



Transcriptions and beyond

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Stravinsky composed his great orchestral work, *Le Sacre du Printemps*, originally for piano 4-hands, before its orchestration and scandalous public premiere in May of 1913. The piano version was first performed in private by the composer and Debussy in June of 1912, then published in 1913. The piano version is far more than a ballet rehearsal score. It makes full use of all the sounds two pianists can bring forth. Many who prefer the orchestral version would agree that it also sounds appropriate on the piano. Different aspects of the music become clearer when it is limited to the black and white palette of the piano. It is by far the most often performed work for two pianists that I have reviewed over the past few years.

The piano arrangements of *Le Sacre* and *Petrouchka* were designated by the composer for piano 4-hands, but published as 4-hands at one or two pianos. Practically speaking, all of the notes written cannot be played by two people at one piano, and a number of duo piano teams choose to use two pianos. Using just one requires intricate choreography, especially between the lower player's right hand and the upper player's left. They are often right on top of each other. I find that many recordings are not perfectly clear about whether one or two pianos were used. Stravinsky regularly employs five music staves for all of the notes, and you can find plenty of examples where three are all playing in the same octave—talk about a traffic jam.

Two excellent pianists, with a love of this music and sufficient rehearsal time are capable of giving a good performance if they simply follow the printed score. Stravinsky may have put more there than it's possible to play. No deep interpretive choices are required, so the variety of recordings available can be tough to sort through. I tend to prefer ones that generate visceral excitement contrasting with the mysterious sonorities. The *Rite of Spring* should never be background music. The other works included on a given disc could make your choice easy or even more difficult.

Duo Silver-Garburg make the logical choice of two ballets arranged by the composer for piano 4-hands. *Petrouchka* for full orchestra has a piano part large enough to get the pianist billed almost as if it were a concerto. It is not a coincidence that the most often performed solo piano work at the last Van Cliburn competition was Stravinsky's highly virtuosic *Trois Movements de Petrouchka*. The composer's arrangement of the full ballet for 4-hands works very well and makes a great companion to *Le Sacre*. The performances here show an upper part played noticeably louder than the lower in many instances. There is also a difference of attack and sustain between the pianists, even when they are playing the same musical gesture. The upper chords marked staccato or sharply accented are often so abbreviated that there is not enough duration to hear and absorb the harmonies. I would also like more volume

and attack in the lower part, especially the bass drum thumps. Those criticisms aside, Duo Silver-Garburg (a husband-wife team) have as perfect an ensemble as I've ever heard. Nuances in tempo are always dead-on together and there is nary a smudged note.

Duo Koroliov (another husband-wife team) surrounds its in-concert recording of Rite of Spring with two sets of Easy Pieces for piano 3 and 4-hands, two solo piano pieces ('Tango' and 'Piano-Rag-Music') and a curiosity that has never come my way before, three pieces for string quartet arranged for piano 4-hands by the composer. The sound is noticeably different between the concert and studio recordings; the studio is brighter and more to my liking for this music. The two sets of easy pieces are played with disarming verve and panache—far more than would normally be expected in little trifles like this. They come off as legitimate, fully worked out short ideas that remind one of Petrouchka or other more significant works. The two solo works are played by Koroliov with great style, and the odd string quartet arrangements are certainly worth a few hearings. The Rite of Spring has more gusto and better balance than Silver-Garburg, but suffers from being a little too careful (slower) sometimes.

Duo Takahashi-Lehmann (no indication of a husband-wife team, but they have been performing together since 2009) are the best of the current lot. Audite's sound and excellent booklet notes complement a stunning performance by this young duo. The amount of excitement they build at the climactic points in The Rite of Spring can leave you breathless. I also found a fascinating video clip on line of the two interviewed and playing excerpts (at one piano). The Concerto for 2 Pianos is a large four-movement work not heard often enough and rarely in as strong a performance as here. Conlon Nancarrow wrote his Sonatina for player piano, but it was arranged for piano 4 hands by Yvar Mikhashoff—explicitly approved by the composer. Arnulf Herrmann wrote his three-movement Hausmusik in deference to the styles and traditions of playing piano duets at home back in the 19th Century, but in a decidedly modern harmonic language. For variety, performance, sound, booklet, and uncovering new works, my choice this time around is Duo Takahashi-Lehmann.