Tampa Bay Times Masterworks

Beethoven’s Fifth
May 1 - 3, 2020

IGOR STRAVINSKY (1882-1971)
RITE OF SPRING
Duration: ca. 33 minutes

If you happened to be in Paris in May 1913, you had to wonder what all the fuss was about. Something strange was going on at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, where Serge Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes staged the world premiere of the ballet *Rite of Spring*, with music by Igor Stravinsky.

A riot broke out. Those who attended the performance weren’t prepared for something so barbaric, elemental and savage. The well-to-do audience, with its conservative tastes, was shocked by such a scandal. First came the hoots and catcalls. Arguments ensued, then fistfights. At one point, the hullabaloo drowned out the orchestra. Through his depiction of a pagan dance festival, Stravinsky took the audience from birth to death in what would become a pivotal musical event of the 20th century, one that continues to resonate, reverberate and even ruffle feathers among today’s audiences.

“It stands, beside Michelangelo’s *Sistine Chapel* and Beethoven’s *Eroica*, as one of the truly brave, inexplicable forward steps in the arts,” wrote the music critic Alan Rich.

Like his contemporary, Picasso, Stravinsky sought a form of expression that forced people to question the role and meaning of art. In his early Russian period, he bathed listeners in the warmth of such nationalist classics as the *Firebird*. But with the *Rite*, he confounded notions of tonality and rules. Stravinsky said he wished to express nature being reborn, “the whole pantheistic uprising of the universal harvest ... the obscure and immense sensation of which all things are conscious when nature renews its forms.”

From the opening bassoon solo in its highest register, each instrument emerges, in the composer’s description, “like a bud which grows on the bark of an aged tree.” The music shifts meter with nearly every measure, a series of stop-and-go tempos, silences and dramatic eruptions. Stravinsky pulverizes melody into flat pellets of sound. Cast in two parts – *Adoration of the Earth and The Sacrifice* – the ballet is both a springtime sacrament and a dance of death, clothed in music of ferocious instrumental color and stabbing rhythm. Here’s Stravinsky’s outline:

**Part 1 – Adoration of the Earth**
Introduction
Auguries of Spring
Dances of Adolescent Girls
Game of Abduction
Spring Rounds
Games of the Rival Tribes
Procession of the Sage
The Sage
Dance of the Earth
Part 2 – The Sacrifice

Introduction
Mysterious Circles
Glorification of the Chosen One
Evocation of the Elders
Ritual Action of the Elders
Sacrificial Dance

RICHARD STRAUSS (1864-1949)
DANCE OF THE SEVEN VEILS FROM SALOME
Duration: ca. 12 minutes

Can anything in the world of classical music really be shocking? Sure, Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring* set off a riot, and the furious *Dies Irae* sections of both the Berlioz and Verdi *Requiem* must have jolted listeners out of their seats in those early performances, as they still do.

Then there’s *Salome*, the opera that put Richard Strauss on the map after its premiere in Dresden in 1905. If he wanted to begin the new century with something provocative and scandalous, he knocked it out of the park, jarring the senses in his musical adaptation of the Oscar Wilde play.

Here was a one-act opera based on Biblical figures mired in a psychologically twisted plot that involves a sexually perverted 16-year-old girl with a penchant for parricide and necrophilia. Whoa.

Strauss had a field day with this decadent material—loosely based on the Gospels describing the story of Herod the king and John the Baptist—weaving it into some of the most evocative music of its day. It has been called less of an opera than a 100-minute tone poem fueled by unstable harmonies and cascading key changes.

After being snubbed by John, and emboldened by her stepfather Herod’s inflamed passion for her, Salome agrees to dance for him if he grants her anything she wishes. In the opera’s most famous excerpt, the *Dance of the Seven Veils*, Salome goes into a trance and performs her erotic striptease. The music moves through five sections that suggest her delirium as she removes her silken veils: a percussive introduction; slow dance in ¾ time with solo oboe and flute; a lyrical waltz announced by horns and strings; a loud presto; and a coda suggesting Salome’s madness.

The story doesn’t end there. Having danced for the king, she now gets her wish: the severed head of John on a silver platter. Salome kisses the dead man’s bloodied lips under the intense light of a full moon, and confesses her passion for him. Horrified by the scene, Herod orders his guards to kill his stepdaughter, and the opera ends on a vicious and unresolved note.

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)
SYMPHONY NO. 5 IN C MINOR, OP. 67 (ARR. MAHLER)
Duration: ca. 33 minutes

In celebration of the 250th anniversary of Beethoven’s birth, TFO brings out the composer’s most famous work, a piece that continues to thrill for the rhythmic drive of its four opening notes. But wait – didn’t
we just hear the *Symphony No. 5* last season? Why is Music Director Michael Francis doing it again so soon?

Well, because we didn’t *really* hear the same symphony last year. This weekend, the orchestra performs a version arranged by Gustav Mahler, who felt such an iconic work needed to be “modernized.” In fact, concertgoers have been hearing Mahler’s arrangements of other Beethoven works this season, such as the *Eroica*, adding a new twist to an old sound.

Mahler – the brilliant conductor and composer who died in 1911 in Vienna – “retouched” Beethoven’s *Third, Fifth, Seven* and *Ninth* symphonies and the *Coriolan Overture*. But for what reason? Haven’t these magnificent creations stood the test of time?

That’s part of Mahler’s logic – time. From the early 19th century when Beethoven composed these works to the dawn of the 20th century, lots had changed: Instruments improved, orchestras grew and concert halls expanded to fit more people. Beethoven’s music, Mahler believed, needed to be refreshed. So the performance you will hear tonight includes extra instruments for a bigger, more vibrant sound, Francis said. “It’s a case of doubling up. More musicians will be involved, that’s all.”

Not everyone approved of Mahler’s meddling. After conducting his retouched version of the *Ninth Symphony* in 1900 in Vienna – a city that revered Beethoven as a favorite child – many were outraged, accusing Mahler of waging war against authenticity. “What was offered yesterday as Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony* is a deplorable example of this aberration, this barbarism,” wrote the critic Richard Heuberger of the *New Free Press*.

In his own defense, Mahler explained that “this is in no way a case of re-instrumentation or alteration, let alone improvement of the work of Beethoven.” He said his views were less about arbitrary change than playing the music as Beethoven would have wanted had he lived 75 or 100 years later – with the formidable Vienna Philharmonic – or TFO – at his disposal. Mahler also noted that when Mozart made his own revision of Handel’s *Messiah*, he added clarinets to the score – which didn’t exist in Handel’s day.

The world heard the *Fifth* for the first time on Dec. 22, 1808, in Vienna. The concert stretched four hours and included the composer’s *Symphony No. 6*; the concert aria *Ah! Perfido*; two sections from the *Mass in C*; the *Piano Concerto No. 4*; a piano improvisation by Beethoven; and the *Choral Fantasy* for Piano, Orchestra, and Chorus. Talk about a long night.

The audience had heard nothing like the *Fifth*. The opening notes launch an arching design in which form takes precedence over melody. After the electrifying opening in the dark key of C minor – which left the Viennese flabbergasted – the second movement introduces a series of double variations, as solace after the storm.

The third movement, a scherzo, is the symphony’s pivot point. It echoes the opening four-note theme in hushed strings and muted timpani before unleashing a blast of horns, bringing on the finale without a break. Darkness gives way to light with a radiant explosion that turns C minor to C major – ending what is arguably the most consummate example of symphonic logic in all music.

*Program notes by Kurt Loft, a freelance writer and former music critic for the Tampa Tribune.*