an advance, autographed copy as a birthday present. She spoke about The Rite during lecture tours and in her classes, but despite knowing it intimately, Boulanger felt uncertain about advocating for it as central to Stravinsky's oeuvre.

Boulanger's earliest, unpublished analytical treatments of the work date from 1925 and 1934, and reveal her fascination with the piece's slippery relationship with tonality. Moreover, Boulanger reveled in the piece's rhythmic characteristics, not because they were novel, however, but because they expanded upon ancient Greek additive rhythmic processes. Indeed, for Boulanger The Rite was never a strong exemplar of Stravinsky's forward trajectory, and as early as 1919 she felt it rather dated. One senses her subsequent reticence to freeze Stravinsky's modernist identity as directly connected to The Rite at the risk of ignoring his other compositions. Ultimately, the evidence shows Boulanger thought The Rite held "a place apart from the rest of his works," thus adding a new layer to the question of the controversial ballet's reception by Stravinsky's peers.

Introduction

Famous French pedagogue, conductor, performer and composer Nadia Boulanger lived a life of unwavering devotion to the music of Igor Stravinsky, and yet her encyclopedic collection of archival materials seems strikingly anemic when it comes to *The Rite of Spring*. This is not to accuse Boulanger of ignorance. On the contrary, she numbered among the anxious Parisians present for its heated premiere on 29 May 1913, and thirty years later, in 1943, sat beside the composer in his Hollywood home as they together reorchestrated the ballet's "Danse Sacrale" movement. The autograph manuscript for this collaborative effort is one of the most valuable in Boulanger's collection and was one of the first she convinced Stravinsky to donate to the Bibliothèque nationale de France in the 1950s.¹ I argue *The Rite of Spring* was a deeply personal work for Boulanger, but incongruously one that remained on the fringes of her pedagogy for the entirety of her career, primarily because Boulanger did not believe it idiosyncratic of Stravinsky's output.

Walking through the evidence of Boulanger's analytical and personal relationship to the *Rite of Spring* in reverse chronological order is perhaps the most effective way to witness Boulanger's relationship to work. Tracing the evidence in this way allows us to begin with her central thesis about the ballet, a position articulated in 1972 and which represents the sedimentation of fifty-nine years observing *The Rite's* reception. I proceed from this later material to a consideration of Boulanger's limited use of the work pedagogically, the evidence for which can only be found in archival documents from the 1930s. Finally, I turn to Boulanger's initial discussion of the *The Rite*, found in published lectures from talks she gave at the Rice Lecture Series in Houston, Texas in 1925. Tying these original reactions to her later comments reveals Boulanger's remarkably consistent and less-than-passionate desire to centralize *The Rite* as a part of Stravinsky's legacy. Indeed, while the evidence suggests the work was intensely personal for Boulanger, *The Rite of Spring* stood apart from Stravinsky's overall oeuvre, and while Boulanger remained emotionally connected to the ballet and what it represented as a historical artifact, she feared, and perhaps rightly so, that an emphasis on *The Rite of Spring* would unfairly eclipse later, more mature Stravinskian works, themselves far more worthy of study.

1972 “When the Curtain Opened, the Storm Broke”: Boulanger's Personal Connection to *The Rite of Spring*

A year following the death of Igor Stravinsky, the British Broadcasting Corporation drew together a number of famous music personalities to speak about Stravinsky's legacy and work. For years, the Corporation had commissioned Boulanger to speak as the leading expert on Stravinsky's compositions, and it is unsurprising that their 1972 homage included lengthy soundbites from the 84-year-old Boulanger. By that point, few remained alive who had recourse to the anecdotal library, to say nothing of the analytical acumen, she did.²

It was not Boulanger who arrived at the subject of *The Rite of Spring* in that interview herself, but instead David Wilde, her interviewer, who asked Boulanger to relate her memories of the evening of the premiere. Boulanger obliged, in her by then quite broken and unpolished English, saying: “it was a scandal,” [the] “reaction of the musicians, Debussy was more upset by *Le Sacre's* success a year later.” She then explained “the dancers knew what they were doing, which often had nothing to do with the music...Dancers followed his counting...But when the curtain opened, the storm broke; never before had they been so angry.”

This was the version of events as Boulanger had managed to retain them for fifty-nine years. In 1913 the work aroused anger in her fellow Parisian citizens such as had never been seen before. What's more, a year after the performance, the work's sustained success shocked composers as revered as Claude Debussy. It was with the benefit of hindsight that *The Rite's* inhuman content could be viewed as an eerie portent of the war France was then embroiled in and that would devastate its male population. *The Rite of Spring*, Boulanger related in 1972, was not so much scandalous for its choreography, which she insisted had little to do with the music. It was scandalous because of *when* it premiered and the hyper-charged environment in which it was first heard. But Boulanger stopped short of reinforcing *The Rite* as anything more than a moment in time, a catalyst

introduced during a volatile moment, and not so much a monumental musical work presented to the world.

The only other evidence from Boulanger's late period that speaks to her relationship with *The Rite of Spring* also reinforces her position as a witness to this historical moment, and less her fascination with the work's technical elements. In September 1969 Stravinsky published an edited version of the sketches for *The Rite of Spring*, produced by Boosey & Hawkes—in French and English—for which Robert Craft provided editorial commentary. Boulanger's copy of the publication came to her signed by the very unsteady hand of her by then old composer friend, wishing her many happy returns for her eighty-second birthday and presenting the score as a gift.³

Boulanger's copy of the French editorial comments is quite thoroughly annotated, at times because she was curious about the content, but more often than not because she surrendered to the compulsion to correct Craft's work. Particularly indicative of her feelings both toward Craft and toward the piece at hand is the marginalia found on page 23 of the French editorial booklet. Here, Craft discusses the rhythmic pulsation left out of revised editions published in 1921 and 1947, lamenting that the 1921 version is practically impossible to find. In the margin, Boulanger refutes this, perfunctorily scrawling in her own arthritic hand, "Mine was purchased in May 1922." It is unclear by the annotation if she is correcting Craft's dates or simply suggesting that all he need do was to ask and she had the score he so desired. In this simple phrase, Boulanger both chastises the young Craft, a person with whom by that point Boulanger had a rather complicated and somewhat fractious relationship, and also reinforces the reality that *she* had lived *The Rite's* reception, and from that she drew the authority to question later details concerning its publication history. *The Rite of Spring* had by then become a work toward which Boulanger felt personally and materially attached. If it was a part of the fabric of music history, her own experiences were woven along with it. Experiencing the work's premiere was only part of the equation for Boulanger. The act of witnessing the progression of its reception—whether that be at the hands of Debussy at the beginning of the First World War, or at the mercy of Robert Craft in the final year of the 1960s—lent her interpretation gravitas. The evidence suggests the work became a symbol for Boulanger of her indisputable authority, grounded in lived experience.

“Everlastingness of Elements of Music”: Her Pedagogical Connection to the Work

Turning now to Boulanger's limited pedagogical treatment of *The Rite*, the evidence reveals her comments most often revolved around the work's final movement. It is tempting to assume this emanated from her editorial involvement with the ballet, except her pedagogy preceded her editorial work by more than a decade. Moreover, oddly enough Boulanger's efforts in reorchestrating the Danse Sacrale movement remain, to my knowledge, undocumented, with the exception of the resultant autograph score she would eventually possess. Of all the editorial projects they shared, Stravinsky and Boulanger's work on *The Rite* left behind the least evidence, not even documented in letters and never mentioned by Boulanger or Stravinsky after it took place. This reality is in and of itself odd, given the voluminous proof surrounding other editorial revisions the musicians completed together, including those for the *Symphonie de psaumes* (1931), *Perséphone*

(1933) the *Dumbarton Oaks Concerto* (1937-38), and even the *Symphony in C* (1941), pieces which also became staples of Boulanger's teaching.⁴

But as far as Boulanger's pedagogy was concerned, at first blush it would appear *The Rite* did not make the cut, and searching for pedagogical evidence on *The Rite* instead requires one dig deeply. Boulanger never treated the work during her famous Wednesday Afternoon Classes, even though she featured other pre-neoclassical compositions by Stravinsky in them, such as *Les Noces*. There is no extant preconcert talk for *The Rite*, and I have yet to find evidence Boulanger ever programmed it on a Fontainebleau concert or elsewhere, potentially excused given the breadth of performers necessary, not to mention the performance level required of them. She was involved in one concert where she conducted the first half and the second half, conducted by Roger Désormière, contained *The Rite*.⁵

Looking for pedagogical evidence in less obvious places, however, reveals when she spoke of the piece, Boulanger consistently imported *The Rite of Spring* to argue not for its iconoclastic properties, but instead because it proved the timelessness of good musical practices. Indeed, Boulanger's few mentions of *The Rite* allowed her to argue for it as a formidable example of music at its most unchanging, as opposed to at its most modern.

The richest documentation of these observations comes from the lecture notes of Louise Talma, a student of Boulanger's during the 1920s and ever-after a disciple of the French pedagogue. Talma attended Boulanger's classes at the Conservatoire Américain, a summer music program housed in the Louise XIV wing of the Fontainebleau Palace, an idyllic location found just an hour's train ride to the south east of Paris. Numerous generations of American composers—among them Aaron Copland, Virgil Thomson, Elliott Carter, and Philip Glass—treated the Conservatoire as a one-woman graduate program, studying there with Boulanger.⁶

Beginning in the 1930s, Talma returned to the palace no longer a student but instead with the intent to continue to hone her skills and buttress her belief in Boulanger's pedagogical approach. Her notes are stunningly close to actual transcriptions, particularly as the years wore on and Talma became capable of anticipating the points of her teacher-idol. Perched at the back of the classroom, Talma documented many of Boulanger's lectures in their entirely idiosyncratic English. It is within Talma's notebooks, currently housed at the Library of Congress, that one finds Boulanger's references to *The Rite of Spring*.

Typically within the first week of Music History classes, Boulanger turned her attention to the concept of natural accentuation of rhythm as opposed to metre. It was then, alongside discussions of Gregorian Chant and Greek additive rhythms that Boulanger most commonly introduced her students to the rhythmic processes of Igor Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*. Take for example a lecture from 25 July 1932. On this balmy Monday afternoon, Boulanger commenced her lecture by telling her students: "One could write a book on why audiences are so unable to appreciate music they hear." She then proceeded to explain how to best improve this situation: "Rhythm must be a running wheel—must feel as though pushed...Rhythm based on multiplication of small values [can be found in] the Delphic Hymn and in the *Sacre du Printemps*."⁷

Two years later one finds the same idea in a different lecture, one presented at the École Normale de Musique where Boulanger taught during the fall and winter terms. The École normale was the brainchild of Alfred Cortot, beloved French pianist and head of

French propaganda during the First World War. Boulanger was hired to teach at the *École normale* as of its opening in 1919, and her classes were soon so popular they overflowed. In an effort to propagate her electric teaching practices beyond the confines of the classroom, Cortot brought in a stenographer in 1934 to document her lectures, texts which he intended to publish later in the periodical closely associated with the school: *Le Monde musical*. Cortot's promotional ambitions are history's gain, providing us with one of the clearest transcriptions of Boulanger's teaching techniques during the 1930s. It is here, on the first day of classes, 10 November 1934, that Boulanger explained to her students:

in modern music, if you take the final movement of *Le Sacre du printemps* for example, you are going to find different lengths of measures. We add bar lines, to tell you, the groupings are such and such a length. But you must find a way to feel that the rhythmic intention is that of classical rhythmic practices, despite the inequality of the groupings. This arises from small values multiplied at different lengths instead of a unit of measure that is divided. Instead of saying "I am in 2/4" You say "I have a half note as my unit of measure."⁸

To reinforce her point, she then had the students sing an antiphon from their texts and thereafter abandoned a discussion of *The Rite*. For Boulanger, the music of the Ancient Greeks, or Gregorian chant, was the same as that of *The Rite of Spring*. Stravinsky was simply reinterpreting the past, rather than forging a new path out of something completely new.

The same could be said of her opinion of Stravinskian harmony found within the *Rite of Spring*. As early as 24 August 1931, Talma's notes again reference *Le Sacre* where Boulanger explained to her students that: "M7ths with trill figure[s] in center change everything and [they] sound very well. [This is] one of the only time[s] you can ignore voice leading 7ths properly."⁹ Three years later, on 20 August 1934, she taught her pedagogy class that one of the few instances she could think of where unresolved sevenths worked properly was in the music of *Le Sacre* where: "[one finds] one compensating voice in the middle [that is] not dissonant with [the] top or...with [the] bottom where as two outside would be...[This is] parallelism employed for resonance."¹⁰

So *The Rite of Spring* was a harbinger of old techniques revisited, the past brought back to life by Stravinsky's unique take on old ideas. It was not a revolutionary work of overwhelming complexity, though Boulanger did concede in a talk at Vassar College in 1937 that *The Rite* was an example of the limits of virtuosity. Instead, Stravinsky's infamous ballet was an old idea brought back to life. And it was his use of the old that Boulanger reinforced with her students during the rare moments she addressed the work at all in the classroom.

Initial (and Final) Impressions

The only time Boulanger treated *The Rite of Spring* at any length, either as performer or as pedagogue, was in 29 January 1925. At 8:15 on this day, Boulanger commenced a lecture on the "Music of Igor Stravinsky" at the Scottish Rite Cathedral in Houston,

Texas.¹¹ It was the final of three talks she had been commissioned to give as part of her tour of the United States that winter. The stenographer's transcript from that evening reveals Boulanger struggled with how to convey the music of Stravinsky to her audience, but the revised text she later sent along for publication gives solid form to what she had likely hoped to emphasize about her favourite composer to the audience that evening. And it would seem, at the very start of her efforts to establish herself as a voice of authority, Stravinsky and *The Rite of Spring* suited her as excellent starting points.

In the published article, we see Boulanger commence her lecture with a dramatic description of the night *The Rite* premiered and a statement of how polarizing Stravinsky's music was in general:

Seldom have the compositions of any composer provoked such hot debate, such violent hatreds and intense enthusiasms as has the work of Igor Stravinsky. The excitement and tumult which reigned at the first performance, in 1913, of the "Sacred Rites of Spring," an event which is usually referred to as "the battle of the *Sacre*," were such as to make one think one was attending some crucial session of the Chamber of Deputies, some sort of political manifestation rather than a performance of Diaghilev's Russian Ballet. People shouted, whistled, screamed, stamped and even came to blows over their no uncertain opinions, for it was impossible, in the presence of such music, to remain neutral. The suspended or the lukewarm judgment would have been ridiculous in such an atmosphere. One either loved or hated the music and that was the end of the matter. Now, of course, the work is universally recognized as a masterpiece and its composer is everywhere acknowledged to be the foremost figure in contemporary music and—what is more amusing, in the light of his supposed anarchistic tendencies—the *chief representative of a return to classic traditions*.¹²

Boulanger cannot resist reminding those present that she had been there and witnessed the passions of those who rioted over the ballet's premiere. There is something to Boulanger's constant recourse to being a witness, never participating herself, or at least never stating where it was she fell along the spectrum of Stravinsky reception that evening.

The remaining published article contains a remarkably technical treatment of Stravinsky's use of tonality, rhythmic procedures, language, and negotiation of his Russian heritage. Boulanger quotes at length from other theorists, particularly Boris de Schloezer. As she unpacks each of her points, Boulanger draws upon musical examples from *The Rite*, especially in describing Stravinsky's contrapuntal virtuosity and his rhythmic advancements. Once again she contextualizes Stravinsky as a "classicist," qualifying her description by saying:

For those who happen to know only the *Sacre*, it may seem strange indeed to speak of Stravinsky as a classicist, for the primitivism of *Sacre* or, if you prefer, its naturalism, is certainly not a "classical" tendency. But.... to borrow from M. de Schloezer...'It was necessary to return to nature and to forget man, or, at least, to reduce him to nothing more than an element of primitive nature, to treat him as a rock or a plant. The rudeness of *Le Sacre*, its disdain for everything which charms

or pleases, its stinging brutalities—all that was necessary, for it was a question of killing sentiment, of destroying all subjective emotion and of making things act directly and by themselves.¹³

The necessity of *The Rite* as an historical moment is here emphasized not only by Boulanger but also by the quotes she chooses to import from other theorists. In her hands, the work again takes on specific historical meaning, wedging into a space inextricable from the context that made it possible. For Boulanger, the evolution of Stravinsky as a composer far exceeded this work, *The Rite* was a piece written for a specific point in time and could not transcend the circumstances of its premiere. Indeed, one of the most pointed comments made by Boulanger is also her final word on *The Rite* to appear in her article, and in many ways it seems to mark the moment when Boulanger began to abandon it to the annals of history. In closing her discussion, Boulanger states: “Stravinsky’s Rites of Spring”, is [his] only excursion into the realm of naturalistic art and occupies, for that reason, *a place apart from the rest of his works*” [emphasis mine].

In Boulanger’s eyes, as early as 1925, *The Rite* was fettered by romantic notions of the natural world and depictions of the mundane. The work was an exception to Stravinsky’s output, not central. This dismissal of *The Rite* predates Boulanger’s status as a Master Teacher, instead suggesting that from the very earliest discussions of Stravinsky’s works, Boulanger wished to separate a space for *The Rite* that did not allow it to overshadow Stravinsky’s overall oeuvre, isolating it as an exceptional work, rather than the rule.

Conclusion

Of all Stravinsky’s canonical works treated by Boulanger, the one given the least amount of emphasis was *The Rite of Spring*. The work casts but the faintest shadow upon her pedagogical practices, compared to the overwhelming presence of such works as the *Symphony of Psalms* or *Perséphone*. *The Rite* was not programmed on her concerts, and she never felt the compulsion to introduce audiences to it through a preconcert talk the way she did for *The Rake’s Progress*, the *Septet*, or the *Symphony in C*. *The Rite of Spring* was also one of the few Stravinsky works Boulanger witnessed before she turned her focus to pedagogy. It was a work witnessed on the eve of the First World War, just prior to a period of immense change for Boulanger personally and for France as a whole. There was something about this early exposure to the work—the emotional impression it left in her mind and the context in which she familiarized herself with its details—that Boulanger seemed willing to abandon after the war and increasingly as the years wore on. It was not, in her view, a piece that lay well within the overall trajectory of Stravinsky’s output. In fact, it was the blemish that disrupted the otherwise smooth progression of his compositional identity. Rather than focus on it, Boulanger easily relegated it to the margins of her own work, perhaps fearing as early as 1925 that it would take on an importance in Stravinsky reception that would otherwise eclipse more important texts, and so she labelled it as “a work apart,” an uncharacteristic work, an exception. As the years wore on, Boulanger must have witnessed and remained aware of the gravity *The Rite* amassed, and must have grown increasingly suspicious of the emphasis it received.

Certainly by 1972 she appears to have jettisoned any desire to speak about the work on a theoretical basis, perhaps because she knew it had achieved the central and iconoclastic status she had for so many years avoided in her own teachings. Controlling *The Rite's* reception proved well beyond her powers, but perhaps this conference and others prove her fears were not so far off base after all.

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Notes

¹ Igor Stravinsky, "Le Sacre du printemps, 'Danse Sacrée,' Autograph (Revised version), 1943, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Paris (*F-Pn*) MS 17946. For pertinent correspondence see: Boulanger to Stravinsky, 30 November 1951, Stravinsky Sammlung, Paul Sacher Stiftung, Basel, Switzerland; and Stravinsky to Boulanger, 8 January 1952, *F-Pn*, N.L.a. 108 (224-226).

² British Library Sound Archives, "In Memoriam, Igor Stravinsky," 1972, Radio Broadcast, British Broadcasting Corporation.

³ Robert Craft, ed. *Le Sacre du Printemps, Esquisses, 1911-1913*, Commentary. (New York: Boosey & Hawkes, 1969), *F-Pn*, Vma. 4011-4012, 23.

⁴ For more on these previous collaborations see, Kimberly Francis, "A Dialogue Begins: Nadia Boulanger, Igor Stravinsky, and the *Symphonie de psaumes*, 1930-1932," *Women and Music* 14/1 (2010): 22-44; eadem. "Surviving Exile: Nadia Boulanger, Igor Stravinsky, and the *Symphony in C*," *The Musical Quarterly* 94 (2011): 234-270. Jeanice Brooks "New Links Between Them: Modernist Historiographies and the Concerts of Nadia Boulanger." *Crosscurrents: American and European Music in Interaction, 1900-2000*. Edited by Carol Oja, Anne Schreffler, Felix Meyer, and Wolfgang Rathert. Basel: Paul Sacher Stiftung, in press; eadem, "Collecting Past and Present: Music History and Musical Performance at Dumbarton Oaks." In *A Home of the Humanities: The Collecting and Patronage of Mildred and Robert Woods Bliss*. Edited by James Carder and Robert Nelson. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, in press.

⁵ Nadia Boulanger, Programmes, 18 December 1934, *F-Pn*, Rés Vm Dos 195 (306).

⁶ Kendra Preston Leonard, *The Conservatoire Américain: A History*. Toronto: Scarecrow Press, 2007.

⁷ Talma Notebooks, 25 July 1932, Louise Talma Papers, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. (LOC)

⁸ "Dans la musique moderne, si vous prenez, la danse finale du *Sacre du Printemps*, par exemple, vous allez trouver différentes longueurs de mesures. On met des barres pour vous dire, le groupe est de telle longueur. Il faut que vous arriviez à sentir que, malgré l'inégalité des groupes le sentiment du rythme que le rythme de la classique. Cela part d'une petite unité qui se multiplie à des grandeurs différentes au lieu d'être une unité de mesure qui se divise. Au-lieu de dire: "je suis à 2/4" vous dites: "J'ai une blanche pour unité de temps." 'Notes pour *le Monde musical*,' 10 November 1934, *F-Pn*, Rés Vmc Ms 129 (2).

⁹ Talma Notebooks, 24 August 1931, Louise Talma Papers, LOC.

¹⁰ Talma Notebooks, 20 August 1934, Louise Talma Papers, LOC.

¹¹ Kimberly Francis, “‘Everything Had to Change’: Nadia Boulanger’s Translation of Modern Music in the Rice Lecture Series, 1925.” *Journal of the Society for American Music* (in print); and Robert Bailey, “Ima Hogg and an Experiment in Audience Education: The Rice Lectureship in Music (1923-33),” *Journal of the Society for American Music* 5/3 (2011): 395–42.

¹² *Lectures on Modern Music delivered under the Auspices of the Rice Institute Lectureship in Music*, January 29, 1925, The Rice Institute Pamphlet, vol. 13, no. 2, April 1926. Also available online: “Igor Stravinsky” (<http://dspace.rice.edu/handle/1911/8735>)

¹³ Ibid.

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