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Since the premiere of *The Rite of Spring* in 1911, musicologists have been intrigued by the controversy it created. Stravinsky did not consider himself a revolutionary, musical or otherwise, because, as Leonard Ott points out, he did not want his art, an inherently constructive entity, to be associated with destruction and chaos.¹ Nevertheless, many historians believe this piece represented the new orchestral style for the twentieth century. Stravinsky “entered the era of ‘modern’ orchestration not by altering the composition of the orchestra, but by extending the boundaries of idiomatic instrumental characteristics.”² These developments are evident in the opening four bars of *The Rite of Spring*. Here, Stravinsky not only surpasses an instrument’s traditional restrictions but also develops new idioms for that instrument. These bars feature a difficult bassoon solo, which is famous for its surprising and unusual use of the instrument’s upper register. As well as using a more percussive and rhythmically complex style than many

¹ Leonard Ott, *Orchestration and Orchestral Style* (Lewiston: E Mellen Press, 1997), 229.

² *Ibid.*, 227.

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earlier works from the nineteenth century,³ *The Rite of Spring* introduces a bassoon style that deviates from its traditional use as an instrument capable only of “antics the most intensely comical,” as Hamilton Clarke writes in his orchestration manual of 1883.⁴

Twenty years before *The Rite of Spring* premiered, Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov published his *Principles of Orchestration*. His book outlines techniques for scoring individual parts, suggests which instruments sound best together, explains how to harmonize a melody for an orchestra, and includes many illustrative examples. Rimsky-Korsakov says that “in the major [the bassoon creates] an atmosphere of senile mockery; a sad ailing quality in the minor.”⁵ He also states that double reed instruments are much better suited to staccato passages than to legato passages.⁶ Stravinsky was almost certainly familiar with these principles when he wrote *The Rite of Spring*, especially in view of his long friendship with the Rimsky-Korsakov family. After the death of Stravinsky’s father in 1902, Rimsky-Korsakov became a more important figure in Stravinsky’s life, mentoring him in his music studies.⁷ However, Stravinsky clearly did not feel restrained by his teacher’s guidelines, and Rimsky-Korsakov himself said “these general directions [concerning the use of woodwinds] should not deter the orchestrator from adopting [another] plan.”⁸

³ Ott, *Orchestration and Orchestral Style*, 246.

⁴ Hamilton Clarke, *Manual of Orchestration* (London: J. Curwen and Sons Ltd., 1883), 51.

⁵ Nikolay Rimsky-Korsakov, *Principles of Orchestration* (New York: Dover Publications, 1964), 19.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁷ Ott, *Orchestration and Orchestral Style*, 228.

⁸ Rimsky-Korsakov, *Principles of Orchestration*, 18.

Indeed, in his scoring of the opening to *The Rite of Spring*, Stravinsky does not restrict himself to his mentor’s suggestions. Figure 1 shows the famous bassoon solo, which is played in the highest part of the bassoon’s range. In fact, less than two decades before, in 1893, Elson stated in *Orchestral Instruments* that the bassoon’s range extends only to the A flat above middle C.⁹

Figure 1

First Part
ADORATION OF THE EARTH
Première Partie
L'ADORATION DE LA TERRE

INTRODUCTION
Lento $\text{♩} = 50$ tempo rubato
colla parte

The musical score shows four staves. The top staff is for Clarinetto 1 in La, with a first ending bracket. The second staff is for Clarinetto basso 2 in Sib, marked 'Solo ad lib.'. The third staff is for Fagotto 1, featuring a complex rhythmic pattern with triplets and sixteenth notes. The bottom staff is for Corno 2 in Fa, marked 'colla parte' and 'mp'. The score is in 4/4 time and begins with a key signature of one flat.

THE RITE OF SPRING
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Stravinsky, however, writes the bassoon part even higher, using C and D a full octave above middle C. Furthermore, Stravinsky does not confine the bassoon to “composite staccato passages”¹⁰ as Rimsky-Korsakov suggests in his treatise, nor does he imitate the style proposed by Berlioz in *Modern Instrumentation* and shy away from high notes

⁹ Arthur Elson, *Orchestral Instruments* (Boston: L.C. Page and Company, 1893), 171.

¹⁰ Rimsky-Korsakov, *Principles of Orchestration*, 18.

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because of their “painful, suffering”¹¹ character. Instead, he writes the instrument’s part in a slow, high, legato passage, thereby creating the effect of “the awakening of nature” and the “wiggling of birds and beasts.”¹²

Stravinsky’s innovative exploitation of the bassoon had a significant influence on later orchestrators. In particular, three concertos from the second half of the twentieth century - the first by Murray Adaskin in 1960, the second written by Andrzej Panufnik in 1986, and most recently, a concerto composed by R. R. Bennett in 2003 - emulate Stravinsky’s style of bassoon writing.

Adaskin’s *Concerto for Bassoon and Orchestra* includes three movements. Measures 15-20 from the *allegro moderato* first movement in particular make use of the bassoon’s highest register. In this respect, it is quite similar to the opening of *The Rite of Spring*, although the tempo is quicker and the harmony more chromatic. Adaskin’s decision to incorporate the upper “weak” range of the bassoon instead of using “. . . the lower octave and a half of the bassoon, [which] can be made irresistibly ludicrous,”¹³ as earlier composers such as Dukas or Prokofiev did, clearly shows Stravinsky’s influence on writing for this instrument.¹⁴

¹¹ Hector Berlioz, *Modern Instrumentation* (London: Novello, Ewer and Co.), 101.

¹² Ott, *Orchestration and Orchestral Style*, 230.

¹³ Clarke, *Manual of Orchestration*, 51.

¹⁴ Samuel Adler, *The Study of Orchestration* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1982), 200.

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Figure 2

The image shows a musical score for three instruments: Flute (FL.), Oboe (OB.), and Solo Bassoon (SOLO B.S.). The score is divided into two sections. The first section, starting at measure 15, features a complex rhythmic pattern with many sixteenth notes and rests, marked with a first ending bracket. The second section, starting at measure 20, is a solo for the bassoon, showing a melodic line with a long note and a subsequent eighth note.

CONCERTO FOR BASSOON AND ORCHESTRA
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Similarly, Panufnik's *Concerto for Bassoon and Small Orchestra* further illustrates Stravinsky's impact on the instrument's orchestral use. In his note to this piece, Panufnik says that the aria movement is an elegy containing "a long melodic line in the spirit and character of Polish folk song."¹⁵ Likewise, the opening solo in *The Rite of Spring* features an Eastern European folk song, in this case a melody from Lithuania.¹⁶ Panufnik's use of the bassoon to convey the melancholy tune mimics Stravinsky's melodic writing as well. In both Panufnik and

¹⁵ Andrzej Panufnik, "Composer's Note," in *Concerto for Bassoon*, (London: Boosey and Hawkes, 1986).

¹⁶ Ott, *Orchestration and Orchestral Style*, 231.

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Stravinsky's pieces, the incorporation of the bassoon into serious melodic passages defies the conventional nineteenth-century attitude articulated in Murray Adler's *Study of Orchestration*, which considered the bassoon to be the "clown of the orchestra."¹⁷ Moreover, the bassoon range in this concerto would have been almost unthinkable one hundred years earlier. Beginning at Rehearsal 5, marked "a tempo," the melody reaches an unprecedented height, including D an octave above middle C. Rimsky-Korsakov wrote that this note would rarely, if ever, be played on a bassoon, as it is "hardly possible."¹⁸

Figure 3

5 a tempo

Solo

ppdolciss.,
molto legato

(senza sord.)

p

poco f

6

Solo

ff

molto

BASSOON CONCERTO

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Finally, the *Concerto for Bassoon and Strings* by R. R. Bennett exhibits the same advanced technical and expressive demands as Stravinsky's bassoon writing. In the *andante lento* movement of the work, the melody is written in the highest part of the bassoon's range. The line is

¹⁷ Murray Adler, *Study of Orchestration* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1982), 200.

¹⁸ Rimsky-Korsakov, *Principles of Orchestration*, 17.

virtuosic in its dynamic range as well; the sudden *diminuendo* after a *forte* section in a taxing register is technically demanding. Furthermore, this passage involves the use of rubato, which again links it with Stravinsky's work. The composer marks "*cantabile, espressivo*" at the beginning of the movement, implying that the performer will likely use rubato. The direction in the opening bars of *The Rite of Spring* is more explicit, instructing the performer to apply "*tempo rubato.*" These directions challenge the prevailing belief that the bassoon is best suited to rhythmically strict, comical passages.

As these works for bassoon all demonstrate, twentieth-century composers' approach to bassoon writing and the instrument's capabilities differ considerably from that of their eighteenth- and nineteenth-century counterparts. Instead of restricting the bassoon to clumsy, lumbering instrumental parts which should be used for "sinister buffooneries" or "prankish diversions,"¹⁹ the bassoon is now frequently treated as an introspective, melancholy instrument and is often written in the upper range. Stravinsky's appealing melody in the opening bars of *The Rite of Spring* significantly changed his successors' perceptions of the instrument's range, extending the conventional note span considerably. As Rogers noted in the *Art of Orchestration*, prior to this work, an example of a 'high register' passage would have been Rimsky-Korsakov's *Scheherazade*,²⁰ which in comparison only reaches an A above middle C in the bassoon, and even then very briefly. Today, the bassoon is finally recognized

¹⁹ Richard R. Bennett, *Concerto for bassoon* (London: Novello, 1982), 18.

²⁰ Rogers, *The Art of Orchestration* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1951), 38.

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as an instrument which “performs lyric melodies beautifully,”²¹ and composers have responded to this new attitude by incorporating the instrument into the most lyrical musical passages. Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring* not only created one of the greatest controversies in music history but also transformed perceptions of the bassoon from an instrument designed for creating “utterances the most weird and plaintive”²² to one perfectly suited to performing expressive melodic passages.

²¹ Adler, *The Study of Orchestration*, 197.

²² Clarke, *A Manual of Orchestration*, 51.

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