

The Rite of Spring in the Gashouder, with Abel Selaocoe

Friday, April 16, 2027 · 20:30 · Gashouder

Gemma New, conductor · Abel Selaocoe, cello and voice

TONIGHT'S PROGRAMME		MIN
1	SELAOCOE b. 1992 <i>Four Spirits, concerto for cello, voice, percussion and orchestra</i>	
2	STRAVINSKY 1882–1971 <i>The Rite of Spring (Le Sacre du printemps)</i>	33'
TOTAL MUSIC		33'

Abel Selaocoe

b. 1992

Four Spirits, concerto for cello, voice, percussion and orchestra

THE COMPOSER

Abel Selaocoe, born in 1992 in the township of Sebokeng in South Africa, is a cellist, singer and composer. He trained as a classical cellist in Johannesburg and at the Royal Northern College of Music in Manchester, and writes music in which the cello repertoire meets South African song, improvisation and body percussion. His first album was 'Where Is Home (Hae Ke Kae)', and his works include the concerto 'Four Spirits' for cello, voice, percussion and orchestra.

ABOUT THE WORK

'Four Spirits' is Abel Selaocoe's first cello concerto, and he is its soloist in more than the usual sense: he plays, sings, tells stories and leads. It was commissioned jointly by the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, the Seattle Symphony and the Dutch orchestra Philharmonie Zuidnederland, and was first performed, according to his record label, in 2022. It is scored for cello, voice, percussion and orchestra, and has four movements that run into one another.

Each of the four takes up something that, in Selaocoe's account, holds life together in the South African township where he grew up. The first, 'MaSebego', is about the ancestors and the traditional healer's

role. The second, 'Bana', is about children and their play. The third, 'Tshepo', is about faith and prayer, and the last, 'Simunye', about community. The words he sings are in Southern Sotho and Zulu.

A concerto in the European tradition usually sets one player against the orchestra. Selaocoe turns that around. The cello part moves freely between written music and improvisation, the voice is treated as an instrument in its own right, and a solo percussionist is as close a partner as the orchestra, whose players are sometimes asked to sing as well. His singing draws on the overtone or throat singing of the Xhosa people, known as *umngqokolo*: a deep, buzzing tone with high harmonics floating above it.

The piece has not stood still. By the time Selaocoe recorded it in 2025, with the Aurora Orchestra under Nicholas Collon, it had been through many changes since the first performances, and because so much of it is improvised no two evenings are the same. In the Gashouder, where the audience is close to the players and part of it is standing, it is paired with another work about ritual and community: Stravinsky's 'Rite of Spring'.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

Listen first for the range of sounds one performer produces. Selaocoe's voice can drop to a low growl beneath the cello line and then leap to light, fluttering high notes, and he often sings and bows at the same time, so that it can be hard to tell where the instrument stops and the voice begins.

In 'Bana' the cello turns playful and scampers high on the fingerboard, with sliding harmonics and skittish plucked notes. 'Tshepo' begins with rapid figures across the strings that recall Baroque cello writing, before percussion and voice pull the music somewhere else entirely. Throughout, the drumming gives the groove that the orchestra then picks up and colours.

The last movement is about singing together, and Selaocoe means it literally. In earlier performances he has taught the audience a phrase before starting and brought everyone in during the finale, so be ready to join in.

Igor Stravinsky

1882–1971

The Rite of Spring (Le Sacre du printemps)

THE COMPOSER

Igor Stravinsky was, more than any other figure, the composer who reinvented twentieth-century music, and he did it three times. Born near St. Petersburg in 1882, he came to international fame in his late twenties through his collaborations with the impresario Sergei Diaghilev, whose Ballets Russes commissioned the three early scores (*The Firebird*, *Petrushka*, and *The Rite of Spring*) that made Stravinsky perhaps the most talked-about composer alive. The 1913 Paris premiere of *The Rite of Spring* provoked a near-riot and changed the course of music history.

Then, almost as soon as he had perfected the explosive, primitivist style of his early ballets, Stravinsky abandoned it. From 1920 onward he spent some three decades writing music in what came to be called his “neoclassical” period: works of cool elegance, reduced forces, and sly references to the music of the past. After the Second World War, he reinvented himself yet again, embracing the rigorous serial techniques pioneered by Arnold Schoenberg and his school. Few composers have demonstrated such restless, lifelong curiosity.

ABOUT THE WORK

The idea, as Igor Stravinsky later told it, came to him as a sudden picture: a pagan rite in which elders sit in a circle and watch a young girl dance herself to death as a sacrifice to the god of spring. He worked it out with the painter Nicholas Roerich, an expert on ancient Russia who also designed the production, and Sergei Diaghilev took it on for his Ballets Russes. The score, subtitled ‘Pictures of Pagan Russia in Two Parts’, occupied Stravinsky for about two years.

The first performance, on 29 May 1913 at the new Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris, is the most famous scandal in the history of music. Pierre Monteux conducted and Vaslav Nijinsky had made the choreography. Laughter and protests began during the introduction and grew once the curtain rose, until the noise in the house was such that the dancers could hardly hear the orchestra, and Nijinsky shouted the counts to them from the wings. How much of the anger was aimed at the music and how much at the stamping, turned-in dancing is still argued over. What is certain is that the score very quickly made its way without the stage. It has been heard far more often in the concert hall than in the theatre, and Stravinsky himself went on adjusting it for decades with concert performance in mind.

More than a century later it has lost none of its force. The harmony is harsh, but the real revolution is in the rhythm: accents that fall where no one expects them, bars that change length from one to the next, and short melodic cells repeated and shuffled where an earlier composer would have developed a theme. The orchestra is very large, with quintuple woodwind and eight horns, and Stravinsky uses it like a huge percussion instrument.

WHAT TO LISTEN FOR

The piece begins with a single bassoon, alone and very high in its register, playing a tune Stravinsky took from a collection of Lithuanian folk songs. Other woodwinds join one by one until the texture teems like something growing. Then comes the passage everyone remembers, the 'Augurs of Spring': the strings hammer out one dense chord over and over in even notes while eight horns punch in accents at unpredictable moments.

Part One, 'The Adoration of the Earth', is a series of games and processions that pile up in speed and weight. Listen for the slow, heavy tread of the 'Spring Rounds', the entrance of the sage, a sudden hush as he kisses the earth, and the 'Dance of the Earth', which ends the first part by simply being cut off at full tilt.

Part Two, 'The Sacrifice', opens in near darkness, with quiet, shifting chords and muted trumpets. The young women dance in circles and one of them is chosen: eleven pounding beats from strings and drums mark the moment. The final 'Sacrificial Dance' is the hardest thing in the score to play, since almost every bar has a different length and the whole orchestra must jolt forward together. It ends with a brief upward flick in the flutes and a last, brutal chord. In the round space of the Gashouder, with the audience close to the players, the physical impact should be considerable.

Tonight's artists

Abel Selaocoe *cello and voice*

Abel Selaocoe is composer and soloist at once in 'Four Spirits', playing the cello, singing and leading the audience, and the orchestra presents him in the Gashouder, the round former gas holder in Amsterdam's Westerpark, which it describes as newly renovated. Seats and standing places are both on offer and none are assigned. The evening, a single performance, ends with 'The Rite of Spring' under Gemma New.

Abel Selaocoe is a South African cellist, singer and composer, born in 1992 in Sebokeng. He began the cello as a child in South Africa and later moved to Manchester to study at the Royal Northern College of Music, where he completed his International Artist Diploma in 2018. In performance he combines classical cello playing with improvisation, body percussion and singing that draws on South African traditions, including overtone singing. He is an artistic partner of the Saint Paul Chamber Orchestra.

FURTHER READING

ACCESSIBLE **Igor Stravinsky**

Jonathan Cross, Reaktion Books 2015

A short, up-to-date life of Stravinsky that explains where 'The Rite of Spring' came from and why it changed what composers thought music could do.

ACCESSIBLE **Diaghilev: A Life**

Sjeng Scheijen, Oxford University Press 2009

The life of the impresario who commissioned the 'Rite', with a vivid account of the Ballets Russes and of the night of 29 May 1913.

DEEPER **Stravinsky: The Rite of Spring**

Peter Hill, Cambridge University Press 2000

A Cambridge Music Handbook on the 'Rite' alone: its genesis with Rorerich, the premiere, a section-by-section analysis and the history of its performance.

SOURCES

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2. Stravinsky's Sacre in Gashouder, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra (Dutch). <https://www.concertgebouworkest.nl/nl/agenda/stravinskys-sacre-in-gashouder-2027-04-16/>
3. Abel Selaocoe: Four Spirits, Warner Classics. <https://www.warnerclassics.com/release/four-spirits>

Igor Stravinsky ·The Rite of Spring (Le Sacre du printemps)

4. Review: Four Spirits (Abel Selaocoe), BBC Music Magazine. <https://www.classical-music.com/reviews/concerto/review-four-spirits-abel-selaocoe>
5. Abel Selaocoe's groundbreaking fusion of traditional and classical music shines in this Seattle concert, Seen and Heard International. <https://seenandheard-international.com/?p=111459>
6. Abel Selaocoe, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Abel_Selaocoe
7. Abel Selaocoe, Warner Classics. <https://www.warnerclassics.com/artist/abel-selaocoe>
8. The Rite of Spring, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Rite_of_Spring
9. Stravinsky: The Rite of Spring, Boston Symphony Orchestra. <https://www.bso.org/works/the-rite-of-spring>
10. Gemma New, conductor, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra. <https://www.concertgebouworkest.nl/en/orchestra/conductors/gemma-new/>
11. Gemma New, Wikipedia. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gemma_New
12. Gashouder, Westergas. <https://westergas.nl/en/locations/gashouder>
13. Igor Stravinsky, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9781780234946>
14. Diaghilev: A Life, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780199751495>
15. Stravinsky: The Rite of Spring, Open Library. <https://openlibrary.org/isbn/9780521627146>



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<https://concertprograms.eu/concerts/rco-2027-04-16-new>

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