

Chamber festival kicks off with spirited 'Les Noces' by Stravinsky

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By [Mark Stryker](#)

Detroit Free Press Music Critic

In 1913, Igor Stravinsky changed the world with "The Rite of Spring." The music's savage attack, irregular rhythms, harmonic dissonance, formal freedom and electrifying sonorities pummeled to death the last vestiges of the played-out romanticism of the 19th Century.

Stravinsky had become the world's most famous composer. What could he do for an encore?

Ever the trickster, he turned away from the big-bang orchestral-ballet scores that made him a star. Instead, he sharpened his newly discovered cubist-like musical language in the context of miniatures and idiosyncratic theatrical works tied to Russian folklore. The most stunning is "Les Noces" ("The Wedding"), the centerpiece of Saturday's opening concert of the Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival.

Russian music provides the theme for this year's festival, but Stravinsky looms largest. The next two weeks will see a fully staged performance of "The Rite of Spring," along with his "Mass" and the Concerto for Piano and Wind Instruments. That's an ambitious slate, even for a festival that likes to think big. "Les Noces," a glorious mongrel that took nine years to come to fruition -- the premiere was in 1923 -- might be the most challenging of all.

It's a ballet-cantata on the theme of a peasant wedding, scored for vocal soloists, chorus, four pianos and eight percussionists. (It was performed Saturday as a concert work.) Ritual, propulsion and ethnic color predominate. Jagged rhythms drive the melodies, which create the biting harmony, which colors the deliriously percussive sonorities. Stravinsky's extraordinary life force makes a joyful noise. But there is also a

descriptive objectivity that previews the neo-classicism Stravinsky was on his way to inventing.

David Rayl, director of choral programs at Michigan State University, led his well-prepared charges in a game performance, long on clarity and balance if short on ecstasy. The decision to employ an English translation of the text was problematic, dulling the impact. The music is tied intimately to Russian speech; the pop of the language is integral to the sound.

The MSU Chorale and Percussion Ensemble formed the ensemble, with vocal soloists Molly Fillmore, Lauren Skuce, Jason Wickson and Benjamin Clements; and pianists James Tocco, Pei-Shan Lee, Panayis Lyras and Deborah Moriarity.

Before intermission, Tocco, the festival's artistic director, teamed with Sofja Gülbadamova in a brilliantly songful performance of Rachmaninoff's Suite No. 1 ("Fantasy") for two pianos. Less satisfying was the opener, Prokofiev's Cello Sonata. Cellist Paul Katz is a distinguished musician but may not command the resources at this point in his career to pull off such a grand and demanding work. Lee played the piano part with muscular sensitivity.

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More Details: Great Lakes Chamber Music Festival

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out of four stars

Saturday, Seligman Performing Arts Center, Beverly Hills

Festival continues through June 24. 248-559-2097 www.greatlakeschambermusic.org .
Complete schedule at freep.com