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The Grand Gesture

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PROGRAM NOTES

IGOR STRAVINSKY (1882–1971)
Le Sacre du Printemps/The Rite of Spring

Commissioned for the 1913 Paris season of the Ballets Russes, *The Rite of Spring* was premiered at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées on May 29, 1913. It was the third of Stravinsky’s collaborations with the colorful impresario Serge Diaghilev, for whose troupe it fulfilled a triptych of works including *The Firebird* (1910) and *Petroushka* (1911). Its reception—a legendary affair at which the audience protested so vehemently that the dancers could not hear the orchestra—definitively established Stravinsky’s reputation not only as a compositional innovator but also an international sensation.

Known for his tendency to tease both the press and his biographers, Stravinsky offered contradictory accounts of the genesis of *The Rite of Spring*. In 1920, seeking to distance himself from the dramatic aspects of the original production (the idiosyncratic, eurythmics-inspired choreography of Vaslav Nijinsky and the neo-rustic sets and costumes of Nicholas Roerich), he emphasized that the music came first and that the movement titles and balletic plot were appended after the fact. However, in his *Autobiography* (1936), he wrote,“I saw in my imagination a solemn pagan rite: sage elders, seated in a circle, watching a young girl dance herself to death.They were sacrificing her to propitiate the god of Spring. Such was the theme of *The Rite of Spring*.” Thirty years later, Stravinsky acknowledged his debt to the poet Sergei Gorodetsky, whose writings drew heavily on Russian mythology, and which the composer had set to music as early as 1907. Following Stravinsky’s death, some musicologists further suggested that, far from naïve, Stravinsky had immersed himself in ethnomusicological research before embarking upon the project. He had studied an anthology of Lithuanian traditional music compiled by the 19th-century Polish priest Anton Juskiwicz and indeed appropriated many ceremonial and folk melodies into *The Rite* virtually unchanged. By 1910, Stravinsky had already conferred with Roerich, not only a mystic and artist but an expert on folk ritual, who worked closely with Stravinsky on the scenario, dramatic structure, and movement titles (including the subtitle,“Pictures of Pagan Russia in Two Parts”). From its earliest stages, *The Rite of Spring* was never conceived as “just” music alone.

It was also never conceived as piano music. How then do we approach the piano version, in terms of its function today and in relation to the original production, so renowned for its ingenious, colorful scoring?

As part of his creative process, Stravinsky wrote at the piano. He composed *The Rite of Spring* at the Hotel Châtelard in Clarens, Switzerland, in a tiny studio barren but for two chairs, a table, and a small upright. Pierre Monteux, the conductor who led the premiere, heard Stravinsky play a solo piano reduction in 1912 as the two prepared for rehearsals.“Before he got very far, I was convinced

he was raving mad,” the conductor recalled (as quoted in Minna Lederman’s *Stravinsky in the Theatre*). “The very walls resounded as Stravinsky pounded away, occasionally stamping his feet and jumping up and down.” By June 1912, however, the solo version had been transformed into a duet. Stravinsky read through this arrangement at a private concert at the home of Louis Laloy, the critic, musicologist, and close friend of Claude Debussy (who served as Stravinsky’s duet partner for the evening).Yet it was clear that this was a blueprint for the final orchestral version. Before the age of recordings, such “short scores” were required to prepare the work for the stage.

Like the orchestral editions of *The Rite of Spring*, which are plagued with inconsistencies, many versions of the piano duet exist. Over the years, Stravinsky rethought rhythms, scorings, timings, and even movement titles and divisions.While the overall work remains largely unchanged in terms of structure and thematic content, the piano version from the mid-1960s reflects a host of small changes from the original 1913 score. (Tonight’s performance incorporates elements of both.) Many of these reflect “purely” musical decisions and changes that could be made by a composer freed from considering their consequences for potential dancers and orchestral players. Other alterations may have been made more arbitrarily, for purposes of retaining copyright protection and maximizing the composer’s profits on what was, historically, an unusually lucrative piece. Some musicologists characterized the inconsistencies among the published editions as the results of sloppy proofreading, while others have sought to find aesthetic motivations for each.

Musicologist Jann Pasler has suggested a deeper, more psychological reason for Stravinsky’s distancing himself from Diaghilev and the premiere version of his work. Indeed, the Ballets Russes production was seen as so “Russian” that even sophisticated Parisian reviewers did not receive Stravinsky’s accomplishment as the inspired work of a creative individual but rather as the result of faceless communal effort.“Who is the author of *The Rite*?” asked critic Jacques Rivière in *The Revue Française* in August 1913. “Nijinsky? Stravinsky? Roerich? The preliminary question ... does not make sense to us Westerners. For us everything is individual; a strong and characteristic work always carries the mark of only one mind.This is not the case for the Russians.” Thus Stravinsky’s later attempts to distance himself from the narratives and images of the original production may be seen as an attempt to reclaim the work for himself and retain his artistic identity and authority.

In the piano version of *The Rite of Spring* heard tonight, we hear the pioneering work of a young master, presented not in Technicolor but in black and white. Clearly etched rhythms, elegantly constructed polyphonic textures, and haunting melodies are heard in relief. Undistracted by the orchestra or the dancers onstage, we are freed to contemplate and

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explore the material itself, which is concise and, more often than not, strangely delicate, and which foreshadows the neo-Classical style to which Stravinsky turned in the 1920s.We hear, in what cannot truly be called a “reduction,” the rise of a modernist aesthetic favoring structure over narrative, and a young composer’s evolution toward the abstract.
—*Marilyn Nonken*

OLIVIER MESSIAEN (1908–1992)
Visions de l’Amen

In the spring of 1943, in German-occupied Paris, a select audience of invited guests gathered at the Galerie Charpentier for the first performance of Olivier Messiaen’s new work for two pianos, *Visions de l’Amen*. Performed by Messiaen and Yvonne Loriod, a prize-winning student at the Paris Conservatoire where the composer had recently been named professor of harmony, *Visions* represented the first musical collaboration between the two and the beginning of a personal and creative partnership that would endure for half a century.

From its opening movement, *Visions de l’Amen* is revealed to be a major work. Slowly emerging out of silence like the birth of sound itself, the “Amen of Creation” is defined by an expansive sense of time, the radical separation of registers of the two pianos, and the mysterious build of the slowly repeated harmonic progression from the lowest depths of the bass. Messiaen, a virtuoso organist, had an acoustic imagination that was at ease with the keyboard but which transcended the conventional limits of piano sound. In *Visions de l’Amen*, the composer transforms two piano keyboards into something far greater, far more resonant, than the doubling of two instruments.

The music expresses almost unbearable tenderness (the plaintive theme in “Agony of Jesus” and the first theme in “Amen of Desire”); primal rhythmic force (the savage dance of “Amen of the Stars”); passion of Wagnerian urgency (second theme in “Desire”); purity and joy (“Amen of the Angels, the Saints, and Birdsong”); terrifying inflexibility (“Amen of Judgment”), and, finally, the dizzying ecstasy of the closing “Amen of Consummation,” in which the theme of Creation makes a final, jubilant return.

Messiaen drew upon an extraordinary range of musical materials and influences to build his musical vocabulary: tonal harmonies forming “cluster-chords” (the composer said,“the most important thing is not to destroy tonality but to enrich it”), nonmetric rhythmic patterns that extend and contract, plainchant, Balinese music, Hindu rhythm, and birdsong. He recognized as direct influences the composers Debussy, Stravinsky and Russian music (Scriabin, interestingly, never mentioned but certainly present), Massenet, Jolivet, and Schoenberg. The resultant music is an astoundingly unified musical construct. Shimmering colors seduce with the sheer pleasure of sound, while the rigor and procedural directness of Messiaen’s compositional process not only provide

structural form but also reflect his deep belief in Catholic dogma.The music, in fact, becomes a mirror image of his faith: a supremely ordered universe with mystical power.

Messiaen described the unusual division of roles between the two pianists in *Visions*: Piano I, performed by Loriod, was given “the rhythmic difficulties, the clusters of chords, all that is speed, charm and quality of sound,” and Piano II, performed by Messiaen, held “the principal melody, the thematic elements, everything that demands power and emotion.” With the composer retaining much of the musical control but delegating much of the virtuosity, one should remember that Loriod was just twenty years old when *Visions* was composed. Messiaen reports delivering the score to her on April 14, 1943—less than four weeks before the work’s premiere! The work itself had been composed in fewer than three months.

Visions de l’Amen is an overwhelmingly affirmative work. It was the composer’s first commission following his return to Paris after his internment in Stalag VIII A in Silesia, the prisoner-of-war camp where he famously wrote the *Quatuor pour la fin du temps*. Attempts have been made to view that seminal work as a response to the horrendous conditions under which it was composed, but it should more rightly be seen as early evidence of Messiaen’s uncanny ability to create a world of his own through his music, a world of spiritual eternity and ecstatic joy far from the turbulence surrounding him. For Messiaen, music was always a language of transcendence.

The impact of the composer’s encounter with the pianist Yvonne Loriod—on this work and on his subsequent development—is immeasurable. Following *Visions de l’Amen*, the first work composed for her, the next twenty years would see the creation of numerous major works with a central piano part written for Loriod, including the epic solo piano cycles *20 Regards sur L’Enfant-Jésus* and the *Catalogue d’oiseaux*. In 1961, Loriod became his wife.

I first met Yvonne Loriod and Olivier Messiaen as I was completing my studies at the Curtis Institute of Music and arranged to come to Paris the following year to study Messiaen’s music. Lessons with Mme. Loriod brought a remarkable balance of reverence for the score and an acutely practical sense as a performer.As I played for her movements from the *20 Regards sur l’Enfant-Jésus*, with neatly sharpened pencils she would dot the score with fingerings, redistribute the large chords between the hands, and demonstrate her amazing fleetness on the keyboard. Unconventional solutions were found to produce the powerful fortissimos the music demanded—thumbs, even fists, could make the black keys ring resonantly.The physical and musical were inseparably linked; sound and gesture were conceived at once.

It was illuminating to witness, through her approach to the music, the intimately reciprocal relationship between performer and composer.

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Yvonne Loriod had literally formed herself as an artist around Messiaen’s music—the composer’s modes were as natural to her as major or minor scales—and, conversely, his unique writing for the piano had developed around her distinctive abilities. Mme. Loriod’s quick mind and quick fingers lived in Messiaen’s encompassing musical universe.

—*Sarah Rothenberg*

ABOUT THE ARTISTS

Hailed by the *New Yorker* as “two of the finest of new music pianists,” **Sarah Rothenberg** and **Marilyn Nonken** have been praised for their “powerful” performances and “passionate exuberance” as a duo by the *New York Times*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, *BBC Magazine*, and more. Their recording of Messiaen’s *Visions de l’Amen* (Bridge) was noted as one of *Stereophile* magazine’s 2011 “Records to Die For.”

Marilyn Nonken is one of the most celebrated champions of the modern repertoire of her generation, known for performances that explore transcendent virtuosity and extremes of musical expression. She has performed at such venues as Carnegie Hall, Lincoln Center, Miller Theatre, the Guggenheim Museum, (Le) Poisson Rouge, IRCAM, and the Théâtre Bouffe du Nord (Paris), the ABC (Melbourne), Instituto Chileno Norteamericano (Santiago), the Music Gallery (Toronto), the Phillips Collection, and the Menil Collection. Festival appearances include Rémonances and the Festival d’Automne (both Paris), When Morty Met John, Making Music, and Works & Process (all New York), American Sublime (Philadelphia), The Festival of New American Music (Sacramento), Musica Nova (Helsinki), Aspects des Musiques d’Aujourd-hui (Caën), Messiaen 2009 (Birmingham, UK), New Music Days (Ostrava), Musikhøst (Odense), Music on the Edge (Pittsburgh), Piano Festival Northwest (Portland), and the William Kapell International Piano Festival and Competition.

She has recorded for New World Records, Mode, Lovely Music, Albany, Metier, Divine Art, Innova, CRI, BMOP Sound, New Focus, Kairos, Tzadik, and Bridge. Her solo discs include *American Spiritual*, a CD of works written for her; *Morton Feldman:Triadic Memories*; *Tristan Murail:The Complete Piano Music*; and *Stress Position:The Complete Piano Music of Drew Baker*. She appears as concerto soloist in David Rakowski’s Piano Concerto (Gil Rose and the Boston Modern Orchestra Project) and Roger Reynolds’s *The Angel of Death* (Magnus Martensson and the Slee Sinfonietta). Her most recent solo release is *Voix Voilées: Spectral Piano Music*, featuring music of Hugues Dufourt and Joshua Fineberg. Notable commissions include works written by Tristan Murail (*Les Travaux et les jours*, 2003), Michael Finnissy (*Verdi Transcriptions*, 2004), Pascal Dusapin (*Preludes*, 2006), and many more.A student of David Burge at the Eastman School, Nonken received a Ph.D. in musicology from Columbia University. Her writings on music have been published in *Tempo*, *Perspectives of New Music*, *Contemporary Music Review*, *Agni*, *Current*

Musicology, *Ecological Psychology*, and the *Journal of the Institute for Studies in American Music*. She has contributed chapters to *Perspectives on French Piano Music* and *Messiaen Perspectives 2: Techniques, Influence, and Reception* (both, Ashgate) and is currently writing *The Spectral Piano* for Cambridge University Press. Director of piano studies at New York University’s Steinhardt School, Nonken is a Steinway Artist.

Sarah Rothenberg has an unusually creative career, recognized internationally both as a pianist with a commitment to new and unusual repertoire and for her innovative interdisciplinary projects relating music to literature and visual art. Performances include Great Performers at Lincoln Center, Washington’s Kennedy Center, London’s Barbican Centre, Gilmore International Keyboard Festival, Aldeburgh Festival, Amsterdam’s Concertgebouw, Palais des Beaux-Arts (Brussels), The Menil Collection, Guggenheim Museum, (Le) Poisson Rouge, Getty Museum, Library of Congress, and leading concert series across the United States. Recordings for Bridge, GM, Koch, and Naxos labels include the US premiere CDs of Fanny Mendelssohn’s *Das Jahr* (Indie Award for Best Solo Classical Recording) and *Rediscovering the Russian Avant-Garde 1912–1925: Roslavetz, Lourié, Mosolov; Shadows and Fragments: Brahms and Schoenberg Piano Works*; and works by Elliott Carter, Charles Wuorinen, Shulamit Ran, George Perle, George Tsontakis, Joan Tower, and, forthcoming, Tobias Picker (with Brentano Quartet), all in collaboration with the composers. Active as a writer, she has had essays appear in *The Threepenny Review*, *Brick*, *Conjunctions*, *Nexus*, *Tri-Quarterly*, *Chamber Music*, and *The Musical Quarterly*.

Interdisciplinary performances conceived, directed, and performed by Rothenberg include Marcel Proust’s *Paris*, *The Musical World of Thomas Mann*, *St. Petersburg Legacy*, *Moondrunk* (all for Lincoln Center Great Performers and Da Camera of Houston); *The Blue Rider: Kandinsky and Music* (for Works & Process at the Guggenheim and Miller Theatre, New York); and *Chopin in Paris: Epigraph for a Condemned Book* (co-produced by Yale Repertory Theatre, University Musical Society Ann Arbor, Krannert Center for the Performing Arts, and Da Camera of Houston). Her latest work, *In the Garden of Dreams*, set in fin-de-siècle Vienna, premieres at Houston’s Wortham Center in May 2013.

Rothenberg is artistic and general director of Da Camera of Houston and was previously co-founder and co-artistic director of the Bard Music Festival. Following her graduation from the Curtis Institute of Music, where she studied with Seymour Lipkin and Mieczeslaw Horszowski, Rothenberg lived in Paris and studied the music of Messiaen with Yvonne Loriod. She received the French medal of Chevalier in the Order of Arts and Letters in 2000. She lives in Houston and New York.

Music

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Sarah Rothenberg and Marilyn Nonken, pianists

The Grand Gesture

PROGRAM

Le Sacre du Printemps/ Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971)

The Rite of Spring (1912-13)

Part I: Adoration of the Earth

- Introduction
- The Augurs of Spring: Dances of the Young Girls
- Ritual of Abduction
- Spring Rounds
- Ritual of the Rival Tribes
- Procession of the Sage
- The Sage-Dance of the Earth

Part II: The Sacrifice

- Introduction
- Mystic Circles of the Young Girls
- Glorification of the Chosen One
- Evocation of the Ancestors
- Ritual Action of the Ancestors
- Sacrificial Dance (The Chosen One)

~~Intermission~~

Visions de l'Amen (1943) Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992)

- Amen de la Création
- Amen des étoiles, de la planète à l'anneau
- Amen de l'Agonie de Jésus
- Amen du Désir
- Amen des Anges, des Saints, du chant des oiseaux
- Amen de Jugement
- Amen de la Consommation

Duration: 1 hour 35 minutes, including one 15-minute intermission.

In consideration of both audience and performers, please turn off all electronic devices. The taking of photographs or videos and the use of recording equipment are not permitted. No food or drink is permitted inside the theater.

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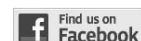
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Peak Performances

12/13
 SEASON



Marilyn Nonken (left) and Sarah Rothenberg (right); credit: Tina Psionos

Sarah Rothenberg and Marilyn Nonken, pianists

The Grand Gesture

April 13, 2013 • 8:00pm

Alexander Kasser Theater

Montclair State University