



On Sacred Ground:
Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*
The Bad Plus

Blurbs

“By turns cerebral, visceral, and disarmingly emotive, pianist Ethan Iverson, bassist Reid Anderson and drummer Dave King boast a rare onstage magnetism that transcends genre.”

Time Out New York

“The Bad Plus made *Rite* their own in every way, from David King’s restless drumming to Reid Anderson’s rangy bass and Ethan Iverson’s catalyzing piano. The trio displayed extreme resourcefulness in paring down Stravinsky’s enhanced orchestra of 100+ players to three instruments, and crafted a legitimate rock show in the process.”

The Thread Duke Performances

“The Bad Plus left us with the exciting feeling of having seen something special being born. [They] definitely laid something new and provocative on us, which is just about as tough as sparking a riot in 2011.”

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CVNC

“Rock stars of the jazz world...”

The Chronicle



The Bad Plus Tackle Stravinsky's 'Spring'

By NPR Staff
March 20, 2011

You probably know Igor Stravinsky's controversial ballet *The Rite of Spring* from its appearance in the Disney film *Fantasia*, where it served as the score for a dramatic sequence depicting the dawn of the universe. Later this week, the piece will be showcased anew – by group of musicians with a reputation for reinvention.



The Bad Plus is a jazz trio with a rock-heavy repertoire. Over seven albums, the band has re-arranged Black Sabbath's "Iron Man" and Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit," as well as classics by Blondie and David Bowie. Several years ago, they dipped a toe into the classical pool with an interpretation of Stravinsky's "Apollo."

As drummer Dave King tells *Weekend Edition Sunday* host Liane Hansen, he and his bandmates dared themselves to take the experiment further: "We thought, well, let's just go all the way and try and tackle the monster."

That monster is *The Rite of Spring* in its entirety. Working on a commission from Duke University and Lincoln Center, the band has been rehearsing their own version of the ballet for the past eight months, which they will perform at Duke on Saturday, March 26. It's a difficult piece, full of odd time signatures — but according to pianist Ethan Iverson, that's not the only thing that has made the process monstrous.

"What we're trying to do, essentially, is turn the piece into something of our own," Iverson says. "The size of the work is what's so different this time — after doing a three-or-four-minute excerpt from a ballet, now we're doing a gigantic piece of music. The concept is kind of like learning 28 little pieces of music that are all really different and don't repeat!"

To ease those difficulties, the band chose a curious plan of attack in crafting their arrangement: They started at the finale and worked backward. "We sort of determined that the last movement was the hardest one," says bassist Reid Anderson. "I think it's good psychologically to kind of get that out of the way."

Adapting the rest of the ballet was an equally demanding process. Dave King says the band's vision and Stravinsky's will have to meet in the middle; the difficulty is knowing just where that ought to happen.

"We've had major discussions about, where is The Bad Plus in this thing?" says King. "We've never approached any of our reworkings with irony. Sometimes people have maybe thought that about us, but we're actually quite earnest about everything we're trying to take apart."



The Bad Plus Premieres “On Sacred Ground: Stravinsky’s Rite of Spring”

By Chris Vitiello
March 29, 2011

During last Thursday’s public talk, the Bad Plus made it clear that they were interested in “playing every note” of Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring*, rather than turning its opening themes into head arrangements to introduce improvisation in a more standard jazz fashion. But they were also careful to say that they intended to make *Rite* into a Bad Plus composition, not a Stravinsky cover.

During the talk, they showed off some swing and jazz grooves that only master improvisers could have located in the source material, though I admit I thought it was either silly or unnecessary for them to claim the work as their own and call it *On Sacred Ground*. It sounded like a marketing ploy. If you’re playing the *Rite*, you’re playing the *Rite*. Right? But in Reynolds Theater on March 26, when the world premiere rolled out in full, I found out just how wrong I’d been.



The Bad Plus made *Rite* their own in every way, from David King’s restless drumming to Reid Anderson’s rangy bass and Ethan Iverson’s catalyzing piano. The trio displayed extreme resourcefulness in paring down Stravinsky’s enhanced orchestra of 100+ players to three instruments, and crafted a legitimate rock show in the process. The visuals by film director Noah Hutton and lighting designer Cristina Guadalupe linked the work back to its balletic origins and even nodded to Disney’s *Fantasia* without explicit narrative or imagery.



The show began in darkness with the band behind a scrim that showed a blurry montage of sun, trees, and snowy ground. The silhouettes of the musicians came into view as a recorded piano played *Rite*’s famous opening notes with some subtle digital effects. Then the scrim rose and lights shined on the band as they leapt into the pounding beat of “The Augurs of Spring,” rendered highly percussive by the

combined thrust of bass and drums, and reducing the short string strokes of the original to their essence.

The staging of the “Introduction” was as essential to the Bad Plus making *Rite* their own as their painstaking arrangement. Instead of walking out to applause as in a normal classical concert, the players seemed to appear like another projection. And by using a manipulated recording for the intro, they announced the driving “Augurs” as the true beginning of their piece, rather than Stravinsky’s lilting, high bassoon.

King’s incessant shifting of accents on his cymbals kept the driving rhythm of “Augurs” from sounding hollow or clocklike. Anderson’s bass ended up being at least as responsible for the beat, and King’s sheer activity made the tempo seem a lot faster than it really was.

“Spring Rounds” was the next section the band transformed in a way that Stravinsky never could have imagined. Instead of flute and woodwinds, the bass and piano handled the beginning, while King jiggled a plastic toy with a two-tone bell inside it. Anderson’s decisively plucked bass notes introduced a slowed-down Coltrane feel that the band settled into. Stravinsky’s strings became a trim bass line that could easily have come out of Jimmy Garrison’s instrument in the early ‘60s. Iverson somehow sounded like McCoy Tyner, too, as King danced in front of and behind the beat.



The naturalistic visuals that accompanied the first movement gave way to sacrificial and ritual ones in the second, where King’s athleticism and Anderson’s precision were particularly impressive. Anderson had to channel the many instruments of the original score, and Iverson held things together in these choppy waters. When they finished, they looked one part relieved (“We got through it!”) and two parts excited (“That was fun!”), as the audience roared to life with at least one audible war-whoop answering the final drum crash. After this intense and concise piece of music, the Bad Plus took a relaxed-feeling and well-earned victory lap with a mini-set of their work over two encores. It must have felt good to improvise again, and to be playful outside the written parameters of a score, though they each quoted bits of *Rite*. Anderson restated the bassoon introduction in his solo on “2 PM,” and Iverson did the same at the very end of their cover of Aphex Twin’s “Flim,” their final tune.



But happily, *On Sacred Ground* was the highlight of the night. It was Stravinsky’s notes, but it sure as hell wasn’t Stravinsky. The Bad Plus left us with the exciting feeling of having seen something special being born. It’s hard to imagine a modern piece of music being as violently transformative as *Rite* in 1913, but the Bad Plus definitely laid something new and provocative on us, which is just about as tough as sparking a riot in 2011.

The Chronicle

Bad Plus unveils new *Rite of Spring* for DP

By Josh Stillman
March 24, 2011

The Bad Plus have covered everyone from Aphex Twin to Black Sabbath to Rodgers and Hammerstein. Next up: Igor Stravinsky.

On Saturday, the popular jazz trio will present the world premiere of their reinterpretation of the Russian composer's most controversial ballet. *On Sacred Ground: Stravinsky's Rite of Spring* is the latest installment in Duke Performances' series "The Sanctified," which showcases modern artistic explorations of traditional forms—past shows this season include the SFJazz Collective and a lecture by venerable music journalist Greil Marcus.



Director of Duke Performances Aaron Greenwald said the Bad Plus' treatment of *Rite of Spring* is particularly exciting because the ballet was itself rooted in tribal and Russian folk idioms.

"It's [significant] that the Bad Plus is interested in the notion of folk music; Stravinsky was interested in that as well," Greenwald said. "But they're also engaged in making music of a degree of nuance and complexity."

Stravinsky's original ballet is hailed as one of the most influential compositions of the 20th century. Its complex, unorthodox use of dissonance and polyrhythms defied classical conventions and listener expectations—in fact, the music, along with Vaslav Nijinsky's primal and sensuous choreography, was so radical that at its 1913 debut in Paris, the audience broke into a riot.

"I don't think you could hear that piece and not think it was changing the world of music," Greenwald said.

There were obvious difficulties in arranging the piece—which was written for more than 100 instruments—for a jazz trio. The group has been developing the composition for eight months, with final preparations taking place through Friday of this week. Channeling the original's massive sound requires more than a little intensity, a task to which the Bad Plus appear equal. They are often portrayed by the media as the rock stars of the jazz world; not only do they display an uncharacteristic affinity for showmanship, but much of their repertoire consists of rock covers, such as Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit" and Rush's "Tom Sawyer."

"We are willing to push things as far as we can; we're interested in the full spectrum of music," said Reid Anderson, the band's bassist. "We do definitely try to give off a certain kind of performance energy."

The show will also feature an interactive, dramatic multimedia presentation developed by New York-based architect Cristina Guadalupe and filmmaker Noah Hutton, which will function as a music video synchronized with the performance.

Saturday's premiere will be the culmination of the Bad Plus' multifaceted residency at Duke this academic year. In addition to composing the arrangement, which was commissioned by Duke Performances, the band have engaged in public conversations and listening sessions. They are also working with four Ph.D. students in musical composition, and the plan is to soon go into the studio and record these pieces.

"We wanted these guys to be engaged with our campus and community for a year," Greenwald said. "It lets people know we're an institution that is serious about supporting and developing new work."

The performance will give listeners a chance to hear *Rite of Spring* as they've never heard it before. But don't expect 1913.

"Hopefully [the audience] won't riot," Anderson said, joking. "But if they do, it'll be because of the pleasure of what they're hearing."



The Bad Plus On Sacred Ground

By Kate Dobbs Ariail
March 26, 2011

The Bad Plus has made much original music, but the group also has a long history with "deconstructing" a wide range of other music and reconstructing it to fit their instruments and their kick-ass attitude. So when Duke Performances' Aaron Greenwald offered them a joint commission from Duke and Lincoln Center to do whatever they wanted in the way of a new piece, it was not too surprising that they would choose to wrangle with some power music, the music that kicked the doors shut on the 19th century once and for all. Over the last 98 years, some of the juice has drained out of *The Rite*, especially from the piano version, but Ethan Iverson's piano, Reid Anderson's bass, and David King's drums fully recharge it for this century in the group's ferocious re-scoring that packs all the grand noise of the orchestral version into a trio.

The performance of *The Rite* was accompanied by projected video by Cristina Guadalupe and Noah Hutton, composed of a flow of abstracted or blurred images that pulsed, throbbed and whirled in a visual corollary to the music. But the real show was the musicians themselves: Iverson, seated foursquare at one of Duke's huge Steinways, his smooth-domed head as reflective as the glossy piano, fingers racing like flames among the pale keys. Anderson, tall and hawk-eyed, wrapped over his bass, as if bewitching it into its repeated resonant thrills. David King at his drum kit with a greedy grin, *his* smooth-domed head, his cymbals and brushes all scattering reflections onto the backdrop as he generated the music's heartbeat and

its most delicate textures. It was really fantastic how each of three used his instrument for both rhythm and melody as the moment demanded. To hear the unforgettable motif central to *The Rite* conveyed by the various tones of King's percussion set was amazing, and when it came from Anderson's bass, it just slayed me. But then, here came Iverson picking it out on the piano, sounding like a nightingale... ravishing. The whole was so rich and engrossing and *alive* that it seemed to pass in a much shorter time than its actual 40 minutes.

 newsobserver.com

'Rite of Spring' with a jazz twist

By David Menconi

Over the past decade, The Bad Plus has become renowned for radical deconstructions of other musical styles, playing avant-jazz covers of highly unlikely tunes - Blondie's "Heart of Glass," Nirvana's "Smells Like Teen Spirit" and Tears For Fears' "Everybody Wants to Rule the World" among them.

But the trio's latest undertaking is the most audacious yet, a reimagining of "The Rite of Spring," the 1913 composition by Igor Stravinsky. The world premiere is Saturday night in Durham.



"It's definitely jumping into the deep end of the pool in terms of projects like this," said Reid Anderson, bassist in The Bad Plus. "It's about 40 minutes of music, so there's a lot of notes. A lot of notes."

Duke Performances commissioned the project, which began when director Aaron Greenwald contacted the trio and said Anderson and band mates Ethan Iverson and David King could do anything they wanted. They brainstormed, and the group's booking agent suggested "The Rite of Spring."

Initially, band members dismissed the idea. But they kept coming back to it, before finally deciding that it was the ultimate challenge.

"Try as we might to think of another that would be easier for us," Anderson said, "it ended up that we had to agree that this was the sexiest idea."

Born as a ballet

It's quite out of the ordinary for The Bad Plus to take someone else's suggestion when it comes to repertoire. People tell the three what to cover so often that they are fairly nonchalant about it.

"We've covered everything from Aphex Twin to 'Chariots of Fire,' so we're pretty open to anything," Anderson said. "It would be pretty hard to shock us at this point. I mean, it's nice that people have suggestions, but honestly, we don't listen to them. It has to generate from an organic process within the group, where someone said, 'Hey, this could work.' We all kind of have to agree that's worth putting the effort into."

"The Rite of Spring" goes back nearly a century, born as the score to a ballet. It's now one of the most iconic pieces in the classical canon, especially after Walt Disney used it to score a sequence depicting Earth through the ages in his 1940 animated classic "Fantasia." But "The Rite of Spring" was controversial and even caused a riot when it was first performed in Paris in 1913, because its rhythms and structure represented such an extreme and unexpected departure from classical ballet.

Playing in New York

After premiering at Duke this weekend, The Bad Plus will reprise "The Rite of Spring" in 2012 at Lincoln Center in New York. The three hope to take it elsewhere, too, if only because of how much work has gone into it over the past year - including artist-in-residence stints at Duke in October and January. The group will also discuss and play samples from the piece at 7 p.m. Thursday at Duke's Reynolds Theater.

"The number of hours put into this is very large and getting larger," Anderson said, sounding a touch weary. "The hardest part is facing the score, this music, and trying to figure out how do we take it apart and put it back together for the three of us. How do we honor the essential element of this large-scale piece while bringing it into a smaller-scale trio format it was never meant to be played in? How do we still convey what it needs to be?"

"That first decision-making process requires a lot of energy and time," he added. "The thing is, you can't imagine it but you have to. Fortunately, it's a great piece of music. That's the real payoff for us in the end, all the hours and effort taking us deeper into something we can learn a lot from."

The Herald-Sun

The Bad Plus to give avant-garde spin on Igor Stravinsky's 'Rite of Spring'

By Cliff Bellamy

The 1913 Paris premiere of Igor Stravinsky's "The Rite of Spring (Le Sacre du Printemps)" was met with critical protest, and produced a near riot. "That the first performance of 'Le Sacre du Printemps' was attended by a scandal must be known to everybody," Stravinsky wrote in the liner notes to a 1961 Columbia Records recording of the piece that he conducted. "I was unprepared for the explosion myself."

The piece would receive a better reception in a performance a year later. Historian Barbara Tuchman, in her book "The Proud Tower" wrote that the piece "was to the Twentieth Century what Beethoven's 'Eroica' was to the Nineteenth, and like it, never surpassed."

Stravinsky's masterpiece will get a new reading Saturday, when jazz-based trio The Bad Plus perform

their world premiere arrangement of the piece, which Stravinsky scored for orchestra.

Translating the piece to a trio is by no means a strange stretch musically. Unlike those dogmatic Parisians of almost a century ago, successive generations have experienced the bop revolution, free jazz, John Cage's experimentalism, and rock music's transition from popular to art music and back again. They've heard Phil Spector's famed "wall of sound" and John Coltrane's "sheets of sound." The members of The Bad Plus will perform their take on Stravinsky for a younger generation that -- with the advent of downloads, YouTube and other digital innovations -- thinks beyond genres and seems more willing to open their ears to different sounds.

The Bad Plus -- pianist Ethan Iverson, percussionist Dave King and bass player Reid Anderson -- embody in many ways this new openness. They have applied their jazz approach to works like Black Sabbath's "Iron Man," and the band's website refers to their music as embodying "avante-garde populism." At a panel discussion about the premiere held in January, Iverson said the band "[takes] a lot of our ethos from rock."

Although the trio is grounded in jazz, their performance this weekend is not a vehicle for improvisation, said Anderson. "Every detail is important," he said of the Stravinsky score. "We really want to honor the intention of the composer on that detailed level," he said. "At the same time we're taking this completely out of context -- for three instruments that it was never meant to be played on." The addition of drums also adds a new element. One challenge of performing the piece as a trio, he added, is deciding which instrument doubles parts played by the bassoon, trumpet or other instruments.

Historian Tuchman also wrote that when "The Rite of Spring" was first introduced, "all the major tendencies of the next half-century had been stated." Those tendencies would lead in directions Stravinsky may or may not have imagined, meaning that listeners who may not have heard this music can find a reference point somewhere. Listeners of progressive rock (it may be a happy coincidence that Yes performed in Durham earlier this week) might appreciate the piece's shifting rhythms, Anderson said. Film scores, a medium familiar to just about everyone, also incorporate many of Stravinsky's ideas, he said.

Stravinsky wrote "The Ebony Concerto" for a jazz ensemble, and also turned the ears of many jazz composers. "A lot of the woodwind music [he wrote] was particularly attractive to some jazz musicians like Charlie Parker," said Baron Tymas, a guitarist and assistant director of Jazz Studies at N.C. Central University. Stravinsky also took intervals and harmonies that listeners perceived as being dissonant, and showed the beauty in those sounds, he said. His music speaks "to musicians across disciplines and genres. It's just great music," Tymas said.

"The Rite of Spring," originally performed with dancers, is about a sacrifice, and the renewal of the earth. From its beginning plaintive bassoon solo to its rhythmic, percussive final movements, this is music that - to paraphrase WNCU-FM Music Director B.H. Hudson -- will blow the top of your head off.

In that spirit, on one of the first warm days recently, a reporter driving on Franklin Street in Chapel Hill switched the MP3 player to a recording of this piece, and turned up the volume. Stravinsky's tympanic wall of sound seemed exactly the right soundtrack for students out running in shorts, residents enjoying a drink at sidewalk tables -- our modern equivalents of an annual rite of spring.

