

## Metrical Organization in “Augurs of Spring” from Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring*

### 1. Introduction

In this famous movement from *The Rite of Spring*, the strings open with bold bow strokes on a persistent eighth note pulse, accented and punctuated with all eight horns at specific points. In this paper, I will attempt to argue that the key defining feature of the main theme presented in the first eight measures is constituted by its rhythmic profile as shaped by its metrical organization. I will also show how this theme reappears and is developed throughout the movement, either as motifs extrapolated from it, or as an underlying hypermeter reflected in the larger phrase structure, and argue that the development of the theme is aligned with an overall shift from irregularity to regularity as the movement progresses.

The image shows a musical score reduction for the first eight measures of "Augurs of Spring" from Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*. The score is in 2/4 time, marked "Tempo giusto" with a quarter note equal to 50 (♩ = 50). It begins with a "2-measure introduction" followed by "phrase A" and "phrase B". The notation shows a consistent eighth-note pulse in the strings, with accents and dynamic markings like "f" and "v".

Fig. 1: reduction of first eight measures of “Augurs of Spring”<sup>1</sup>

In these first eight measures of music, the same sonority consisting of a F $\flat$  major chord in the cellos and basses and a dominant seventh chord in first inversion on the root of E $\flat$  is repeated exactly in an eighth note rhythm. The lack of any harmonic and melodic motion as well as

<sup>1</sup> All references to the score of *The Rite of Spring* in this paper will be based upon the Dover edition published in 1989 in NY.

rhythmic change obliterates any sense of meter, and the only points of reference for the listener within this seemingly ametrical passage are the accented notes, accompanied by the horns. Due to the prominence of this metrical pattern as shaped by the accents throughout the movement, these first eight bars do not serve merely as an introduction to the movement, but rather, as an exposition of its main theme<sup>2</sup>, which is primarily defined by this specific metrical patterning. This signifies a radical shift in the conventional definition of a theme in music.

## 2. Exposition of the Main Theme

With reference to Figure 1, I propose that these first eight measures may be segmented as follows: the first two measures function as an introduction, and the next six measures may be further divided into two similar phrases of three measures each (phrases A and B), as both phrases end in the same way with the accent on the second eighth note of the measure. It might be argued that with the lack of any metrical indicators within these bars, the first nine eighths of the passage could be perceived as belonging to one group, with the next group starting on the second eighth of the third measure which is accented. However, the “Augurs of Spring” is immediately preceded by five iterations of a four-note cell in the first violin part from the last three measures of the “Introduction,” in exactly the same rhythmic configuration as the opening eighth notes<sup>3</sup>. This helps to shape the listener’s perception of grouping the notes in

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<sup>2</sup> Any subsequent reference to the “main theme” in the paper refers to the first eight measures of the movement in its entirety.

<sup>3</sup> The five iterations of this four-note cell in the first violin part in the last three measures of the “Introduction” are written as sixteenth notes at a tempo of quarter note = 50, but are played in the same time as the eighth notes in the opening of “Augurs,” which are to be played at a tempo of half note = 50.

four, even in the absence of other metrical markers. Hence, the accents on the second and fourth eighths in the third measure of “Augurs” can convey a sense of syncopation, with the preceding rhythmic context in mind, making this 2+3+3 measure division plausible.

### 3. Appearances of the Main Theme on a Micro Level

#### 3.1 Direct Appearances of the Main Theme

<b>Ritornello</b>	<b>Episode</b>
First 8 measures of letter 13	
	First 4 measures of letter 14
Last 4 measures of letter 14 (phrase A) - end of letter 15 (with new material)	
	Letter 16 - end of letter 17
Letter 18 - end of letter 21	

Fig. 2: Outline of Formal Structure of First Half of the Movement

This main theme functions like a “ritornello” in the first half of the movement (up to letter 22). The movement starts off with this theme, diverts into a brief contrasting four-measure episode in letter 14, before moving back into part of the main theme. New musical material is introduced in letter 15 over the existing eighth note pulse on the same harmony as the main theme in the strings, which stops at letter 16. In this manner, letter 15 features an overlap between material from the main theme and the introduction of new material. Letters 16 and 17 feature another episode, before the final reappearance of the main theme. The positioning

of the main theme creates a structurally-closed section that is clearly distinct from the rest of the movement. However, as I will show later in the paper, features from the main theme still appear in the second half of the movement on both micro and macro levels, but under various guises.

The image shows a musical score for 'Letter 14'. It consists of three staves. The top staff is marked with a box containing the number '14'. The first four measures of the top staff are marked with a dynamic of *mf*. The bottom two staves are marked with a dynamic of *f*. The bottom staff is also marked with *meno f*. The score is in a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat) and a common time signature. The first four measures show a sequence of notes in the top staff, followed by a bracketed section labeled 'phrase A' which contains the final three measures. The notation includes various rhythmic values and dynamic markings.

Fig. 3: Letter 14

The next four measures in letter 14, after the exposition of the main theme, present three layers of melody, where the pitch material from the vertical sonority in the first eight measures is “horizontalized.” The topmost line is played by the English horn, featuring four iterations of the same four-note cell that was played by the first violins three measures before “Augurs.” The bassoons play a running sixteenth line, arpeggiating a C major chord downwards on the first beat of the measure and upwards on the second beat of the measure, playing four iterations of this downward and upward arpeggiation. The cellos arpeggiate an E major chord upwards in one measure and arpeggiate a C major chord downwards in the next, all on an eighth note motion, playing two iterations of this complete figure. The metrical and rhythmic regularity

within these four measures (with the melodic grouping falling under two, four or eight eighth notes) stand in stark contrast to the preceding irregular rhythmic theme in the first eight measures of the movement, which are characterized by syncopated accents. Hence, these first four measures of letter 14 play an important structural role in reinforcing the regularity of the metrical context within the movement, making the syncopated nature of the A phrase more apparent when it reappears in the following four measures.

### 3.2 Varied Appearances of the Main Theme

Apart from the more apparent reappearances of the main theme (with the same harmony in the strings played in the same consistent eighth note pulse with accents on specific beats) in a “ritornello” fashion, the main theme also appears in varied forms, while retaining the same rhythmic profile.

Fig. 4: Comparison of first six measures of letter 15 to main theme

Fig. 5: Comparison of violin part in three measures before letter 17 to phrase A

In Figures 4 and 5, we see the appearances of the rhythmic profile of the main theme incorporated into the melodic writing and orchestration. In Fig. 4, the syncopated punctuations in the first measure of letter 15 obviously cohere with the syncopation in the first measure of

the main theme. The third measure of letter 15 also features a syncopation. Though it is a triplet figure, the position of the syncopation creates a rhythmic profile of this phrase that resembles phrase A of the main theme. The entrances of the oboe and the first violins correspond with the accents in phrase B of the main theme. Though the trumpet enters before the third accent of phrase B, the first violins stop only just before that accent, demarcating a phrasal division with the use of instrumental color. Through the use of different instrumental colors and melodic phrasing, the rhythmic profile of the main theme is presented in these six measures. A similar manner of presentation occurs in three measures before letter 17 (as illustrated in fig. 5), where the leaps to the higher notes in the first violins accentuate the offbeat eighths, making the rhythmic profile of these three measures resemble that of phrase A.

30

The musical score for letter 30 consists of two staves. The top staff is for clarinets and the bottom staff is for the first violins. The key signature has two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The time signature is 3/4. The score is divided into two phrases: 'phrase A' (measures 3-5) and 'phrase B' (measures 6-8). The clarinet part has rests in measures 1 and 2, followed by notes in measures 3-5, and notes in measures 6-8. The violin part has a continuous eighth-note accompaniment throughout all eight measures.

Fig. 6: Restatement of main theme in letter 30

In letter 30 (second half of the movement), we see an exact restatement of the main theme in terms of rhythmic profile. These eight measures also follow the same 2+3+3 phrasal structure of the main theme. The pitch material here has shifted from the semitonal sonority of the F $\flat$  and E $\flat$  polychord to being based upon the tritone, primarily constituting an octatonic 12 collection. Hence, though the metrically irregular rhythmic profile of the main theme is

restated here, the pitch material has already shifted to demonstrating a greater sense of symmetry as compared to preceding material, due to the symmetrical nature of the octatonic scale. This sense of symmetry and regularity is also perpetuated with clear groupings of two and four eighth notes in terms of pitch units. This is one example of the overall shift from irregularity to increasing regularity as the movement progresses.

**19**

repeated motif from 1st measure of phrase A      1st measure of phrase B

Fig. 7: Bassoon parts in the first four measures of letter 19

Elsewhere, we see that the rhythmic profile main theme is not only being restated exactly, but also being developed. Though also featuring a three-measure phrase structure, the accents in the bassoon melody in the first four measures of letter 19 show a variation in the rhythmic profile of the main theme, as illustrated in fig. 7.



### 3.3 Appearances of motifs derived from the main theme

The highlighting of the motif derived from the first measure of phrase A by the means of repetition as shown in fig. 7 is significant in light of discussion of regularity and irregularity. For the ease of discussion, I will label this particular motif *a*.



Fig. 8: Motif *a*

Of all the measures of the main theme, the first measure of phrase A containing motif *a* is the only measure with accents that demonstrates some degree of regularity, as it is balanced in a 2+2 eighth note metrical unit. As the movement proceeds, we see the irregularity of the main theme gradually being taken over by the regularity of the motif *a* which becomes repeated over and over, and thus emphasized.

 Musical score for bass voices starting at letter 31. The score is in bass clef and includes a dynamic marking of *sf*. A bracket labeled "4-note ostinato" spans the first four measures. The first measure is marked "(horn IV)". The second measure is marked "(cbsn.)". The score continues with various rhythmic patterns and accents, ending with "etc." and a final measure marked "(horn IV)".

Fig. 9: Bass voices carrying motif *a* from letter 31 onwards

From letter 31 onwards for instance, the syncopated rhythmic figure based upon motif *a* becomes an ostinato in the bass voices all the way to the end of the movement. This new

ostinato figure emerges only after the restatement of the main theme in letter 30 as shown in fig. 6. Also, in terms of pitch, this ostinato figure is based upon a four-note cell. In this manner, the restatement of the main theme signifies a structurally divisive point in the movement, perhaps functioning as a sort of “counter-exposition” after which regularity supplants the original irregularity inherent within the main theme.

#### 4. Presentation of the Main Theme on a Macro Level

##### 4.1 Connection between main theme and the larger hypermetrical organization

Earlier on, in section 2 of the paper, I had proposed a 2+2+3 phrasal structure of the main theme. Alternatively, given the almost ametric implication of the repeated eighth note chords in the strings, one might also group units by the eighth notes, as demarcated by the placements of the accents (illustrated in fig. 10, with the numbers in boxes indicating the groupings).

**13** Tempo giusto ♩ = 50

The musical score for Figure 10 shows a piano accompaniment. The right hand features a main theme of repeated eighth-note chords, each with an accent. The chords are grouped into units of 9, 2, 6, 3, 4, 5, and 3 eighth notes, as indicated by brackets and numbers in boxes above the staff. The left hand provides a steady eighth-note bass line. The tempo is marked 'Tempo giusto' with a quarter note equal to 50 beats per minute. The score is in 2/4 time, key of B-flat major, and marked 'f' (forte).

Fig. 10: Grouping of main theme units by accent placements

The irregularity of this grouping is also reflected in the larger hypermetrical structure of the phrases in the movement. For instance, fig. 11 shows how the passage in letter 15 to the end of letter 17 features a chain of phrasal units grouped in a 6:3:4:5 ratio in terms of number of measures, and this 6:3:4:5 grouping is also found in the main theme (see fig. 10).

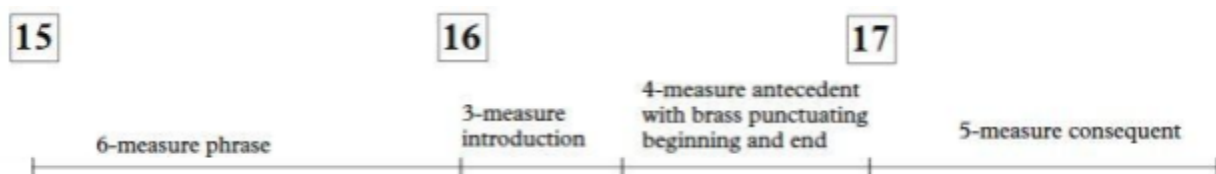


Fig. 11: 6:3:4:5 hypermetrical grouping in letters 15-17

As mentioned in section 3.3 of this paper, the restatement of the main theme in letter 30 marks a significant structural division in the movement between irregularity and regularity.

The musical score consists of three staves. The first staff is for flutes, starting at letter 28 with a 4-measure introduction. The second staff is for trumpets, starting at letter 28 with a 6-measure phrase. The third staff is for trumpets, starting at letter 29 with a 5-measure phrase followed by a 3-measure phrase. The key signature has one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 4/4.

Fig. 12: 4:6:5:3 in letters 28-29

Referring to fig. 12, it can be seen that the 6-3-4-5 pattern has been jumbled up, and appears in a 4-6-5-3 in letters 28-29, right before the restatement of the theme. Despite the fact that a new melody has been introduced in the trumpet parts (that later becomes the theme for the “Spring Rounds” movement), the irregularity of hypermetrical structure has been preserved. This is significant when one makes the comparison with the regular 2/4/8-measure phrasal structure that appears in letter 31 to the end of the movement after the restatement of the main theme in letter 30. Again, the change in hypermetrical organization, particularly before and after the restatement of the main theme in letter 30, signifies a progression from metrical irregularity to regularity.

## **5. Conclusion**

In this paper, I have attempted to show that rhythm and meter carry very much thematic significance within this movement of *The Rite of Spring*. Besides maintaining thematic and motivic connections with the rest of the movement, the metrical organization of the main theme is also reflected in the larger structural framework of the movement. Through examining these various connections, it can be seen that there is an overall shift from irregularity to regularity within the entire movement.