

Marin Symphony teams with Ballet Afsaneh to explore pagan roots of 'Rite of Spring'

Paul Liberatore

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In one of classical music's most notorious opening night disasters, the 1913 Parisian world premiere of Stravinsky's "The Rite of Spring" was so shocking and strange and different that it caused a riot.

That's unlikely to happen when the Marin Symphony performs Igor Stravinsky's once-controversial ballet April 5 and 7 at the Veterans Memorial Auditorium.

But it is likely that Marin audiences will come away with a better understanding of the pagan ritual and traditional costumes in a ballet that freaked out conservative Parisians nearly 100 years ago.

This pair of concerts is the latest in the season's "The Wind Beneath the Wings" theme, highlighting the symphonic music of dance.

"We wanted to emphasize the fact that this music's roots are based in the ballet," said Noralee Monastere, symphony executive director. "It's our way of putting the dance part of the music into the minds of people as they listen to the performance."

Before the orchestra performs the famously controversial piece, with its driving rhythms, dissonance and polytonality, concertgoers will get an unprecedented look at near replicas of the costumes Serge Diaghilev's dancers wore on that wild debut night.

In a pre-concert program, Ballet Afsaneh, a Bay Area-based professional dance troupe devoted to

the arts and traditions of Central Asia's Silk Road, will perform wearing intricately embroidered, crimson and white antique folk costumes nearly identical to the ones designer Nikolas Roerich created for the original production.

"Ballet Afsaneh is a perfect pairing for us," Monastere said.

Stravinsky claimed that the setting for the ballet was his idea, coming to him in a dream. It's only been in the past decade that scholars have discovered that Roerich deserves the credit, finding the inspiration for the design and the costumes in the culture of Central Asia, a region that includes Iran and Afghanistan.

"I've been researching this piece for many years, and it struck me immediately that the costuming for the original work was so similar to the traditional Central Asian costumes that our company has been wearing in our performances," said Sharlyn Sawyer of Woodacre, who founded Ballet Afsaneh in 1986. "The original costume renderings with their embroidered tunics and long braids are spitting images of ours."

Sawyer and her dancers will join music director Alasdair Neale in a talk about the pagan roots and design elements of the originally staged ballet, the reasons early audiences found it so outrageous.

"In that era, people were expecting to see a romanticized vision of the East, a lovely Orientalism that was pretty and quaint," Sawyer explained. "And what they experienced was something quite different. Here were these dancers in bulky tunics doing abstract movements in a fanciful recreation of a virgin being prepared for sacrifice."

Sawyer was quick to point out that she could find no reference to actual virgin sacrifice in her

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research into Central Asian culture. "That was probably an artistic embellishment," she said with a laugh.

But she did discover some contemporary resonance in "The Rite of Spring," describing it as "a spiritual invocation and an ecstatic trance, or catharsis, induced by dance, rhythm, song and music."

That same description could apply to the ecstatic dancing that is popular in Marin and is so much a part of today's New Age zeitgeist. "It's something that is practiced to this day," Sawyer said.

In addition to the talk and performance, dancers will model traditional costumes in the foyer before the concert and will mingle with concertgoers during intermission.

The only thing the symphony and the ballet company regret is that the auditorium's stage isn't big enough for Ballet Afsaneh to perform with the symphony orchestra, to live music.

They'll have to make do with recorded sections of "The Rite of Spring" as well as a traditional piece called "Safar-e Zamaan (Time's Journey)."

"We only wish our stage were bigger," Monastere said. "It would be fabulous."

IF YOU GO

- What: Marin Symphony performs Stravinsky's "The Rite of Spring," Sierra Carnaval (Magnum Opus commission); and Mozart's Concerto for Flute and Harp in C Major K. 299, featuring Monica Daniel-Barker on flute and Dan Levitan on harp

- When: 7:30 p.m. April 5 and 7

- Where: Veterans Memorial Auditorium, 10 Avenue

of the Flags, San Rafael

- Tickets: \$27 to \$65

- Information: 499-6800, www.marinsymphony.org

- More: Free preconcert talk with conductor Alasdair Neale and Ballet Afsaneh from 6:30 to 7 p.m.

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