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Resisting "The Rite"

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Resisting *The Rite*

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Editorial abstract

The paper analyses multifaceted manifestations of resistance to "Rite of Spring" by Igor Stravinsky. It discusses artistic, cultural, philosophical, and political sources of the resistance.

Keywords: Stravinsky; The Rite of Spring; Le Sacre du printemps; resistance; music; ballet.

We in the Stravinsky game saw this coming from afar. We knew that we would spend the 2012-13 season dancing with *The Rite of Spring*. It was one of those inescapable tributes to round numbers on which the classical music business depends. In North Carolina we stole a march on the actual centennial by starting our celebrations in the fall of 2012, thus staying clear of the twin steam rollers, Wagner and Verdi, heading our way in 2013. But practically every year there's something. In 2011 it was Liszt. 2010 brought us Chopin and Schumann. There was Haydn in 2009 and Rimsky-Korsakov in 2008 (inescapable in Russia, anyway, even though they didn't get around to the official celebrations until 2010). The Shostakovich centennial in 2006 was one that I personally resisted. I spent the whole year declining invitations, and waited till 2007 to start airing a talk that I subtitled "Post-centennial Reflections," in which I reviewed and deplored the polluted pool that Shostakovich studies have become, so full of political invective and fraudulent claims. But I found the prospect of commemorating *The Rite of Spring* irresistible.

Why the inconsistency? Is there an inconsistency? I would like to argue that there isn't, because the *Rite* centennial differs from the others in that it celebrates not a person but a piece, and how many pieces of music have that kind of stature? I can think of only one other, and I will name it in due course. But not even that one possible rival has actually been celebrated, as far as I know, with galas and conferences and exhibits all over the world. *The Rite* is unique, and uniqueness invites inquiry.

So why *The Rite*?

To begin with—and this is something musicologists are apt to forget—*The Rite* is not just a piece of music. It originated, very self-consciously, as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a mixed-media synthesis, and belongs to the histories of dance and stage design as well as music. One of the marks of *The Rite*'s unique status is the number of books that have been devoted to it—certainly a greater number than have been devoted to any other ballet, possibly to any other individual musical composition (with that same likely rival). They include general introductions by Peter Hill, in English, Volker Scherliess, in German (the latter published during Stravinsky's centennial year).³⁵⁰ There are heavy-duty academic analytical studies by Allen Forte (1978) and Pieter van den Toorn (1987).³⁵¹ There is a deluxe facsimile edition of Stravinsky's sketches, with detailed annotations by his assistant, Robert Craft, and an even more deluxe facsimile of the full autograph score, plus the piano four-hands arrangement, published for the current centennial along with a large collection of essays.³⁵² An even more lavish commemorative collection was issued by the Moscow Bolshoi Theater.³⁵³ There is a copious compilation of facsimile reviews in several languages from Russian to Catalan, which seems to have become a bibliographical rarity: the single copy offered for sale at Amazon.com the day I looked was priced at \$2500.³⁵⁴ (Hang on to your copies!) There is even a book about *The Rite of Spring*'s tympani part—just a pamphlet, really, at 35 pages, and self-published, but a bound volume nonetheless.³⁵⁵ And there is a little book called *Le Sacre du printemps: Le tradizioni russe, la sintesi di Stravinsky*, which turns out to be a translation of the twelfth chapter of my monograph of

³⁵⁰ Peter Hill. 2000. *Stravinsky: The Rite of Spring*. Cambridge Music Handbooks. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Volker Scherliess. 1982. *Igor Strawinsky, Le sacre du printemps*. Meisterwerke der Musik. München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag.

³⁵¹ Allen Forte. 1978. *The Harmonic Organization of The Rite of Spring*. New Haven: Yale University Press. Peter C. van den Toorn. 1987. *Stravinsky and The Rite of Spring: The Beginnings of a Musical Language*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

³⁵² Igor Stravinsky. 1969. *The Rite of Spring (Le Sacre du Printemps) Sketches 1911-1913*. London: Boosey & Hawkes; *Idem*. 2013. *The Rite of Spring, Facsimile of the Autograph Full Score*, ed. Ulrich Mosch. Basel: Paul Sacher Stiftung and London: Boosey & Hawkes. *Idem*. 2013. *The Rite of Spring, Facsimile of the Version for Piano Four-Hands*, ed. Felix Meyer. Basel: Paul Sacher Stiftung and London: Boosey & Hawkes; Hermann Danuser and Heidy Zimmermann, eds. 2013. *Avatar of Modernity: The Rite of Spring Reconsidered (Essays)*. Basel: Paul Sacher Stiftung and London: Boosey & Hawkes.

³⁵³ Pavel Gershenson and Olga Manulkina, eds. 2013. *1913/2013: Vek Vesni svyashchennoy—vek modernizma*. Moscow: Bolshoi Theater.

³⁵⁴ François Lesure, ed. 1980. *Le Sacre du Printemps: Dossier de presse*. Geneva: Minkoff.

³⁵⁵ Charles Lafayette White. 1965. *Tympani instructions for playing Igor Stravinsky's "Sacre du printemps"*. Los Angeles: C. L. White.

1996, *Stravinsky and the Russian Traditions*.³⁵⁶ Its Italian publication was an act of pure piracy, suggested, according to the preface, by Luciano Berio, who I'm sure intended me no harm. I mention it not (or not only) out of immodesty, but also so that, if these words should ever come to the attention of the publishers, they might be shamed into coughing up some royalties.

But there are almost an equal number of books devoted to *The Rite* as dance, beginning with surveys by Shelley Berg and Ada D'Adamo (the latter a veritable coffee-table book).³⁵⁷ Three volumes have been devoted to individual choreographies, two of which address the original one by Nijinsky: one a booklet by the prolific theatre historian Etienne Souriau and the other being Millicent Hodson's magnificently illustrated account of her painstaking reconstructive work for the Joffrey Ballet, laid out measure by measure against Stravinsky's piano score.³⁵⁸

Last, and far from least, there is Truman C. Bullard's imposing dissertation on *The Rite's* first night, which reminds us that *The Rite* was not just a score, and not just a ballet. *The Rite* was an event—perhaps the most notorious event in the history of twentieth-century art, and one that links up momentarily, or at least suggestively, with other notorious events in other histories.³⁵⁹ Bullard set it as his task to get to the bottom of the event and determine who or what was responsible for it, and, like any other writer in his wake, I will be mining his wonderful documentary compendium in this essay. But there was never any doubt who its protagonist was. The leading role in *The-Rite-as-event* was played neither by Stravinsky nor by Nijinsky, nor by Nikolai Roerich, the scenarist and designer. Nor was it played by the orchestra or by its conductor, Pierre Monteux. Nor was it even played by Sergey Diaghilev, the Man Behind the Curtain, the puppetmaster who set it all in motion. Nor by Gabriel Astruc, the manager of the brand-new Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, who (as Bullard revealed for the first time) also had a major hand in the run-up to the event.³⁶⁰ It was none of these.

³⁵⁶ Richard Taruskin. 2002. *Le Sacre du Printemps: le tradizioni russe, la sintesi di Stravinsky*, trans. Daniele Torelli. Milano: Ricordi; 2nd ed. Universal MGB, 2011; cf. Richard Taruskin 1996. *Stravinsky and the Russian Traditions*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press: 849-966.

³⁵⁷ Shelley Berg. 1988. *Le sacre du printemps: Seven productions from Nijinsky to Martha Graham*. Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press. Ada D'Adamo. 1999. *Danzare il rito: Le sacre du printemps attraverso il Novecento*. Biblioteca teatrale. Rome: Bulzano.

³⁵⁸ Étienne Souriau. 1990. *Le Sacre du Printemps de Nijinsky*. Paris: Théâtre des Champs-Élysées. Millicent Hodson. 1996. *Nijinsky's Crime against Grace: Reconstruction Score of the Original Choreography for Le Sacre Du Printemps*. Stuyvesant, NY: Pendragon Press.

³⁵⁹ Truman C. Bullard. 1971. *The First Performance of Igor Stravinsky's Sacre du printemps*. 3 vols. PhD diss. Eastman School of Music.

³⁶⁰ On Astruc and his role, see most recently Nathalie Sergent et al. ed. 2013. *Théâtre, Comédie et*

As those who know the story will recall, the protagonist of *The Rite-as-event* was the audience, whose outraged and outrageous resistance to the work took everyone by surprise, even if (as always) various parties claimed later to have foreseen or even engineered it (Jean Cocteau supposedly writing that the audience had played the part written for it; or Diaghilev saying, according to Stravinsky, that it was “exactly what I wanted”).³⁶¹ The first night of *The Rite*, when, as Stravinsky laconically reported in a letter home, *delo dokhodilo do draki* (“things got as far as fighting”)³⁶² was indeed a fiasco, a rejection that would not be redeemed for many years. It left everyone, whatever their later contentions, with a sense of failure and letdown. If *The Rites’s* reception had indeed been a *succès de scandale*, it would have generated the kind of publicity that guaranteed full houses and revivals. But that is not what happened.

The Ballets Russes presented *The Rite* three more times in Paris in June of 1913, as scheduled, then took it to London for another three showings in July. These performances went off without incident, but neither did they generate any special enthusiasm or interest. London critics expressed a bit of self-satisfaction at the placidity with which their countrymen received what had so antagonized the Parisians a month before. “We are either surprisingly quick or surprisingly careless in accommodating ourselves to new forms of art,” said *The Times*.³⁶³ Nijinsky gave an interview to the *Daily Mail* in which he “cordially sa[id] thanks and ‘Bravo!’ to the English public for their serious interest and attention in *The Festival of Spring*. There was no ridicule . . . and there was great applause.”³⁶⁴

And yet after this London run Diaghilev decided not to revive *The Rite*, whereas *Firebird* and *Petrushka* had become, and would remain, Ballet Russes perennials. The usual explanation for this is the break between Diaghilev and Nijinsky over Nijinsky’s decision to marry. But that was more a pretext than a reason. *The Rite* was expensive. It required nineteen more musicians than any other score in the Ballet Russes repertory, and many extra rehearsals. Canceling it seemed an inevitable commercial decision. Diaghilev knew enough to accompany *The Rite* on every showing (including the stormy prem-

Studio des Champs-Élysées: Trois scènes et une formidable aventure. Paris: Verlhac Éditions.

³⁶¹ Jean Cocteau. *A Call to Order*, paraphrased in Richard Buckle. 1979. *Diaghilev*. New York: Athaneum: 253; Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft. 1959. *Conversations with Igor Stravinsky*. Garden City: Doubleday: 48.

³⁶² Letterto Maximilian Steinberg, 20 June/3 July 1913; ed. Igor Blazhkov in “Pis’ma I. F. Stravinskogo,” in Lyudmila Sergeevna Dyachkova and Boris Mikhailovich Yarustovsky, ed. 1973. *I. F. Stravinskiy: Stat’i i material’i*. Moscow: Sovetskiy Kompozitor: 474; ed. Viktor Varunts in I. F. Stravinsky, *Perepiska s russkimi korrespondentami*, II (Moscow: Kompozitor, 2000) : 99.

³⁶³ *Times* of London, 26 July 1913; quoted in Nesta MacDonald. 1975. *Diaghilev Observed*. New York: Dance Horizons: 104.

³⁶⁴ *Daily Mail*, 12 July 1913; quoted in MacDonald 1975: 99.

ière) with his most dependable crowd-pleasers: *Les Sylphides*, *Le Spectre de la Rose*, and the *Danses Polovtsiennes du "Prince Igor."* That kept the houses full enough. But Stravinsky's third ballet had proved a bad investment, and Diaghilev seems to have told Stravinsky as much. In an all but uniquely self-revealing letter he sent four months later to Alexandre Benois, his collaborator on *Petrushka*, Stravinsky gave vent to the anxieties he was feeling in the wake of *The Rite*. *Akh, dorogoy!* Stravinsky wrote, *Ah, my dear—*

*even now this last offspring of mine won't give me a moment's peace. What an incredible storm of teeth-gnashing rages about it! Seryozha [Diaghilev] gives me horrible news about how people who were full of enthusiasm and unwavering sympathy for my earlier works have turned against this one. So what, say I, or rather think I—that's how it ought to be. But what has made Seryozha himself seem to waver toward *Le Sacre*, a work he never listened to in rehearsals without exclaiming, "Divine!"? He has even said (something that by rights ought to be taken as a compliment) that this piece ought to ripen a while after completion, since the public is not yet ready for it—but why then did he never before bring up such a course of action? . . . To put it as simply as possible, I'm afraid that he has fallen under bad influences—strong not so much from the moral as from the material point of view (and very strong). To tell the truth, reviewing my impressions of his attitude toward *Le Sacre*, I am coming to the conclusion that he will not encourage me in this direction. This means that I am deprived of my single and truest support when it comes to propagating my artistic ideas. You will agree that this knocks me completely off my feet, for I cannot, I simply cannot write what they want from me—that is, repeat myself—repeat anyone else you like, only not yourself!—for that is how people write themselves out. But enough about *Le Sacre*. It makes me miserable.*³⁶⁵

What rescued *The Rite* was the first Parisian concert performance of the score, led by Pierre Monteux, who had conducted the all-but-drowned-out première, and who in later life confirmed his first impression of *The Rite*: "I decided then and there that the symphonies of Beethoven and Brahms were the only music for me, not the music of this crazy Russian!"³⁶⁶ But he gave the crazy Russian the night of his life, leading an "ideal" performance, as the composer gratefully recalled it half a century later, and allowed him to experience what he called (thinking perhaps of Nijinsky's curtain calls) "a triumph such as few composers can have known the like of."³⁶⁷ *The Rite* now began to make its way,

³⁶⁵ Letter of 20 September/3 October 1913; Dyachkova and Yarustovsky. ed. 1973. *I. F. Stravinskiy: stat'i i material'i*: 477-78.

³⁶⁶ Doris G. Monteux. 1965. *It's All in the Music: The Life and Work of Pierre Monteux*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux: 91.

³⁶⁷ Igor Stravinsky. 1959. 'Apropos 'Le Sacre du Printemps.' *Saturday Review*, 26 December: 30; the wording was improved (" . . . such as few composers have enjoyed") when the text was reprinted

until it achieved the colossal iconic status that it has today. It is an unequalled status (but for the single possible exception with which I continue to tantalize you, dear reader); but what possesses that status is just the score, the artifact—or the experience—that was vindicated by Pierre Monteux on 5 April 1914, not the *Gesamtkunstwerk* that went down in flames on 29 May 1913. That night in May is the date that shimmers in history,³⁶⁸ but the permanence of *The Rite* was assured on that later night in April. It is from then that the unbroken tradition of the piece—that is, of the score—in performance dates.

That artifact, the *Sacre* score, has a rare distinction among twentieth-century “concert” or “classical” compositions as a central constituent of both the academic canon and the performing repertory. The gulf that opened up in the twentieth century between the canon (that is, the works praised, or at least parsed, in the classroom) and the repertory (that is, the works applauded by paying customers in the concert hall) may embarrass us now, but it was an accepted fact of life when I was a student half a century ago. You would almost never hear tell of Rachmaninoff or Shostakovich or Respighi or Vaughan Williams in the classroom or in textbooks and you would almost never hear Schoenberg or Webern, and only rarely hear Bartók or Berg, in the concert hall. Some twentieth-century composers inhabited both the canon and the repertory, but only by dint of compartmentalization. Richard Strauss crossed over from canon to repertory between *Elektra* and *Rosenkavalier*. Aaron Copland deliberately wrote some of his pieces for the one and others for the other. But by the 1950s, *The Rite of Spring* had become indispensable to both. Both as a work and an event it is reported in every textbook on music history, and heard in every music history course. Countless graduate seminars have worried its every note to death. But it is also universally heard and studied in music appreciation courses and books, which aim to popularize the repertory rather than maintain the canon; and it is in the active repertoire of every professional orchestra (but very few ballet companies; Balanchine, for one, never went near it). So, while the canonic status of *The Rite* could not be higher, as witness the list of serious scholarly monographs reeled off above, you will also find *The Rite* in any list of the favorite fifty pieces and in any consumer guide to recordings, and there are many dozens of recordings to choose from.

in Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft. 1962. *Expositions and Developments*. Garden City: Doubleday: 164 (italics original both times).

³⁶⁸ And not just for musicians. Pauline Kael began her legendarily hyperbolic review of Bernardo Bertolucci’s *Last Tango in Paris* (now usually cited as her greatest blunder) by declaring that its opening night “should become a landmark in movie history comparable to May 29, 1913—the night *Le Sacre du Printemps* was first performed—in music history” (Tango. *The New Yorker*, 28 October 1972; rpt. in Pauline Kael. 1976. *Reeling*. Boston: Atlantic Monthly Press/Little, Brown: 171.

The whole story of its absorption into the repertoire is encapsulated in a comment that Louis Speyer, the veteran Boston Symphony oboist and English horn player, who had played in the orchestra at the première under Monteux (who had brought him to Boston), made to Truman Bullard, who was interviewing him for his dissertation. Describing the first sectional rehearsal of the winds and brass, Speyer recalled that “already the introduction was a surprise, a bassoon in that register, we all looked and even some composers present asked if it was a saxophone.” (Later, as you may recall, this story was morphed apocryphally into an anecdote about the aged Saint-Saëns at the première.³⁶⁹) Speyer then continued, referring to the bassoonist Abdou Laus (1888-1945), who also went on to play under Monteux in Boston, that he “was the first to attack this difficult solo; he had to find fingerings which was a terrible experience. Today any good player knows this solo.”³⁷⁰ And not only good players; all conservatory students study their parts for *Le Sacre* because they know they will be asked to play them at auditions. Programming the piece is no longer a special event; audiences expect it alongside the Beethoven symphonies and the Tchaikovsky concertos. Since the 1980s, when musicology developed a conscience—or, at least, became self-conscious—the canon and its formation have been the object of skeptical sociological study. But while consciousness of the social practices that have informed the construction of canon and repertoire alike has softened their borders somewhat, it has not effaced the distinction, or the invidious judgments that follow from it.

The invidiousness works in both directions. Stravinsky lived to see his early works achieve standard repertoire status, and it made him nervous. In the late 1950s, finally succumbing to Robert Craft’s importuning and dictating some memoirs about his three pre-war ballets—something he had refused to do for their first collaboration, *Conversations with Igor Stravinsky* (1959)—for use in various publicity releases before they were consolidated and revised for *Expositions and Developments* (1962), he remarked that “*Petroushka* [sic], like

³⁶⁹ It surfaces most dependably in promotional hype, especially in France, as in the following passage from a French ad for a San Francisco Symphony DVD: *Premier basson de l'orchestre de San Francisco, Stephen Poulson, à qui échoit le rude honneur d'entonner à découvert les six premières mesures de l'oeuvre, rapporte que le vénérable Saint-Saëns, 78 printemps à la création du Sacre, se récriait: «Si ça, c'est de la musique, moi je suis un babouin!»*

(The principal bassoonist of the San Francisco Symphony, Stephen Poulson, to whom falls the tough honor of intoning the first six measures of the work, reports that the venerable Saint-Saëns, a man of 78 springs at the time of the *Rite* première, protested, « If that’s music, I’m a baboon ! ») [<http://www.telerama.fr/musiques/le-sacre-du-printemps-san-francisco-symphony-orchestra-dir-michael-tilson-thomas,16663.php>] Stravinsky claimed in a late memoir that Saint-Saëns (“a sharp little man—I had a good view of him”) came not to the première but to the triumphant 1914 concert performance (A propos ‘Le Sacre du Printemps.’ *Saturday Review*, 26, December 1959: 30; rpt. *Expositions and Developments*: 164).

³⁷⁰ Truman C. Bullard. 1971. *The First Performance of Igor Stravinsky’s Le Sacre du Printemps*, Ph.D dissertation. University of Rochester, I:99.

The Firebird and *Le Sacre du Printemps*, has already survived a half-century of destructive popularity, and if it does not sound as fresh today as, for example, Schoenberg's *Five Pieces for Orchestra* and Webern's six, the reason is partly that the Viennese pieces have been protected by fifty years of neglect."³⁷¹ His nervousness was understandable given the puritanical strictures, as common in those days as they were authoritative, against modern music that audiences liked: a verdict pronounced not only by Adorno, whose *Philosophie der neuen Musik* Stravinsky seems (by Robert Craft's avowal) never to have read, but also, and even more ominously by those, like René Leibowitz, who accused composers of audience-pleasing music—most notably Bartók, whose late works crossed over, like Strauss's operas, from canon to repertory—of “compromise,” a baleful term with ruinous implications in the aftermath of World War II, especially for someone like Stravinsky, who had an interwar flirtation with Fascism to live down.

But of course Carolina Performing Arts would not have hosted the year-long bacchanalia of tribute that provided this essay with its pretext in honor of Schoenberg's *Five Pieces for Orchestra* or Webern's six. Nor did we have one in 2010 in honor of *The Firebird*, or in 2011 in honor of *Petrushka*. Severine Neff, the Schoenberg specialist to whose initiative we owed said bacchanalia, and to whom we participants have all expressed heartfelt gratitude for giving us our forum, knows this better than anyone. Inasmuch as she let it be known in Carolina Performing Arts's publicity materials, I feel it permissible to mention here that she had originally proposed honoring the centennial not of *The Rite* but of Schoenberg's *Pierrot lunaire*, and was overruled. From all these stories and testimonies we can conclude that neither a piece belonging only to the canon, like *Pierrot*, nor a piece belonging only to the repertory, like *Firebird*, could have given rise to such an orgy of commemoration. You have to have the dual status that seems to be *The Rite*'s alone, among twentieth-century masterpieces. And the relevant question is not how did it happen that a piece of modernist music managed, unlike Schoenberg's or Webern's, to join the standard repertory, but rather how did it happen that in its crossing over to the repertory *The Rite* did not lose its commanding place in the academic canon?

The answer (rather obviously, I think) lies in the relationship between *The Rite* as an artifact and *The Rite* as an event. It was the furious resistance the work encountered on its first exposure that prevented its later popularity from becoming “destructive” of its reputation. Its equal fame as artifact and as event combined to give it an even higher status—the status of myth. And now it is time to name the work I have been adumbrating as *The Rite*'s only possible rival in iconic or mythic stature—and that work, as you have probably already

³⁷¹ Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft. 1981 [1962]. *Expositions and Developments*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press: 137.

guessed by now (especially if you are familiar with books by Thomas Kelly), is Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, another work that lives as an epoch-making feat of composition, but that also had a legendary first night.³⁷² The legend of the Ninth also entails audience incomprehension, if not violent resistance. Beethoven was the first composer, in fact, whose legend was fed by the myth of resistance. Audience resistance to artistic greatness was part of the myth of romanticism, according to which creative genius is socially alienating and isolating. The artist, no longer an especially skilled craftsman but an especially endowed spirit—that is, a genius—is by that gift or curse estranged from the rest of mankind, cast into a vanguard that inspires both awe and resentment from the mass of ordinary men, who are made to feel and acknowledge their ordinariness in his presence.³⁷³ Beethoven's socially alienating deafness certainly played into this myth, and sure enough, the most famous story involving Beethoven's deafness pertains to the Ninth's première, when Caroline Unger, the alto soloist, had to turn Beethoven around after the Scherzo to acknowledge applause that he could not hear.

So the story of the Ninth is a story of *Kampf und Sieg*, struggle against and victory over adversity, with the deaf genius Beethoven the hero. Its content symbolized the humanistic values of the Enlightenment, freedom and brotherhood, brought to a transcendent level by Romantic genius, despite the social alienation that genius entails (so: chalk up another struggle and victory). Its vibes were all good, and the import of its myth was entirely positive. *The Rite* stood for something else—something that challenged those good enlightened vibes, something that its original audiences, whether or not they actively resisted, recognized as spectacularly ugly. Even the most favorable reviewers saw it that way. The one writing for the London *Evening Standard* expressed the opinion that “everyone should go and see *Le Sacre du Printemps*, if only on account of its bizarrerie and astonishing ugliness—ugliness on the stage and in the orchestra. The thoroughness with which it is pursued in every department is extraordinary, scenic artist, composer, and dancer combining together with marvelous success in accomplishing the general purpose.”³⁷⁴ That reviewer was reacting to *The Rite's* aesthetic ugliness. But the moral ugliness of the ballet was also recognized, and even praised, especially by the awestruck critic who now looms in retrospect as the most prescient reviewer of the

³⁷² See Thomas Forrest Kelly. 2000. *First Nights: Five Musical Premières*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, in which *The Ninth* and *The Rite* are each accorded chapters (along with Monteverdi's *Orfeo*, Handel's *Messiah*, and Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*).

³⁷³ For the even more extreme version of this myth associated with modernism, see José Ortega y Gasset. 1925. *La Deshumanización del arte*, trans. Helene Weyl in Ortega. 1968. *The Dehumanization of Art and Other Essays*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, esp. 6-8.

³⁷⁴ *The Standard*, 12 or 13 July 1913; MacDonald 1975: 98.

première: Jacques Rivière, the editor of the *Nouvelle revue française*. *C'est un ballet sociologique*, he exclaimed:

This is a sociological ballet . . . We witness the movements of man at a time when he did not yet exist as an individual. . . . At no time during her dance does the Chosen Maiden betray the personal terror that ought to fill her soul. She accomplishes a rite; she is absorbed by a social function and, without giving any sign of comprehension or interpretation, she acts according to the will and the convulsions of a being more vast than she, a monster full of ignorance and appetites, cruelty and gloom

And even more frightening, *Ce ballet est un ballet biologique*. "This ballet is a biological ballet. Not only is the dance of the most primitive man, it is the dance before there was such a thing as man."³⁷⁵

These perceptions of Rivière's jibe clairvoyantly with Nijinsky's own view of his choreographic creation. Nijinsky told a London reporter that *The Rite* "is really the soul of nature expressed by movement to music. It is the life of the stones and the trees. There are no human beings in it."³⁷⁶ This chilling dehumanized vision and its angry rejection on at first sight contributed mightily to the romantic myth of *The Rite*; and as modernism, in Leonard Meyer's wonderful phrase, was "late, late Romanticism," so *The Rite* was the *ne plus ultra* of the Romantic myth of the alienated artist, adapted to the bleak vision of early modernism.³⁷⁷ That is what gained *The Rite* its spectacular place, unrivalled by any other musical work, in the cultural history of the early twentieth century, epitomized by Modris Eksteins's now celebrated book, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age*, whose title, and whose very thesis, is a tribute to the myth. The first chapter of the book, which is otherwise devoted to real war and mayhem, is a description of *The Rite's* tempestuous première, cast as if it were a rehearsal for the devastating war unleashed the next year. That is mythmaking with a vengeance. A sample:

The Rite of Spring, which was first performed in Paris in May 1913, a year before the outbreak of war, is, with its rebellious energy and its celebration of life through sacrificial death, perhaps the emblematic oeuvre of a twentieth-century world that, in its pursuit of life, has killed off millions of its best human beings. Stravinsky intended initially to entitle his score The Victim.

³⁷⁵ Jacques Rivière. 1913. *Le Sacre du Printemps*. La Nouvelle Revue Française. 1 November; rpt. in Rivière. 1947. *Novelles Études*. Paris: Gallimard: 95.

³⁷⁶ Quoted in MacDonald 1975: 97.

³⁷⁷ Leonard B. Meyer. 1991. A Pride of Prejudices; or, Delight in Diversity. *Music Theory Spectrum*, XIII/2 (Autumn) : 241.

And, a little later

*Most history of warfare has been written with a narrow focus on strategy, weaponry and organization, on generals, tanks, and politicians. Relatively little attention has been paid to the morale and motivation of common soldiers in an attempt to assess, in broad and comparative terms, the relationship of war and culture. The unknown soldier stands front and center in our story. He is Stravinsky's victim.*³⁷⁸

Thus, when contemplating the “Danse sacrale” at the end of *The Rite*, Eksteins would have us think, say, of the furious Abram in Wilfred Owen’s harrowing, posthumously published poem “The Parable of the Old Man and the Young” (1920; familiar to musicians from its setting in Britten’s *War Requiem*), who refused to stay his hand when the Angel bade him spare Isaac, “but slew his son, / And half the seed of Europe, one by one.” It is a gripping thought; and anything that adds intensity to the experience of *The Rite* is welcome. But although Stravinsky and Nicholas Roerich, the artist and archeologist to whom he turned for a scenario, did initially call their project *Velikaya zhertva*, and while *zhertva*, in Russian, can mean “victim,” Eksteins’s parallel is somewhat strained. *Velikaya*, the other word in the working title, means “great”; and with that word in front of it, *zhertva* has to revert to its other meaning, *sacrifice*. Thus the ballet was originally conceived, in accordance with Stravinsky’s originating vision, as *The Great Sacrifice* (now the subtitle to Part II), the title evoking the action rather than the victim—whence the title finally adopted, coined (originally in the plural, as “Les Sacres du printemps”) by the painter Lev Bakst. Ekstein’s conceit was fertile. The book it brought forth, on the carnage of World War I and its lasting cultural aftermath, is justly fêted. But while recommending it heartily, I nevertheless resist the romantic urge to elevate our artists into prophets.

Like any myth, the myth of *The Rite* coexists uneasily with the facts. For some, the appropriate rejoinder will be “What price facts, then?” But while share the aversion to what I fear I may have started to resemble—namely, the sort of academic pest who is forever toting a pail of cold water with which to douse all fertile conceits—I do think that the myth of *The Rite* could use, and will survive, a fresh, cold look.

³⁷⁸ Modris Eksteins. 1989. *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin: xiv-xv.

* * *

As *The Rite* made its way with the assistance of its myth, a contradiction very swiftly developed and grew. As we have seen, the progress of *The Rite* was, at least at first, the progress of the score, not the whole ballet. That score has never suffered the resistance that was shown the ballet on its legendary first night. Indeed, the music of *The Rite* as such has never attracted that sort of protest. That first night a lot of it went unheard beneath the whistling and hooting. One of the reviewers, Louis Vuillemin, writing in the theatrical journal *Comœdia*, stated outright that “at the end of the prelude [that is, when the curtain went up on what Stravinsky in later life (inaccurately) called Niinsky’s “group of knock-kneed and long-braided Lolitas jumping up and down”]³⁷⁹ the crowd simply stopped listening to the music so that they might better amuse themselves with the choreography,”³⁸⁰ and his remark is, as it were, negatively corroborated by the many reviews that neglect Stravinsky’s contribution altogether beyond merely naming him as composer.

But blaming the fiasco on Nijinsky and his “crime against grace” also appears to be an inadequate explanation, for the same review by Vuillemin has a passage that suggests the audience had been antagonized in advance, and was ready to protest no matter what it saw or heard (thus partially substantiating the famous surmises of Cocteau that have become so familiar a part of *The Rite*’s lore).

Some people, invited to a few final rehearsals, went back out into [the streets of] Paris wild-eyed and convinced they had reason to be. They were of two kinds; both wild and both convinced. “Marvelous, magnificent, splendid, definitive!” cried some to everyone who would listen for a moment. “Abominable, hateful, ridiculous, pretentious!” screamed the others even to those who did not have time to listen. I leave it to you to surmise the kind of damage brought about by such passion. It spread through the entire public like wild-fire thirty-six hours before the curtain rose. “Just you wait,” those convinced said, “we are about to witness the great musical revolution. This evening is the appointed time for the symphony of the future!” “Watch out,” warned the skeptics, “They are out to make fun of us. They take us for fools. We must defend ourselves!” Result: the curtain goes up—I should say even before the curtain went up—you could hear “OH!” and then they all began to sing, to hiss, to whistle. Some clapped, some cried “Bravo!” some shrieked, some cheered. Some hooted, some extolled. And there you

³⁷⁹ Stravinsky and Craft 1981. UC Press reprint: 143. In Nijinsky’s choreography the curtain actually goes up on the male corps de ballet, plus one soloists portraying a 300-year-old crone; the knock-kneed Lolitas enter later.

³⁸⁰ Quoted from Bullard 1971: II:49.

*have the première of *Le Sacre du Printemps*. You can well imagine how that half-dozen people who were not fanatics were prevented from getting a clear idea of the work or forming a logical and rational opinion.*³⁸¹

We can supplement Vuillemin's semi-satirical description of a house divided in advance against itself and armed to the teeth (quite literally so, many having come with whistles in their pockets)³⁸² with a couple more documents from Bullard's incomparable dossier plus one that I discovered serendipitously while researching this essay. Bullard's very first exhibit is a press release from the management of the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, published the morning of the première in all the main Paris newspapers. "*Le Sacre du Printemps*," it averred,

which the Russian Ballet will perform for the first time this evening at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, is the most amazing creation ever attempted by M. Serge de Diaghilev's admirable company. It evokes the primitive gestures of pagan Russia as conceived by the triple vision of Stravinsky, poet and composer, of Nicholas Roerich, poet and painter, and of Nijinsky, poet and choreographer.

Here we see powerfully portrayed the characteristic attitudes of the Slavic race in its response to beauty in the prehistoric era.

*Only the wonderful Russian dancers could portray these first stammered gestures of a half-savage humanity; only they could represent these frenzied mobs of people who stamp out untiringly the most startling polyrhythms ever produced by the brain of a musician. Here is truly a new sensation which will undoubtedly provoke heated discussions, but will leave every spectator with an unforgettable memory of the artists.*³⁸³

That is heavy hype. It is a bizarre pitch, actually: the oxymoronic image of half-savage humanity reproducing the most startling polyrhythms ever produced by the brain of a musician recalls Debussy's immortal sally—made the very same day, hence possibly in response—that *The Rite* was "primitive music with all modern conveniences."³⁸⁴ The prediction of heated discussions helped produce them.

³⁸¹ Bullard 1971: II:48.

³⁸² As reported by Victor Debay in his review, "Les Ballets russes au Théâtre des Champs-Élysées," *Le Courier musicale* (June 15); quoted in Bullard 1971: I:146.

³⁸³ Quoted from *Le Figaro*, 29 May 1913: 6, in Bullard 1971: II: 1-2. (Translation adapted.)

³⁸⁴ Letter to André Caplet, 29 May 1913; François Lesure and Roger Nichols, ed. 1987. *Debussy Letters*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press: 270.

The extent to which the publicity surrounding the ballet was held responsible for the hostilities in the theater can be judged from a front-page editorial that appeared four days later in *Le Figaro*, signed by Alfred Capus (1858-1922), not a critic of the arts but the paper's senior foreign-affairs correspondent, who the next year would become the paper's very jingoistic wartime editor. You may be sure that this article (whose author gives no sign of having actually attended the première) did not escape the notice of Modris Eksteins, who discovered it, as I did, in Bullard's dissertation. Seizing upon the coincidence that the Treaty of London, ending the war between the Balkan League and the Ottoman Empire, had been signed the day after the *Rite* première, Capus wrote that

*Although peace has been signed in the Balkans there remain nevertheless a number of international issues that still have to be settled. Among these I have no hesitation in placing in the front rank the question of the relationship of Paris with the Russian dancers, which has reached a point of tension where anything can happen. It has already produced the other night a border incident whose gravity the government should not underestimate.*³⁸⁵

Under the command of Nijinsky, "a sort of Attila of the dance," Capus reported, the Russian dancers had "seized the small section of the eighth arrondissement [that is, the block on which the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées was located] after a fierce battle with the city of Paris, and today they form a little independent state there."³⁸⁶ At the end of the article Capus proposes a treaty with the Russians:

*Nijinsky would have to agree not to stage any more ballets that aspire to a level of beauty inaccessible to our feeble minds, and not to produce any more three-hundred-year-old "modern" women, or little boys feeding at breasts, or, for that matter, even breasts. In return for these concessions we would continue to assure him that he is the greatest dancer in the world, the most handsome of men, and we would convince him that we mean it. We should then be at peace.*³⁸⁷

Between these opening and closing sallies Capus lodged a more serious and pointed complaint, thanks to which the *Rite* première was covered by the *New York Times*. This was the discovery that surprised me as I was trawling the *Times* online archive in preparation for this talk. I had not heard that *The Times* had a correspondent in attendance at the *Rite* première—and in fact they did not have one. But their Paris correspondent noticed the Capus piece

³⁸⁵ Alfred Capus. 1913. *Courrier de Paris. Le Figaro*, 2 June: 1; Translation adapted from Modris Eksteins. *Rites of Spring*: 53.

³⁸⁶ Bullard 1971: II: 77-78.

³⁸⁷ Adapted from Eksteins 1989: 53.

owing to its prominent front-page placement in the French capital's premier political newspaper, and on 7 June 1913 filed a report on it, which the *Times* ran the next day under the headline "Parisians Hiss New Ballet," followed by a trio of banners:

"Russian Dancer's Latest Offering, 'The Consecration of Spring,' a Failure."

"Has to Turn Up Lights"

"Manager of Theatre Takes This Means to Stop Hostile Demonstrations as Dance Goes On."

Here is how the *Times* reported Capus's complaint, and the event that inspired it:

"Bluffing the idle rich of Paris through appeals to their snobbery is a delightfully simple matter," says Alfred Capus in Le Figaro this week. "The only condition precedent thereto is that they be gorged with publicity."

"Having entertained the public with brilliant dances," he adds, "the Russian ballet and Nijinsky now think that the time is ripe to sacrifice fashionable snobs on art's altar. The process works out as follows:

"Take the best society possible, composed of rich, simple-minded, idle people. Then submit them to an intense régime of publicity. By booklets, newspaper articles, lectures, personal visits and all other appeals to their snobbery, persuade them that hitherto they have seen only vulgar spectacles, and are at last to know what is art and beauty.

"Impress them with cabalistic formulae. They have not the slightest notion of music, literature, painting, and dancing: still, they have heretofore seen under these names only a rude imitation of the real thing. Finally, assure them that they are about to see real dancing and hear real music.

"It will then be necessary to double the prices at the theatre, so great will be the rush of shallow worshippers at this false shrine.

"This," observes M. Capus, "is what the Russian dancers have been doing to Paris. The other night, however, the plan miscarried. The piece was 'The Consecration of Spring,' and the stage represented humanity. On the right are strong young persons picking flowers, while a woman, 300 years old, dances frenziedly. On the left an old man studies the stars, while here and there sacrifices are made to the God of Light.

"The public could not swallow this. They promptly hissed the piece. A few days ago they might have applauded it. The Russians, who are not entirely acquainted with the manners and customs of the countries they visit, did not know that the French people protested readily enough when the last degree of stupidity was reached."

At this point the *Times* correspondent turned from Capus's article to an interview with Gabriel Astruc, the theater manager:

"The Consecration of Spring" was received with a storm of hissing. The manager, M. Astruc, however, has devised a novel method for silencing a demonstration. When hisses are mingled with counter-cheers, as they were the other night, M. Astruc orders the lights turned up. Instantly the booing and hissing stop. Well-known people who are hostile to the ballet do not desire to appear in an undignified rôle.

(So according to the *Times* reporter who interviewed him, it was Astruc rather than Diaghilev, who often gets the credit, who resorted to this method of crowd control.) And only now is the composer named, as the *Times* correspondent moves on to report an interview with the composer that had appeared on the front page of *Gil Blas* on 4 June.³⁸⁸

Igor Stravinsky, who wrote the music of "The Consecration of Spring," says that the demonstrations are a bitter blow to the amour propre of the Russian ballet dancers, who are sensitive to such displays of feigning and fear they may be unable to continue the performances of the piece.

"And that is all we get," added M. Stravinsky, "after a hundred rehearsals and one year's hard work."

*The composer, however, is not altogether pessimistic, for, he adds: "No doubt it will be understood one day that I sprang a surprise on Paris, and Paris was disconcerted. But it will soon forget its bad temper."*³⁸⁹

The cause of the bad temper, it would appear, was neither the music nor the dancing, but rather the hype, which outsnobbed the snobs, and the insult it thus administered to French taste. When in 1909 the Russian dancers first exported back to the French an imitation of the ballet they had previously imported from France, at a level of accomplishment the French themselves could no longer equal, the French had been flattered and captivated. But when four years later the Russians presumed to go beyond their hosts in aesthetic discrimination, they committed an unforgivable *faux pas* that required punishment.

The Rite's reception in London the next month was, as we have seen, far more reserved. But the same sort of social resentment can be detected in the measured but skeptical reviews. The terms of British resistance are effectively summarized in a notice that appeared in the magazine *The Lady* about a week

³⁸⁸ Henri Postel du Mas. 1913. Un Entretien avec M. Stravinsky. *Gil Blas*, 4 June: 1. (Bullard 1971: III: 87-89.)

³⁸⁹ Parisians Hiss New Ballet. *New York Times*, 8 June 1913.

after the London première. The anonymous writer was clearly speaking up not on behalf of Philistines, but rather in defense of the local connoisseurs:

*Report said before the curtain rose . . . that all previous efforts of Diaghilev ballets were going to be eclipsed. With such stupendous seriousness was the novelty taken up by its creators that Mr. Edwin Evans³⁹⁰ was sent before the curtain to explain beforehand what it really meant. . . All this did not inspire confidence, for a beautiful work of art ought to be able to reveal itself. If we are allowed to take *Sacre* on its merits, we may accept it and even enjoy it, but all attempts to represent it as inspired truth about the movements of the youth of mankind are likely to alienate us . . . I found [the ballet] very interesting. There were some charming patterns made by the permutations and combinations of different groups of dancers. There were ideas in profusion. But as a whole I am afraid that it appeals to all that is pretentious in human nature, and so I condemn it as the evocation of a principle. It may be quaint and delightful to see people crawling on all fours, but it is irritating to be told that in that posture they are more 'original' than when walking on foot. It is quite possible to be original in erect motion.³⁹¹*

The same reviewer had taken similarly stern positions on the other novelties the Ballets Russes had brought to London that season. Before *The Rite*, Londoners had been shown Debussy's *Jeux* and Florent Schmitt's *La Tragédie de Salomé*. Reviewing the latter, *The Lady's man* expressed by now familiar suspicions of charlatanism, and adapted the national resistance of the French to a British standard. "There are some people," he wrote—

*who appear to swallow the Russian Ballet and all its works with open-mouthed and closed-eyed enthusiasm. I have often been enthusiastic . . . but one must discriminate. *Salomé*, the novelty of last week, is worse than *Jeux*, the novelty of the week before. It strikes me, not for the first time, that Paris is not exerting an altogether wholesome influence on the Russian Ballet.³⁹²*

The Lady's man had a point. Paris was more than a venue for *The Rite*. Paris helped shape both the ballet's conception and the discourse that surrounded it; and it was to the discourse that the London reviewer, like the French reviewers quoted earlier, was reacting—and resisting. The neoprimitivist impulse, of which *The Rite* now looms in retrospect as the supreme embodiment (or at least the supreme remnant in active repertory), had a legitimate Russian pedigree. Under the name *skifstvo*, or Scythianism, it had become of a craze in

³⁹⁰ Evans (1874-1945) was then the music critic of the *Pall Mall Gazette*; co-opted by Diaghilev as a publicist, he was the author of some early handbooks about Stravinsky's ballets.

³⁹¹ *The Lady*, 17 July 1913; quoted in MacDonald 1975: 100.

³⁹² *The Lady*, 10 July 1913; quoted in MacDonald 1975: 96.

the Russia of the late Silver Age. “Poets wore themselves out trying to roar like wild animals,” Korney Chukovsky recalled in 1922. “The craze for the savage, the primitive, and the beast of the forest,” he wrote, “became the outstanding feature of the epoch.”³⁹³ A book by one such poet, Sergey Gorodetsky, called *Yar’*, from which Stravinsky had set two poems in 1906, contained another, “Yarila,” which described a virgin sacrifice to the God Yarilo: exactly the culminating “vision” or “dream” of the future *Rite* that, according to the familiar story, Stravinsky imagined in 1910 as he was finishing *Firebird*. These neat correspondences prompted me to remark—overly archly, perhaps—in my book about Stravinsky, that his “was by no means an unusual sort of dream for a creative artist to have in St. Petersburg in 1910. In that environment, one could even call it conventional.”³⁹⁴

But behind all modern primitivist movements lurked an old-fashioned colonialist exoticism, much of it of French inspiration.³⁹⁵ Everyone recognized the shadow of Paul Gauguin behind the work of Nicholas Roerich. Behind Stravinsky’s primitivism there lay a cognate Russian orientalism that, when presented to the French, cast the native in auto-exoticized terms.³⁹⁶ That parallel between the French and Russian orientalist strains vouchsafed Diaghilev’s Parisian triumphs, for he knew that the Russia the French wanted to see was a Frenchified, exoticized, orientalized, racialized, one almost wants to say Negrified Russia. *Firebird* had followed directly on, and brought to a new plateau, the repertory of the first Russian seasons: *Shéhérazade*, *Cléopâtre*, *Danses polovtsiennes*, *Danses persanes*; even as *The Rite* followed directly upon *Firebird*, and brought it to a new plateau in every way from radicalized (and racialized) style to pretentious publicity—for everyone sat at the feet of the French to learn the art of *faire réclame*, and to exploit the *prestige*-making *cachet* of the *avant-garde* (also not-by-accident French terms). In lumping together and resisting *tout d’un coup* all the novelties of the 1913 season—Debussy’s *Jeux*, Schmitt’s *Salomé*, and Stravinsky’s *Sacre*—the London critic was resisting France, not Russia, and by his lights he was indeed perceptive. The Russian dancers were bringing the news to London not directly from their barbaric, chthonous homeland, but from effete and decadent, overcivilized Paris.

³⁹³ Korney Chukovsky, *Futuristī* (1922), quoted in Izrael V. Nestyev. 1960. *Prokofiev*. Stanford: Stanford University Press: 91.

³⁹⁴ Taruskin 1996: 860.

³⁹⁵ See Ralph P. Locke. 1998-99. Cutthroats and Casbah Dancers, Muezzins and Timeless Sands: Musical Images of the Middle East. *19th-Century Music* XXII: 20-53.

³⁹⁶ See Richard Taruskin. 1997. Entailing the Falconet: Russian Musical Orientalism in Context, in *Defining Russia Musically*. Princeton: Princeton University Press: 152-85.

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That is among the reasons why as a score *The Rite* inspired so much less resistance than it had as a ballet. Audiences received it without protest, and it soon eclipsed the ballet in fame. The earliest concert performances took place in Russia under Koussevitzky (one each in Moscow and St. Petersburg early in 1914), and they were well enough received to disgust 79-year-old César Cui, the lone survivor from the Mighty Kuchka, who, after describing it as “a treasure chest in which Stravinsky has lovingly collected all sorts of musical filth and refuse,” went on to observe that “this *Rite* has been booed everywhere abroad, but among us it has found some applauders—proof that we are ahead of Europe on the path of musical progress.”³⁹⁷

And then came the triumph under Monteux, which set the score on its inexorable path of conquest. And why not? While it was at first a sore test for orchestra and conductor, and while it took fully half a century before music analysts caught up with it,³⁹⁸ *The Rite* has never been a difficult piece for the audience. Stravinsky, who had already experienced two huge audience successes, had every reason to expect a third, and looked forward to the première with confidence, writing to Roerich that “from all indications I can see that this piece is bound to ‘emerge’ in a way that rarely happens.”³⁹⁹ It is not, after all, a complex score. Its textures are simple, though very artfully and colorfully elaborated. What there is in it of counterpoint (beyond the prelude preceding the action) is uncomplicated. Its ostinato-driven forms are downright rudimentary, as is only right given the subject and setting. Its dissonances are indeed harsh and grating, but never mystifying (except to analysts), and neither are the irregular percussive rhythms. They all have obvious topical correlates in the argument and action, and that argument and action are sufficiently conveyed by the title. Nobody ever wonders why Stravinsky wrote the piece the way he did—that is (as he once put it to Vladimir Ussachevsky), “with an axe.”⁴⁰⁰ The sounds of the music make a direct and compelling appeal to the listener’s imagination, and the listener’s body. In conjunction with Stravinsky’s peerless handling of the immense orchestra they have a visceral, cathartic impact. They leave—and to judge from the history of the score’s re-

³⁹⁷ Letter to M. S. Kerzina, 16 February/1 March 1914, in Cesar Antonovich Cui. 1955. *Izbrannīye pis'ma*. Leningrad: Muzgiz: 446.

³⁹⁸ The breakthrough came in 1963 with Arthur Berger’s seminal article. Problems of Pitch Organization in Stravinsky. *Perspectives of New Music*, II/1 (Autumn - Winter, 1963) : 11-42.

³⁹⁹ Letter of 1/14 December 1912; Irina Yakovlevna Verzhinina, ed. 1966. Pis'ma Stravinskogo Rerikh. *Sovetskaya muzika*, no. 8: 62.

⁴⁰⁰ Vladimir Ussachevsky. 1971. My Saint Stravinsky. *Perspectives of New Music*, IX/2-X/1: 37.

ception, have always left—most listeners feeling exhilarated. It is only the mythology of *The Rite* that would suggest anything else.

The path of conquest was sure, but it was not rapid, and not only because few orchestras were capable of tackling the piece at first. The progress of *The Rite* as an orchestral score was retarded in the first place by the war that broke out almost immediately after its first concert performances, which put an end to performances in the immediate future, and delayed publication until 1921. During the decade of the twenties, performances were rare, but their very rarity made them big events, always enhanced by repetitions of the legend of the original event. The fact that it was always preceded by its reputation—a reputation founded on the opening-night scandal, in which the score as such had played practically no part—actually smoothed the path of conquest; for in light of the legend, the music always came as a pleasant surprise. And the myth took hold, according to which the scandal itself was evidence of the music's greatness and originality—an originality the music theory establishment works very hard to defend against historical contextualizers like me.⁴⁰¹ And so the myth lives on. The review of the New York concert première in January 1924, by Olin Downes, then fresh from Boston and just starting his long tenure at the *New York Times*, can serve to illustrate its early stages:

To Pierre Monteux and the Boston Symphony Orchestra fell the task, superbly executed, of introducing to the public of this city Igor Strawinsky's "Le Sacre du Printemps," as the work is most commonly known, last night in Carnegie Hall. This work, which created a riot when it was first performed, by Mr. Monteux and the Russian Ballet in Paris in 1913, has been more discussed than any other composition of Strawinsky.

The audience, knowing this and fearing more through the many articles of a descriptive kind which had appeared in the daily press, came prepared for the worst, to listen to the new music. After the first part of the score had come to an end there were a few hisses—whether in indignation or to suppress premature applause was not easy to tell. After the second part it was apparent that a majority had enjoyed themselves. The applause of this majority was long and loud, and to all appearances most sincere. Two false impressions had been spread abroad, concerning this music, first, that it was unequaled in ugliness and fearfulness generally, and secondly, that it was completely unprecedented among Strawinsky's compositions. Both these reports, as Mark Twain would have said, seem greatly exaggerated. The music, filled as it is with a primitive and at times vertiginous energy, has pages of a rare and highly individual beauty. The score is obviously a logical evolution of the style of Strawinsky, following naturally from indica-

⁴⁰¹ See Richard Taruskin. 2011. Catching up with Rimsky-Korsakov. *Music Theory Spectrum*, XXXIII/2: 169-85, followed by seven rebuttals (186-228) and a response (229).

tions contained in “*The Fire-Bird*” and “*Petrouchka*.” There are a number of passages in “*Sacre du Printemps*” which could come straight from both these earlier works. . . . The expression, however, is greatly intensified. It is done principally by the force and individuality of the counterpoint, and also by rhythms that have an at times all but hysterical shock and fury. There is the effect of the complete abandon of mood and manner in this music. We believe that it is written with the most exact precision, with enormous power and with an uncanny knowledge—prescience—of the capacities of a greatly extended orchestra.⁴⁰²

What’s the problem? Downes seemed to be asking. So safe was the reputation of the score after the triumph under Monteux, that when Diaghilev revived the ballet in 1920, freshly choreographed by Leonid Massine and warmly received in Paris as if in atonement for the 1913 fiasco, he took out a sort of insurance policy on its success, before having it danced in London, by sponsoring a concert performance under Eugène Goossens in June 1921, so that London audiences, too, could be won over by the music in conjunction with—or in contrast to—the legend. As Nesta MacDonald, the chronicler of Diaghilev’s London exploits, averred, this was a “masterstroke” and a “resounding success,” and won for the ballet, now titled in English the way we know it today, a lasting *succès d’estime* that finally disarmed critical resistance. Percy Scholes, writing in the London *Observer*, elicited a quote from Bernard Shaw, so as “to give,” he said, “*Observer* readers the view of our oldest music critic, and he replied: ‘Mind, I’m not to be understood as condemning it, but—if it had been by Rossini people would have said there was too much rum-tum-tum in it!’”⁴⁰³

By 1929, the last year of the Diaghilev enterprise, the impresario could exult, in a letter from London to Igor Markevitch, posted about a month before Diaghilev’s untimely and unexpected death, that *The Rite*, in what turned out to be its last performance by the Ballets Russes, “had a real triumph last night. The idiots have caught on to it. *The Times* says that *Sacre* is for the twentieth century the same as Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony was for the nineteenth! At last!”⁴⁰⁴

It would seem that resistance was at an end. In fact it was only entering a new phase, one that has lasted up to our own time. And of course Diaghilev knew that perfectly well. The master of spin was still spinning, even in a letter to one of his intimates, egregiously misrepresenting the snarky way the anonymous commentator for the London *Times* had reacted to what was evidently a bit of overheard (and no doubt oversold) partisan scuttlebutt, quite likely

⁴⁰² Olin Downes. 1924. Music: ‘Sacre du Printemps’ Played. *New York Times*, 1 February.

⁴⁰³ MacDonald 1975: 264.

⁴⁰⁴ Letter of 23 July 1929; Ilya Samoylovich Zil’bershteyn and Vladimir Alekseyevich Samkov. 1982. *Sergey Dyagilev i russkoye iskusstvo*. Moscow: Izobratitel’noye iskusstvo, II:148.

planted by Diaghilev himself. “Le Sacre,” he wrote, “is ‘absolute’ ballet, and we are assured that it will come to be regarded as having a significance for the 20th century equal to that of Beethoven’s choral symphony in the 19th. Well, perhaps; meanwhile there was a rather thin attendance in stalls and boxes last night, but the lovers of true art in the gallery applauded to the echo.” Clearly the good grey *Times* found the comparison absurd.

But it has been resilient, for it does point up that unique status that *The Rite* shares with the Ninth. Both are emblematic bulwarks of canon and repertory alike; both possess that magic combination of a cherished and prestigious score with an unshakable reputation for innovation, plus a hardy first-night legend that makes them “historic.” They are executed on what seems an equally monumental scale—which is an extra tribute to *The Rite*, because it is only half the length of The Ninth. But what it lacks in length it makes up in weight of sound—and then some. Both have accordingly cast enormous shadows, and wielded enormous influence. As my old colleague Joseph Kerman once observed, “We live in the valley of the Ninth Symphony—that we cannot help.”⁴⁰⁵ Robert Craft was a bit more sanguine about *The Rite*, calling it “the prize bull that inseminated the whole modern movement”—a lovely metaphor for a work that is all about fertility.⁴⁰⁶ Many composers have testified to the justice of Craft’s metaphor—most famously, perhaps, Elliott Carter, who often said that he decided he wanted to be a composer when he heard the New York première of *The Rite* (as a concert piece, of course) with the Boston Symphony under Monteux in 1924, the very performance of which we have already sampled the *New York Times* review.⁴⁰⁷

In other ways, though, *The Rite* and the Ninth can look like opposites. When Pablo Casals, the great cellist, was asked by his Boswell, José Maria Corredor, to comment on the comparison, attributed on this occasion to Francis Poulenc, whom Corredor quoted as saying that “What the Ninth Symphony did to stir up the people of the XIXth century, *The Sacre du Printemps* does already for those of the XXth century.” Casals retorted, “This time I completely disagree with my friend Poulenc. . . . Although I acknowledge the talent of Stravinsky and the interest of the *Sacre du Printemps*, I think that to compare these two works is nothing short of blasphemy.”⁴⁰⁸

⁴⁰⁵ Joseph Kerman. 1979. *The Beethoven Quartets*. New York: W. W. Norton: 194.

⁴⁰⁶ Robert Craft. “The Rite of Spring’: Genesis of a Masterpiece. Introduction to Igor Stravinsky. *The Rite of Spring: Sketches 1911-1913*: xv.

⁴⁰⁷ See, for example, Daniel Wakin. 2008. Turning 100 at Carnegie Hall, with New Notes. *New York Times*, 11 December.

⁴⁰⁸ J. Ma. Corredor. 1956. *Conversations with Casals*, trans. André Mangeot. New York: E. P. Dutton: 174.

Blasphemy—a violation of holiness. The Ninth has that aura. It gives compelling voice to the highest humanitarian ideals—the very ideals for which Pablo Casals, as famous in the mid-twentieth century for his anti-Fascist stance as he was for his cello playing, had become a spokesman and an emblem in his turn. He too had an aura of sanctity, and that could only make him allergic to *The Rite*—hardly a herald of universal fellowship, and certainly no Ode to Joy. One could hardly imagine devout or ceremonial performances of *The Rite* at occasions like the breaching of the Berlin Wall, such as the one Leonard Bernstein so memorably led of the Ninth in 1989. But neither could one imagine *The Rite* being ritually performed before an assemblage of the Nazi elite on Hitler’s fifty-third birthday, as Wilhelm Furtwängler did the Ninth in 1942, and as we can still see him doing online.⁴⁰⁹

That 1942 performance is a painful thing to witness now, especially the handshake between Dr. Furtwängler and Dr. Goebbels at the end. Such a reminder of the transitivity or relativity of noble aspirations (for, make no mistake, the Nazis certainly thought of their cause as holy) can cast a countershadow over The Ninth, as it has compromised the pretensions of high art to the moral high ground generally—and that probably accounts in part for Joseph Kerman’s gloom at having to dwell in its valley. From many, by now, The Ninth now attracts derision the way a cartoon millionaire’s top hat attracts snowballs. Ned Rorem, the American composer, has made spreading contempt for The Ninth one of his life’s missions, insulting it repeatedly in print (“the first piece of junk in the grand style”)⁴¹⁰ and in public speech, as I heard once at Columbia University nearly thirty years ago, where he called it “utter trash” in a lecture to student composers.

Stravinsky took some whacks of his own at the Ninth—at Casals, too—in “his” very late interviews that were published long after he could have actually given them in the *New York Review of Books*. So with all appropriate caveats in place: here, dated September 1970, is the ultimate aestheticist critique of Beethoven’s magnum opus. If Oscar Wilde had known more about music, he could have written it:

Concerning the great-untouchable finale, however, one hardly dares tell the truth, [which] is that some of the music is very banal—the last Prestissimo, for one passage, and, for another, the first full-orchestra version of the theme, which is German-band music about in the class of Wagner’s Kaiser marsch. . . . Still more of the truth is that the voices and orchestra do not mix. The imbalances are a symptom. I have not heard a live performance since 1958, when I conducted a piece of my own on a programme

⁴⁰⁹ <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zzXgZjVf8GY>

⁴¹⁰ Ned Rorem. 1987. *The Nantucket Diary of Ned Rorem 1973-1985*. San Francisco: North Point Press: 8.

with it; but I have never heard a balanced one. The ‘wrong’ notes stick out wrongly in the ‘apocalyptic’ opening chord, despite recording engineers, nor can all of their periphonic faking pick up the string figuration in the “*Seid um schlängen [sic], Millionen!*” the failure being not electronic but musical. Yet the greatest failure is in the “message,” hence, if you will pardon the expression, in the “medium.” For the message of the voices is a finitude greatly diminishing the message of the wordless music. And the first entrance of the voice is a shocking intrusion. The singer is as out of place as if he had strayed in from the prologue to *Pagliacci*.⁴¹¹

So that is another thing *The Ninth* shares with *The Rite*: Both have “extramusical” baggage that has caused embarrassment and aroused resistance. Leonard Bernstein changed the words of the Ninth at that Berlin-wall performance, substituting *Freiheit* for *Freude* in the finale, and justified the change the way one always justifies such interventions, by claiming that it was Schiller’s true intention. And while nobody has ever proposed that the text of the Ninth be ditched altogether, turning the symphony back into an instrumental piece—nobody except Brahms, anyway, who came up with a pointedly instrumental, or de-vocalized Ode to Joy when he wrote “Beethoven’s Tenth”—there has been a strong move to divest *The Rite* of its troubling subject matter ever since 1920, and the original divestors—which is to say the leaders of the new resistance—were Diaghilev and Stravinsky themselves.

The vindication *The Rite* enjoyed as a score at the hands of Monteux induced Diaghilev to take another chance on the ballet when that became possible after the war, thanks in the first instance to an anonymous gift of money from Coco Chanel. The company he led, however, though still called Les Ballets Russes, was no longer in the same sense the Russian Ballet—that is, a troupe of Russian dancers performing abroad. By 1920 it had become a troupe of post-revolutionary Russian émigrés, now augmented by non-Russian dancers with Russian stage names, like Lydia Sokolova (née Hilda Tansley Munnings in Wanstead, England), who danced the role of the Chosen One in the revival to the new choreography Diaghilev had commissioned from Leonid Massine. Roerich’s costumes and one of his backdrops were kept, as an economizing measure, but the scenario was effectively scrapped. The program no longer included a synopsis about the great sacrifice to “Iarilo, le magnifique, le flamboyant.”⁴¹² Instead, there was a paragraph that described *The Rite* as “a spectacle of pagan Russia,” adding only that “the work is in two parts and involves

⁴¹¹ Igor Stravinsky. 1982. *Themes and Conclusions*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press: 168-69. For his animadversions see “An Interview with Igor Stravinsky.” *The New York Review of Books*, 3 June 1965; or (somewhat reined in), Igor Stravinsky and Robert Craft. 1966. *Themes and Episodes*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf: 101-2.

⁴¹² Facsimile in Bullard 1971: I:241.

no subject. It is choreography freely constructed on the music.”⁴¹³ That rhetoric is what the London *Times* critic had in mind when he wrote with ironic scare-quotes that *The Rite* was being touted as “‘absolute’ ballet.” Critics who had seen Nijinsky’s version almost unanimously deplored the elimination from the new choreography of all historical and ethnological references. “I am not quarreling with this,” wrote André Levinson, who was obviously quarreling:

*The theater is not a museum. But the void is filled with a succession of movements without logic, with a collection of exercises devoid of expression. Nijinsky’s dancers were tormented by the rhythm. Here, they must simply keep time.*⁴¹⁴

When Leopold Stokowski collaborated with Massine on a performance of *The Rite* for the League of Composers in 1930 with Martha Graham cast as the Chosen One—the American première of the ballet as such—he announced that “we are not aiming to make this production of the work essentially Russian because we felt that the ideas and feelings it expresses are universal.”⁴¹⁵ And he got Nicholas Roerich, the author of the original scenario, now living in the United States and already at the center of what we would today call a New Age cult, to in effect revoke the scenario in a talk he gave at the Wanamaker Auditorium in Philadelphia, in which he, as it were, bequeathed *The Rite* to America. “So many beautiful things,” he wrote:

*are possible if we can keep our positive attitude and open-mindedness. We can feel how the primal energy is electrified in this country; and through this energy in the easiest way you can reach the inner constructive feeling of the nation. This constructive striving of spirit, this joy before the beautiful laws of nature and heroic sacrifice, certainly are the essential feelings of “Sacre du Printemps.” We cannot consider “Sacre” as Russian, nor even Slavic—it is more ancient and pan-human. This is the natural festival of the soul. This is the joy of love and self-sacrifice, not under the knife of crude conventionality, but in exuberance of spirit, in connecting our earthly existence with a Supreme.*⁴¹⁶

⁴¹³ Théâtre des Champs-Élysées program, quoted in Berg 1988: 67.

⁴¹⁴ André Levinson. 1922. *Les Deux Sacres*. *La Revue musicale*, 4 (1 June); trans. Shelly Berg in Berg 1988: 71-72.

⁴¹⁵ Oliver Daniel. 1982. *Stokowski: A Counterpoint of View*. New York: Dodd, Mead: 225; quoted in Berg 1988: 77.

⁴¹⁶ Nicholas Roerich. 1930. *Sacre* (Address at the Wanamaker Auditorium, under the Auspices of the League of Composers), rpt. in Nicholas Roerich. 1931. *Realm of Light*. New York: Roerich Museum Press: 185-86.

For Roerich, then, *The Rite* had become the American dream, or rather, his dream of America. For the rest, surrounded by epithets like “absolute” and “universal” and even “devoid of expression,” *The Rite* had been pressed into the service of the postwar “dehumanized” esthetic, later to be dubbed “neo-classical”; and Stravinsky’s voice was the loudest and most insistent of all in repositioning it—indeed, in rewriting its history and revising its meaning, all the while refusing to acknowledge that he was doing anything of the sort. Four decades later, dictating a memoir to Robert Craft, he was more candid, explaining simply that by the time Diaghilev revived *The Rite*, he (Stravinsky) “realized that I prefer *Le Sacre* as a concert piece.”⁴¹⁷ Of course he did. When performed that way it was unencumbered by those aspects of the work that (he must have thought) had been the greatest obstacles to its success in 1913, and besides, he could take all the credit for it as a concert piece.

But that is not what he told a Paris reporter in 1920. Asked which choreography he preferred, he did as Diaghilev would certainly have wished him to do, perhaps as Diaghilev had told him to do, and chose Massine over Nijinsky as more faithful to what he now touted as his original conception. “I composed this work after *Petrouchka*,” he told the reporter, Michel Georges-Michel, who was interviewing him for *Comoedia*, as always the Paris organ friendliest to the Diaghilev ballet:

*The germinal idea of it is a theme which came to me when I had finished Firebird. Because this theme and those which grew out of it were conceived in a rough and brutal manner, I chose as a pretext for developing their implications the prehistoric epoch of Russia, since I am a Russian. But note well that this idea came from the music and not the music from the idea. I have written an architectonic work, not an anecdotal one. And it was a mistake to treat it anecdotally, which goes against the whole thrust of the piece.*⁴¹⁸

This is completely at variance with all other accounts Stravinsky gave of *The Rite*’s moment of conception, which took place in his mind’s eye, not his mind’s ear. The music did indeed come from a visual “idea,” and not, moreover, until the idea had been elaborated into a detailed and (but for the originating sacrificial vision) an ethnographically quite accurate scenario with Roerich’s help. Stravinsky here assumed the role he would play to the end of his days: one could say with little exaggeration that he spent the second half of his life telling lies about the first half. And until the 1980s his lies possessed unchallengeable authority.

⁴¹⁷ Stravinsky and Craft 1981: 144.

⁴¹⁸ Michel Georges-Michel. 1920. *Les Deux Sacre du Printemps*. *Comoedia*, 11 December; adapted from the translation in Bullard, *First Performance*, I:2.

Stravinsky's resistance to the scenario, and his propaganda on behalf of the score as an abstract concert piece succeeded in changing the "whole thrust of the piece" for generations of listeners and critics. Pieter van den Toorn was unquestionably correct in announcing, at the very outset of his book-length treatise on *The Rite*, that "[f]or the greater part of this century [i.e., the twentieth] our knowledge and appreciation of *The Rite of Spring* have come from the concert hall and from recordings."⁴¹⁹ Whether he was as obviously right in further asserting that the scenario and the choreography and what he calls "the close 'interdisciplinary' conditions under which the music is now known to have been composed" were "matters which, after the 1913 première, quickly passed from consciousness," is less clear, at least to me. "Like pieces of a scaffolding," he wrote, "they were abandoned in favor of the edifice itself and relegated to the 'extra-musical.'" And hence, "[t]hey became history, as opposed to living art."⁴²⁰ As he often does in writing about Stravinsky's music, Van den Toorn relies on the passive voice to create the impression that the processes he describes were inevitable and impersonal. But they had their agents—powerful ones, like the impresario, the scenarist, the new choreographer and above all the composer, who used the press quite actively to repress consciousness of those old "interdisciplinary" conditions and just as actively to assert a new line.

Among the first to swallow the new line—and not just the line, but the hook and sinker as well—was Olin Downes, in his *New York Times* review of the 1924 New York première. Defending *The Rite* against its reputation as a shocker mainly notable for its grisly action, Downes wrote of the score that

It is music, not mere sound to accentuate or accompany something done in the theatre. This should be emphasized, as Strawinsky has emphasized in various statements. "Sacre du Printemps" is not an accompaniment for a ballet. It is the other way round. The ballet was the accompaniment for the representation, after the conception, of the music.

Lest there be any doubt as to the source of these assertions, Mr. Downes went on to paraphrase the *Comoedia* interview: "Long before the scenario of the ballet existed, as Strawinsky told Michel Georges-Michel, he had conceived the 'embryo-theme' of the score." And then a direct quotation, in Downes's translation, ending with the famous insistence that "My work is architectonic, not anecdotal; objective, not descriptive construction."

"That is the story," Downes concluded, "and, we believe, the sincere story of the musical evolution of this extremely interesting and exciting creation."⁴²¹

⁴¹⁹ Pieter C. Van den Toorn. 1987. *Stravinsky and The Rite of Spring: The Beginnings of a Musical Language*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press: 1.

⁴²⁰ *Ibid.* 2.

⁴²¹ Olin Downes. 1924. "Music: 'Sacre du Printemps' Played. *New York Times*, 1 February.

Stravinsky was exploiting the media to control the reception of his work, as he had learned to do from Diaghilev, the manipulator of all manipulators, and as he would continue to do until the end of his life. In this case the press was cooperating in Stravinsky's own resistance to *The Rite*, which demanded the rejection of the scenario as an "extramusical" appendage. That resistance is still going strong—most obviously in much of the academic writing on the piece, which still insists on decontextualizing it, decontextualization being the indispensable price of understanding it within the terms set by the conventions of the discipline, which adamantly confine the purview of scholarly interest and discussion to the making of the object.⁴²² "It may indeed be the case," Arnold Whittall wrote, in what amounted to the keynote article in the maiden issue of the British journal *Music Analysis*:

*that the 'rules' of the game can only be discovered if the discords are 'translated' into some other medium [he was speaking of Allen Forte's "pitch-class sets"], in which they can be examined without the psychological burden of their true character and quality. For Le Sacre remains an explosive work, and analysis may be impossible unless the score is first defused.*⁴²³

That is a fine description of active resistance and repression. And that resistance has drastically affected performance as well. Even without jettisoning the subject *in toto*, the message of *The Rite* has been relentlessly muted over the years by its performers. Beginning with Massine's, staged versions of the ballet have recoiled from or toned down the "sociological" or "biological" action that so impressed Jacques Rivière with its remorselessness. In keeping with the new view of the work as "absolute" and "objective construction," Massine favored geometrical designs and what he called dance counterpoint over the folkloric or ceremonial dances that could still be detected in Nijinsky's version. Stravinsky assisted him in soft-pedaling the folkloric basis of the work by flatly denying the presence of nearly a dozen folk melodies in his score, admitting only that the opening bassoon solo in the prelude had come from an anthology of Lithuanian wedding songs.⁴²⁴ He even gave his first biographer, André Schaeffner, the exact page reference, evidently in the hope

⁴²² See Richard Taruskin. 2004. The Poietic Fallacy. *Musical Times*, vol. CXLV, no. 1886: 7-34; rpt. in Richard Taruskin. 2009. *The Danger of Music and Other Anti-Utopian Essays*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press: 301-29.

⁴²³ Arnold Whittall. 1982. Music Analysis as Human Science? *Le Sacre du Printemps* in Theory and Practice. *Music Analysis*, I, no. 1: 50. For pitch-class sets see Allen Forte. 1973. *The Structure of Atonal Music*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press and Allen Forte. 1978. *The Harmonic Organization of The Rite of Spring*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

⁴²⁴ Anton Juszkiewicz. 1900. *Melodje ludowe litewskie*. Cracow: Wydawnictwo Akademji Umiejtnosci.

that his show of candor would forestall investigation of the claim.⁴²⁵ The ruse worked for nearly fifty years, until Stravinsky's Los Angeles friend Lawrence Morton decided one day, seven years after Stravinsky's death, to reopen the Lithuanian anthology and browse for other tunes.⁴²⁶ Morton once told me, as I was starting my own investigations of Stravinsky and his works, that I was lucky I had not known the man. He was thinking of the inhibitions, born of personal loyalty, that had prevented him from making the most elementary tests of Stravinsky's many spurious assertions and denials until the Old Man had left the scene.

Many of the more recent choreographies of *The Rite*, perhaps most famously Maurice Béjart's, have replaced the grim sacrifice with another sort of fertility rite, turning the work into a joyously orgiastic celebration of human sexuality—"very positive, very youthful and very strong," in Béjart's own description, which unwittingly echoed Roerich's introduction of the piece to American audiences.⁴²⁷

The clumsiest attempt at resistance in performance that I've seen was the first Soviet production of the ballet, choreographed for the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow by Natalia Kasatkina and Vladimir Vasilyov in 1965. I caught it in 1972 and will never forget how it startled me. Although the composer had become *persona grata* by then in the homeland on which he had turned his back so long ago, and was touted, especially since his death, as *russkaya klassika*, "a Russian classic," the ballet scenario was still a problem, which the Soviet choreographers solved by having a young man, identified in the program as "the shepherd," leap out of the corps de ballet during the little flute scale that comes right before the final fatal crashing chord, sweep the Chosen One off her feet and into safety, and (coinciding with that final chord) plunge a dagger into the idol of Yarilo, the sun god before whom she was doing her fatal dance (rechristened Dazh'-bog for the occasion, in accordance with the eleventh-century Russian *Primary Chronicle*).

Even Millicent Hodson's now much-travelled version for the Joffrey Ballet, which purported faithfully (and, for many, convincingly) to reconstruct Nijinsky's harsh original to the extent that it could be reassembled from the available evidence, may have flinched a bit, allowing a hint of humanitarian sentiment to creep into the pitiless "Danse sacrée," when the Chosen One, a look of terror on her face, tries repeatedly to break out of the circle of tribal elders that surrounds and confines her as she performs her lethal leaps. The evi-

⁴²⁵ See André Schaeffner. 1931. *Stravinsky*. Paris: Éditions Rieder, 43 n 1; also Table des planches (217), pl. 21.

⁴²⁶ See Lawrence Morton. 1979. Footnotes to Stravinsky Studies: *Le Sacre du Printemps*. *Tempo*, 128 (March 1979): 9-16.

⁴²⁷ Interview with Shelly C. Berg, quoted in Berg 1988: 93.

dence on which Hodson based this episode⁴²⁸ consists of two items. The first is a notation, evidently in the hand of Marie Rambert, the eurythmics coach, on the piano four-hands score that guided Nijinsky in fashioning the choreography. The second is a passage in the memoirs of Bronislava Nijinska, the choreographer's sister, whose testimony carried authority because until she became inopportunistically pregnant, Nijinska had been the intended performer of the role of Chosen One, and it was on her body that Nijinsky had created the original steps. (Her recollections had been incorporated by Vera Krasovskaya, the great Soviet dance historian, in her monograph on Nijinsky.)

Rambert's actual words as inscribed in the four-hands rehearsal score indicate that the Chosen One "runs across clutching her head" (*perebegayet khvatayas' za golovu*); it is Hodson, not Rambert, who interprets the gesture as a "foiled escape attempt."⁴²⁹ Nor does Krasovskaya's text corroborate this interpretation directly. She quotes Nijinska, in language also quoted by Hodson, likening the Chosen One to "the image of a prehistoric bird . . . conjured up by the force of the music and by the mad scramble of jumps." But then Nijinska adds (only now not in direct discourse but in Krasovskaya's paraphrase), "it was a bird" whose "wings were attempting to raise its clumsy body not yet ready for flight."⁴³⁰ Given this ambiguous evidence, I believe it is fair to describe thoughts of escape as an interpolation by Hodson.

It was later strongly endorsed by Tamara Levitz in an article proposing that, whatever the implications of Stravinsky's music or the explicit assertion of Roerich's scenario, Nijinsky's "Chosen One may not have been a passive victim who succumbed to her community without conflict, . . . but rather a subject who experienced deep animosity toward her peers." In that case, Levitz argues, "the 'Danse sacrale' becomes less an essay in inhumane musical form than a physical expression of a critical spirit of opposition."⁴³¹ I do not find any support for this thesis in the work, in the documents pertaining to its genesis, or in the discourse surrounding it at the time of its unveiling. Like Bé-

⁴²⁸ So identified by her in an oral exchange with me following my keynote address at the conference, "*The Rite of Spring* at One Hundred," organized by Carolina Performing Arts at the Chapel Hill campus of the University of North Carolina on October 25, 2012.

⁴²⁹ Hodson 1996: 172, 174.

⁴³⁰ Vera Krasovskaya. 1979. *Nijinsky*, trans. John A. Bowlit. New York: Schirmer Books: 267 (Bowlit has "still not ready" for "not yet ready"; this is a common error in translations into English from Russian, in which the word *yeshcho* can be translated as both "still" and "yet."). Compare Hodson, *Nijinsky's Crime*: 174 (which purports to represent Nijinska's text in faithful translation rather than paraphrase): "Leaning to the ground, the Chosen One sits (in *plié*) such that the hand that is down hangs to the earth, and just then her legs begin to stamp and her hands beat against her bent knees—like a large bird choosing and setting up a nest."

⁴³¹ Tamara Levitz. 2004. The Chosen One's Choice. In Andrew Dell'Antonio, ed. *Beyond Structural Listening? Postmodern Modes of Hearing*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press: 72.

part's and other revisionary choreographies such as Mary Wigman's or Pina Bausch's, Prof. Levitz's interpretation seems to me an attempt to salvage something "positive" from *The Rite* according to our contemporary standards. This is what we are always tempted to do with works we want to keep current, and it is a reasonable and justifiable endeavor. The only part I object to is the attempt to usurp Nijinsky's authority by attributing the revisionary reading to him.

Nijinsky's contribution to *The Rite*, unhappily, is no longer available for inspection. It was never filmed, and Millicent Hodson, by her own admirably frank admission, had to do a great deal of speculative supplementing in order to turn the evidence she had—chiefly verbal descriptions and still drawings and photos—into actual *plastique animée*, the realization of movement in space and time. It is from Hodson's supplements, further supplemented, I would venture to say, by her own strong moral convictions, that Prof. Levitz derived her argument that Nijinsky's Chosen One "expressed her opposition to the people who had chosen her to die."⁴³² "From all accounts," she claims, "the dominant emotion [of the *Danse sacrée*] seems to have been . . . fear and a deep antagonism between the Chosen One and her surroundings."⁴³³ I know of no such accounts. None of the witnesses Levitz cites—to "fear and grief," to "tragedy," or to the Chosen One's "subjective will," her "defiant expression," her "attempts to flee"⁴³⁴—had actually seen Nijinsky's version of the *Danse sacrée*; and those who did see it, especially those few who described it sympathetically and in detail, contradict her contentions. Andrey Levinson, in what seems to me a masterpiece of pithy accuracy of observation, wrote of the Chosen One in her moment of glorious agony:

*To the sound of ferocious rhythmic pounding, deafened by the piercing tonalities of the orchestra, she crumples and writhes in an ecstatic angular dance. And once again the icy comedy of this primeval hysteria excites the spectator with its unprecedented impression of tortured grotesquery.*⁴³⁵

And Jacques Rivière, whose account Levitz praises as "remarkably insightful,"⁴³⁶ wrote that the Chosen One "accomplishes a rite, absorbed by a social function, and without giving the slightest sign of comprehension or of interpretation, she acts according to the will and the convulsions of a being more vast than she." Her fate is shown not as horrible but as inevitable and, by the lights of the tribe for whom she dies, beneficent. In the ballet's final gesture,

⁴³² *Ibid.* 85.

⁴³³ *Ibid.* 85-86.

⁴³⁴ *Ibid.* 86, 96-97.

⁴³⁵ Andrey Yakovlevich Levinson. 1913. *Russkiy balet v Parizhe. Rech*, 3 June.

⁴³⁶ Levitz 2004: 96.

when the elders bear her aloft, her death is celebrated, not deplored—and that, of course, is what to us is horrible.

An icy comedy of primeval hysteria. Convulsions of a will more vast. We don't get, because we don't want, such messages from *The Rite* any more. In the ballet theater it has become a humane indictment of oppression or else a revelry of procreative sex. There were intimations of both of these, it seemed to me, in the latest new choreography, by Sasha Waltz, which was given its première performance in a double bill with Hodson's reconstructed Nijinsky at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées on the actual anniversary date, 29 May 2013. In the concert hall (as opposed to the theater), amnesia has been complete, and *The Rite* has become Olympic fun and games, a showpiece for instrumental virtuosity. These are all resistances to *The Rite*—both to the shocking object unveiled on May 29, 1913, and to the disorderly reaction that it incited.

But do not think that I am deploring these transformations. Change is concomitant in all artistic reception, and in all traditions. It can be celebrated or opposed, but never stopped. It is what keeps beloved works alive, or (in Pieter van den Toorn's language), maintains their status as "living art." It is precisely because *The Rite* has changed enormously, both in sound and in significance, over the century of its existence, that we can celebrate it today with such enthusiasm. To assess and account for these changes is perhaps the most fascinating task of the art or music or ballet historian confronting *The Rite*, and certainly the most pressing one. So in conclusion, I offer a few vignettes to illustrate the way in which *The Rite* has been resisted in concert performance. As before, the chief resister turns out to be the composer himself, which is what has made resistance so irresistible.

The earliest recordings, by Monteux and by Stravinsky, date from 1929, the year of the last Ballets Russes performances.⁴³⁷ They show the work to have been an almost unplayable ordeal at the time—and literally unplayable when it came to maintaining the marked tempos. The performances are arduous and sloppy, and in the *Danse sacrée*, the hardest part of all, they convey something of the crushing force and tension that drive the Chosen One to her doom. You can still hear a little of that arduousness and tension in Stravinsky's much faster 1940 recording with the New York Philharmonic.⁴³⁸ The *Danse sacrée* is still a mess, and, like the doomed dancer, it totters more and more inelegantly as it nears the end—this despite the presence of Saul Goodman, perhaps the greatest kettledrummer of all time, in what is surely the

⁴³⁷ Both have been reissued on Pearl CDs: GEMM 9334 (Stravinsky) and GEMM 9329 (Monteux).

⁴³⁸ Most recently reissued, together with nine other historical "reference recordings" (including Stokowski's with the Philadelphia Orchestra, first published somewhat later in 1929), on Sony Music / RCA Red Seal B00BXQ3KXY (2013).

most spectacular timpani part in the whole literature. It wasn't Goodman's fault, or the orchestra's. Nobody knew the piece very well in those days. It was still a relative rarity on concert programs in 1940, and the unpredictable accents and irregular phrase lengths were a constant surprise and challenge to all concerned, including Stravinsky, who was not a trained conductor. The combination of his uncertain beat and the orchestra's need for leadership through the rhythmic thickets conspired to prevent a good performance—if by a good performance one means a fluent and rhythmically secure performance.

But is a fluent and rhythmically secure performance the sort of performance Stravinsky originally intended? A recent study of *The Rite* by the music theorist Matthew McDonald showed, to me convincingly, that in order to evoke a genuine sense of primeval hysteria the composer used *ad hoc* algorithms, formulas derived arbitrarily from the harmonies and melodies, to assemble rhythmic patterns that would defeat anyone's expectations, even his own, and prevent the music from ever losing its shock value by becoming familiar or predictable.⁴³⁹ But now everybody knows *The Rite*. It is a classic, and an audition piece that every music student practices, so that now any conservatory orchestra can give a spiffy performance of what used to stump their elders, and professional orchestras can play it in their sleep, and often do.

Stravinsky came to want it that way. After the Great War came the great neo-classical reaction, in which Stravinsky played the leading role among musicians. That is when he started resisting *The Rite* by touting it as “architectonic, not anecdotal,” an “objective construction,” and “absolute ballet.” One of the strange fruits of his neoclassicism—but not so strange when you put it in the context of that objectivist esthetic—was Stravinsky's infatuation with the piano, a mechanical instrument that never misses a note or a cue and never grows tired. It can maintain a regularity of tempo and rhythm far beyond the capacity of any mortal performer, and Stravinsky eagerly arranged all his music for the machine that so epitomized his new impersonal (or, to speak the language of the period, “dehumanized”) ideals. His piano roll of the *Danse sacrée* gave the piece a new meaning: no longer a dance of lethal fatigue and exhaustion but a paean to imperturbable stability and speed. For make no mistake: “dehumanized” meant superhuman, not subhuman; and for *The Rite* this was a diametrical reversal of meaning.⁴⁴⁰

Ever since the 1920s, that lithe stability and speed have been the performance ideal for *The Rite*, which Stravinsky officially sanctioned by re-notating and slightly rescoring the *Danse sacrée* (in 1943, after his frustrating experience

⁴³⁹ Matthew McDonald. 2010. *Jeux de Nombres: Automated Rhythm in The Rite of Spring*. *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, LXIII: 499-551.

⁴⁴⁰ The piano roll has been recorded by Rex Lawson on IMP Masters CD 25 (1991).

with the New York Philharmonic three years earlier) to make the conductor's part easier to beat, and the orchestral parts easier to read. From then on it became the John-Henryish ideal of performers to match or even exceed the piano roll's rendition, and when the first recordings to do so (Benjamin Zander's with the Boston Philharmonic and Robert Craft's with the Orchestra of St. Luke's) were issued in 1991, they were greeted as a decisive breakthrough.⁴⁴¹

Now the best orchestras and conductors can proudly equal or exceed that feat in live performance, as one may see the San Francisco Symphony doing, under Michael Tilson Thomas, in a DVD the orchestra issued on its own label in 2006.⁴⁴² As is usual in performance videos, it is full of close-ups, both of individual members of the orchestra and of the conductor, whose face live audiences never get to see during performances. At the very end of the *Danse sacrale*, when the applause begins, Maestro Thomas's beaming face fills the screen, and it is a perfect picture of what *The Rite of Spring* conveys now: elation and euphoria, the emotion of an athlete who has just completed the decathlon or an engineer who has designed and demonstrated a perfectly tuned and efficient precision appliance. Precision tooling is the message the camerawork is obviously deployed to emphasize throughout the performance, hopping from player to imperturbable player through all the rhythmic intricacies. The dark biological ballet of 1913, the icy comedy of primeval hysteria, has been decisively resisted, rejected, repressed in favor of "positive" good vibrations.

But not necessarily for all time. The tradition continues. Who can say where it is headed? What I have just described is merely the rendering of *The Rite* that best accords with current views and thus follows what is now the line of least resistance.

⁴⁴¹ Zander's performance is preserved on the same CD as the piano roll (see fn 91); Craft's is on Musicmasters B000000FQS ("Stravinsky the Composer, vol. 1").

⁴⁴² Keeping Score: Revolutions in Music—Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* (San Francisco Symphony Productions 821936001493).

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