
Aurora's The Rite of Spring

Karl Queensborough actor
Sarah Twomey actor

Aurora Orchestra
Nicholas Collon conductor

Jane Mitchell concept, script & director
James Bonas director
Nathan Crossan-Smith associate director
Lili Warden lighting designer

A dramatised and musical exploration of Stravinsky's The Rite of Spring

45'

INTERVAL

Igor Stravinsky (1882–1971)
The Rite of Spring (1913) · performed from memory

35'

‘The way Stravinsky writes for the orchestra in *The Rite of Spring* makes it feel like a terrifying single organism – or a machine,’ notes Aurora’s artistic director, Jane Mitchell. ‘It takes on its own momentum and feels unstoppable, and just when you think it’s reached its maximum, the gears shift again in a way that is genuinely frightening.’ Composed as the score for a new ballet by Sergei Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes company, *The Rite of Spring* was premiered in 1913 and has continued to astonish audiences with its startling complexity and force ever since.

Over his lifetime, Stravinsky gave various different accounts of the work’s genesis. He remained consistent on its intent though, declaring the piece to be ‘unified by a single idea: the mystery and great surge of the creative power of Spring’. For Jane, the mounting political unrest of the era was also key to its creation: ‘I’m always struck that the piece was written two years before the start of the First World War, and somehow it feels to me that it taps into that turning point, foreshadowing the catastrophe about to unfold. I think the impact of the work for the listener comes from this overwhelming sense of unstoppable power.’

Aurora first staged their memorised performance of *The Rite of Spring* in 2023. For Jane, the theatrical first half of the concert was conceived to ‘shed light on the incredible score. This project felt like such a unique opportunity to have the orchestra at our fingertips – that the players would be able break things apart and show physically what is going on with the textures and rhythms and harmonies. The effect of listening to this music is so overwhelming that I wanted to be able to show people how Stravinsky does this – to delve into how the score is built and let the audience feel and see what’s going on within the machinery of those hundred musicians.’

The sense of the production bringing Stravinsky’s music to life is a key for actor Karl Queensborough. ‘I’ve always been mesmerised by how music is constructed, but this production really transports you by sharing the narrative of Stravinsky’s life, what influenced him, the struggles he went through. And you can feel the energy of the players when they’re performing. There is an incredible sense of connection. In rehearsals I’ve sometimes become so transfixed I have to do a sudden intake of breath.’

For Nicholas Collon, Aurora’s principal conductor, performing in such a multi-dimensional performance is ‘a rollercoaster ride! I have conducted the work for over 20 years and have always enjoyed exploring the unusually rich context to this particular piece, but in preparing for Aurora’s theatrical take on it, I had to immerse myself even more deeply in every corner of both score and context. The work is full of abrupt changes of tempo and character, moving from one narrative section to another, all of which require different kinds of concentration. Whenever I finish the piece I feel a little shell-shocked, asking myself: what just happened?’

In terms of specific musical moments that might catch the breath, for Jane it is the arrival of the Sage, towards the close of Part One. ‘It gets me every time because it’s SUCH powerful sonic storytelling. The Sage’s footsteps are inaudible at first – but they’re there – disrupting the machine without you knowing it. And then as the Sage approaches, the rhythm of

these footsteps become more and more powerful until they wreck the whole machine and it sounds as if some sort of internal alarm system has been triggered. I think I’d have to say that moment is the most exciting moment in all orchestral writing.’

The intensity of Aurora’s performance is much heightened by every player performing from memory. The process of memorising such a work is colossal: ‘I think every trick in the book is used!’ reflects Jane. ‘The musicians do all sorts of things they wouldn’t normally need to do – putting words to rhythms, colour-coding scores, creating memory walks while listening to the piece, creating rhymes and tables and sets of numbers – the list goes on and on.’ For Jane, the work’s special complexity makes the impact of its memorisation even more profound: ‘rather than it becoming risky and cerebral, it actually becomes instinctive and natural. Sitting in rehearsals in 2023, it felt like the orchestra were almost improvising the piece.’ Nicholas agrees: ‘We find a tightness in ensemble which means we can totally trust each other. We are all taking a giant leap of faith together.’

Kate Wakeling © 2026

Part One: The Adoration of the Earth

Introduction – The work opens with a snaking bassoon solo, soon joined by the other winds.

Augurs of Spring – The pace shifts with the arrival of pounding string chords as the formal celebration of spring begins.

Ritual of Abduction – A rapid, breathless dance sequence marks the arrival of the young girls.

Spring Rounds – Heralded by woodwind trills, the girls then perform a slow dance.

Ritual of the Rival Tribes – Brass fanfares mark the division of the crowd into two competing groups.

Procession of the Sage: The Sage – A dramatic procession leads to the entry of the Sage who quietly blesses the earth.

Dance of the Earth – A frenzied dance concludes Part One.

Part Two: The Sacrifice

Introduction – Quiet swirling strings mark the very beginning of the sacrifice.

Mystic Circles of the Young Girls – The maidens perform a slow, circling dance.

Glorification of the Chosen One – With the Chosen One selected, the orchestra erupts with renewed pace and force.

Evocation of the Ancestors – Shrill brass fanfares mark the summoning of ancestral spirits.

Ritual Action of the Ancestors – A quiet but brooding sequence, with softly winding woodwind solos.

Sacrificial Dance – In the work’s ferocious conclusion, the Chosen One dances herself to death.

VIOLIN I

Maia Cabeza leader
Marcus
Barcham-Stevens
Alexandra Raikhlina
Tiberiu Buta
Ellie Fagg
Tom Aldren
Sijie Chen
Alexandra Lomeiko
Naoko Keatley
Michael Jones
Elise Scheurer
Colette Overdijk
Anna Caban

VIOLIN II

Jamie Campbell
Lonneke van Straalen
Tamara Elias
Will Newell
Bridget O'Donnell
Greta Mutlu
Gillon Cameron
Hannah Bell
Iona Allan
Alicia Berendse
Will McGahon

VIOLA

Miguel Sobrinho
Christine Anderson
Connie Pharoah
Hélène Koerver
Anna Barsegjana
Ruth Nelson
Lourenço Macedo
Sampaio
Raquel Bolivar Lopez
Kasia Ziminska

CELLO

Sébastien van Kuijk
Adi Tal
Ben Chappell
Charlotte Kaslin
Naomi Pavri
Kieran Carter
Yseult Cooper Stockdale

DOUBLE BASS

Ben Griffiths
Billy Cole
Lucía Polo Moreno
Martin Ludenbach
Marianne Schofield
Toby Hughes

PIANO

John Reid

FLUTE

Fiona Kelly
Emilia Zakrzewska

FLUTE / PICCOLO

Clare Jefferis

PICCOLO

Rebecca Larsen

ALTO FLUTE

Claire Wickes

OBOE

Thomas Hutchinson
Hannah Condliffe
Katie Bennington

OBOE / COR ANGLAIS

Katherine Bryer

COR ANGLAIS

Henry Clay

CLARINET

Peter Sparks
Massimo Di Trolio

CLARINET / BASS CLARINET

Max Welford

BASS CLARINET

Tom Lessels

E FLAT CLARINET

Emma Burgess

BASSOON

Jonathan Davies
Dominic Tyler
Ide Ni Chonaill

BASSOON / CONTRABASSOON

Llinos Owen

CONTRABASSOON

Simon Davies

HORN

Annemarie Federle
Elise Campbell
George Strivens
Sarah Pennington
Hugh Sisley
Jake Parker
Fabian van de Geest

HORN / WAGNER TUBA

Andrew Budden
Joel Ashford

TRUMPET

Aaron Akugbo
Sam Kinrade
James Nash
Erika Curbelo

PICCOLO TRUMPET

Holly Clark

BASS TRUMPET

Jamie Tweed

TROMBONE

Davur Juul Magnussen
Benny Vernon

BASS TROMBONE

Simon Minshall

TUBA

Sasha Koushk-Jalali
Stuart Beard

TIMPANI

Antoine Siguré
Francesca Lombardelli

PERCUSSION

Henry Baldwin
Jacob Brown
Laura Bradford
Heledd Gwynant