Ballets are not meant to look hideous, and music is not supposed to sound ugly. Who would want to pay to see classically trained ballet dancers stomping on the stage with their feet turned in and their heads resting on their hands? And who would want to hear an instrument play inharmonious notes that are almost out of its range? Such questions express the mindset of elite and fashionable Parisians in 1913, and it was this mindset that led them to react so strongly to the premiere of Russian composer Igor Stravinsky’s ballet, *The Rite of Spring*. Instead of hearing the agreeable and predictable melodies of Beethoven and Mozart, the audience members were assaulted with a wild circus of discordant sounds and strange dance steps. However, even though the atonal music and unconventional dance moves seemed to complement each other, the choreography did not effectively reflect the music. Stravinsky himself said that his choreographer, Vaslav Nijinsky, did not “make any attempt to understand [his] choreographic ideas for *Le Sacre du Printemps*” (Stravinsky and Craft 37). Stravinsky made this remark because Nijinsky’s choreography too faithfully followed his music, to the point that it failed to capture the music’s Dionysian spirit. As the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche explains, Dionysus, the god of fertility, wine, and spiritual ecstasy, incorporates the wild, the ambiguous, and the collective, while Apollo embodies the precise, the restrained, and the individual. Ironically, Nijinsky’s perfect imitation of the music resulted in his choreography expressing Apollonian restraint rather than Dionysian ecstasy.

Musician and author Peter Hill believes that the idea of *The Rite of Spring* comes from one of Stravinsky’s dreams—“a scene of pagan ritual in which a chosen sacrificial virgin danced herself to death” (3). Thus, as religious studies professor Sarah Levine has pointed out, the piece contained many “elements intended to evoke a Dionysian world: the communal intoxication of Spring, pre-Christian origins, sacrifice, and musical dissonance” (101). According to Greek mythology, unrestrained, masked, torchlit dances and animal sacrifices often occurred at the cult ceremonies of...
Dionysus. These ceremonies, or orgia, were exceptionally savage and enthusiastic; the participants danced and worshiped so vigorously that they were forced to step out of their own identities and become one with Dionysus. Similarly, when the Greeks drank wine, they became possessed by Dionysus’s godly presence. These euphoric and intoxicated people no longer had independent minds. Instead, they were all under the control of one powerful god who brought them together into an irrational, primitive, and ecstatic community.

Stravinsky’s ballet music evokes this sense of community and togetherness. This feeling of unity is also the focal point of the influential German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche’s definition of the Dionysian spirit of art. Nietzsche states that, in a Dionysian world, every man feels “not only reunified, reconciled, reincorporated, and merged with his neighbor, but genuinely one” (23). For example, more than one instrument plays a single melody, and this serves to amplify the sound. This practice is reminiscent of a group of people coming together and performing the same actions at the same time. Moreover, there are sections of the music in which only one instrument is playing, but the instrument tends to play the same tune over and over again. Some examples are the eleven consecutive “BANG”s by the timpani near the end of the piece and the warbling yet soothing *hum* the bassoon plays at the very beginning. Although both instruments are singled out from the rest of the orchestra, their repetitive tunes fail to make them unique.

A syncopated rhythm complements the music played by the instruments. Rhythm is often seen as an element that gives music an attitude and makes each musical piece unique. But according to the German sociologist and philosopher Theodor Adorno, rhythm actually contributes to the standardization of music. He coined the term “pseudo-individualization” to describe the endowment of “cultural mass production with the halo of free choice or open market on the basis of standardization itself” (Adorno 445). In other words, although rhythm grants melody the illusion of freedom, it actually strengthens its repetitive and standardized nature. For Adorno, then, standardization and repetitiveness are the real foundations of Stravinsky’s Dionysian world. Even his dissonances are forced into formulaic patterns in which nothing is truly unique: Dionysian unity is reduced to pseudo-individualism.

Although *The Rite of Spring* is often considered a Dionysian work of art, there are Apollonian qualities also sprinkled throughout its heart-pounding sounds, dramatic silences, and violent tonalities. Nietzsche believed the Apollonian world is associated with dreams, calmness, and individuality (23). Every person can have complete control over his or her thoughts and body. This reasonable world is separated from the chaos of life and concerned with appearances and perfection instead of reality. According to Modris Eksteins, there are a “few brief melodic lines” in *The Rite of Spring* (50). However, they rarely last for more than ten seconds and are often used as transitions from one Dionysian passage to another. These few Apollonian moments function to give structure to the hectic music—they are, as Nietzsche once said about Apollonian music, “Doric architecture rendered in sound” (24). For instance, an Apollonian moment occurs around the sixteen-minute mark of *Stravinsky Conducts Stravinsky: The Rite of Spring*: the brass instruments play a short but regal passage producing a pleasant, harmonic melody. But as the next section of the piece is about to commence, the agitated pounding of the timpani abruptly interrupts the peaceful melody. Its loud, booming sound creates chaos and reminds the listeners that they remain in an ambiguous, Dionysian world.

Stravinsky had always envisioned dance choreography to accompany his music. So, in 1911, Sergei Diaghilev, the ballet impresario and founder of Ballet Russes (*The Russian Ballets*), officially commissioned *The Rite of Spring*. It was to premiere in the 1912 season under the direction of
celebrated Russian dancer and choreographer Vaslav Nijinsky. Both composer and choreographer were excited about this collaboration; Stravinsky saw Nijinsky as full of passion and zeal, while Nijinsky greatly admired and respected Stravinsky. But, despite his energy and commitment to the ballet, it appears that Nijinsky had difficulty communicating his choreographic vision to his classically trained dancers. Perhaps this was because they viewed Nijinsky’s teaching style and choreography as new and unconventional. For example, while most choreographers provided their dancers with basic steps and allowed them to develop their own details, Nijinsky “forbade any pantomime or ad-libbing,” forcing them to meticulously follow his choreographic plan (Levine 104). Instead of the old “symbolism of the mouth,” in Nietzsche’s terms, there would be a Dionysian “symbolism of the body” that encompassed all parts of the community rather than any single, rational, Apollonian element in it (Nietzsche 26). In other words, the dancers were not individuals, but “members of a higher communal order” (Nietzsche 95). For example, in the BBC documentary film The Riot at the Rite, the sacrificial maiden joins in the rite automatically, as if she were in “an entranced state”: her eyes are glassy and staring straight ahead, her small mouth is slightly open, and she has a hypnotized facial expression, while the rest of her body moves deftly and rapidly, as if controlled by an outside force (Nietzsche 23). The maiden’s community had already chosen her fate, and she accepts it without any sign of comprehension. So far, according to Nietzsche’s definitions of Apollonian and Dionysian, it seems that Nijinsky’s choreography is Dionysian, and the choreographer himself viewed it as such.

But in Nijinsky’s choreography, rhythm and syncopation merely mask pre-digested and unvarying dance moves. Nijinsky wanted the dancers to move as pagans who believe that they are free because they are able to create their own new rhythm in their movements. At first, they mingle and create a single rhythm, but eventually the adolescent boys and girls divide and each group makes its own individual rhythm. However, the pagans do not know that the rhythms they are creating are “essential” to representing the natural order, for as Stravinsky explained in his 1913 defense of the ballet, they are a part of the mandatory, “annual cycle of forces” that the pagans undergo during the ritual to welcome spring (What I Wished 525). According to writer and critic Jacques Rivière, the dancers display “motion that does not run off, that has been forbidden to chant its own tune; motion that must come back to take orders every minute” (qtd. in Kirstein 165). Thus, the choreography of the play is similar to the music for the play: not chaotically communal, but pseudo-individualistic.

Stravinsky initially was very happy with Nijinsky’s work. He stated that it was “incomparable” and nearly flawless (qtd. in Eksteins 41). However, as time went on, Stravinsky changed his mind and said that “Nijinsky [did not] make any attempt to understand [his] own choreographic ideas for The Rite of Spring” (Stravinsky and Craft 37). For example, against Stavinsky’s wishes, Nijinsky strove to “re-emphasize” the music through “constant coordination” of the music and dance (Stravinsky, Autobiography 44). This strategy “restricted the dance to rhythmic duplication” and made the choreography a mere “imitation” of the music (Stravinsky, Autobiography 44). Perhaps Nijinsky—who “may have been unstable from his youth” due to a “genetic predisposition to depression” and possible brain damage from a “serious fall he took at age twelve” (Acocella, “Secrets of Nijinsky”)—was beginning to show signs of madness when the ballet was performed. Written a few years after The Rite of Spring was performed, Nijinsky’s diary gives us insight into the thoughts and obsessions running through his mind. The diary suggests that Nijinsky was very proud of his Russian roots and that he emphasized “feeling,” or the “quasi-mystical form of intuitive, empathic perception.”
(Gesmer, Dance), which allowed him to understand Stravinsky’s Dionysian music and convert it into a seemingly Dionysian dance. But “according to folk wisdom in ‘Mother’ Russia, the insane have stopped feeling and begun thinking too much” (Gesmer, Dance). Though Nijinsky was not “insane” when The Rite of Spring premiered, his mind was beginning to unravel with the demands of choreographing and dancing while his growing fame unsettled him even further. Nijinsky was beginning to “think” instead of “feel,” prodding his choreography to mimic rather than purely interpret Stravinsky’s music.

Nijinsky deliberately, if unconsciously, applied measured restraint to his choreography, and, according to Nietzsche, the state of “measured restraint” is an Apollonian quality rather than a Dionysian one (21). During Part Four of The Riot at the Rite, for example, the dancers all give a forceful stomp and drop their bodies downward at every downbeat played by the timpani, thus copying the music perfectly. The music in Part Five of The Riot of the Rite also commands the dancers’ actions, for they move and sway in time with the notes played by the orchestra. At the same time, the dancers’ movements also slow as the tempo of the music decreases. So, even though the dancers appear to be participating in a pagan rite in a frenzied, communal world, they are actually separated from the chaos of life. They are merely converting Stravinsky’s music into dance instead of creating a scene that shows the true spirit of the Dionysian world. Stravinsky believed that choreography should complement rather than replicate the music:

Choreography, as I conceive it, must realize its own form, one independent of the musical form though measured to the musical unit. Its construction will be based on whatever correspondences the choreographer may invent, but it must not seek merely to duplicate the line and beat of the music. (Stravinsky and Craft 37)

Pieter Van den Toorn, an author and professor of music, believes that “Stravinsky himself…initiated and then encouraged the music’s dissociation from its scenic and choreographic ties” (3). Unfortunately, Nijinsky completely reversed Stravinsky’s intentions when he choreographed the ballet—it was too Apollonian for his Dionysian music. So, after nine performances in 1913, Nijinsky’s choreography was discarded and forgotten. “The music has, in contrast, remained a permanent fixture” and is regularly played in concert halls around the world (Van den Toorn 4).

And nothing has been lost by the absence of dancers. In fact, that loss might actually help audience members’ imaginations, for now they are free to create their own interpretation of the music in their minds. This is where Nijinsky failed as a choreographer; his choreography did not persuade the audience members to break away from their formally reasoning minds and become intoxicated by the music. Instead, he forced them to see and feel the music in one way only—his way. His dancers’ movements were so defined and they followed the music so closely that it was impossible to interpret the choreography in more than one way. For example, in the
scene before the maiden is sacrificed, the other dancers formed a circle and danced and jumped around her as if they were commemorating her designation as the sacrificial maiden. Every time the music rose in pitch, the dancers mimicked it by jumping up in the air. Then, as it returned to its initial range, the dancers returned to their original stance. Meanwhile, the sacrificial maiden did not move at all; she seemed unaffected by the chaos around her. The rigidity of Nijinsky’s choreography contradicted Stravinsky’s beliefs, which held that *The Rite of Spring* is “unified by a single idea: the mystery and great surge of the creative power of spring” but it does not have a definite plot, only “choreographic succession” that corresponds with that single idea (qtd. in Levine 101). Nijinsky’s definitive choreography contradicts the idea that music can have many different interpretations, and that these depend on the listener’s imagination. In the maiden sacrifice scene described above, the rapid back-and-forth changes in the music’s pitch could easily have signified the frightened sacrificial maiden’s heartbeat rising and falling, but Nijinsky’s choreography did not allow for this kind of interpretation. So, along with the dancers being stuck in an Apollonian world of fixed forms, the audience members were also separated from the chaos of life, stopped from becoming intoxicated by the Dionysian music. Discarding Nijinsky’s choreography has allowed audiences to focus on the orchestral piece and to conceive their own imagery and story for the music.

In 1987, Millicent Hodson (a doctoral candidate in dance history at Berkeley) and Kenneth Arthur (an English art historian conducting research on Nicholas Roerich, the painter who designed the sets for *The Rite of Spring*) attempted to recreate Nijinsky’s choreography as part of Hodson’s dissertation project. To reconstruct the work, Hodson and Arthur sifted through every scrap of information that existed about the 1913 production: photographs, costume sketches, choreographic notes, Stravinsky’s rehearsal score, and reviews of the ballet. But unfortunately, according to acclaimed *New Yorker* dance critic Joan Acocella, the revival was a “dud.” “Instead of looking like modernist primitivism—a dance that altered the very source of all our aesthetic judgments—it just looked like stage primitivism” (Acocella, “Lost Nijinsky”). Some people may attribute its “stage primitivism” to the passage of time, but according to Acocella, if today one looks at Marcel Duchamp’s *Nude Descending a Staircase*, it still contains some of the shock value that people felt when they first saw it at the Armory Show in 1913—the same year that *The Rite of Spring* premiered in Paris (Acocella, “Lost Nijinsky”).

Hodson and Arthur’s failed revival suggests that Nijinsky’s original Apollonian choreography was never quite as revolutionary as Stravinsky’s Dionysian music, which still emotionally affects listeners today. In September 2012, for example, while the renowned Los Angeles Philharmonic’s rendition of *The Rite of Spring* did not cause a riot, it did receive a standing ovation. A riot did not occur because increasing amounts of Dionysian music and sound have been incorporated into our daily lives. In fact, we can’t seem to escape from the cacophonous clamor of sound and noise created by our modern industrial soundscape. No matter where we are, there is always noise around us, ranging from the hum of the air conditioning unit to a cell phone ringing during a class lecture. Thus, we are more acclimated to hearing discordant and atonal orchestral pieces. But, in 1913, when music and dance were decidedly Apollonian and rarely exhibited Dionysian elements, it was Stravinsky’s music, not Nijinsky’s dance, that caused a riot on opening night.
Works Cited


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