

Dispelling the Myths: The Opening Bassoon Solo to *The Rite of Spring*

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Bassoonists have been struggling to interpret Stravinsky's intentions for the opening solo to *The Rite of Spring* since the ballet's première in 1913. Common practice dictates that this difficult passage must be played as smoothly as possible; bassoonists' teachers, colleagues, and audition jurors demand nothing less. Meanwhile, there are numerous stories in "bassoon lore" that suggest quite the opposite. Many bassoonists believe that the primitive nature of the ballet suggests that the solo requires a more untamed sound. Most of the anecdotes surrounding this interpretation are the results of eighty-five years of bassoonists trying to rationalize why Stravinsky, who was obviously aware of instruments' ranges, would stubbornly choose to compose beyond the established range of the bassoon.

The question of how Stravinsky intended the solo to be performed was once again raised by **Maurice Allard** in a 12 December 1989 letter to **Sol Schoenbach**.¹ According to Allard, Stravinsky once told **François Oubradous**, who was first soloist at the Opera, that the solo must "be very painful." Fifteen days later, however, Stravinsky reportedly advised **Gustav Dhérin** that he would like the beginning to sound "nice." To quote Allard: "Who to believe? What to believe?"

The historical background of *The Rite of Spring* suggests that Stravinsky intended for the solo to depict not a person "with a noose around his neck,"² but a Russian folk instrument called the dudka. As for the question of why Stravinsky chose to write the solo in the extreme upper register of the bassoon, evidence seems to reveal that he did not consider the solo to be unreasonably high. Stravinsky may have felt that he was writing in a feasible range of the instrument that had largely been ignored by composers up to that time.

Stravinsky's Plan for the Solo to Depict a Dudka

In keeping with the ballet's subtitle "Pictures of Pagan Russia," Stravinsky composed the orchestral score to reproduce the music of pagan rituals. He originally entitled the Introduction, which contains the opening

bassoon solo, "Dudki." This indicates that Stravinsky designed it to depict the sounds of the graceful reed-pipe instrument that is most often associated with the music played by shepherds.

On 26 September 1911, Stravinsky wrote a letter to Nikolai Roerich, who designed the scenery and costumes for the ballet's première, in which the composer recorded, "I have already begun to compose, and, in a state of passion and excitement, have sketched the Introduction for 'dudki.'"³ In a 15 December 1912 letter to the editor of the *Russkaya musikal'naya gazeta*, Stravinsky wrote, "The orchestral introduction is a swarm of spring pipes (dudki)."⁴ Although the title "Dudki" was not used in the final score, one of Roerich's designs for Part I of *The Rite of Spring* does include a youth playing a dudka (Example 1).⁵

Stravinsky was not the first Russian composer to use the bassoon to represent the dulcet sounds of dudki. Michail Glinka used a flute, an oboe, a clarinet, and two bassoons to depict a dudka in his opera *A Life for the Tsar* (1834-36) (see Example 2). In Act IV of the original version of *Snow Maiden* (1880-81), Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov employed



Example 1.

“a separate small orchestra of woodwinds, to represent, as it were, the shepherds' horns and reed pipes.”⁶

The most striking precedent for Stravinsky's depiction of a dudka can be found in Modest Mussorgsky's unfinished opera *The Fair at Sorochintsi* (1874-80). In the "Dumka Parobka" at the end of Act I, a young peasant boy's aria is

Example 2. Glinka, *A Life for the Tsar*, Introduction, mm. 168-193.

The image shows three systems of musical notation for Example 2. The first system features a Flute part in the upper staff and a Bassoon part in the lower staff. The second system features an Oboe part in the upper staff and a Clarinet part in the lower staff. The third system features a Clarinet & Oboe part in the upper staff and a Bassoon part in the lower staff. The music is in 2/4 time and consists of a series of eighth and sixteenth notes, with some triplets and slurs.

accompanied by a solo bassoon, which represents his dudka. The melody and rhythm of the first measure of this solo (see Example 3a) bear an uncanny resemblance to the first measure of *The Rite of Spring* (see Example 3b).

The Solo's Origins

In keeping with the Introduction's folk-like setting, Stravinsky borrowed its musical material

Example 3a. Musorgsky, *The Fair at Soróchintsi*, "Dumka Parobka," ms. 1.

The image shows a single system of musical notation for Example 3a. It is a bassoon part in 4/4 time. The melody is marked with a bracket and the word "melody" above it. The rhythm is marked with a bracket and the word "rhythm" below it. The melody consists of a series of eighth notes, with a triplet of eighth notes in the third measure.

Example 3b. Stravinsky, *The Rite of Spring*, ms. 1.

The image shows a single system of musical notation for Example 3b. It is a bassoon part in 4/4 time. The melody is marked with a bracket and the word "melody" above it. The rhythm is marked with a bracket and the word "rhythm" below it. The melody consists of a series of eighth notes, with a triplet of eighth notes in the third measure.

from a folk tune. There were numerous anthologies at Stravinsky's disposal that contain ceremonial songs associated with the same types of pagan festivals on which *The Rite of Spring* was based. For the opening solo, Stravinsky chose "Tu, manu seséréle" from Anton Juszkiewicz's *Melodje ludowe litewskie* (see Example 4)⁷. It may have been Stravinsky's knowledge of the bassoon solo in *The Fair at Soróchintsi* that attracted his

eye to that particular tune out of the 1,785 melodies in the anthology. Stravinsky presumably added grace notes to the song in his efforts to imitate the traditional music of Russian folk instrumentalists.

As with the depiction of dudki, Stravinsky took his place in a long tradition of Russian composers by employing folk themes. Glinka, Balakirev, and Rimsky-Korsakov used folk melodies in anthologies, operas, and orchestral works. By using these songs, they were able to

tap into the "ceremonial side of folk-life which gives expression to the survivals from ancient paganism."⁸

The Issue of the Solo's Range

A cursory examination of the bassoon's repertoire demonstrates that Stravinsky's orchestration for the bassoon's upper register, especially his inclusion of D⁵'s⁹, was hardly unprecedented. The bassoon *concoirs* solos used by the Paris Conservatoire between the time they began commissioning the contest pieces in 1898 to 1913, when *The Rite of Spring* was premiered, show that composers at the turn of the century considered D⁵ to be at the top of the bassoon's practical range (see Table 1)¹⁰. Paul Jeanjean's *Prelude and Scherzo* even ascends to an F⁵. The 1908 *concoirs* piece, Weber's bassoon concerto, was written in 1811. Its inclusion of a D⁵ shows that the bassoon was expected to ascend to this pitch one hundred years prior to the composition of *The Rite of Spring*.

Stravinsky's early symphonic works demonstrate a gradual awareness of the potential of the bassoon's upper range. In *Scherzo fantastique*, op. 3 (1907-8), the bassoon ascends to C₅ once. The bassoon part to *Fireworks*, op. 4 (1908), includes two C₅'s (measures 82 and 94), but the bassoon is reinforced both times by higher-pitched instruments. In the original version of *The Firebird* (1909-1910), the bassoon

Example 4. Juskiewicz, *Melodje ludowe litewskie*, no. 157, "Tu, manu seséréle."

157 (158). Cf. Nr. 1, 2.

Tu, manu se-se - ré-lé, kad nori vargą vargti, te-kék už baudžiau-ninkų
 (se-se-lé guf-bu - - žélé!) SD. 393; cf. SD. 401.

only ascends to C₅ once.¹¹ In the "Russian Dance" of *Petrushka* (1911), however, the first bassoon ascends to D₅ four times (measures 378-86), but this passage becomes buried in the orchestral texture. In a more exposed part in "Petrushka's Room," the bassoon ascends to a C₅ (measures 378-85).

The presence of C₅'s, C₅#'s, and D₅'s in Stravinsky's bassoon parts prior to *The Rite of Spring* demonstrates that to the composer, the notes in the bassoon's upper register are more than just orchestral effects. This is simply a range of the instrument that Stravinsky envisioned as reasonable yet relatively unexplored. By including notes in the extreme upper range of the instrument in a passage that also requires virtuosic facility, Stravinsky was simply taking the next logical step in the development of orchestral techniques for the bassoon. ❖

Endnotes

¹ This letter was reprinted in the 25th Anniversary Commemorative Issue of *The Double Reed*; see "Who Performed the Premiere of the Bassoon Solo in Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*?" *The Double Reed* 19:3 (1996): 165-166. The letter originally appeared in *The Double Reed* 13:1 (1990): 43-44.

² "Who Performed the Premiere of the Bassoon Solo in Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*?" 166.

³ Vera Stravinsky and Robert Craft, *Stravinsky in Pictures and Documents* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), 83. These sketches have unfortunately been lost.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 92.

⁵ Alexander Schouvaloff and Victor Borvsky, *Stravinsky on Stage* (London: Stainer and Bell, 1982), 68.

⁶ Andrey Nikoleyevich Rimsky-Korsakov, *My Musical Life*, trans. Judah A. Joffe (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1942), 242.

⁷ Anton Juskiewicz, *Melodje ludowe litewskie* (Cracow: Academy of Sciences, 1900), 21.

⁸ Rimsky-Korsakov, 207-8.

⁹ According to the Acoustical Society of America's approved system of naming pitches, Middle C is C₄. The opening bassoon solo to *The Rite of Spring* calls for a D₅.

¹⁰ Kristine Klopfenstein Fletcher, *The Paris Conservatoire and the Contest Solos for Bassoon* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), 49-58.

¹¹ The E₅ in the "Danse infernale" did not appear until the 1919 revision of the suite.

About the Author ...

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Table 1. Paris Conservatoire *concours* bassoon solos, 1898-1913.

Date	Composer	Piece	Highest Note
1898	Gabriel Pierné	<i>Solo de Concert</i>	D ₅
1899	Eugène Bourdeau	<i>Solo de Basson</i>	C ₅
1900	L.A. Bourgault-Ducoudray	<i>Fantaisie</i>	D ₅
1901	Charles René	<i>Solo de Concert</i>	D ₅
1902	André Bloch	<i>Fantaisie Variée</i>	C ₅
1903	Henri Dallier	<i>Sonata in B-flat</i>	B ₄
1904	Antoine Taudou	<i>Morceau de Concours</i>	B ₄
1905	Albert Bertelin	<i>Introduction et Rondo</i>	D ₅
1906	Gabriel Pierné	<i>Solo de Concert</i>	D ₅
1907	Eugène Bourdeau	<i>Deuxième Solo</i>	D ₅
1908	C.M. von Weber	<i>Concerto</i>	D ₅
1909	Henri Büsser	<i>Récit et Thème Varié</i>	C ₅
1910	Eugène Cools	<i>Concerstück [sic]</i>	C ₅
1911	Paul Jeanjean	<i>Prelude and Scherzo</i>	F ₅
1912	Jean Mouquet	<i>Ballade</i>	A ₄
1913	Henri Dallier	<i>Sonata in B-flat</i>	B ₄