

# The Rite Of Spring: Pictures From Pagan Russia In Two Parts

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Igor Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring: Pictures from Pagan Russia in Two Parts* is one of the most influential works in twentieth-century music and dance. Created for Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, it premiered at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris on May 29, 1913. Stravinsky composed the score, Vaslav Nijinsky created the choreography, and Nicholas Roerich developed the scenario and designed the sets and costumes. The work presented an imagined sequence of seasonal rituals in ancient Russia, culminating in the selection of a young woman who dances herself to death as a sacrifice intended to secure the renewal of spring. Its violent rhythmic energy, dense orchestration, unconventional movement, and deliberately earthbound visual world challenged the expectations of an audience accustomed to the elegance and narrative clarity of nineteenth-century ballet. (Garafola, 1989)

The original essay correctly emphasizes that the dance, music, and costumes surprised viewers because they rejected many conventions associated with classical ballet. The dancers did not appear weightless, refined, or individually heroic. They moved in groups, bent their knees, turned their feet inward, stamped, trembled, and formed heavy geometric patterns. Stravinsky's score likewise avoided predictable phrasing and smooth melodic development. Repeated fragments, changing accents, dissonant harmonies, and layered rhythms made the music feel unstable even when its underlying construction was highly controlled. Roerich's bulky garments and archaeological vision of pre-Christian Russia completed an artwork in which sound, body, and visual design produced a deliberately unfamiliar ritual environment.

## The Two-Part Ritual Structure

The subtitle, "Pictures from Pagan Russia in Two Parts," identifies the ballet as a sequence of ritual images rather than a conventional dramatic plot. Part One, commonly translated as "The Adoration of the Earth," presents the awakening of spring, games, rival groups, processions, and the arrival of the Sage. The scenes do not develop through individual psychology in the manner of a romantic ballet. They accumulate through collective actions. The community listens to the earth, competes, celebrates, and submits to ritual order. The music repeatedly creates tension between recurrence and disruption: a pattern begins, accents shift, another layer enters, and the audience loses the easy ability to predict where musical emphasis will fall.

Part Two, "The Sacrifice," moves from communal celebration toward the selection and death of the Chosen One. Young women form ritual circles, and one becomes trapped in the role of sacrificial victim. The elders and ancestors surround her while she performs the final dance. The conclusion is

not graceful transcendence. It is physically exhausting, rhythmically severe, and morally unsettling. The community's renewal depends on the destruction of one body. By organizing the ballet around group ritual rather than romantic love, heroic adventure, or supernatural rescue, the creators made the audience confront collective power and the violence hidden within ceremonial unity.

## Music: Rhythm, Dissonance, and Orchestral Force

The score opens with a bassoon playing in an unusually high register. The instrument is recognizable only with difficulty, immediately destabilizing the listener's expectations. This melody is often associated with folk material, but Stravinsky does not present folk music as a simple national decoration. He fragments, repeats, layers, and transforms melodic shapes until they become part of a modern orchestral language. Woodwinds enter in overlapping lines, and the texture gradually thickens as though the natural world is awakening through competing voices rather than through a calm pastoral scene.

The "Augurs of Spring" is among the work's most famous passages. Repeated chords are driven by accents that seem to fall irregularly. The effect is often described as primitive or brutal, yet those terms should not imply a lack of compositional intelligence. The apparent rawness is produced through exact calculation. Stravinsky manipulates duration, repetition, meter, orchestral color, and accent so that a simple block of sound becomes unpredictable. Instead of melody leading the listener through a stable harmonic journey, rhythm becomes a principal structural force.

Dissonance contributes to the sensation of conflict. Different harmonic materials are placed together without being resolved according to traditional expectations. The orchestra is unusually large and uses extremes of register, sharp attacks, percussion, and sudden changes in density. At times, separate instrumental groups appear to operate according to different rhythmic logics. This layering gives the music an architectural quality: blocks are placed beside or above one another, and tension arises from their collision.

The score is not chaotic, despite the confusion it can produce. Motifs return, ritual sections are carefully ordered, and recurring rhythmic cells create continuity. The listener's difficulty comes from the fact that the organizing principles are not always those of familiar nineteenth-century phrasing. Stravinsky makes repetition dynamic by shifting accents, changing orchestration, shortening or extending patterns, and inserting interruptions. The music therefore teaches the audience how to hear it while continually resisting complete comfort.

## Nijinsky's Rejection of Classical Ballet Movement

Nijinsky's choreography was as controversial as the score because it contradicted the ideals of turnout, elevation, length, and effortless grace associated with classical ballet. The original essay accurately notices the pigeon-toed stance, bent arms and legs, clenched fists, hunched heads, jerks,

jumps, trembling, and shivering. These choices brought the dancers' weight toward the ground. Instead of attempting to conceal effort, the choreography made muscular strain and repeated impact visible.

The inward rotation of the feet was especially disruptive. Classical training encourages turnout from the hips, helping create open lines and facilitating a vocabulary of steps. Nijinsky asked trained dancers to work against those habits. Bent knees lowered the center of gravity, while parallel or inward positions produced a closed and communal appearance. The body was not displayed as an autonomous instrument of individual beauty. It became part of a larger ritual formation.

Group movement dominates much of the ballet. Dancers cluster, form circles, move in lines, and repeat synchronized gestures. Individual roles exist, but the community remains visually powerful. The Chosen One's isolation is therefore intensified: she emerges from a collective structure that selects, surrounds, and witnesses her death. The choreography shows how a group can generate both belonging and coercion.

Movement and score are closely connected, but not through ordinary counting alone. The dancers respond to changing accents and complex rhythmic structures. Nijinsky reportedly used demanding rehearsal methods to coordinate the choreography with Stravinsky's music. The result was a bodily map of the score in which stamping, directional change, stillness, and repetition make musical force visible. This relationship explains why the work belongs simultaneously to the histories of music and dance. (Stravinsky, 1962)

## Costume, Setting, and Roerich's Imagined Russia

Roerich's designs helped construct the ballet's pre-Christian world. The costumes were loose, layered, patterned, and visually heavy. Tunics, head coverings, woven designs, fur-like materials, and strong colors prevented the dancers from resembling the slim, elongated figures of conventional ballet. Fabric enlarged the body and emphasized group identity. The garments also changed how movement appeared; a bent knee or stamping step carried the weight of cloth and ornament, making the stage picture denser.

The costumes should not be treated as a direct documentary record of one authentic pagan ceremony. They were part of an early twentieth-century artistic imagination of ancient Russia, shaped by archaeology, folklore, nationalism, modernism, and Roerich's own interests. The ballet's ritual is invented rather than reconstructed from a complete historical source. Nevertheless, the visual design gave the work cultural specificity and distinguished it from generic exotic fantasy.

The landscape and costumes also connect human beings with the earth. The dancers appear to belong to the ground rather than rise above it. Their clothing echoes natural colors and folk patterns, while their movements repeatedly return weight to the floor. Spring is not presented as gentle flowers and pleasant weather; it is a force that demands communal participation and sacrifice.

## The 1913 Premiere and Its Reception

The premiere became famous for the disorder in the theatre. Audience members laughed, shouted, argued, and reacted strongly enough that the performance was difficult to hear. Later retellings often call the event a “riot,” although accounts differ concerning the degree of physical violence and the relative importance of music, choreography, social rivalry, and deliberate provocation. What is clear is that the production divided the audience and became a symbol of modernist rupture.

The reaction should not be explained only by the score’s difficulty. Parisian audiences encountered a Russian company associated with fashion, artistic prestige, and spectacle. Some spectators expected novelty, while others defended established taste. Nijinsky’s movement could appear deliberately ugly to viewers trained to admire classical refinement. Stravinsky’s music challenged listening habits, and Roerich’s designs created a world that was both archaic and aggressively modern. The evening therefore concentrated artistic, social, and cultural tensions already present in the city.

The scandal later became part of the work’s mythology. It helped establish *The Rite of Spring* as an emblem of an artwork initially rejected because it was ahead of its time. That story is partly accurate, but the work’s influence also resulted from repeated performance, careful study, and the ability of later musicians and choreographers to discover new meanings in it. Controversy attracted attention; artistic complexity sustained the work.

## The Joffrey Reconstruction

Nijinsky’s original choreography disappeared from regular performance after the early productions. Decades later, choreographer and dance historian Millicent Hodson and art historian Kenneth Archer attempted to reconstruct it from photographs, drawings, reviews, musical annotations, memories, costume designs, and other surviving evidence. The Joffrey Ballet presented their reconstruction in 1987. Robert Joffrey’s company provided the institutional setting, while Hodson reconstructed the movement and Archer reconstructed Roerich’s visual designs. (Hodson, 1996)

The reconstruction was an extraordinary scholarly and artistic project, but it should not be described as unquestionable recovery of every original step. The evidence was incomplete, and reconstruction required interpretation. Photographs capture positions rather than transitions, reviews may be contradictory, and memories recorded decades later can be unreliable. The 1987 production therefore offers a reasoned approximation of Nijinsky’s choreography rather than a mechanical restoration.

Its importance lies partly in making the original production imaginable. Modern audiences can see the inward feet, heavy formations, ritual circles, and relationship between movement and music that earlier generations knew mainly through written descriptions. The reconstruction also encourages discussion about how performance history is preserved. Dance exists through bodies in time, and when notation or film is absent, later artists must negotiate between evidence and invention.

# Modernism, Primitivism, and Neoclassicism

The original essay describes the work as both primitivist and neoclassical. The distinction requires correction. *The Rite of Spring* is usually understood as a landmark of musical and choreographic modernism, and it is frequently associated with primitivism because of its invented ritual subject, rhythmic violence, folk-derived materials, and emphasis on collective bodily force. Stravinsky later became a leading neoclassical composer, but *The Rite* was created before the mature neoclassical phase represented by works such as *Pulcinella*. (Toorn, 1987)

Calling the work “primitive” can also be misleading if the term is interpreted as simple, undeveloped, or culturally inferior. The music is technically sophisticated, and the imagined pagan society is a modern construction. Primitivism describes an artistic strategy through which modern European artists sought forms they considered elemental, pre-industrial, or outside academic tradition. That strategy can be analyzed critically because it often projected modern desires onto imagined ancient or non-Western cultures.

The ballet’s relationship with classical tradition is therefore one of transformation rather than total rejection. It was created for trained ballet dancers, performed by a major ballet company, and structured as a staged work with designed scenes and musical development. Yet it redirected those resources toward new bodily and sonic effects. It stands between inherited institutions and radical experimentation.

## Sacrifice, Community, and Gender

The Chosen One is a young woman whose body becomes the price of collective renewal. The ballet does not provide her with a spoken voice or individual biography. She is selected through ritual and forced to dance under the gaze of the elders. This structure can be interpreted as a representation of communal violence, gendered sacrifice, and the conversion of an individual into a symbol.

Her final solo is both submission and extreme agency. She cannot escape the ritual role, but the performance depends on her physical endurance. The community remains largely still while she moves toward death. The contrast places moral attention on the relation between the many who watch and the one who suffers. Spring, traditionally associated with life and fertility, is achieved through destruction.

Modern productions have interpreted this sacrifice in many ways, including ecological crisis, political oppression, sexual violence, social conformity, and the cost imposed on vulnerable bodies. The score’s power allows choreographers to create new contexts while retaining the tension between collective rhythm and individual mortality.

## Conclusion

*The Rite of Spring* transformed ballet by joining Stravinsky's dissonant and rhythmically complex score with Nijinsky's grounded choreography and Roerich's visually heavy imagined pagan Russia. The dancers' bent knees, inward feet, stamped steps, clustered formations, and trembling bodies challenged the long lines and apparent weightlessness of classical ballet. The costumes and stage design made the body part of a ritual landscape, while the music destabilized ordinary expectations through repetition, changing accents, orchestral blocks, and unresolved dissonance.

The work's 1913 reception made it famous, but its lasting importance comes from more than scandal. It created a new relationship among music, movement, and visual design and opened possibilities for modern dance and orchestral composition. The 1987 Joffrey reconstruction by Millicent Hodson and Kenneth Archer allowed later audiences to encounter an informed interpretation of the lost choreography, even though no reconstruction can remove all uncertainty.

The ballet is best understood as modernist and primitivist rather than as a mature neoclassical composition. Its imagined ritual is not an exact historical document, yet it remains a powerful study of community, violence, renewal, and sacrifice. More than a century after its premiere, *The Rite of Spring* continues to provoke choreographers and audiences because its rhythms and images make the arrival of spring feel dangerous, collective, and morally disturbing.

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