

Why stravinskys rite of spring is revolutionary

[History](#), [Revolution](#)



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The Rite of Spring is famously and perhaps infamously regarded as one of the most major turning points in the history of Western music. Furthermore, the notoriously catastrophic reception at the première of Stravinsky's 1912 composition has now come to be appreciated as an historical phenomenon in its own right of unmatched and, in all likelihood, unmatched proportions. The social climate capable of spawning outrage of such violent and uncouth physical embodiment as evidenced in the theatre in Paris that fateful day of 29 May, 1913, betrays at its core an undercurrent of volatility which reaches its talons well beyond the scope of aesthetic opinion and pleasurable diversion into something much more sinister. The Rite of Spring sparked a revolution which may be considered truly political in nature; a sociological confrontation which elicited spontaneous combustion in the music world and from which point, nothing would ever be the same. The following study will expound upon the nature of this revolution and collate a survey of possible reasons for its extraordinary and unprecedented sociological impact.

The Rite of Spring was the third in a triptych of ballets by Igor Stravinsky for Sergei Diaghilev's itinerant company the Ballets Russes, an initiative which travelled the continent to perform and met with particular success in Paris as

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the result of the city's large Russian exile population and its rooting in Neonationalistic Russian themes. The Rite's predecessors *The Firebird* (1910) and *Petrouchka* (1911) achieved near unanimous positivity and celebrated critical acclaim. The Rite was written over the course of several months in late 1912 but the rehearsal season was considerably extended due to its choreographic complexity, not to mention the comparable inexperience of the young dancer-choreographer, Nijinsky, for whom the piece was intended as a primary collaborator.

Although having presented the composition in its pianistic form to a veritable plethora of notable artistic and musical minds in the leadup to its orchestrally staged debut, Stravinsky is nonetheless purported to have had no indication whatsoever, nor reason to remotely conceive that the presentation of *The Rite* might provoke the scandal and outcry that ensued. Modris Eksteins provides a particularly colourful and somewhat exhaustive account of the circumstances of its premiere. In terms of historical data, reports from the premiere are conflicting, confused and wildly varying. Witnesses tell of catcalls, hissing, and a 'battery' of screams; of howling, whistling, spitting, slapping and punching. The police were called and at least forty of the offending protesters were forcibly evicted, this doing little to lull those remaining, who continued their commotion. By all accounts, the performance elicited no less than a " seismic response" which has retrospectively become a thing of legend.

The socio-cultural context of Paris at the time is of much import in setting the scene for such an upstanding brouhaha. Programmes being rehearsed

and billed contemporary to The Rite's premiere included Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloé* and Debussy's *Jeux*. The ballet audience was largely contingent on the lavish snobbery of both high society and the intelligentsia, comprising predominantly wealthy patrons with a desire for elegance and enchantment, and altogether typical of the common lightweight perceptions of French taste. Although exotic themes were very much in Parisian vogue, the passions and political motivations of Russia could hardly but remain distant in every respect. Enormous media hype surrounded The Rite's premiere and in an effort to garner an underlying core of support, Diaghilev ensured a "generous distribution of free tickets" to his loyal supporters. The particularities of the newly unveiled layout of the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées held that this ring-in cheersquad, albeit a guaranteed endorsement, was situated in an area of the auditorium central to the masses, essentially circled by the opposing faction. Such provocative positioning of the Russians in itself was perhaps enough to instigate a brawl in the first place.

With such explosive jeering and cheering, it is of exceptional logistical importance that according to numerous accounts, Stravinsky's music was completely drowned out by the audience reaction. With the 100-piece orchestra inaudible, dancers have been said to have relied exclusively on Nijinsky shouting counts from the prompt. Whether this pertained to the metric complexity of the composition or the pervading inability to hear it remains questionable but either way, it was certainly the case. The "abstract and absurd" quality of a company dancing their euphoric tribal sacrifice to a chorus of insults and abuse was perhaps a telling premonition of the Dada sentiment which succeeded the event several years later.

The lights in the auditorium were fully turned on but the noise continued and I remember Mlle. Piltz (the chosen maiden) executing her strange dance of religious hysteria on a stage dimmed by the blazing light in the auditorium, seemingly to the accompaniment of the disjointed ravings of a mob of angry men and women.

If in fact the orchestra was itself inaudible, it follows in point that the public outrage expressed so vehemently at The Rite's première was not a response to the pitches, rhythms, structures and instrumental colourings of Stravinsky's music, however bold his innovations, but to something else entirely. The inward turned feet and graceless jumping and pumping gestures of the dancers were certainly denounced as bad taste and grotesque caricature, with witnesses suggesting such blasphemy to the elevated art of ballet was received as a direct insult to the integrity of the cultivated audience. But while representing somewhat of an innovation in dance style, the propulsion for such outrage seems more deeply rooted in the commentary of stylistic change on the nature and sociological function of the arts, and the implications of this change in structuring socio-economic factions. As expressed so concisely by Ekstein,

Is there not sufficient evidence to suggest that the trouble was caused more by warring factions in the audience, by their expectations, their prejudices, their preconceptions about art, than by the work itself?

The Nature of Revolution

Thus it can be seen that Stravinsky's Rite of Spring generated a series of revolutions at various levels. I have taken the term revolution to refer both to

an upheaval of policy which breaks radically from the past, as well as to the cyclic implication of the word revolution, the continual and somewhat meditative return to a point, each time with new outlook.

In musical terms, The Rite brought a repudiation of the post-Romantic and Impressionistic ideals which permeated the Parisian scene. The typical French soundworld cut clearly by Debussy, Saint-Saëns, Ravel, Massenet, Fauré; but notably never adopted nor remotely assimilated by Stravinsky, was in this case so thoroughly replaced by the primacy of clustered chordal rhythms, uncharacteristic harmonic motivation, and intervallic asymmetry in melodic structures that the French government was effectively overthrown.

Despite much retrospective dispute to be discussed in due course, the programmatic genesis of The Rite was an imagined prehistoric ritual of a sacrificial virgin “ dancing herself to death” to entice the gods of the seasons. It is implicit that although a fabricated mythology, the essence is of a tribal Russian character. Thus not only does the work possess a haunting, if not definitively terrifying spiritual presence of extraordinary power, but makes a simultaneous nationalistic statement in doing so which can simply not avoid political implication due to the aggression with which it is asserted. The combination of such pounding rhythmic impetus and the breadth of the chords with which this ruthless impetuosity so compulsively drummed sends out the message of its all-encompassing rule in an urgent, brutal S. O. S. The combination of relentless rhythm and hard-edged, dissonant chordal units has the tendency to give a sense of impulse associated with violence. Heavy

and ultimately colouristic percussion, brass and winds were featured, these being associated with outdoor, warring instrumental forces.

However, as undoubtedly evidenced by ethnological studies, actions which may appear ferocious within a cultivated urban setting may hold completely different meaning within their own cultural context. That which we may observe as savage or defensive may in fact resonate with ecstasy and/or tribal belonging. A notable example of this is the distinct absence of clarity surrounding the nature of the virgin's sacrifice; whether this pertains to a giving of her life or of her maidenhood. Either way, the surrender carries mixed emotions in its duality of horror with martyrdom, and equally for the Western listener, in its voyeuristic presentation. The mammoth scope and intensity of *The Rite of Spring*, dwarfing humanity and quashing everything in its path, is bigger than Paris, bigger than Christianity, bigger than social class structure, pearls and silks. The tribe is bigger than the individual. *The Rite of Spring* is bigger than artistic divertimento, *The Rite of Spring* is essentially bigger than the arts itself.

Musical Modernism

The Rite is widely considered to be the primary hallmark example of Modernism in music. It was praised and acclaimed primarily for its rhythmic innovation and asymmetry. The work is an informed but conscious reaction against the Germanic Romantic realism, French Impressionism and the generic urban industrialist mentalities which pervaded the compositional climate at the turn of the century. At the same time, through the recently discovered inclusion of abstracted folksong transcriptions, *The Rite* was a

nod to Nationalistic tendencies, now on the rise with thanks to technological developments both in travel and the recording industry. This reactionary stance brought about by Modernism heralded the beginning of the current period of compositional production which encourages a multiplicity of styles for a multiplicity of audience tastes. Serialism and minimalism might coexist in the same cities; likewise Expressionism and Impressionism just across the border from each other.

The major musical innovation of *The Rite of Spring* was a new and absolute denial of expectation in terms of meter and harmony. At the most basic level, Stravinsky instigated a complete regeneration of the conventions of functional pitch and rhythm in Western music. The work's critical condemnation by Taruskin as "anti-symphonic" is certainly true in Schenkerian terms, in that pitch polarities in the scalic sense were radically abandoned: the leading note no longer led, the supertonic, subdominant and submediant no longer sought the triad. The same pertained to beat hierarchies within the bar and even the dominance of the downbeat. Established polarities and gravities which had evolved in due course over the history of Western music were at once relegated to something of the past. Instead, this music relaxed into a new and ultimately organic creation of expectation, allowing the music to breathe in every respect, through pause and rest, pace and weight, singing its strange new laments at whim of a deeper soul rather than stickytaped haphazardly onto someone else's framework.

This is not to say that the concept of polarities became obsolete. To the contrary, organic weight and depth became the natural new order. Gravity and innate direction was now established through a more abstract tool of arched melodic contouring, essentially through patterning and figuration; if not in the primary melodic voice, then in the accompanying section. Whether or not the base of these arch structures held pitch significance to a tonicized, home or bassline pedal became irrelevant, as the weight of the fall was enough in itself to establish a root. In the work's ' Introduction' this is repeatedly evident: firstly in the clarinet section at Figure 1, bassoons after 3, flutes leading into Figure 7, etcetera. It is important to note that while harmonic motivations were annulled, homophonic motions continued to exist, primarily doing so in a polytonal setting: for example, intervallic relations at Figure 94 in ' The Mysterious Circles of the Young Girls', where the clarinets and later, first violin section, move languidly together at the 7th.

As for rhythm, The Rite is perhaps most widely acclaimed for its eradication of meter as a polar tool and the subsequent introduction of the use of time signatures purely for organizational purposes. Its constantly shifting meters to the point of seasickness have retained their power of obscurity even to the present day. It has been mentioned that the undisputed reign of the downbeat had already been questioned. In ' Dance of the Adolescent Girls', the accentuation patterns in the string opening at Figure 13 are as good as anti-metric. Although the famous bassoon solo exists in somewhat of a dreamscape beyond the scope of meter, the weight of the downbows at the start of the second movement function effectively as a transition which is

equally free of metric form. Melodic phrases are grouped into threes and fives, the bass at Figure 28, for example, delineating a broad 6/8+6/8 within a context where others are playing superficially in the notated meter of 2/4, but not within any kind of phrase arrangement sympathetic to the 3-bar base cushion. It follows that such freedom opens the floodgates for polymeters, and equally, polytonalities to coexist in true equality. A notational innovation particular to Stravinsky is the beaming of groups of notes such as quavers as they sound metrically, rather than the way they would ordinarily fit into a given duple or compound metric frame. This notational peculiarity makes the polymeters easy to identify from a visual standpoint.

Structurally, much debate has ensued about the architecture of *The Rite of Spring*. The majority of critics of the period observed its construction as a series of independent dances in an almost Cubist-style pastiche. This reading supported the genesis of the work in the ballet tradition. The most vocal of these was Taruskin, who identified 'static blocks' progressing, if at all, through 'repetition, alternation, and above all, sheer inertial accumulation... Each chord or motif was 'so fixed that even transposition - let alone transformation or transition - were inconceivable'. Such ideology has been recently challenged by the favoured notion of organic evolution at a more cellular level, essentially posing the possibility of through-composition. It seems natural and essentially implicit that *The Rite*, by nature of its seasonal programmatic ties, should undergo a process of careful growth, cocooning and rebirth over of its visceral half hour in the ear.

Revolutions of Appraisal

The Rite of Spring also enjoyed what one might consider a series of revolutions of appraisal. Following the calamity of its original balletic première, Stravinsky was quick to denounce the work's tie to the stage so that it might exist independently in the concert hall in and of itself. It is no secret that he was disappointed in the product of Nijinsky and disenchanted with the production as a whole. Obviously there were also significant financial advantages to the work's availability in concert version and this undoubtedly also played a role in its redefinition. Thus The Rite's interdisciplinary conception was staunchly and quite strangely abandoned in favor of its musical construction inasmuch as Stravinsky giving, over the course of his life, many dramatically differing accounts of factual events in an effort to disguise or distort the nature of its compositional origins. This somewhat mechanistic dissociation of the work towards an abstract, absolute and/or autonomous entity, whether or not it could possibly exist as such with its particular strength of character, was a telling precursor to Stravinsky's Neoclassical mindset, a purging and reinvention of something heavy with baggage but which might then live on in its cleansed form. It is an inexplicable curiosity that in what van den Toorn describes as a "complete reversal of the riot" that had gone before, the 1914 première performance of The Rite on the concert platform was an absolute unequivocal success; so much so that Stravinsky himself was "hoisted to the shoulders of a few bystanders [and] led triumphantly from the hall of the Casino de Paris by an exuberant crowd of admirers". A further revolution in the work's appreciation took place in the late 1960s based on the

rediscovery of sketches, source materials and other evidence. Apparently this revisionist revival was equally enjoyed by the composer himself, who appeared equally interested to revisit the work's origins in what was casually designated a 'revisionist revival'.

As an aside, it is a curious multiplicity to note that the French version of the work's title, *Le Sacre du Printemps*, identifies directly the character of the chosen maiden, *Le sacre* being the sacrificed one in question. In translation to *The Rite*, the work takes on a more holistic quality of process, ceremony and celebration. While originally conceived as a staged piece, the work is universally acknowledged for its complete bonding with dramatic vision, its honesty and rawness, unique in comparison with Stravinsky's other work which is often heavy with satire and irony. In transferral to the concert platform, the intensity of the drama is so strong as to be able to hold its own even without an interdisciplinary accompaniment. *The Rite* is an existing and ultimately monumental fatalistic presence which, more surely than ever, "needs no frame, no theatrical artifice". This is a work which seems perhaps more aptly suited to the genre of ceremonial theatre than to the stage or even the platform.

Thus, the many revolutions, both instigated and undergone by Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*. The work's historical evolution over the course of the 20th century as a pivotal compositional cornerstone has become modern-day folklore of its own, and of mammoth proportions; rousing freedom and preaching the 'Great Sacrifice' for the sake of seasonal rebirth and newness of thought in a constantly revolving artistic climate.