***The Rite of Spring* (*Le Sacre du Printemps*); Théâtre des Champs-Elysées, Paris, 29 May 1913.**

The premiere of *The Rite of Spring* at the Théâtre des Champs-Elysées in Paris on 29 May 1913 provoked greater storms of controversy than any other work of ballet history and an opening night ‘riot’ which has become legendary. With a ground-breaking score by Igor Stravinsky and equally innovative choreography by Vaslav Nijinsky, *Rite* was the most significant declaration of modernism to appear up to that time on the dance stage.

Commissioned by the Russian impresario Serge Diaghilev for the Ballets Russes, the score was viewed from the first as a touchstone of musical and choreographic modernism. For Stravinsky, the score was a paean to his Russian homeland and ‘the violent Russian spring that...was like the whole earth cracking’.[[1]](#footnote-1) The composer conceived and planned the ballet’s scenario with the Russian painter and ethnologist Nicholas Roerich, who designed the ballet’s ethnographically informed sets and costumes. Vaslav Nijinsky, the company’s fabled male star, created the choreography, using a stylised version of Russian folk dance as his primary inspiration but coupled this with movements that largely rejected the precepts of nineteenth-century ballet. The original 1913 work was performed only nine times (including the *répétition générale)* and soon became a ‘lost’ ballet. Since then more than 200 versions have been choreographed, many bearing little relationship to Nijinsky’s and most of them now lost, but testifying to the work’s enduring power as a cultural icon. In 1987 Millicent Hodson, a dance lecturer known for the dance reconstructions she stages with her partner Kenneth Archer, led an archivally based reconstruction of Nijinsky’s work for the Joffrey Ballet.

*Rite* had its genesis in 1910, shortly after the premiere of Stravinsky’s first work for the Ballets Russes, *Firebird*. Toward the end of that year, the composer told Diaghilev about a musical-choreographic work he had begun to compose to a libretto conceived in collaboration with Roerich. It was to represent ‘pagan Russia…the mystery and surge of the creative power of spring’.[[2]](#footnote-2) The climax of the ballet was a ritual in which a girl – the Chosen Maiden (danced by Maria Piltz) – danced herself to death to propitiate the god of spring. Nijinsky’s semi-abstract choreography emphasised weight and angularity rather than the aerial; the dancers stamped, ran, trembled and fell to Stravinsky’s relentless, complex rhythms. In the final *danse sacrale*, the Chosen Maiden expired in a crescendo of spasmodic leaps, at once submissive and heroic, terrified and exultant. The work stressed community, a human tribe convulsed in violence and driven by the vital instincts that Freud spoke about in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), a world of faceless, impersonal beings. With its extensive use of rhythmic counterpoint (different parts of the body often moved to different counts), the choreography was partly indebted to the eurhythmics system developed by Émile Jaques-Dalcroze, whose centre at Hellerau both Nijinsky and Diaghilev had visited in 1912. (At Hellerau Diaghilev hired Marie Rambert, a young eurhythmics instructor, to assist Nijinsky.) At the same time, the choreography’s non-balletic or even anti-balletic movements stressed that the language of ballet in performance could be very different from that practised by the dancers in their daily class and did not have to reproduce nineteenth-century forms to be considered ballet. Finally, *The Rite of Spring* asserted that in the hands of a gifted choreographer the *danse d’école* or academic dance could be transformed into highly creative form of corporeal expression.

The audience greeted the first performance of *The Rite of Spring* with pandemonium. The violence which erupted in the audience nearly overwhelmed the spectacle enacted on stage; Nijinsky, who did not appear in the ballet, stood in the wings shouting counts to the dancers, who could not hear the orchestra above the din. Reviews ranged from thoughtful evaluations to contemptuous dismissals. London’s *Daily Telegraph* termed the ballet ‘a whirlwind of cacophonous, “primitive” hideousness’,[[3]](#footnote-3) but French music critic Léon Vallas thought the score ‘the music of the future’.[[4]](#footnote-4) Jacques Rivière hailed the ballet in a very long piece for *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, the leading French intellectual journal: ‘By breaking up movement and bringing it back to the simple gesture’ Nijinsky caused ‘expression to return to the dance’.[[5]](#footnote-5) Some critics linked the choreography to Cubism, the avant-garde movement associated with the painters Pablo Picasso and Georges Braques.

With *The Rite of Spring*, Stravinsky and Nijinsky declared themselves modern artists. The ballet was a summing-up and a beginning; in French poet Jean Cocteau’s phrase, it was a ‘work which opened and closed an epoch’.[[6]](#footnote-6) Its creators shared a cultural heritage and a homeland, and each in his way paid homage to them. Roerich’s knowledge of ancient Slavic cultures, Stravinsky’s transformation of Russian folk sources and Nijinsky’s abstraction of Russian folk dance combined to make *The Rite of Spring* a potent metaphor for a vision of Russia which celebrated its legendary Scythian past through a lens of transgressive modernism.

**Shelley C. Berg**

**References and Further Reading**

Berg, S. C. (1988) *Le Sacre du Printemps: Seven Productions from Nijinsky to Martha Graham*, Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press.

Buckle, R. (1971) *Nijinsky*, New York: Simon and Schuster. (The standard English-language biography of Nijinsky by the mid-twentieth-century’s leading British authority on the Ballets Russes)

Bullard, T. (1971) ‘The First Performance of Igor Stravinsky’s “Sacre du Printemps”’ 3 volumes. Ph.D., The University of Rochester, Eastman School of Music. (A detailed analysis of the French reception of *The Rite of Spring*, along with a full collection of the press generated by the work, both in the original French and in English translation)

Eksteins, M. (1989) *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin. (A work of cultural history that sets *The Rite of Spring* within the broad context of the First World War)

Garafola, L. (1989) *Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes*, New York: Oxford University Press. (A comprehensive account of the company’s history and a choreographic analysis of its repertoire)

Hodson, M. (1996) *Nijinsky’s Crimes Against Grace: Reconstruction Score of the Original Choreography for Le Sacre du Printemps*, Stuyvesant, NY: Pendragon Press. (A detailed account of Millicent Hodson’s reconstruction of Nijinsky’s *Rite of Spring*, including her bar-by-bar score for the choreography)

Jordan, S., and L. Nicholas (2002) *Stravinsky the Global Dancer: A Chronology of Choreography to the Music of Igor Stravinsky*, London: Roehampton University. (A chronology of more than 200 versions of *The Rite of Spring* with brief descriptions of most items)

<http://ws1.roehampton.ac.uk/stravinsky/>

Kelly, T. F. (2000) *First Nights: Five Musical Premieres*, New Haven: Yale University Press. (Includes a chapter on the chaotic reception of the premiere of *The Rite of Spring* in 1913)

Rivière, J. (1960) *The Ideal Reader: Selected Essays*, edited, translated, and introduced by Blanche A. Price, New York: Meridian Books. (Includes a complete version in English translation of Rivière’s 1913 essay on *The Rite of Spring* originally published in *La Nouvelle Revue francaise*)

Taruskin, R. (1996) *Stravinsky and the Russian Traditions: A Biography of the Works Through ‘Mavra’*, Berkeley: University of California Press. (A magisterial work tracing the genesis of Stravinsky’s ‘Russian’ works, including *The Rite of Spring*)

**Moving Image Material**

The Search for Nijinsky's *Rite of Spring* (1989) WNET/New York and Danmarks Radio in association with Czechoslovak Television and BBC, La Sept and NOS Television. (Documentary on the history and reconstruction of Nijinsky's *Rite of Spring* by Millicent Hodson and Kenneth Archer, concluding with a performance of the work by the Joffrey Ballet)

*Riot at the Rite* (2006) BBC Drama and BBC Classical Music. (A dramatisation of events surrounding the premiere of *The Rite of Spring*, with extended clips of the Millicent Hodson-Kenneth Archer recreation performed by the Finnish National Ballet, with the Royal Ballet’s Zenaida Yanowsky as the Chosen Maiden)

YouTube has clips of many later versions of *The Rite of Spring*.

**Paratextual Material**

1) Nicholas Roerich, costume design for a ‘Painted Maiden’ in *The Rite of Spring*. Bakhrushin State Central Theatrical Museum, Moscow.

Reproduced from Richard Tarushkin, *Stravinsky and the Russian Traditions*, vol. 2, cover.

2) Young Men and Youths in *The Rite of Spring*, 1913. Photo by Gerschel. *Le Théâtre*, 1 July 1913, p. 19.

3) A group of Maidens in *The Rite of Spring*, 1913. Marie Rambert is second from left and Maria Piltz, who danced the role of the Chosen Maiden, is second from right. Photo by Gerschel. *Le Théâtre*, 1 July 1913, p. 20

4) The Old Sage in *The Rite of Spring*, 1913. Photo by Gerschel. *Le Théâtre*, 1 July 1913, p. 20.

1. Shelley C. Berg, (1988) *Le Sacre du Printemps: Seven Productions from Nijinsky to Martha Graham*, Ann Arbor, MI: UMI Research Press: 16. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Ibid., 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid., 60. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Jacques Riviére, ‘Le Sacre du Printemps’, *La Nouvelle Revue française*, Nov. 1913, p. 722. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Berg, 61. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)