

Total performance time: approximately 100 minutes, including an interval of 20 minutes

Aurora Orchestra: The Rite of Spring

Aurora Orchestra

Sheku Kanneh-Mason cello

Nicholas Collon conductor

Edward Elgar (1857–1934)

Cockaigne: In London Town

Op.40 (1900–1)

15'

Ernest Bloch (1880–1959)

Schelomo: Rhapsodie Hébraïque

for cello and orchestra (1915–16)

23'

INTERVAL

Igor Stravinsky (1882–1971)

The Rite of Spring (1913)

40'

Part One: Adoration of the Earth

i. Introduction

ii. Augurs of Spring

iii. Ritual of Abduction

iv. Spring Rounds

v. Ritual of the Rival Tribes

vi. Procession of the Sage: The Sage

vii. Dance of the Earth

Part Two: The Sacrifice

i. Introduction

ii. Mystic Circles of the Young Girls

iii. Glorification of the Chosen One

iv. Evocation of the Ancestors

v. Ritual Action of the Ancestors

vi. Sacrificial Dance

In photographs, Edward **Elgar** cuts a distinguished figure; an impressive moustache rests on chiselled facial features, and a crisp Edwardian collar protrudes above square, tweed-clad shoulders. His music often exudes nobility and dignity, but Elgar was no aristocrat. He grew up above his father's music shop in Worcester and was largely self-taught as a musician, spending his early career as a freelance orchestral violinist. Compared with privileged contemporaries like Charles Villiers Stanford, or the generation of British composers he inspired, like Vaughan Williams, he was from far humbler origins. He was also arguably more cosmopolitan, influenced by French and German composers rather than the English folksong and Renaissance polyphony that underpinned much 20th-century English composition.

His concert overture *Cockaigne* was composed in 1900–1901, a year after the success of his 'Enigma' Variations, which was then followed by a relative failure in the now-popular *Dream of Gerontius*. Commissioned by the Royal Philharmonic Society, who had commissioned Beethoven's Ninth Symphony 75 years earlier, *Cockaigne* represented Elgar's arrival at a new level of prestige and renown.

'Cockaigne' is a moralising Edwardian term for drunkenness and gluttony, disparagingly applied to Londoners at the turn of the 20th century. Elgar's 15-minute orchestral piece is a humorous portrait of London at this time, taking in cockneys, church bells, amorous lovers, Salvation Army bands and military parades, and culminating in a glorious, full-orchestra theme with booming brass and percussion.

Ernest **Bloch** was born in Geneva to Jewish parents, and emigrated to America in 1916 – one of millions who left war-torn Europe in search of a peaceful and prosperous life. A primary source of inspiration for Bloch was always his Jewish heritage, which he combined with expert writing for string instruments (he had studied violin with the virtuoso Eugène Ysayë in Brussels) in heart wrenching, soulful music.

Schelomo (subtitled *Rhapsodie Hébraïque*) was composed in early 1916, shortly before Bloch emigrated to the USA. It is the culmination of his cycle of pieces related to Jewish themes. For years, he had been attempting a musical depiction of the Biblical book of Ecclesiastes, whose author was King Solomon (reigned 970–931 BCE); the problem was choosing a language, as his Hebrew was not sufficiently sophisticated. The solution came in the form of cellist Alexandre Barjansky (1883–1961), for whom he decided to write this profoundly expressive, wordless piece for cello and orchestra.

The cello represents Solomon, with the orchestra reflecting his internal world. Melodies are drawn from actual 19th-century Jewish cantorial chant,

recast in the idiom of a late-Romantic cello concerto. There is an overriding sense of loneliness and pessimism, perhaps reflecting Solomon's words near the opening of Ecclesiastes: 'behold, all is vanity and a striving after wind'.

Stravinsky's reputation as one of the 20th century's great composers was founded in his early music for Sergei Diaghilev's (1872–1929) Ballets Russes. Scored for enormous, late-Romantic orchestras, *The Firebird* (1910), *Petrushka* (1911) and *The Rite of Spring* (1913) all have at their core genuine Russian folk melodies. Orchestration learned from his teacher, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov (1844–1908), is combined with a radical approach to harmony and jagged, highly complex rhythms. Over a century later, the music still seems strikingly modern, yet with a timeless, earthy quality derived from its Russian folk origins.

The Rite of Spring became the most famous of these ballets thanks to a scandal in which the audience verbally and physically protested during the first performance in Paris in 1913 – though it was actually the choreography of Vaslav Nijinsky (1889–1950) and the primitivist costumes and set of Nicholas Roerich (1874–1947) that provoked their outrage, rather than Stravinsky's music.

The ballet is set in pagan Russia and explores the surge of natural forces that accompanies the arrival of spring. The opening folk melody, scored for a bassoon at the very top of its range, unfurls like the new shoots of a plant, whilst on stage the spring celebration, entitled 'Adoration of the Earth', is taking place. The entry of an old woman interrupts the pipers and fortune tellers; she knows the mysteries of nature and can predict the future. Young girls with painted faces arrive from the river and perform springtime dances, and the spring games start. A procession of old wise men arrives, and their leader interrupts the games in order to lead a blessing of the earth ('Dance of the Earth'). Amongst these dances, the 'Augurs of Spring' is perhaps the most famous musical sequence of *The Rite of Spring*: a dense cluster chord is repeated over and over again, punctuated by barbed, unpredictable accents; the sheer daring of such dissonance paired with such determined, brutal repetition is still shocking.

The second part of the ballet takes a darker turn. After a violent end to the first part and a momentary silence, the music becomes still; virgins are engaged in mysterious games, walking in circles. One of their number is chosen and she is honoured with a marital dance. Invoking the ancestors, she is entrusted to the wise old men, and she sacrifices herself by dancing herself to death.

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