

eric hofbauer quintet

—  
prehistoric jazz — volume 1

the rite of spring <sup>41.99</sup>

— igor stravinsky

arranged by eric hofbauer

eric hofbauer — guitar

jerry sabatini — trumpet

todd brunel — Bb clarinet & bass clarinet

junko fujiwara — cello

curt newton — drums & percussion

produced by eric hofbauer  
([erichofbauer.com](http://erichofbauer.com))

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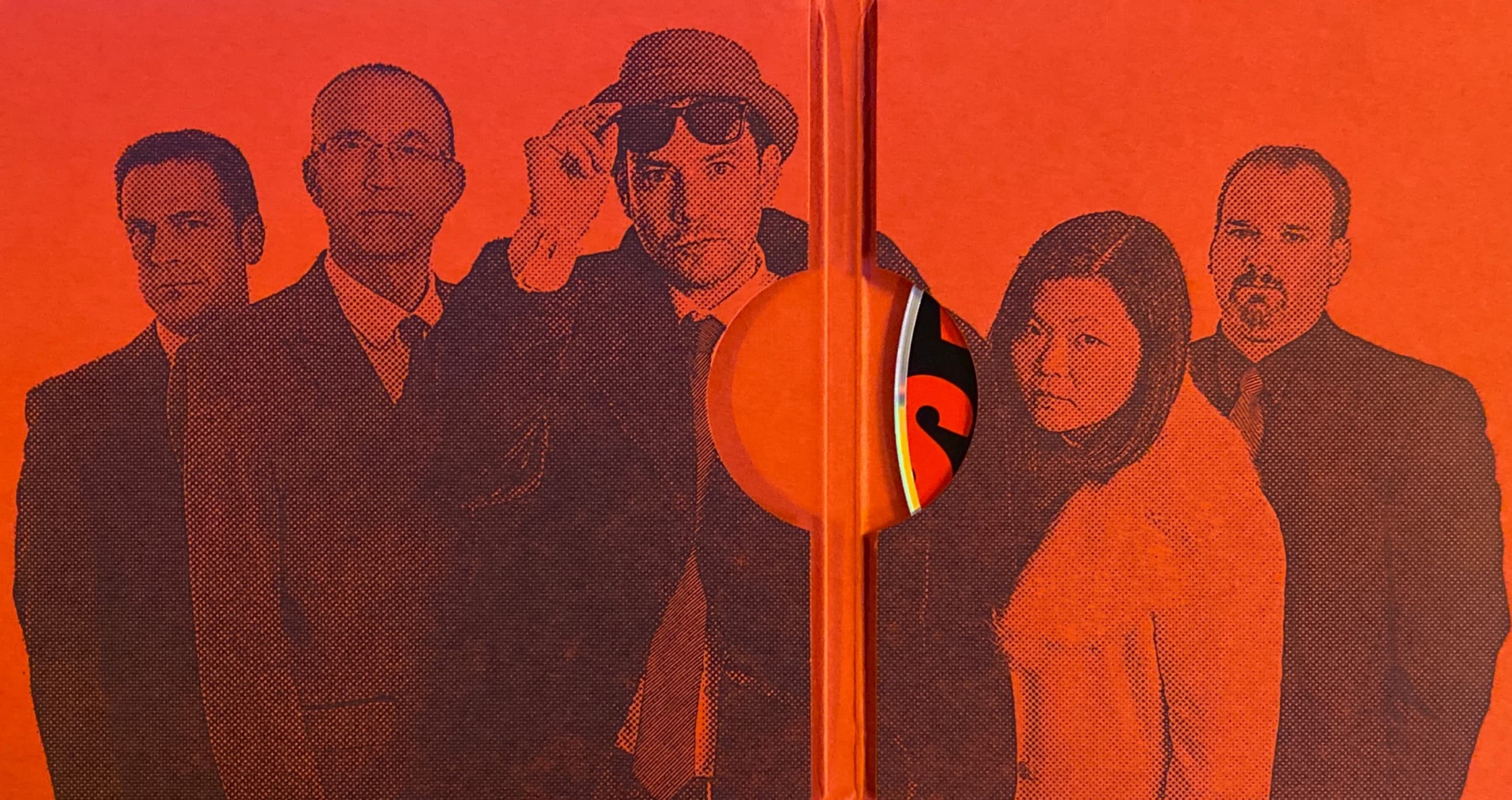
eric hofbauer quintet — prehistoric jazz — vol. 1 — the rite of spring

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prehistoric jazz — volume 1

# THE RITE OF SPRING





jerry sebatini  
curt newton  
eric hofbauer  
junki fujiwara  
todd brunei



- 1 a kiss of the earth: introduction <sup>5.51</sup>
- 2 the augurs of spring,  
dances of the young girls <sup>3.44</sup>
- 3 ritual of abduction <sup>3.44</sup>
- 4 spring rounds <sup>5.07</sup>
- 5 ritual of the two rival tribes <sup>1.44</sup>
- 6 procession of the oldest and wisest one <sup>1.22</sup>
- 7 the kiss of the earth <sup>0.34</sup>
- 8 dancing out of the earth <sup>1.51</sup>
- 9 the exalted sacrifice <sup>2.42</sup>
- 10 mystic circle of the young girls <sup>2.29</sup>
- 11 the naming and honoring  
of the chosen one <sup>2.51</sup>
- 12 evocation of the ancestors <sup>2.04</sup>
- 13 ritual action of the ancestors <sup>4.06</sup>
- 14 sacrificial dance <sup>2.46</sup>

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prehistoric jazz — volume 1

# THE RITE OF SPRING



## the background

— Long before the emergence of a formal “third stream” movement in the mid to late ‘50s, the fluid boundary between classical music and jazz (or pre-jazz) was an established fact. Scott Joplin and his forebear Louis Moreau Gottschalk were among the composers who birthed a new American sound, steeped in European Romanticism but also the vernacular of Joplin’s African-American Texas and Missouri, or Gottschalk’s Jewish-Creole New Orleans.

Against this background it’s gratifying to see young jazz bandleaders of our day reinvent the music of Shostakovich, Webern, Ligeti, Machaut and others. For Boston-based guitarist Eric Hofbauer, who confronts monumental works by Stravinsky and Messiaen on *Prehistoric Jazz, Vols. 1 & 2*, the goal was not a melding of genres or a salute to “serious” music in general, but rather a puzzling over matters of timbre and instrumentation, improvisational pathways and harmonic implications specific to these composers and not others. The orchestrations are rigorous yet everywhere is the spark of the unexpected. Hofbauer’s take on the encounter of European modernism with the America of blues and jazz follows in the best tradition of Joplin and all that came after.

It’s hard not to think of Stravinsky’s *Le Sacre du printemps* (The Rite of Spring) and Messiaen’s *Quatuor pour la fin du temps* (Quartet for the End of Time) as big and scary

pieces, loaded with historical significance. But they’re on a par with other unlikely works that Hofbauer has explored in a solo guitar context: “Hot for Teacher” by Van Halen, or “West End Blues” by Louis Armstrong and His Hot Five, or “Everybody Wants to Rule the World” by Tears for Fears. Hofbauer’s solo guitar trilogy — *American Vanity* (2002), *American Fear* (2010) and *American Grace* (2012) — was remarkable in the way it expanded the song canon, and with it the idiomatic reach of the instrument. The jump from this to deconstructing great orchestral and chamber music might have been bold, but it made perfect sense.

## the rite of spring

— In an ‘80s video clip posted on YouTube, Leonard Bernstein rehearses a European student orchestra for an upcoming performance of Stravinsky’s *Le Sacre du printemps*. As the young musicians attempt the “Games of the Rival Tribes” section, Bernstein grows frustrated, focusing his critique on the percussionists in the back line. He growls out loud the phrases he wants, demonstrates with his body the swing and power of the asymmetric rhythms. “That last entrance was too late, by one beat,” he gestures to one player. “And I don’t feel this prehistoric jazz,” he says to the whole group. “It’s a kind of elephantine jazz. Very Russian. . . . I don’t feel the jazz, man.”

In that one term from Bernstein — “prehistoric jazz” — Eric Hofbauer found all the affirmation

he needed to venture his own small-group treatment of the Rite. He wrote in a blog post shortly after premiering the arrangement live: “For me, feeling ‘the jazz’ was my primary point of reference and my entrée into this masterwork of shifting rhythms and polytonality back when I first heard it as a student [at Oberlin].”

It should be noted that Hofbauer’s is not the first jazz version of the Rite. Back in 1971, Don Sebesky did a nine-minute reduction for a CTI album by flutist Hubert Laws, with Ron Carter, Jack DeJohnette, Bob James (on Rhodes) and others. In 1983, Larry Coryell released an album-length arrangement for solo Ovation acoustic guitar, produced by Teo Macero. The most recent jazz Rite is by The Bad Plus, the acclaimed piano trio: “I met them while on tour in France,” Hofbauer says. “We are cut from similar cloth in how we look at repertoire and the expanding definitions of jazz.”

Hofbauer’s Rite is a different animal: it’s intimate acoustic chamber jazz with an extraordinary purity of tone, not least of all from the leader’s beautifully recorded Guild Artist Award archtop. Hofbauer is effusive about the members of his quintet, each indispensable to the session’s focus and dynamism. “I’ve played with them in various bands for years and I know each of their sounds and concepts intimately,” he says. “[Trumpeter] Jerry Sabatini and I share a deep affinity for nuances in timbre and articulation, and he’s an expert a navigating odd time

signatures and difficult harmonic terrain. He’s a child of Sun Ra and his versatility takes him from the gutbucket to outer space free jazz and back again.”

Todd Brunel (clarinet/bass clarinet) and Junko Fujiwara (cello) can “mix classical virtuosity with an adventurous spirit,” Hofbauer continues. “Together they bring balance to the sound of the ensemble: often you hear them holding down the center of the piece with the primary and familiar melodies, but just as often Todd and Junko are the chaos factors, bringing the right amount improvisational surprise whether it’s a flurry of notes and noise in a dense collective, a swinging blues solo or walking bass lines.”

That leaves the drums, perhaps the most unambiguously jazzy element in the ensemble. “Curt Newton and I are the chameleons of the group,” Hofbauer declares. “We actually do the most improvising, often in disguise as timekeeping. We usually work off of the score in lieu of parts because we have to know what’s happening at all times. Curt’s amazing at nailing the specifics yet making it sound natural and flowing, like it was the logical extension of his interactive timekeeping. These pieces don’t work without Curt — and like the rest of the band on their respective instruments, he was the only drummer I had in mind.”

In this quintet incarnation, as Hofbauer noted on his blog, “each family of the orchestra was represented. The drums covered the percussion, cello covered the strings, and

clarinet and trumpet covered the woodwinds and brass respectively. The guitar plays a curious role. . . . By not fitting into a specific family of orchestral instruments I play the role of rogue interloper, assimilating into each family when they need an extra voice, or gluing components together by providing a rich harmonic palette of chords. This I believe is a very American thing to do with the music, and the archtop guitar, a completely American invention, is crucial to transforming ‘The Rite’ to prehistoric jazz in sound and style.”

What about that melee, disturbance, riot, whatever it was, that greeted the 1913 premiere of *Le Sacre du printemps* in Paris? Those who heard the music as animalistic, deliberately incoherent, an assault — what if there’d been some nice post-concert discussion on polytonality, or the many other aspects of the Rite that would usher in a new aesthetic order for the 20th century? (Recall that bebop was once derided as chaos; today it’s almost a byword for jazz conservatism.) The point is this: far from an anarchic mess, the Rite has a staggering structural detail and theoretical sophistication, but more than that, it has a harmonic schema that would prove directly relevant to jazz in its post-bop years.

That’s a subject Hofbauer has taught and written about in detail. He calls his harmonic system the Diamond, “a method to tonally organize chromatic playing and a way to chromatically enhance tonal playing,” as

he writes in a book excerpt available at his website. More specifically, the Diamond “is the inter-relationship between four (hence the diamond shape) dominant chords built from a diminished 7th arpeggio. (ex. C, Eb, Gb, A).”

Reader, stay with me. What Hofbauer wants to establish is that elements of the Diamond are everywhere. They’re present in some form in Bartok’s Axis system. They’re part of the very essence of Charles Ives’ music. They can be discerned in the playing of Eric Dolphy and John Coltrane and in many classic jazz tunes. They’re also strongly evident in the two pieces that make up *Prehistoric Jazz*. “The Rite and *Fin du temps* are like long-lost ancestors who share the DNA and already speak in the same tongues as the Diamond,” Hofbauer says. “The arrangements just flowed — I wrote them in about 24 hours each. It was all very natural because the source material was already speaking my language.”

Hofbauer uses the Diamond concept “quite liberally” throughout *Prehistoric Jazz*, he says. “For the short little gumbo ya-ya dixieland-type improves at the end of ‘Ritual Action of the Ancestors,’ each of us was assigned a dominant 7th arpeggio or Lydian b7 scale on the diamond starting on D7. Stravinsky loves the tritone polychord example Ab over D, which is the very last chord of the whole piece. And my solo piece on ‘The Naming and Honoring of the Chosen One’ is built off of Eb7 over A, so it is working in the diamond of the V of the final key center.”



This isn't just "nerding out," or music as math with no feeling—for Stravinsky and for Hofbauer, the theoretical *is* emotional. "The first two sections, 'A Kiss of the Earth' and 'Augurs of Spring, Dances of the Young Girls,' explore this wonderful duality and conflict between man and nature by playing the tonic and the dominant tritone sub at the same time. That beautiful opening C major 7th-ish melody ultimately resolves over a Db. The driving intense chord of 'Augurs' is Eb7 over E, so tonic and dominant together, consonance and dissonance, chaos and order—to me that is why this piece can still resonate today. That type of duality strikes at the essence of our human existence and our relationship with the universe. Why did Coltrane get more polytonal as he got more spiritual? There is some truth in there."

In his blog post Hofbauer described the mechanics of his Rite in fairly straightforward jazz terms. "Most sections to my ears became a sort of lead sheet, where at some point a collective theme and variation (riffing, to an extent) took over, usually over a strong pulse or vamp. . . . I set about the task of distilling sections down to their main theme or themes, harmonic colors and perhaps most importantly rhythmic structures. Stravinsky loves pulse and it always grooves in its own way. . . . But what happens if you take the primary rhythmic figures and even them out to phrases that repeat with more regularity? Vamps, bass lines, shout choruses, even forms—for example the

12-bar blues on 'Mystic Circle of the Young Girls,' which was not imposed by my hand but directed to me by Stravinsky's melody and harmonic suggestions—rise to the surface as solo or group improvisation sections."

The results are fascinating, right from Brunel's extemporized bass clarinet cadenza leading into the famous opening melody (it's easy to imagine it as a bassoon). Brunel steps up later with a searing Bb clarinet solo in the "Mystic Circle" section. Sabatini's braying, trombone-like declarations and varied use of mutes throughout put one in mind of early Ellington. Fujiwara's solo cello meditation at the opening of "The Exalted Sacrifice" puts the Rite on a new footing, initiating other unaccompanied turns that alternate with deft ensemble passages as the quintet works toward the climactic events of "Ritual Action" and the 5/8 finale "Sacrificial Dance."

Finally, there's that "rogue interloper" on guitar, just seconds before the final perplexing polychord. Hofbauer slides up the neck with an elusive *whoosh* and a chordal stab—an abstraction of the flutes and piccolo called for in the orchestra score. Enfolding that sort of minute subtlety within a work of hair-raising fortissimos and disorienting rhythmic churn is part of Stravinsky's genius. That Hofbauer and band can take that same work to such a distinctive and personal place over a hundred years later only adds to its import.

David R. Adler

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