

Abigail Wagner

### A Different Type of Rhythm

In 1913, *The Rite of Spring's* premiere provoked a shocked, disillusioned, and violent reaction from its audience. Equally violent was the subsequent controversy over the work's artistic validity. Critic Cecil Gray called the work "the very negation and denial of rhythm," claiming that, "Strip the music [of 'Sacrificial Dance'] of the bar-lines and time-signatures, which are only a loincloth concealing its shameful nudity, and it will at once be seen that there is no rhythm at all. Rhythm implies life, some kind of movement or progression at least, but this music stands quite still, in a quite frightening immobility" (qtd. in *The Cambridge Companion*). Gray, like many in his time, failed to recognize that Western meter is not the only way of organizing music and dance. *The Rite of Spring* may seem arrhythmic to those accustomed to Tchaikovsky, but Stravinsky and Nijinsky's concept of rhythm was not without precedent in a global sense and certainly not random. Careful listening and big-picture analysis of the work reveals that their newly invented rhythmic language defines the primal feeling and sense of perpetual motion. *The Rite of Spring* is built upon a legitimate rhythmic idiom that is quite remote from that of the classical Western tradition, an idiom that effectively challenges audiences, evokes a primal past, and drives the work through a powerful progression of scenes and emotions.

In referring to the "negation and denial of rhythm," Gray perceives the absence of conventional meter in Stravinsky's work, while overlooking the other elements of rhythm present. According to the Harvard Dictionary of Music, rhythm consists of four independent elements: duration, pulse, rhythmic gestures, and meter. Each element can be more or less important, or even absent, in a given musical idiom. For example, Hindustani vocal music consists of pitches that are distinguished rhythmically only by duration; neither a pulse nor a regular pattern of accented values is present (723-8). In Western classical music, the most salient feature of rhythm is the pattern of metric accent within a steady pulse. Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* does not follow a steady meter, but clearly and deliberately utilizes the other three elements of rhythm. At the beginning of the Augurs of Spring, the strings beat out a constant

eighth note pulse (0:00-1:12). In the same movement, there are durational contrasts between the strings' eighth notes and the woodwinds' and trumpets' triplets and sixteenths (0:30). The desire for an easily identifiable pattern of accent in music is not a divine truth, but a cultural phenomenon. The 1913 audience's shock at hearing *Rite* was akin to that of someone who has only read verse in iambic pentameter reading a prose novel for the first time. There is intelligent rhythmic organization within *Rite*. That determined, we must further examine the rhythmic idiom of the music and the dance, and what it communicates to the listener.

Instead of using meter as the basis for his music, Stravinsky made the elements of pulse and rhythmic gestures paramount. During the *Augurs of Spring*, and elsewhere throughout the work, Stravinsky turns the orchestra into a giant percussion instrument by giving the typically melodic stringed instruments repetitive, harsh eighth notes (0:00-1:12). *Spring Rounds* uses an ostinato of heavy bow strokes alternated with offbeat pizzicato (plucked strings) underneath the woodwind melody (0:23). In the *Glorification of the Chosen One* and the *Sacrificial Dance*, each measure is a word in Stravinsky's rhythmic vocabulary. Each section is composed of six to ten "words" repeated in different combinations, giving a sense of flow through reiteration, but creating tension by leaving expectations of a pattern unfulfilled (McQuinn). Throughout the work, cleverly planned durational contrasts are prevalent among concurrent notes, as well as at the big-picture harmonic level. The *Dance of the Earth* contains triplets against sixteenth notes, three notes in the same space as four, creating a chaotic whirlwind effect (0:29). In the *Introduction to Part One*, the accelerating pace of trading melodies among the wind instruments builds tension and excitement, evoking the chaos of springtime and the emergence of new life (1:37-2:25). Stravinsky's music is rhythmically alive, though in a different sense than the conventional one to which Gray's mind is bound.

Dancers as well as musicians participate in the rhythmic idiom that is the foundation of *The Rite of Spring*. Looking past the unconventional costumes and grotesque movements, one can see the organic logic of the dance. The dancers beat the pulse of the music with their feet and arms. For example, the female dancers step sixteenth notes during the introduction to Part Two. During the *Glorification of the Chosen One*, the young girls' movements repeat in gestural

patterns in the same way as the rhythmic fragments of music. The dancers also create visual rhythms of density and formation. At times, they are chaotically dispersed about the stage. Small groups run from one side of the stage to the other, changing the distribution of movement and color. The chaos then resolves to order as dancers form lines or circles (Joffrey Ballet, *Dance of the Earth*). The amount of time spent in each formation creates a chaos-order hyper-rhythm eliciting feelings of tension and release in the viewer in a way that is conceptually similar to the strong-weak feeling of classical music's metric accents. The dancers even participate in the music by clapping their hands and stomping their feet, as the young girls do as they dance around the chosen one (Joffrey Ballet, *Glorification of the Chosen One*). Stravinsky and Nijinsky placed a premium on rhythm: they wanted it blatant and noticed. The dancers of *Rite* are not performing a waltz or even a can-can, but they are integral participants in the work's nontraditional rhythm.

The manipulation of rhythm in contrast with our expectations, both in music and in dance, is a psychological tool central to the power of *The Rite of Spring*. Stravinsky uses the audience's expectations to add tension to their experience of music. Knowing that people are accustomed to music with a predictable three or four beat meter, he deliberately defies expectations with melodies and rhythms with no consistent downbeat. In the *Augurs of Spring*, he accents off beats to thwart the traditional sense of strong downbeat followed by weak beats. The sporadic repetition of rhythmic gestures in the *Glorification of the Chosen One* and the *Sacrificial Dance* teases the ear by suggesting a pattern and then rearranging it (McQuinn). Similar confusion ensues when the dancers' rhythms do not match the music. In the Joffrey Ballet reproduction, the dancers step to a swung rhythm while the orchestra pulses a straight rhythm, and run about the stage mock-fighting during the *Ritual of Abduction*, abandoning graceful steps in time to the music for an all-out free-for-all. The absence of a predictable meter is not the "nudity" Gray writes of, but a tool that evokes images and emotions that Stravinsky and Nijinsky want to convey. Why should an ancient pagan ritual use Western classical rhythms? Only something radically different and unsettling could transport the audience to a time hundreds of years ago. The cognitive tension created by the listener's attempt and failure to organize the music and dance into a familiar schema communicates the

incomprehensible tension contained in the ritual of sacrificing an innocent young girl. The subject matter of *Rite* is ancient and harsh. Stravinsky and Nijinsky's foreign rhythmic language transports the audience years into the past, involves them in the raw tension of the ritual, and gives depth to the spectacle because it is beyond comprehension.

Perhaps Gray's harshest, most ignorant claim against *The Rite of Spring* is that the music "stands quite still." There are many instances of forward motion and progression within *The Rite of Spring*, both macroscopically and microscopically. The motion that is directly related to the rhythm. Gray was correct in saying that "rhythm implies life," but incorrect in assuming that life is defined only by traditional Western metered rhythm. Right from the opening, *Rite* moves and changes strangely but cohesively. The Introduction begins with a single voice, the bassoon, like the first ray of light at sunrise or the first bird singing in the springtime. Soon the clarinets, then the English horn, trumpets, and strings add their small melodic fragments to the music, in a growing mass of voices. The melodic baton is passed from instrument to instrument at an accelerating pace, evoking the chaos of plants sprouting and animals emerging from hibernation. The ominous pizzicato in the strings warns of impending strife among this blossoming world (1:37-2:25; 2:37). Here we see motion: the emergence of life from the silence of winter. In the introduction, each instrument has its own voice. The dancers move in blocks and lines, running around the stage haphazardly. Later, we perceive the gradual loss of self to the ritual of Earth worship and virgin sacrifice (McQuinn). By the Spring Rounds dance, the dancers have formed a large circle, and the orchestra plays a unison rhythm (1:45; Joffrey Ballet, Spring Rounds). Movement from chaos to order, from independence to complete subjugation to a higher cause, is certainly indicative of motion and life. *The Rite of Spring* is anything but static.

It could be argued that Stravinsky and Nijinsky's work did not have a rhythm that was meaningful to their audience, and therefore, was of no value. However, the unconventional rhythms of *Rite* served high artistic purposes beyond sensationalism. They succeeded in probing the primal depths of human nature so deeply that the audience was disturbed enough to riot. The very essence of *Rite* is its temporal and emotional strangeness and remoteness.

The otherworldly aura is created in large part by the refusal to adhere to a traditional meter and the defiance of the listener's subconscious expectations of what music should sound like. *Rite's* creators did not desire to please the audience; in fact, Nijinsky was highly excited by the riot (McQuinn). The long legacy of *Rite* proves that what is not understood can be highly influential.

*The Rite of Spring* challenged audiences worldwide to rethink the definition of rhythm in music and dance. Must it be predictable, waltz- or march-like, to be meaningful? Before *Rite*, the answer would have been a flippant, naïve, unequivocal yes. After the 1913 debut, some people, like Gray, still said yes because they could not think outside of the cultural norms that had been inculcated in their minds. Some people answered "no" and began to explore new ways to organize music and dance. *The Rite of Spring* expanded the definition of rhythm for Western audiences and paved the way for the fusion of idioms that came to define the twentieth century's "modern" performing arts. *Rite* broke the ice of classical Western music's many rules and opened the door to the experimentation that is essential to the progression of art. When artistic stagnation ensues, a revolution is needed. Stravinsky and Nijinsky were those revolutionaries for the early twentieth century, and rhythm was their declaration of independence.

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N.B. The numbers in parenthesis refer to time designations in the specified section of the Stravinsky recording. The names of scenes in parentheses refer to the Joffrey Ballet reproduction.

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