

IGOR STRAVINSKY

Les noces ("The Wedding")

BORN: June 17, 1882, in Oranienbaum, Russia

DIED: April 6, 1971, in New York

WORK COMPOSED: 1914–23

WORLD PREMIERE: June 13, 1923, in Paris, conducted by Ernst Ansermet

The music here is an extension of the style Stravinsky had pioneered in his famous ballet *The Rite of Spring*. The vocal lines follow irregular rhythms reflecting those of the Russian verses for which they were conceived. They are accompanied by astringent blocks of sound, frequently in the form of repeating figures, with sharp outbursts punctuating the texture from time to time.

Les noces, Stravinsky's evocation of a Russian peasant wedding, underwent a long creative process. The composer remembered conceiving in 1912 the idea for a choral description of a rustic wedding, but more than a decade passed before the work reached its final form, in the spring of 1923.

The unusual nature of this piece surely accounted in large part for its protracted gestation. Part cantata, part ballet, *Les noces* conforms to the traditions of neither genre. Its narrative is advanced obliquely; its various characters are not represented consistently by specific singers; its dialogue resembles, as Stravinsky described, "those scenes in [James Joyce's] *Ulysses* in which the reader seems to be overhearing scraps of conversation without the connecting thread of discourse."

All this might seem unpromising material for the stage, but *Les noces* was successfully produced as a ballet in June 1923, in Paris. Following a subsequent production in London, the novelist H. G. Wells, an author not otherwise known for music criticism, wrote: "I do not know of any other ballet so interesting, so amusing, so fresh, or nearly so exciting as *Les noces*." He went on to describe the piece as "a rendering in sound and vision of the peasant soul in its gravity, in its deliberate and simple-minded intricacy, in its subtly varied rhythms, in its deep undercurrents of excitement."

The first scene begins abruptly, without any prelude, and those that follow do so without the slightest pause. (Stravinsky's deliberate avoidance of overture or interludes constituted, in the early 20th century, a radical rethinking of musico-dramatic convention.) This initial section finds the bride at home, having her hair braided and lamenting the end of her childhood. The second scene takes us to the groom's house, where similar activities are in progress: the young man's hair is curled, his parents muse that henceforth his wife will be tending to this task, and everyone beseeches the saints to bless the forthcoming marriage.

The brief third scene relates the bride's departure from her house. Scene four brings us the wedding feast. There are songs, sayings and jests, and a couple is selected to warm the bridal bed for the newlyweds. Finally, bride and groom are led to their chamber as the groom, his part taken by various voices, sings lovingly to his bride.

Although Stravinsky first thought to score *Les noces* for a huge orchestra of some 150 players, he eventually arrived at a novel ensemble of percussion and four pianos. Still, the piece is primarily a work for voices, and singing is practically continuous from the opening note until the end, where first the vocal and then the instrumental music gradually winds down. At last there remains only the periodic chiming of a bell and, in the poetic words of Stravinsky scholar Eric Walter White, "pools of silence [that] come flooding in between."

Scored for soprano, mezzo-soprano, tenor and bass soloists; mixed chorus; 4 pianos; 2 groups of percussion instruments (pitched percussion and unpitched percussion).

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