

Program Notes by Michael Keelan (unless otherwise noted)

### **Clint Needham**

#### ***Digital Reality (2019) - notes by Clint Needham***

*Digital Reality* is a rhapsodic commentary on the world as it is currently (in 2019). The idea for the piece came to me over a few days while observing my family interact with their digital devices (iPhones, tablets, video game consoles, etc.) while still attempting to interact with each other... often attempting to do both at the same time. Growing up, I could have never envisioned this world. One where seemingly real connections are made not in person, but over online platforms and where spending large amounts of time in digital spaces is the norm. As technology entwines itself into our lives more and more, it seems that we are headed to a place, if not already there, where we must actively schedule human connections into our daily routine as a break from our digital reality.

To musically explore various levels of our connections with the digital world, I have divided the work into three sections: 1. *Screen-time/Stress-test*, 2. *Face-time/(un)connected*, and 3. *Offline/Bypass*. Firmly connected to our magnetic digital gadgetry, the opening section is a bit hectic, alluring at times, and relentless in its pacing. The middle section attempts to highlight the limits that our devices have with making real connections with each other. Finally, the music detaches from the digital world and, hesitantly, opens up to the wonderment of the world happening around us. By the end of the work, there is an optimistic blending of the real and digital worlds.

### **Saariaho- Aile du songe (Wing of Dreams)**

Kaija Saariaho is an active Finnish composer, prominent since the 1980s. Her music focuses strongly on tone color- the possibilities of various instruments have to create distinctive sounds and their combinations. She gained wider exposure from her 2000 opera *L'amour de loin* (Love from afar) being presented at New York's Metropolitan Opera in 2016, the first woman in over a century to gain that distinction.

Her first major piece composed after the opera was tonight's *Aile du songe* (Wing of Dreams), which takes its title from a literary source, a device Saariaho uses often. It is scored for flute solo and orchestra without winds or brass, which enables the flute to both stand in relief and avoid competition with the louder instruments. The source poetry collection by Saint-John Perse, called *Oiseaux* (Birds), is clearly a favorite, since Saariaho even asked for part of it to be recited by the soloist in another flute solo. The poem invokes impressionistic and allusive imagery of a bird in relation to its surroundings. Choosing a flute to represent the agility of a bird has musical precedents, including Stravinsky's *The Firebird* and Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf*. Pointedly and in accordance with the text, Saariaho is *not* trying to reenact birdsong. She nonetheless explores all the instrument's possibilities, including blowing air without a tone and whispering articulations (phonemes) into the flute, something common to her other flute music. Extended techniques are not limited to the solo part, however. The string players are asked for quarter-tones (notes between the keys on the piano), bowing *col legno* (dragging the wood of the bow across the string), and extreme *ponticello* (bowing on the wooden bridge of the instrument).

The two main sections translate as:

I.           Ethereal: Prelude -- Garden of the birds -- Of other shores  
In the garden, the bird-flute interacts with other instruments, and the last subsection (marked "dolorous and intense") shows the solitary airborne bird casting shadows in contrast to the landscape below.

II.           Terrestrial: Dancing bird -- The bird, a tiny satellite of our planetary orbit

On Earth, the bird teaches an Aboriginal village to dance. The final subsection is a synthesis of the entire piece.

### **Igor Stravinsky**

#### ***Le sacre du printemps (The Rite of Spring)***

The scores Stravinsky wrote for the *Ballet Russes* (Russian Ballet) in Paris remain a cornerstone of his legacy in the concert hall, even though he lived many more decades into old age after writing them. *The*

*Firebird*, his first ballet, used an old Slavonic legend for its story, which he mirrored closely in the music. *Petroushka* came next, a love triangle between living puppets. For *The Rite of Spring*, a legend was once again the root, but he took a less slavish approach.

While still at work on *The Firebird*, Stravinsky imagined what he described as, “a solemn pagan rite: wise elders, seated in a circle, watching a young girl dance herself to death. They were sacrificing her to propitiate the god of spring.” This idea didn’t materialize out of the blue—there was a strong interest in regional anthropology and ethnography in early twentieth-century Russia, and Stravinsky’s singer father had played a role on stage in a now-obscure opera as an elder sanctioning human sacrifice.

The composer went to painter Nicholas Roerich, who had a keen interest in the ancient Slavs, and worked out the scenario with him by the summer of 1911. Stravinsky described in a 1912 letter:

The first part, which bears the name 'The Kiss of the Earth,' is made up of ancient Slavonic rituals—the joy of spring. The orchestral introduction is a swarm of spring pipes [dudki]; later, after the curtain goes up, there are auguries, khorovod (i.e. round dance with singing) rituals, a game of abduction, a khorovod game of cities, and all of this is interrupted by the procession of the 'Oldest and Wisest,' the elder who bestows a kiss upon the earth. A wild stomping dance upon the earth, the people drunk with spring, brings the first part to its conclusion.

In the second part, the maidens at night perform their secret rituals upon a sacred hillock. One of the maidens is doomed by fate to be sacrificed. She wanders into a stone labyrinth from which there is no exit, whereupon all the remaining maidens glorify the Chosen One in a boisterous martial dance. Then the elders enter. The doomed one, left alone face to face with the elders, dances her last 'Holy Dance'—the Great Sacrifice. These last words are in fact the name of the second part. The elders are witness to her last dance, which ends in the death of the doomed one.

Numerous folk melodies form the basis for the score, some of which Stravinsky found in a published collection. However, it is his process with the material that sets the ballet apart. Rhythm is often heightened, such as obsessively repeating a figure (*ostinato*), gradually building the elements on top of one another. Harsh dissonances and unexpected accents imbue the music with a “primitive” tone. Smooth transitions, or a sense of sweeping narrative, are not important. Just as in the earlier ballets, his handling of a large orchestra’s capabilities is masterful. Generally, Stravinsky composed at the piano, which easily produces the percussive sound of *The Rite’s* most characteristic passages.

The dancer Nijinsky created the choreography. Although it doesn’t survive, his approach can be gleaned from his remark: “(*The Rite*) is really the soul of nature expressed by movement to music. It is the life of the stones and the trees. There are no human beings in it.” Stravinsky recognized his departure from the past, describing it as a “choreodrama.” Components in the music seem, as much as the dancers, to interact with each other.

The sum total was technically very difficult for the artistic personnel. The conductor Pierre Monteux, later famous in the U.S., led the work more out of professionalism than enthusiasm. The première on May 29, 1913, was only two months after Stravinsky had finished the score, further stressing the participants through haste. The ballet company’s impresario Diaghilev, a master promoter, had fomented curiosity to the point of dividing the audience into factions for and against such a modernist ballet, even before they heard it. Stravinsky drily reported that

“... things got as far as fighting,” in the crowd, as some members booed and hissed while others were equally vociferous in their approval. Many unverifiable stories exist about the behavior of individuals, including the challenge of at least one duel.

While there are definitely bold passages in the music, it was the now-lost choreography that compelled many of the demonstrations. The sophisticated French did not take kindly to being schooled by foreigners (Russians) in a new approach to both composing and crafted movement. The reviews, however, did not put much emphasis on Stravinsky as the composer, a tendency that continues to this day in writing about ballet.

Within weeks, *The Rite* was played three more times in Paris and crossed the Channel to London in July, where the furor of France was not repeated. “We are either surprisingly quick or surprisingly careless in accommodating ourselves to new forms of art,” a London paper reported. By the next year, the score was

being played in concerts, the way it is usually heard today. Without the “distraction” of visuals, early audiences went wild for *The Rite*, and its raw power still impresses. But its expense and demands limited early performances.

Today, professional orchestras no longer consider *The Rite* as daunting as it was in the early days. But, as musicologist Richard Taruskin points out, it is the only piece to rank on a par with Beethoven’s ninth symphony as both historically enshrined and frequently played. Clearly, it influenced at least a generation of composers trying to harness barbarism (“primitive music with all modern conveniences,” as Debussy wryly put it). Yet, when clearly described in a 2019 “Final Jeopardy” clue on television, only one finalist could query the ballet’s correct author. There are still fresh audiences to reach.