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Screening Rites

Video Essay

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How does the process of screening orchestral music direct and focus audience attention? Visualization strategies can have a profound impact on how we appreciate music and can guide us to listen in very specific ways. Just as particular conductors and orchestras have interpretative identities, so do multi-camera directors. There has, however, been scant research on the influence of strategies and methods used in the visualization of orchestral concert music. Nicholas Cook suggested that musical enjoyment is spoiled by the 'monstrous close-up'[1] and Keith Negus explained that broadcasters believe that viewers will direct their attention to whatever instrument is most noticeable to the ear, 'as if music audiences are similar to those following the ball in a tennis or football match'.[2] The close-up is not solely about chasing action, though; it is also central to the continuity editing system, which is designed to maintain a continuous and clear narrative across time and space.[3] Edits are not just about faithfully following or capturing action; they also have dramatic and psychological implications.

In this video essay I examine sections from three different BBC Proms broadcasts of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*.[4] This comparative analysis initially focuses on a striking

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[1] Nicholas Cook, *Music, Imagination, Culture* (Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 153.
[2] Keith Negus, 'Musicians on Television: Visible, Audible and Ignored', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 131.2 (2006), pp. 310–30 (p. 320).
[3] See David Bordwell, 'Camera Movement and Cinematic Space', *Ciné-Tracts*, 1.2 (1977), pp. 19–25; David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson, *Film Art: An Introduction*, 8th edn (University of California Press, 2006); James E. Cutting, 'Perceiving Scenes in Film and in the World', in *Moving Image Theory: Ecological Considerations*, ed. by Joseph D. Anderson and Barbara Fisher Anderson (Southern Illinois University Press, 2007), pp. 9–27.
[4] *The Rite of Spring*, BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, conductor Ilan Volkov, BBC Four, 13 August 2009, TV director Bridget Caldwell.
The Rite of Spring, Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France, conductor Myung Whun Chun, BBC Four, 19 July 2011, TV director Bridget Caldwell; 'Stravinsky *Le Sacre du printemps* (Rite of Spring)', YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k-D-rgDzL4o> [accessed 12 December 2024].

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passage near the beginning of 'Part 1: The Adoration of the Earth' where a complex, multi-layered aural texture is represented through a variety of visual shots, including specific close-ups. In his book on orchestration, Samuel Adler described this section as 'one of the most ingenious passages in all orchestral literature […] counterpoint at its most sophisticated'.[5] Walter Piston described the same section as an 'ensemble of many elements, none of which emerges as a primary element', calling it a 'tapestry of sound'.[6] There is an inherent tension between the use of close-ups and the intricate orchestral soundscape. I also consider aspects of rhythmic visual style, identifying differences in the overall number of shots, shot length, camera movement, main areas of focus, and the dynamism of the edit. This reveals how visual constructions shape musical attention and impact on the way the music is heard. By unpacking the visual approaches to the piece as well as broader analysis of screened performances, I build towards some foundational principles of orchestral visualization. I also consider wider approaches to screening concerts, including post-Covid-19 implications for music in an age where audiences will increasingly encounter orchestral music via screened presentation rather than through physical attendance at live concerts.

To view the video essay, please visit https://doi.org/10.1017/rma.2024.41.



Ballets russes at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, 1913: a scene from the ballet *The Rite of Spring*. Photograph by Keystone-France/Gamma-Keystone via Getty Images.

The Rite of Spring, Les Siècles, conductor François-Xavier Roth, BBC Four, 14 July 2013, TV director Peter Maniura; 'Stravinsky - The Rite of Spring - Roth', YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hL87s53Rubw> [accessed 12 December 2024].

[5] Samuel Adler, *The Study of Orchestration*, 3rd edn (W.W. Norton, 2002), p. 265.

[6] Walter Piston, *Orchestration*, 5th edn (Victor Gollancz, 1990), pp. 409, 411.

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Supplementary material The supplementary material for this article can be found at http://doi.org/10.1017/rma.2024.41.

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