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About the Cover

by

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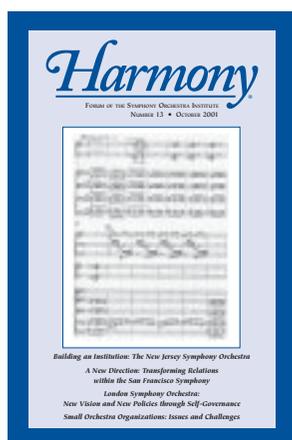
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It was probably at some point during performance of the score fragment reproduced on our cover—the now-famous series of thundering chords—that conductor Pierre Monteux sensed that a riot was breaking out in the audience behind him. This passage comes early in Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring*, but as the composer would later recall, the crowd grew restless and noisy almost as soon as the ballet began. Eventually there were catcalls and fistfights, and the entire theater “seemed to be shaken by an earthquake.”

May 29, 1913, the night *The Rite of Spring* opened at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris, is now remembered for the most notorious premiere in the

history of music. Sergei Diaghilev, the great impresario who had commissioned Stravinsky to write the score for his Russian ballet, flipped the house lights off and on to quiet the crowd. Vaslav Nijinsky, the celebrated dancer who was making his debut as a choreographer, stood on a chair in the wings shouting directions to his dancers. And all the while Monteux continued conducting. “He stood there apparently impervious and as nerveless as a crocodile,” Stravinsky recalled. “It is still almost incredible to me that he actually brought the orchestra through to the end.”

This was classic Monteux—the epitome of grace under pressure. Thirty-eight years old, Monteux was already a seasoned pro—he had recently conducted the historic premieres of Stravinsky’s *Petrushka*, Ravel’s *Daphnis and Chloe*, and Debussy’s *Jeux*—and his long career had only begun. He was born in 1875, the year Bizet’s *Carmen* opened; he knew Saint-Saëns and played chamber music for Grieg and Brahms. Although he started out as an orchestral violinist and violist, as soon as he picked up the baton at the turn of the century, he was hooked.

In 1910, he organized his own orchestra, the Concerts Berlioz, and the following year he became Diaghilev’s resident ballet conductor. Over the next five decades, he worked with some of the world’s great orchestras, including the Boston

Symphony (which he rebuilt nearly from scratch his first season, following a particularly brutal musicians' strike), the Amsterdam Concertgebouw, and the San Francisco Symphony (where he served as music director from 1936 to 1952). When he was in his 80s, he took on one last job, as music director of the London Symphony. (He signed a 25-year contract.) He kept conducting until his death in 1964, at the age of eighty-nine, surpassing even Toscanini, who retired at eighty-six.

Stravinsky recalled that of all the conductors he knew, Monteux was “the least interested in calisthenic exhibitions for the entertainment of the audience and the most concerned to give clear signals to the orchestra.” Monteux once compiled a list of rules for conductors that is a model of common sense—don't stop in rehearsal for obviously accidental wrong notes; don't stare at players during tricky passages. He was a born teacher, and in 1943, the year after he became an American citizen, he organized an important conducting school at his home in Hancock, Maine, to perpetuate his self-effacing, no-nonsense approach to music making. As Stravinsky remembered from their time together preparing *The Rite*, “He never looked for his own glory in it.”

Phillip Huscher is the program annotator for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra.