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Influence of the Khorovod on the form “*Spring Rounds*” from *The Rite of Spring*

Le Sacre du Printemps or *The Rite of Spring* very well may be considered as one of the most influential pieces, or furthermore, as the most influential, of the 20th century musical canon. This piece followed the successes of his previous two ballet scores with ballet organizer Sergei Diaghilev, *Firebird* in 1910 and *Petrushka* the following year. *Rite of Spring*, or as the accurate subtitle says, “*Pictures of Pagan Russia in Two Parts*”, was such a groundbreaking work, that it infamously led to an audience uproar at its premiere in the *Théâtre des Champs-Élysées* in Paris. The piece featured Stravinsky’s new experiments with differing meters, expanded and dissonant tonalities, Russian folk music (as well documented by Richard Taruskin) and more. An extended analysis of the fourth section of the piece, *Spring Rounds*, demonstrates, however, something much more impacting on the construction of the music, and that is the replication of ancient Russian dance of the Khorovod.

Rite of Spring’s overall goal is to create the impression of an ancient pagan Russian tribe, beginning the process of selecting a young maiden to sacrifice as a token of the tribe’s thankfulness to their gods for the arrival of a new spring. Out of Stravinsky’s letter to conductor Serge Koussevitzky in February 1914, Stravinsky noted that the piece “has no plot” (at least in a very direct sense) but rather a “succession of choreography”,¹ and that the fourth episode featured the “Spring Khorovod”. While it is obvious throughout the piece that folk songs are used at a melodic and motivic level, in *Spring*

¹ Van Der Toorn, Pieter C. *Stravinsky and the Rite of Spring: The Beginnings of a Musical Language*. Berkeley: University of California, 1987. Print.

Rounds, the entire episode is based off the idea of folk music, in this case, the dance known as the Khorovod. The Khorovod is a traditional Russian round dance that has ties all the way back to ancient Russia as a paganistic ritual for the sun god Yarilo.² The Khorovod can stay as a circle dance or develop into more elaborate snake-like or zig-zag formations. Khorovod dances require that there be a leader to the dance, who should be in the middle of the formation, and to whom all of the dance's unraveling depends, as much of the Khorovod has an improvisatory nature. There are different types of Khorovods, of which Stravinsky mixes and matches in the orchestration. There are lyrical Khorovods, defined by their slow tempi and melodies that feature either asymmetrical or compound meters. *Skoyora* Khorovods, are fast, with abrupt changes, with resolute rhythm and astute articulation.³ Stravinsky's implementation of the Khorovod can be seen when closely examining the score.

The section opens at rehearsal mark no. 48 with a *tranquillo* section that opens with the melody from a lyrical folk tune that provide a quick introduction for the incoming slower tempi of the lyrical Khorovod that is the basis for most of *Rounds*, as seen by this four part piano reduction in example A:

Example A.

Spring Rounds

Tranquillo ♩ = 108

² <http://int.rgo.ru/news/russian-round-dance-following-the-movement-of-the-sun/>

³ Prokhorov, Vadim. "Khorovod Songs." *Russian Folk Songs: Musical Genres and History*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2002. N. pag. Print.

Although, mixed meter is used as a hallmark throughout the entirety of *Spring*, due to its invocation of the Khorovod dance it is especially important here, as we can see the opening six bars featuring only either asymmetrical or compound time signatures. Also noteworthy is that the opening folk melody also introduces the Eb dorian modality as a tonal foundation for much of the movement. Following this the pesante section in 4/4 time takes over which has this ostinato figure (ex.B) in the low strings and woodwinds as reinforcement of the Eb tonality throughout:

The image shows a musical score for a section titled "Example B". It is in 4/4 time and marked "Sostenuto e pesante" with a tempo of "♩ = 80". The key signature is three flats (Eb major). The score consists of two systems of staves. The first system has a treble clef staff with a melodic line and a bass clef staff with a rhythmic ostinato. The second system has a piano (p) dynamic marking and continues the ostinato in the bass clef staff while the treble clef staff has a melodic line. The ostinato figure is a sequence of chords: Eb2-Gb2, Eb2-Gb2, Eb2-Gb2, Eb2-Gb2, Eb2-Gb2, Eb2-Gb2, Eb2-Gb2, Eb2-Gb2.

Example B.

Even in just four bars, Stravinsky with his music reinforces the feels and cultural expectation of the Khorovod dance. In Vadim Prokhorov's *Russian Folk Songs*, he lists more elements of the Khorovod that can be demonstrated in *Rounds*:

“Structurally, the melodies of Khorovod songs most often consist of two dissimilar, contrasting, question-and-answer type phrases, creating different types of binary form. The contrast can be created by the ascending and descending movements of a melody, by mode changes...rhythmic contrast...Regardless of tempo a Khorovod is usually associated with smooth and uninterrupted movements of women (graceful swans) and the slow but certain steps of young men (falcons).”⁴

⁴ Prokhorov, Vadim. "Khorovod Songs." *Russian Folk Songs: Musical Genres and History*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2002. N. pag. Print.

Looking back at example B we can identify Stravinsky's use of the Khorovod. The low voices rising in open fifths, create an eerie, dark mood, while the folk melody is light and playful, and though modal has more major inclinations tonally. The contrasting idea of "swans" and "falcons" can be seen comparing the low ostinato, with the graceful folk melody in the upper voices. They also function in a call and response way. In addition to this, the call and response idea is expanded, as a second folk melody emerges, this time with full dramatic backing from the rest of the ensemble (ex.C):

Example C.

The musical score for Example C consists of two systems. Each system has two staves. The top staff of each system is in treble clef and contains a soprano line with many beamed notes and accents, often marked with a 'v' (accents). The bottom staff of each system is in piano clef and contains a bass line with a similar rhythmic texture. The music is in 2/4 time and features dense, rhythmic textures with many beamed notes and accents. The dynamic marking 'ff' is present in both systems. The key signature has one flat (B-flat).

Even though here, the texture is thicker and the harmony is much more dense (the ostinato continuing the tonal center of Eb Dorian along with the melody of the upper voices, clash with the triads in the middle staves, which are separated by a semitone, and lead to a tense and utterly powerful answer to the relative clear section that preceded it.), the division between low voiced falcons, and melodic swan (even though here the grace is replaced by a much more forceful nature) remains unchanged. However following this section is an alarming break from the previous feel of this movement. In example D, rehearsal mark 54, the tempo is much faster and the texture instead of being

largely homorhythmic as earlier, becomes much more independent per part, with the exception being the two 4/4 measure at rehearsal mark 55:

Example D.

The image displays two systems of musical notation. The first system on the left features a piano part (bottom staff) and a violin part (top staff). The piano part is marked 'Vivo' with a tempo of quarter note = 160. The violin part is marked 'sempre' and includes dynamic markings 'ff' and 'f'. The second system on the right shows a more complex arrangement with multiple staves, including piano and violin parts, with dynamic markings like 'ff' and 'f'. The notation includes various rhythmic values and articulation marks.

This change in feel may seem odd until we consider that we have shifted the feel of the Khorovod from a *lyrical* to a *skoyora* style, the style that is fast, features abrupt changes, and intricate and precise rhythmic action. Following this is the final part of the movement, an additional *tranquillo* section section that acts as an outro with the same material in the first *tranquillo* section. Now that all of the various individual sections of the movement have been analyzed, the question that remains is to be solved is how to conceive the form of the movement as a whole.

It seems difficult to ascertain how this movement is structured, as it seems at first glance like 3 separate sections sandwiched between the *tranquillo* parts in the beginning and end of the movement. When put through the lens of the Khorovod again, however, the structure seems to become more understandable. The call and response portion of Khorovods often lead to binary structures.⁵ If we can agree that the *tranquillo* sections of the movement are segways between the entirety of the piece,

⁵ Prokhorov, Vadim. "Khorovod Songs." *Russian Folk Songs: Musical Genres and History*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2002. N. pag. Print.

then what can we make of the 3 middle parts, which don't lend to the binary argument? Well, first off, examine the lengths of each section. The pesante section (Example B) starts at rehearsal mark 49 and continues until 53. This is the section that is the longest in the movement (25 measures long), as the section with the second folk melody lasts only 11 measures, and the subsequent Vivo section lasts 12 measures. But if we allow the second of the three sections to form as a single unit they total in at around 23 measures, similar in length to the pesante section. How do we account for the changes in style? The pesante "A" section can be seen as the lyrical Khorovod, while the "B" section contains two parts: the initial response to the call initiated in the A section, and then the shift, led by the Khorovod's center dancer, to the *skoyora* type of Khorovod.

The scoring of the *The Rite of Spring* is brilliant because Igor Stravinsky not only crafted a masterpiece out of his experimental primitivist style, but utilized cultural knowledge to add legitimacy to the ideas he was trying to demonstrate. And that knowledge extended beyond mere folk songs, but into how dance affects music, and its formal structures. Intertwining the form of traditional Khorovod to music not only led to an interesting take on musical structure, but also acted as a force of authenticity to the choreography and production, thus creating that much more of an impact, when listening to the sounds and watching the movements of "ancient pagan Russia."

Bibliography:

1. Van Der Toorn, Pieter C. *Stravinsky and the Rite of Spring: The Beginnings of a Musical Language*. Berkeley, University of California, 1987. Print.
2. <http://int.rgo.ru/news/russian-round-dance-following-the-movement-of-the-sun/>
3. Prokhorov, Vadim. "Khorovod Songs." *Russian Folk Songs: Musical Genres and History*. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2002. N. pag. Print.