

**Preview****Akron Symphony & GroundWorks's *Rite of Spring*:  
a conversation with choreographer David Shimotakahara**

by Daniel Hathaway



There are lots of ways of celebrating the centennial of Igor Stravinsky's revolutionary ballet score, *The Rite of Spring*. The Joffrey Ballet's reconstruction of the original Ballets Russes production will be a highlight of The Cleveland Orchestra's Blossom season this summer. Cleveland's Verb Ballets is undertaking a new version with an overdubbed performance of the original two-piano score.

Taking a different tack, the Akron Symphony is spreading the joy by creating a community project spearheaded by David Shimotakahara's GroundWorks Dance Theater that will involve eight professional dancers and fifteen student dancers in addition to the more than one hundred musicians Stravinsky's score requires. The performance, led by ASO's music director Christopher Wilkins, will take place in Akron's E.J. Thomas Hall on Saturday, April 13 at 8 pm (followed by an orchestra-only runout performance in Medina on Sunday afternoon).

"I wish I could have been at that performance," Shimotakahara told us by phone from his studio, referring to the ballet's turbulent premiere at the Theatre Champs-Élysées in Paris on May 29, 1913. "Nijinsky was trying something with movement that had never been done before." Indeed, it now seems to be generally agreed that the choreography rather than Stravinsky's music — radical though it was — inspired the famous opening night riot, which was so loud and disruptive that few attendees seem to have heard the orchestra at

all.

When Wilkins invited Shimotakahara to incorporate members of the community into his movement design, the choreographer knew he had to make a fresh start. “I looked at the Joffrey re-creation, but I didn't want to get stuck to the original scenario. It didn't seem it would work very well with younger children — 'Oh! Let's pretend we're the village elders!' I wanted to live into it in a way that was more authentic. The challenge was to work with a score that was written in very specific ways and see if I could shift the story a little.”

The original scenario calls for a human sacrifice to appease the gods. “I wanted to figure a way where she would represent the idea of rebirth, so instead of being chosen by the community, she self-selects. Because it's her choice, she's less of a victim, but she's still ostracized. I call her 'the other' rather than 'the chosen.' So it becomes a metaphor for the idea of individual will vs. groupthink. This honors the original intent but falls in line with the belief of youth that they're somehow different from what has gone before them. But hope gets dashed by circumstance and the forces that be, and that's the way the world is.”

In keeping with this concept, costuming will emphasize the community nature of the action. “I'm working with Christine Davies, who did GroundWorks's costumes for *Luna* and last summer's tribute to Dave Brubeck. The design is minimal and simple. I want people to see the bodies. The costumes are not character or gender-specific. The dancers need to be part of a unit.” For Saturday's performance, the Akron Symphony will be upstage, leaving plenty of room — 30 feet in depth and the full width of the Thomas Hall stage — for the dancers to operate.

Since no riots seem likely to break out in Akron next Saturday, Stravinsky's score will be fully audible in all of its metrical complexity and rhythmic glory. Putting movement to that music remains a challenge because, unlike musicians reading from printed music, dancers have their own systems for organizing their moves. “I had some wonderful help from David Brown,” Shimotakahara says. “I read music but not all that well and I wanted to understand what was there, and he did that very patiently. Then I needed to find ways to count relationships — the things that we hear — to make the score intelligible to the students and let them feel confident about the structures. I spent a lot of time breaking down what I wanted them to hear and how to count that.”

The results were not unlike Nicolas Slonimsky's famous rebaring of Stravinsky's score so that Serge Koussevitsky could make sense out of the music when he conducted it with the Boston Symphony (Leonard Bernstein gratefully used Slonimsky's score himself). “I tried to find patterns and relationships that could be bunched together, bridging different parts of the score by counting it more regularly. I liked what that did: it created its own counterpoint that doesn't conflict with the music but adds another dimension.”

Dancers most often work with a pianist in rehearsals, but GroundWorks and its student complement have practiced their movement with the help of recordings and technology that allows the tempo of the music to be adjusted. “I think it's important to hear the full orchestration. There's so much going on that they need to attach the movement to.”

Wilkins has spent a considerable amount of time attending dance rehearsals. “We're going to have so little time onstage with the orchestra that we wanted to be on the same page with tempos. A little tempo change for the orchestra makes a big difference for the movement.”

Though the students have had limited rehearsal time, Shimotakahara is pleased with what they've accomplished. “The kids have been eager and willing. We're going to tear the stage up. It's going to be pretty amazing!”

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