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THE RITE OF SPRING: A FAILURE AND A TRIUMPH

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The Rite of Spring was the startling result of a collaboration between Stravinsky, Nijinsky (choreography) and Roerich (sets and costumes). In the immediate aftermath, it seemed to be a fiasco because of its riotous reception, but it proved to be the successful introduction of a new modernist aesthetic that cultivated ugliness and machine-like movements. We will trace the musical, choreographical and visual aspects of this new trend through several later Diaghilev ballets: *Parade* (Satie/Picasso), *Chout* (Prokofiev/Larionov), *Le Pas d'Acier* (Prokofiev/Yakulov).

***Petrushka* and the new dancing body**

1911 The Ballet *Petrushka* was a collaboration between Igor Stravinsky, Mikhail Fokine (choreography), and Alexander Benois (scenario, design). The principal role was taken by Vaslav Nijinsky. We should note several points that will cast light on *The Rite of Spring*, which will be the main focus of this lecture:

- Fokine/Nijinsky's invention of deliberately awkward and ungraceful movements and postures for the male protagonist
- Fokine's creation of choreography that followed the moment-to-moment details of the music ("visualisation")
- Stravinsky's grotesque use of folk tunes, including the "stamping" music of the Coachmen's Dance
- The communication of a "Russianness" that was not nationalist – it did not seek to glorify the Russian people

***The Rite of Spring*: Scenario, Music, Design, Choreography**

Le Sacre de Printemps (1913) was originally translated in a variety of ways: *The Crowning of Spring*, *The Spring Ritual*, and *The Spring Rite*. This stems from an idea developed by Nikolai Roerich and Stravinsky

Stravinsky on the genesis of *The Rite of Spring* (1920):

"Its embryo was a theme that came to me while I was finishing The Firebird. Since this theme and what followed from it were conceived with a stark and brutal character, I chose as a pretext to develop them as an evocation of prehistoric Russia, since I am Russian. But note well that the idea came from the music, and not the music from the idea. I have written an architectural work, not an anecdotal one."

Roerich, however, created paintings that were similar in theme at around the same time, such as *The Idols* (1910).

Violent savage rites were already a motif within European vanguard culture at the time. Here, for example, is a fascinating quotation from Gauguin (responding to the criticism that his paintings were monotonous and violent, 1899):

"Are not these repetitions of tones, these monochrome harmonies (in a musical sense) analogous to oriental chants sung in a shrill voice, to an accompaniment of pulsating notes which ... intensify them? ..."

Think also of the musical role that colour will henceforth play in modern painting. Colour is vibration just as music is, and so colour is able to rise to the level of what is most universal, and ... yet most elusive in nature: its inner force.

Here, close to my cabin, in complete silence, amid the intoxicating perfumes of nature, I dream of violent harmonies. A delight enhanced by I-know-not-what sacred horror, which I divine in the infinite."



Gauguin was an important influence on Roerich, and also on Nijinsky. A similar fascination with primitivism is also found in Picasso, who took “primitive” objets d’art as the material or the inspiration for his ground-breaking modernist works.

Note also the connection with Rimsky-Korsakov’s *The Snow Maiden*, where a similar spring myth is played out through a series of calendar rituals and which startles us by veering sharply away from the Romantic psychological exploration of characters, which in turn invited us to empathise.

The Scenario

- Minimal narrative content: the ritual consists of a series of “games” or dances
- Introduction
- Augurs of Spring (The Old Woman foretelling the future)
- Ritual of Abduction
- Spring Rounds
- Ritual of the Rival Tribes
- Procession of the Sage
- The Sage (who, with the elders, interrupts the games and kisses the earth)
- Dance of the Earth

- Mystic Circles of the Young Girls (leading to the choice of sacrificial victim)
- Glorification of the Chosen One
- Evocation of the Ancestors
- Ritual Action of the Ancestors (the Chosen One is now in the care of the elders)
- Sacrificial Dance (the Chosen One dances herself to death)

The Score

- Devoid of all markers of sophistication (such as elaborate harmony or counterpoint) – it was fashioned “with an axe”
- A celebration of offensively loud and violent dissonances

Compare this to Kandinsky’s statement from around the same time: “Just as in music or in painting, there exist no “ugly” sounds and no external “dissonance” ... every sound or concordance of sounds is beautiful providing that it arises from some inner necessity.”

- Rhythms are repetitive, but unpredictable
- Very basic material “based on three notes”, inspired by folk rituals, although there is very little quotation from folk sources
- The dense combination of primitive elements creates new kind of complexity for performers and the conductor

The Design

- Minimalist set
- Back-cloth with landscape in bright colours
- Designs based on authentic folk ornaments but with an element of stylisation
- Costumes cover the whole body, faces heavily painted, excluding individual emotional expression
- The sets and costumes were produced before the choreography was created, and served as an inspiration to Nijinsky

The Choreography



In a 1913 interview, Nijinsky said that because he danced in ballets by Fokine “which aim at grace pure and simple, I am tied down to “grace” for ever. Really, I begin to react with horror at the mention of the word; “grace” and “charm” make me feel nauseous.”

- Nijinsky’s choreography was lost and then reconstructed as far as possible from a number of sources (Millicent Hodson/Kenneth Archer, 1987), but it is still a “lost ballet”
- What has been preserved is “a set of ideas” (Lynn Garafola): primitivism, modernity, violence, the repudiation of conventional ballet aesthetics
- Rejection of classical balletic technique: pigeon-toed stances, slumped posture, and foot stamping
- Masculinisation (24 men on stage, over half the cast of 47)
- Choreography that does not clearly face the audience – patterns best appreciated from the gallery
- Conventional balletic movements replaced by naturalistic movements
- Virtuosity of a new kind: complex rhythms, precision, stamina (123 jumps in the Sacrificial Dance)
- Counterpoint of rhythms between groups of dancers

“figures in scarlet run wildly around the stage in a great circle while the shaking masses within are forever splitting up into tiny groups revolving on eccentric axes” – the description given by one London critic

- Asymmetry
- Influence of the “eurhythmics” method (the development of musical skills through kinetic exercises) invented by Émile-Jaques Dalcroze; Diaghilev’s company visited Dalcroze’s school in Hellerau (Germany)
- The role of The Chosen One was created for Nijinsky’s sister Bronislava, but she fell pregnant, and it was danced instead by Maria Piltz

Correspondences

In 1912, Stravinsky complained of Fokine’s choreography : “At the outset of his career he appeared to be extraordinarily progressive. But the more I knew of his work, the more I saw that in essence he offered nothing new at all... New forms must be created, and the evil, gifted and greedy Fokine has not even dreamt of these”

- The dancers are hunched in circular groups that imitate the clumps of vegetation in the set
- Circles, representing the Sun, are prominent in the costume designs
- Millicent Hodson thinks that the cross-bone figure on the costumes is replicated in the choreography
- The choreography is based very closely on the musical contrasts and patterns, even reflecting individual gestures in the score (e.g. The Augurs of Spring). Nijinsky, who was a competent musician with some piano skills, took the trouble to memorise sections of the score before he choreographed them

The Rite of Spring: Premiere and Reception

- The myth of the “riot”
- The premiere took place on 29 May 1913, but there was a dress rehearsal on the 28 May for the critics
- The premiere was a Grand Gala performance, for an elite audience
- The new Théâtre des Champs Elysées built by the manager Astruc had 1900 seats, and a 100-piece orchestra was employed
- There was a bitter sense of failure, but this was not as dire as it is often portrayed: there were curtain calls, the evening continued with another ballet, there were four more performances in Paris, and then several more in London
- The ballet was deleted from the Ballets Russes repertoire only because of Nijinsky’s marriage, which led to his sudden exit from the company (Diaghilev was displeased); if events had not taken this turn, it would most likely have shown up again the following season
- Some of the critical responses:



“Stravinsky’s music, written with uncommon verve and virtuosity, was purposefully and deliberately intended to be the most cruel for the ear that we had ever had the chance, or had been inflicted upon us, to hear... The wrong note is its most basic material, with the most crude, raucous, and unsociable timbres”.

“This music is sometimes genuinely ugly. I mean that it seems so to us, as people living in the year 1913.”

The choreography was described as “cubist”, monotonous, pretentious, insignificant

It was suggested that the ballet “mocked the public”

“Almost every quality of beauty or dramatic interest which we had grown to expect in a ballet was absent from this one, [although it was] not a destruction of what had been valued in the past... but a gradual evolution towards a new expressiveness and a new technique”

“Are you taking the **, Mr Diaghilev?!” The Ballet Parade**

The ballet *Parade* was premiered in wartime Paris, in May 1917. It was a collaboration between Jean Cocteau, Pablo Picasso, and the composer Eric Satie. The choreography was provided by Leonid Massine. The production was under the patronage of Misia Sert (then Misia Edwards), a Polish pianist and Paris socialite.

- The narrative is almost non-existent. Three groups of circus artists try to attract an audience to an indoor performance, so everything is, in effect, a prelude to a show that we do not see.
- A sarcastic commentary on the situation in the art world
- Some of the costumes are made of cardboard and severely restrict movement
- The music is influenced by the popular styles of the day and includes several non-standard instruments such as a foghorn and a typewriter. It has a deliberately simple block-type construction and musical material that can fairly be described as “banal”
- The whole enterprise was a provocation, aiming to elicit a *Rite of Spring*-type scandal
- Close to the Dadaist aesthetics, it prompted Apollinaire to invent the word “surrealism”

What do we know about *Chout*?

Taking its name from a French transliteration of a Russian word meaning “buffoon”, *Chout* was the first successful collaboration between Diaghilev and Sergei Prokofiev (music written 1915, reworked and premiered 1921). The original Russian title was “The Tale of a Buffoon who Outwits Seven Other Buffoons”.

- The scenario was based on Russian folk tales chosen for their absurdity and obscenity. The Buffoon plays several tricks on the other Seven Buffoons. First, he pretends to whip his wife to death and then brings her back to life with the same “magic” whip. The Buffoons buy the whip, then whip their wives to death but cannot revive them. They hunt for the Buffoon, hoping to kill him, but they find a woman whom they take hostage (“she” happens to be the Buffoon in disguise). The Merchant comes to choose a wife from among the Seven Buffoons’ daughters, but chooses the disguised Buffoon instead, and takes “her” to his bedroom. The Buffoon manages to escape by substituting a goat for himself in the dark. Suspecting magic, the Merchant and his friends try to turn the goat back into a young girl, but kill it in the process. The Buffoon sheds his disguise, and reappears, claiming that the Merchant turned his sister into a goat and then murdered her. The Merchant has to pay a large amount in compensation, and the Buffoon leaves to celebrate with his wife.
- An absurdist “debasement” of an exotic Russian folk topic
- Ballet driven by design: The artist Mikhail Larionov also acts as a choreographer (assisted by the choreographer Slavinsky)
- The costumes are once again designedly unsuited for dancing
- The music develops the “grotesque” style pioneered by Stravinsky. It made reference to the Russian style at Diaghilev’s insistence
- Prokofiev’s first success in Paris – the beginning of his Western career

The Bolshevik ballet



Le pas d'acier, premiere 1927 (*Steps of Steel* was Prokofiev's preferred English rendering)

- Diaghilev needed to repackage “Russian exoticism” in the 1920s, and this was the result
- The idea comes, once again, from Diaghilev's fascination with a new artistic trend, in this case Constructivism, which was developed in Soviet Russia
- Ballet driven by design: a Soviet artist, Georgy Yakoulov, was invited to collaborate
- Prokofiev creates a musical counterpart for Constructivism: his score is filled with “machine music”
- The influence of *The Rite of Spring* can be found in the repetitive patterns (ostinati), dissonance and noise, as well as depersonalised collective dances, can be seen as stemming from “*The scream of the motor-horn, the rattle of machinery, the grind of the wheels, the beating of iron and steel, the roar of the underground railway, and other barbaric noises of modern life*” (T.S. Eliot on *The Rite of Spring* in 1921)

This urban, futuristic sound world was explored in 1923 by Arthur Honegger in his piece portraying a high-speed steam train, *Pacific 231*, which made an indelible impression on Prokofiev. Prokofiev's final “Factory” scene is written in the same manner.

- Prokofiev attempted to maintain neutrality, hoping to alienate neither the Russian émigré community in Paris nor the Soviet authorities. Even so, both take offence, and political scandal ensues. The ballet is nevertheless successful in the theatre and remained in Diaghilev's repertoire until his death in 1929
- Reconstructed by Princeton University (project leader Simon Morrison), although there is much less information than was available for the reconstruction of *The Rite of Spring*. The choreography was again by Millicent Hodson and Kenneth Archer. The result, for all its speculation, allows us to imagine the piece as the multi-media spectacle it was back in the 20s.

Conclusions

We know how successful *The Rite of Spring* has become as a free-standing musical score, as a reconstructed Nijinsky ballet, and as a non-Nijinsky ballet in more than 200 different productions. My aim was to show that *The Rite of Spring* was not ultimately regarded as a mistake in Diaghilev's circle, since its initial failure in no way deterred Diaghilev from experimenting further with avant-gardist ideas. The aesthetic of “ugliness” in the music, choreography and costumes, the “anti-ballet” approach, the avoidance of narrative, the impersonality that precludes the audience's empathy, the sonic assault, and even scandal itself – none of these components were disavowed by Diaghilev. On the contrary, he explored them thoroughly in further provocations. On a broader scale, Nijinsky's choreography gave birth to what we now call “modern dance”, while Stravinsky's score lay ground for the “machine music” of the 20th century and left traces on all kinds of other musical phenomena from minimalism to rock.

Sources and Further Reading

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