

The Rite of Spring:
Celebrating One of the Most Infamous Riots of the 20th-Century

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Abstract

The premiere of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* on May 29, 1913 at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris was a momentous evening for the avant-garde art movement. The event itself — a spectacular combination of Stravinsky's irregular rhythms and unusual dissonances in the music, Nijinsky's strange choreography (i.e. toes pointed inward for the ballet dancers), as well as Roerich's loose, draping pagan costumes and colourful set designs — generated a notorious riot that reverberated through decades to come. Had the crowds prepared themselves to riot? What did public riots look like in the early twentieth century? What were some factors that may have ignited such public fury? What were some common audience expectations in the early twentieth-century when attending performances? What were prominent ways of expressing dissent and protest at such performances at the time? On the night of its premiere, the *Rite of Spring* followed a performance of *Les Sylphides*, a non-narrative *ballet blanc* (ballet in a romantic style featuring dancers in white tutus) with music by Frédéric Chopin: did the startling contrast between these two works heighten the unfulfilled expectations — and was it intentionally programmed to do so? By analyzing various newspaper articles and relevant sources, one can begin to piece together the mob mentality that fuelled the celebrated riot during one of the twentieth-century's most infamous modernist works.

Introduction

Nearly a hundred years before the *Rite*'s premiere in Paris, this picture (see next page) was printed in the *Satirist* on June 1st, 1813: it is an artist's rendering of a riot at the Opera-House in Haymarket, London, that took place one month earlier. The scandalous tale behind this event involved a bankrupted manager, William Taylor, who had neglected to pay opera singer Angelica Catalani. She refused to sing until her debt was paid. The company's attempt on May 1, 1813, to perform the opera by Vincenzo Pucitta, "La caccia di Enrico IV," without her caused a riot and repeated calls for the manager. The police were called in and unsuccessfully attempted to establish order. Choristers and musicians tried desperately to leave the pandemonium, and apparently, the orchestra narrowly escaped "carrying off large music-books, one open."¹ In the picture, Robert Coates, playing the part of Lothario in a feathered hat and jeweled star, storms into the scene exclaiming, "Ladies and Gentlemen! Where's the use of our going a rioting?"² Though this was not a riot where the public was displeased with the music — but rather with the lack of it or at least a performer — it's an early example of how theatrical politics served as a catalyst for protest and demonstration.



Brooke, William Henry. *The uproar house!!!* (*The Satirist*), hand-coloured and etching on paper, 1813, The British Museum, London, England.

The term ‘riot’ is often associated with an incident of social pandemonium due to two main scenarios: 1) a political protest against unjust acts or government policy; or 2) passionate fans at a sporting event. A riot at the theatre or classical music event is not an everyday occurrence and it is fascinating to examine the circumstances behind such scandals, especially the premiere of Stravinsky’s *Rite of Spring* on May 29, 1913, alongside Nijinsky’s untraditional choreography.

Brief Background: Music, Dance, and the Press

With the exception of a few Russian-sounding folk tunes, Stravinsky’s score was very different from the traditional classical canon. It lacked anticipated lyricism and resolved harmonies; furthermore, it was littered with unpredictable rhythms marked by irregular accents and constant meter changes. In addition to shocking music, the Parisian audience at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées on May 29, 1913, witnessed some shocking anti-ballet choreography. Drawing on contemporary sources, historian Modris Eksteins describes the scene:

Movement was reduced to heavy jumping, with both feet, and walking, in either a smooth or stomping fashion. As in all of Nijinsky's compositions, there was a basic position; this time it consisted of the feet turned inward with great exaggeration, knees bent, arms tucked in, head turned in profile as the body faced forward. In other words, the classical pose was contradicted entirely by what appeared to many as knock-kneed contortion. Nijinsky called his movements 'stylized gestures' to emphasize his departure from the flow and rhythm of classical dance, to stress the disconnections, the jaggedness, of existence.³

Interestingly enough, this description is rather similar to that of the Charleston, the dance form with African-American roots that became increasingly popular in the United States in the 1920's. The description given by critic Gilbert Seldes sounds very much like the summary given by Eksteins, with "the knock-knees, legs 'akimbo,' toes turned in until they meet, squattings, comic little leaps sidewise."⁴ According to Seldes, when performed by a skilled dancer, these movements were "woven, into a rhythm of dance, into a pattern which was full of grace and significance, which was gay and orgiastic and wild."⁵ Similarly, Nijinsky had choreographed a difficult routine, which involved difficult movements regarded as the antithesis of classical ballet.

The spectators witnessed a ballet that seemed raw and primitive, with dancers moving more with their hips than their feet, and dressed as pagan tribesmen with ugly masks painted on their faces. There were no tutus or elegant arabesques, as many would have expected, and the startling music combined with angular dance motions might well have prompted protest. Press documentation is well known, and is well summarized by the American critic Carl Van Vechten, who wrote after the event:

Cat-calls and hisses succeeded the playing of the first few bars...and then ensued a battery of screams, countered by a foil of applause. We warred over art (some of us thought it was and some thought it wasn't) ... Some forty of the [protesters] were forced out of the theater but that did not quell the disturbance. The lights in the auditorium were fully turned on but the noise continued and I remember Mlle. Piltz [the chosen maiden] executing her strange dance of religious hysteria on the stage dimmed by the blazing light in the auditorium, seemingly to the accompaniment of the disjointed ravings of a mob of angry men and women.⁶

To experience a modern dramatized version, one can refer to "Riot at the Rite," a 90-minute movie directed by Andy Wilson, from the BBC 2005 Drama Series.

Analysis: Some Thoughts Behind the *Rite's* Premiere

Scholars have long speculated on the reasons for the hostile reaction, ranging from the shattering of everyone's expectations to the brutality of the harmony and rhythms.

But it is also interesting to turn to science to consider what might have been going on in the brain on a neurological level during the premiere of the *Rite*. Why is it that music makes us feel, and particularly, feel so *strongly*? An episode called "Musical Language" from the radio podcast, *Radiolab*, gives some insight on the matter.⁷ When

sound of any sort enters the ear, it is converted into microscopic electrical signals that tap a particular pattern into the brain. Consonant sounds tend to have a regular, rhythmic wave pattern, signaling to the brain that this is a pleasant experience (i.e. a perfect fifth interval). By contrast, dissonant sounds will create an irregular pattern on a neuronal level, which the brain will interpret as unpleasant (i.e. a minor second interval). When the brain undergoes an experience that is continuously unpleasant, dopamine — a neurochemical associated with reward-motivated behavior — is released, and one feels a temporary happiness as a survival mechanism to cope. When there is too much dopamine present, the brain becomes confused and paranoid, which the *Radiolab* podcast notes is the sensation similar to that of schizophrenics.

Now apply this fascinating information on the brain's neuronal activity to the *Rite of Spring* premiere. Consider that the audience had never heard this sort of music before: the unpredictable accents in the rhythmic pattern and the unfamiliar, dissonant chords must have fired a plethora of irregular electrical patterns into the brain on a continuous level. Stravinsky's piece carries on with a driving, percussive ostinato pattern and unresolved harmonies, so there is no time for the brain to rest. Add to that the jagged dance movements from the ballet — and so, there is confusing *audio* and *visual* material — and one can only imagine how much excessive dopamine must have been released in the audiences' brains that evening, causing the eventual pandemonium.

But perhaps riots were just the order of the day, as Scott Spiegelberg, a professor of music theory at DePauw University, claims, “most music historians now agree that the riots were caused not by the music, but by the riot-happy Parisians.”⁸

Other Classical Music Riots

And perhaps this was true. One of the earliest documented examples of classical music rioting in that city was the premiere of Wagner's *Tannhäuser* in 1861 at the Salle Le Peletier, home of the Paris opera from 1821. At that time, it was customary in performance practice for the ballet to be placed in the middle of the opera, so that members of the aristocratic Jockey Club could arrive late from dinner, and still enjoy the ballet. Wagner, however, placed the ballet in Act I, which meant that by the time the Jockey Club members arrived, the ballet was over, which naturally displeased them. Though it occurred several decades earlier than the *Rite of Spring* riot, the *Tannhäuser* “riot” showed that Parisian audiences, or at least its wealthy members, were all too ready to express dissent.

Fast forward to May 29, 1912, where Debussy's *L'Après-midi d'un faune* was presented for the first time with the Ballets Russes. Nijinsky, who was also dancing the title role of the faun himself, choreographed the ballet for the piece. The performance took place at the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris precisely one year before the *Rite's* premiere. Inspired by Mallarmé's poem about a mystical faun who falls in love with a young wood nymph, this is a tale of unrequited love, as the faun is left to contend with himself in a passionate mix of euphoria and depression. Nijinsky was dressed in a skin-tight leotard, and moved with suggestive motions around the nymph's scarf. The highly sexualized dance scene broke all rules of traditional decorum in classical ballet. The Paris police had to be brought in by the second evening of the sold-out performance. There were mixed reactions. French composer Louis Vuillemain wrote, “For myself, I

admit never having enjoyed as much so a perfect union of mime and music, such complete joy to the eye and the ear.”⁹ Gaston Calmette, editor of *Le Figaro*, expressed otherwise on the front page of his paper:

Anyone who mentions the words 'art' and 'imagination' in the same breath as this production must be laughing at us. This is neither a pretty pastoral nor a work of profound meaning. We are shown a lecherous faun, whose movements are filthy and bestial in their eroticism, and whose gestures are as crude as they are indecent. That is all. And the over explicit miming of this misshapen beast, loathsome when seen full on, but even more loathsome in profile, was greeted with the booing it deserved.¹⁰

Likewise, in other parts of Europe, there were strong reactions toward contemporary art music. In Vienna, a mere 2 months before the *Rite*'s premiere, the so-called *Skandalkonzert* on March 31, 1913 — hosted by the Vienna Concert Society and conducted by Schoenberg — erupted in rioting when audiences were subjected to the experimental expressionism of the Second Viennese School. The programme listed the premiere of Webern's "Six Pieces for Orchestra, Op. 6"; Zemlinsky's "Four Orchestral Songs on poems by Maeterlinck"; Schoenberg's "Chamber Symphony No. 1, Op. 9"; a first performance of Berg's "Five Orchestral Songs on Postcard Texts of Peter Altenberg, Op. 4" and Mahler's first song from the *Kindertotenlieder*. Berg's piece, however, caused such an uproar that they never got to Mahler's music.¹¹ This is hardly surprising, considering much of the work of the Viennese artists was designed to provoke and shock, defying traditional harmony. Douglas Jarman describes this particular concert as one where "the performance of Berg's songs led to a riot, with fisticuffs in the hall, the police called in and the concert organizer arrested."¹² Like the *Rite*, it is considered "one of the great musical scandals of the 20th century."¹³

Riots, In General

Why do people riot? How do such rowdy incidents begin, and what factors might increase its likelihood? Dr. Ken Eisold sheds some insight on the matter:

It usually takes an incident to get a riot started, such as an accident or the police attacking or killing an innocent bystander. But once it has begun, the raging mob has a life of its own. Deep-seated resentments, repetitive frustrations and long standing disappointments galvanize people into action. And the mob provides cover, an anonymity that makes it easier to overcome one's usual reticence or moral scruples. One is immersed, engulfed. And it can become an exuberant experience, a joyful release for long suppressed emotions. It can also become manic, driven, a means of restlessly seeking new outlets. Leadership emerges spontaneously and changes rapidly.¹⁴

In other words, it only takes one influential individual to start the fire: afterward, the general sense of anonymity amidst a crowd allows for the indulgence of any subconscious savage impulses. Tory Higgins, a professor of psychology at Columbia

University who studies motivation, comments on the power of peer pressure: “Crowd psychology shows that when you see other people acting in a certain way, you're more likely to do it. It intensifies whatever is normative in the group.”¹⁵

From my own informal thoughts and readings on riots in general and the classical music world, I've discovered five important observations in the common sequence of events that I have deemed “the *ingredients* for a riot.” (1) Firstly, there is a large gathering or crowd in a public space. (2) Secondly, there is a collective form of displeasure amongst the people: noteworthy examples include discontented fans on a losing sports team, controversial government policy, and a perplexed Parisian crowd subjected to a continuous wave of incomprehensible noise and drama on stage when they were really expecting “music” and “dance.” (3) Thirdly, one or more dissenting persons loudly then expresses his/her views in a very conspicuous, vocal manner. Soon after, there is (4) a rapid build-up of frustration, and perhaps confusion, amongst a dissenting public as influenced by the crowd psychology, spiraling into anger as the issue is ignored — or inadequately addressed — by the opposition. Finally, when there appears no means to a peaceful resolution, (5) the angry and frustrated crowd is forced to release the build-up of negative energy: it continuously expresses its displeasure in a very vocal — and sometimes violent — manner, thus resulting in mobs and riots. That being said, the premiere of the *Rite of Spring* appeared to have all these *ingredients* in place: the fact that it resulted in a scandal and rioting hardly seems surprising.

Closing Thoughts

Whatever the reason for the riot, the premiere of the *Rite of Spring* reveals the critical role of the audience in the modern art experience. Previously, riots were often set off by social class issues whereas in the early 20th-century, the catalyst appeared to be the performance itself. The public response and riot at the *Rite* attests to the organic wholeness of contemporary art. The “show” does not merely consist of the musicians and dancers, but also the spectators present in the experience. In other words, the audience is part of the *living art*. In essence, no two performances are identical: each will be a unique experience that is coloured by the crowd that is present. The *Rite of Spring* was one of the key works to have started this new, organic trend in modern art. I close with Eksteins's comments: “To have been in the audience that evening was to have participated not simply at another exhibition but in the very *creation* of modern art.”¹⁶

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Endnotes

¹ The British Museum, “The uproar house!!!” *Satirist*, 1st June 1813. Viewed 4/3/2013. http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=1480617&partId=1.

² Ibid.

³ Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (Toronto: Random House of Canada Limited, 2012), 68.

⁴ Amy Koritz, *Culture Makers*, (University of Illinois Press: 2009), 68.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Carl van Vechten, *Music and Bad Manners* (New York, 1916), 34, from Eksteins, 28.

⁷ Jad Abumrad and Robert Krulwich, “Musical Language,” *Radiolab*, Season 2 Episode 2, Podcast audio September 24, 2007, <http://www.radiolab.org/2007/sep/24/>.

⁸ Scott Spiegelberg, “Riots in Paris,” *Blog: Musical Perceptions*, Monday, May 24, 2004, <http://musicalperceptions.blogspot.ca/2004/05/riots-in-paris.html>.

⁹ *Commoedia*, May 30, 1912, 2. *Troisième série des Ballets Russes*, quoted in Davinia Caddy’s “The Ballets Russes and Beyond: Music and Dance in Belle-Époque Paris” (Cambridge University Press), 72-73.

¹⁰ Gaston Calmette editorial, “Un Faux Pas,” *Le Figaro*, May 30, 1912, cited in Buckle, *Nijinsky*, 242.

¹¹ Kathryn Bailey, “Webern, Anton,” *Oxford Music Online*, Viewed 3/29/2013, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezproxy.library.yorku.ca/subscriber/article/grove/music/29993?q=Skandalkonzert&search=quick&pos=1&_start=1#firsthit.

¹² Douglas Jarman, “Berg, Alban,” *Oxford Music Online*, Viewed 3/29/2013, http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.ezproxy.library.yorku.ca/subscriber/article/grove/music/02767?q=Skandalkonzert&search=quick&pos=2&_start=1#firsthit.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ken Eisold, “Understanding Why People Riot,” *Hidden Motives from web blog Psychology Today* (Sussex Publishers), <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/hidden-motives/201108/understanding-why-people-riot>.

¹⁵ “The Psychology Of A Rioter,” *The Huffington Post*, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/08/11/the-psychology-of-a-riot_n_924839.html.

¹⁶ Christopher Lehmann-Haupt, “Books of The Times; Modernism: Rites of Spring, Rites of Destruction,” *The New York Times*, (Published: March 13, 1989).

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