

Stravinsky, Fabulist of Evil

By Kyle Rothweiler

Igor Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* has rightly been considered a fit 20th-century counterpart to Beethoven's *Eroica Symphony* of the 19th century. But whereas Beethoven's work is the first, and probably the best, presentation of the heroic in musical history, Stravinsky's *Rite* is the first, and perhaps best, accurate depiction of evil in musical history.

Stravinsky describes the scenario of the work in his autobiography: "I saw in imagination a solemn pagan rite; sage elders, seated in a circle, watched a young girl dance herself to death. They were sacrificing her to propitiate the god of spring." It is the ancient story of man being crushed between two forces—mysticism and the collective. It is the story of the individual being offered up to the former by the latter. It is, ultimately, the story of that abomination that has cursed the human race ever since it acquired reason—unreason.

The Rite's creator, Igor Stravinsky, is the most influential and most discussed composer of this century, with the possible exception of Arnold Schoenberg. It is therefore surprising that little attention has been given to how unmusical a mind he actually possessed.

Stravinsky's deficiencies in purely musical intelligence are illustrated not only by his ineptitude as a melodist (a startlingly large number of his works have as their raw materials the tunes of others) but by his essays in absolute form—the bleached-out and jerry-built *Symphony in C*, for example. It was only when Stravinsky combined his musical conceptions with a specific didactic intention that he was capable of composing something worthwhile. And it is here that his chief value lies—as a musical fabulist, a Krylov or Aesop of sound.

This is made clear by his preference for narrative ballets and is evident from the beginning of his career, in his two earliest ballets, *The Firebird* (1910) and *Petrushka* (1911). The latter is especially significant as a fable for our times, a story about a sentient being who is a mere puppet, controlled (literally) by ex-



Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971):
His RITE OF SPRING captured the curse of unreason.

ternal forces. This conception of self is one of the most common impressions of modernist despair, and except in totalitarian countries, it is also totally misconceived. Even if one doesn't buy the determinism of the tale, however, one can appreciate its ingenuity and effectiveness as a conveyer of its theme. But Stravinsky's best work is *The Rite of Spring*, composed in 1913.

Although *The Rite of Spring* is a story from primordial times, it is particularly relevant in an age of nostalgia when primordial times are enjoying a revival. In the 19th century there were attempts by composers to depict the savagery of irrationalism in its various forms—one thinks of Boris Godounov in Mussorgsky's opera of the same name or the Grand Inquisitor in Verdi's *Don Carlo*. But the great significance of the Stravinsky method in *The Rite* is that for once the evil of irrationality is presented naked, with no dignifying Romantic idiom. The evil of the sacrifice, the irrational hysteria of primitive superstition, is presented in a musical style that takes full cognizance of the horror involved. It is to this end that Stravinsky applied all the techniques that he had devised and that made the piece famous: the violent rhythms; the strange, exotic instrumentation; the primitive-sounding but tonal harmonies combined with wrenching dis-

sonances; and so on.

The melodic materials of the work were based on a series of folk tunes, the same sort of corny peasant melodies that had been the chief influence on serious Russian music for more than 50 years. Only now they were used in a fitting manner; not even Mussorgsky had seen so clearly the underlying connection between the brainlessly primitive and the violently savage. *The Rite of Spring* is, in effect, the *reductio ad absurdum* of musical nationalism, the ultimate artistic expression of the primitive for what it is—not benign folksiness, but tribal barbarism.

To be understood completely, *The Rite* requires knowledge of its ballet scenario and comprehension of the nature of the evils described therein. It is not enough to say that Stravinsky's work is a superb depiction of irrationalism: there are hundreds of modern works that fit this description simply because they sound like incomprehensible ravings. Stravinsky's music is intended as objective description, not as a record of his inner state; it is this that separates Stravinsky the intellectual from a profoundly musical thinker like Beethoven.

Beethoven's *Eroica* is an exercise in pure form through which Beethoven expressed the grandeur of his own soul—and, incidentally, initiated an era. Stravinsky, on the other hand, used his compositional skill to examine external matters. In this case his task was to study the nature of evil and irrationalism as they are exhibited in tribal mysticism, and he succeeded. If the *Eroica* presents a musical *utopia*, a statement of human potentialities, then *The Rite* is the musical equivalent of that 20th-century literary form the *dystopia*, a grim warning.

Although the work is set in the primeval past, it has a peculiar relevance to our time. It was written 70 years ago but continues to be the work that, in some nagging way, seems the quintessence of 20th-century music. But why? The best answer seems to be that listeners hear the work as what it is: an eloquent description, with little left to the imagination, of the modern trend toward totalitarianism and irrational mysticism. The sacrifice of one young girl to the delusions of her savage elders is the

prehistoric prototype of the equally pointless annihilation of millions in wars and concentration camps that has been the predominant activity of modern history. It scarcely matters that the moderns have been sacrificed not to some deity but to some social theory or another: the impulse to sacrifice and to be sacrificed is still there.

Stravinsky himself may not have understood the full implication of what he had done. *The Rite*, however, was his masterpiece, a work whose quality he never again reached. Seemingly frightened of what he had wrought, he became more cautious in his moral judgments. His didactic works came to be characterized less by passionate conviction than by cool irony, such as that evinced in *The Soldier's Tale* (1917) and *The Rake's Progress* (1951). This icy irony eventually took the form, in his "neoclassical" works, of the parodistic glorification of the empty practices of academic hacks, resulting in music impeccably crafted but barren of substance.

In the content of his music, Stravinsky was becoming an amoralist. This is obvious not only by the increasingly indifferent emotional tone of his works but by his tendency to turn to religious texts and subjects. It is possible that as he observed the human race moving to embrace the evils he had warned against in *The Rite*, he began to seek a refuge in religion. But in doing so he diminished any possibility of his having a role in solving the moral dilemmas of his time. Morality is necessarily concerned with the free will of rational beings choosing between right and wrong: it is essentially a guide to reasoned action. Inasmuch as formal religions tend to prefer their devotees to act on edicts and dogma, they are ill-equipped to deal with fundamental moral questions.

And Stravinsky was perhaps the most honest religious composer ever. His music to religious texts conveys fully the literal sense of the words, the indifference to earthly things that is the essence of formal religion. It is impossible to imagine a listener being converted by it, as one can imagine his being converted by Bach's *B-Minor Mass* or Beethoven's *Missa Solemnis*, overwhelmed by the sheer emotional power of the music. Listening to a Stravinsky piece like *The Symphony of Psalms* (1930) or *Canticum Sacrum* (1955), one is reminded more of the bland despair of Middle Ages Gregorian chant than of the life-affirming exuberance of Romantic sacred works. This is appropriate; Stravinsky was a

man of his time and was intelligent enough to observe that the Middle Ages, with their burden of irrationality, superstition, and oppression, were making a comeback. Only this time Stravinsky was writing not as an indignant protester of the 20th-century trend against reason but as a phlegmatic supporter of it.

Toward the end of his long life, Stravinsky tended to write and talk about his art as much as he created—always a danger signal in an artist. His intellectualism led him in his youth to produce works of originality that attempted to

reflect the world around him and in his middle age to adopt various half-baked versions of "art for art's sake" to defend a series of increasingly dull works. In his old age, that same intellectualism made him an erudite bore. And the moral fervor that had directed his youthful originality toward instructive ends eroded to the point where he was no longer capable of providing moral guidance in his music.

Kyle Rothweiler is a free-lance writer and is currently writing a book on modern music.

A Triumph of the Will

By Holmes Alexander

Here I am in a nut house. Many times in arrogance and perhaps in fear, I had vowed never to go to a psychiatrist. But I had walked unshackled into this university hospital ward clearly marked

Simpler advice—to get up from a sleepless bed and go for "a walk around the block"—took no account of the crime wave in our capital city. "Sir," a uniformed policeman accosted me, "what's



"Mental Health." It wasn't bedlam, nor snakepit, nor the cuckoo's nest. But the doors at each end were locked. Security guards, I would learn, were on call against violence. There would be no brainwashing, but it was no place for reticence.

My problem was chronic insomnia. Insomnia, I later learned, is not an illness but a symptom of depression. Not uncommon in post-retirement, it has to do with introspection and a lifetime of memories. In my case the aggravating memories had to do with the cold editor, the unsold story, the bombed-out book, the unloved girl, the unfought fight, the "road not taken," just as in every human life.

Under medical advice I had swallowed many prescribed sleeping pills and gained only an addiction and shattered nerves.

an old man doing out here alone? My partner and I are looking for a guy with a gun. Please go home."

After two years of pillow-punching I decided to see a specialist. This alienist asked me to subtract 7 from 100; he had me recall the names of my grade school teachers; he questioned me about sex activity and death wish. I was ready to

cancel this sophomoric psychology when he mentioned the Sleep Clinic, at which I leaped like a trout at a fly.

Soon after the corridor doors slammed shut behind me, I felt entrapped. The resident physician explained that this was not only a sleep clinic, it was an all around problem-clinic. Had the alienist resorted to a white lie to get me here? Or had my subconscious rephrased his words to fit my desperation?

A problem clinic? It was that, all right. My first roommate (a sweet, gentle fellow when I got to know him) was a purple African who would rend the darkness with shouts in a mix of his native lingo and colonial French. Next I roomed with a puzzled lad who dreaded his bar exams. My third roomie was a realtor in distress over the high interest rates.

life & liberty

Here was a floating population of 20-odd—the black and white, the college kid and college teacher, the confused adolescent and tough-guy laborer, the soft-spoken ingenue and obscene loud mouth, and a polite Oriental who spoke no English and was taking the cure by osmosis.

Some of us were in for a short stay calibrated to our Medicare and private insurance; some were transfers from better or worse places than this; still others were serving a third or fourth term. You could tell which ones were capable of accepting help and which were beyond it.

Call it a benevolent police state. We had wake-up calls and clean-up duties. We met in group therapy classes. I didn't see any paper dolls, but we molded clay, danced to instructions, performed play-acting to reveal our repressions, told our troubles aloud, and commented on those of our fellows.

It was all compulsory. There were no black snake whips or cattle prods, but there were persuasions. If you didn't participate, the staff wouldn't allow you "pass-and-privilege," which permitted restricted and accompanied freedom outside the locks. Only by cooperating could one earn his discharge. A recalcitrant patient could leave on 48-hour notice, but only A.M.A.—against medical approval.

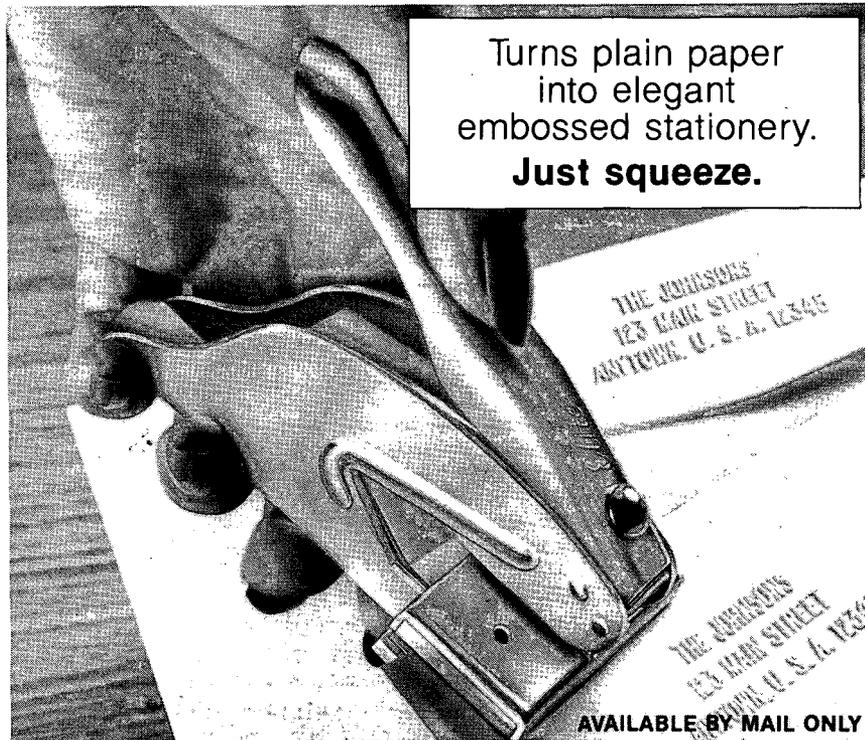
When told that I must kick the sleeping pills or else, I toughed out some sleepless nights and broke the reliance. I learned that, with will power, much is possible. Human beings are gifted with free will and have the potential to select and reject their thoughts. Insomnia cannot be expelled like spittle, but through practice and diligence it can be defeated.

It took a while to acknowledge the causes of my depression. A beloved wife had died in this same hospital after a distressing mental illness—I had never talked it out. A scribbler since prep school, I became a professional writer without setting the lake afire—and I'd balked at saying, "So what?" A syndicated columnist for 34 years, I had supposed that at 75 the transition back to free-lancing would be a cinch—it wasn't. I had stubbornly persisted at this advanced age in writing creative fiction—yet how to explain those two unpublished novels? "So you're not Shakespeare," I was told. "Come off it."

In sum, I'd grown older but not wiser. Let me say to all who come after—even that isn't so bad once it's admitted to one's self.

Holmes Alexander is a free-lance writer.

Elegant Embossed Stationery Make all you want... whenever you want it!



Turns plain paper into elegant embossed stationery.
Just squeeze.

AVAILABLE BY MAIL ONLY

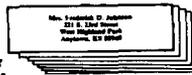
No expensive stationery to re-order.



No messy ink to refill.



No return address labels to run-out-of.



Why spend a lot of money on personalized stationery when you can easily make your own...and never run out? Just squeeze the handle of our compact hand press and instantly convert plain paper into expensive looking embossed stationery.

Unlike others you may have seen, our stationery embosser features a patented reversible plate so you can emboss *both envelope flaps and letterheads*. It's also ideal for personalizing books, magazines and valuable documents.

And to make your personalized stationery even more distinctive, we give you a choice of either *block letters or script*. But best of all, our incredibly low sale price for this high quality embosser is only



1/2 PRICE SALE
A \$20.00 VALUE
ONLY \$9.95

\$9.95...the lowest price available anywhere! And at that price, you can afford to give them as long lasting gifts to those people on your list.

MAIL SINCE 1873
Barnes & Noble
BOOKSTORES
126 Fifth Ave., Dept. M264, New York, N.Y. 10011

STYLE #	QTY	PRICE	TOTAL
1160233		\$9.95	
1160241		\$9.95	
Subtotal			

Add \$1.75 shipping & insurance for each embosser ordered
N.Y. and N.J. residents add applicable sales tax.

TOTAL PAYMENT

Check one:
 A check or money order is enclosed
 Please charge this to: Visa MasterCard
Account# _____ Exp. Date _____

Signature _____
Please print personalization on lines below.
(Up to 3 lines and 30 spaces per line.)

If ordering more than one embosser please print name and address clearly on a separate sheet of paper.

SHIP TO:
Name _____
Address _____
City, State, Zip _____

30-DAY MONEY-BACK GUARANTEE
Every item you purchase from Barnes & Noble must meet your standards... If not, return it within 30 days for a full refund.

© 1984, Barnes & Noble Bookstores, Inc.

the book case

The Wrong Road to Space

By K. Eric Drexler

The Heavens and the Earth: A Political History of the Space Age, by Walter A. McDougall, New York: Basic Books, 576 pp., \$25.95

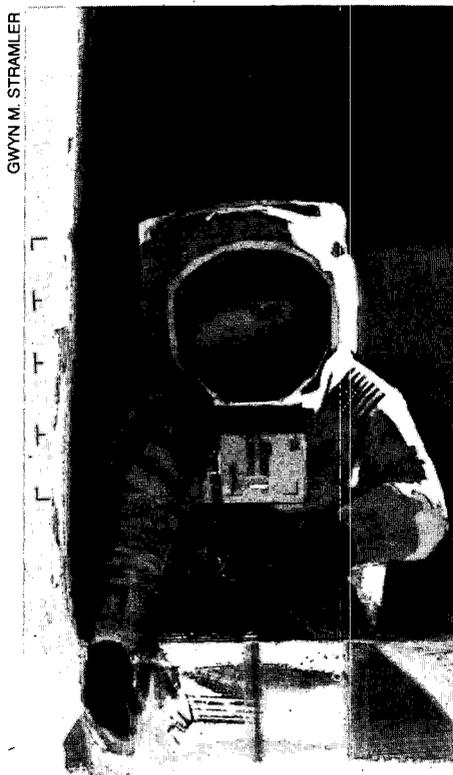
In an interview with Walter Cronkite during the Apollo 11 mission to the moon, Lyndon Johnson praised the space program as a source of progress. Until the USSR had launched its Sputnik, he said:

we didn't have any Federal aid for education. . . . So we started passing education bills, we made a national effort in elementary education, a national effort in higher education, where two million students were brought into our colleges. And they said, "Well, if you do that for space and send a man to the Moon, why can't we do something for grandma with medicare?" And so we passed the Medicare Act, and we passed forty other measures. . . . And I think that's the great significance that the space program has had. I think it was the beginning of the revolution of the '60s.

Why did the challenge of space chiefly invigorate the federal government? This question is central to Walter McDougall's *The Heavens and the Earth: A Political History of the Space Age*. But he covers far more than just the US space program—his true topic is the relationship among technology, politics, and foreign affairs in "an age of perpetual technological revolution."

McDougall traces the rise of centrally directed research and development (or "command technology") to the pressures of 20th-century warfare and, in particular, World War II. The atomic bomb, the ballistic missile, radar, and the electronic computer all were credited to command technology. And these successes made central planning more credible.

Later, the Soviet example loomed large. The Soviet state made technology and central planning its emblems, and Sputnik blazed them across the heavens. McDougall traces the causes of the Sputnik surprise, from the long Soviet tradition in rocketry to the US army inspectors sent to keep Werner von Braun, working on the development of military missiles, from "accidentally" orbiting a US satellite with the technology he was developing (since US policymakers pre-



GWYN M. STRAMLER

ferred that the first satellite be a civilian one). He then describes the media uproar, Soviet propaganda, and global confusion that followed the Soviet Sputnik success. In the minds of the ignorant, a limited technical achievement became a great victory for the Soviet system as a whole.

To defend American virtues, America aped Soviet methods, turning to "five year plans and national mobilization under federal bureaucracies." With this came a fresh wave of enthusiasm for grand federal programs. If we could reach the moon by central planning, what couldn't we achieve? Success at organizing employees to plan and build rockets was seen as proof that new management methods would enable government to plan and rebuild society itself. And so the '60s and '70s were churned by a federal activism unheard of in the Eisenhower years.

McDougall tells a story that reaches from Stalinist views of technology to congressional views of the Atomic Energy Commission to the decisions that led to the present US strategic posture. Throughout, he focuses on the dilemmas faced by a free society forced into a technology-based military competition with a mobilized, totalitarian adversary.

Yet in arguing his thesis about technology, international competition, and centralization, McDougall downplays other centralizing forces and the example of the New Deal era. The book also contains errors of technological, scientific, and historic fact—hydrogen bombs are not "more compact" than fission bombs, the earth is not merely "2.8 billion years" old, J. D. Bernal was a Marxist physicist (not a "Marxist sociologist"), and so forth. Finally, in the last two chapters the book plunges nose-down into a murky discussion of systems analysis, humanism, theology, and the need for G.O.D.—a Guarantor of Decisions.

These final chapters clearly betray what earlier chapters suggest: McDougall suffers from attitudes characteristic of what Nobel laureate F. A. Hayek calls "constructivist rationalism." That is, he overestimates our ability to control or plan outcomes of economic and social interactions. Though McDougall clearly cherishes the spontaneous order of a free society, he does so from the stance of a conservative—he seems to believe that order requires orders and that trustworthy knowledge requires a trustworthy source. This leads him to accept the arguments of central-planning advocates too readily. He speaks of the historical US pattern of research as a "luxury" permitted by our isolation, wealth, and established competence. This luxury, he says, vanished in 1941. He sees the alternative as the "centralized mobilization of intellectual resources"—a development that, though he sincerely regrets, he finds inevitable.

In this, McDougall has fallen into the historian's natural trap. He slips from describing *historical* decisions in terms of the then-considered options to describing *present* decisions in terms of those same options. In short, he neglects the possibility of new alternatives to old dilemmas.

The dilemmas are real: in today's