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“I think the whole thing has been done by four idiots: First, M. Stravinsky who wrote the music. Second, M. Roerich who designed the scenery and costumes. Third, M. Nijinsky who composed the dances. Fourth, M. Diaghilev who wasted money on it.”

-Enrico Cecchetti, Diaghilev’s ballet master

Avatar of Modernity: The Rite of Spring Reconsidered is a publication produced by the Paul Sacher Foundation. Avatar is a companion volume to the facsimile publications of the autograph full score and a version for four-hand piano of Stravinsky’s Rite. Both manuscripts are central pieces of the Sacher Foundation’s Stravinsky collection and their publication commemorates the centenary of the premiere of Le Sacre du printemps. One gains the impression that the Foundation clearly put a great deal of effort into the details of this publication from the bright red colour of its hardcover to the idea of issu-

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ing a companion volume of essays that addresses numerous topics related to Stravinsky’s seminal work.

Hermann Danuser and Hiedy Zimmerman, the editors of this collection, argue that Le Sacre is a true Gesamtkunstwerk; an “alliance of the arts” which was Michel Fokine’s description of the reigning ideology of the Ballets Russes. The collection of essays considers the work both as a ballet with sets and costuming and as a concert piece for orchestra. If Le Sacre is to be considered a Gesamtkunstwerk, then the ballet and text ought to acknowledge the other contributors to its creation, and this is what Avatar aims to do. In this book the ballet and music are treated as partners in the creation of one of the most significant pieces of twentieth-century art.

Although the book is primarily aimed at the academic community it is, in large part, readable and engaging to the amateur historian. The book addresses the history of Le Sacre by focusing on the contexts of its creation and reception. At the same time, contributors are all authorities in their field of study, ensuring that the book provides informed opinions based on current scholarship. Danuser and Zimmerman divide the book’s eighteen essays into five sections, with content-oriented titles. The essays provide the context for how and when Le Sacre was created but also who was involved besides Stravinsky. Several essays also examine the legacy and reception of Le Sacre in its first 100 years. I found the most enjoyable parts of the text to be the essays that lent support to the idea of Le Sacre du printemps as a complete work of art. This concept was not a new idea at the turn of the century, yet describing Le Sacre as such generates many compelling perspectives via which to augment our understanding and appreciation of the work.

The first section, “A Team’s Work”, begins with “Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes: A New Kind of Company” a historical survey of the Ballet Russes by Lynn Garafola. It details how the itinerant ballet company survived and thrived from 1909 until Diaghilev’s death in 1929. The Ballet Russes played a fundamental role in the evolution of modern dance, but Stravinsky never acknowledged Diaghilev’s part in the creation of Le Sacre. Indeed one of the central points Richard Taruskin makes in Avatar’s final essay is that Le Sacre would not have been possible without the Ballet Russes and its co-creators (380). Diaghilev continued to produce operas and ballets by Stravinsky throughout the 1920s. Although the depth of their collaboration was denied by Stravinsky, the

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2 Juliet Bellow, Modernism on Stage (Burlington and Surrey: Ashgate Press, 2013), 2.

projects he and Diaghilev worked on are substantial. The Ballets Russes was “the culmination of a long-developing vogue for Russian dancers in the west.”

Considered the second member of the “team” was Nicholas Roerich and in Avatar’s second essay Paul Griffiths examines the creative relationship between Stravinsky and Roerich. Roerich’s exact role in the creation of Le Sacre has been the subject of debate, as Griffiths outlines. Roerich was the designer of the sets and costumes and is often referred to as a collaborator on the scenario. That said, our understanding of his contribution has evolved over time. Roerich was a recognized authority on ancient Slavic rituals and research has shown he had already been at work on a scenario titled Great Sacrifice by the time Stravinsky had his “vision” while writing the Firebird.

Roerich was a poet, painter, sculptor, archeologist, and essayist. In Avatar’s final section John E. Bowlt devotes his essay, “Kingdom of Mystery: The Artistic Ideas of Nicholas Roerich,” to detailing Roerich’s artistic ideologies and how his search for authenticity had an impact all the contributors as they forged Le Sacre. Griffiths ends by discussing how Roerich’s designs were driven more by ethnographic rather than artistic ideas and that this made his sets and costumes all the more appropriate to Le Sacre.

The final essay of the first section is Esteban Buch’s “The Scandal at Le Sacre: Games of Distinction and Dreams of Barbarism.” The fracas at the first performance of Le Sacre is something most have heard about, yet the details have remained unclear and accounts inconsistent. Buch calls the scandal a shadow that has pursued Le Sacre. His research provides facts through which to reconcile eyewitness accounts and recollections. Buch’s essay considers how the stories of a “scandal” all appeared after initial reviews and, moreover, became more elaborate with time. Buch argues for a description of the initial performance as “degenerating into a political meeting” instead. Arguing that a heated and boisterous debate erupting during the performance seems more likely than a full-scale riot (60). Buch easily explains the police presence that night as a matter of routine, the Paris police being obligated to have officers stationed at all major performances. Moreover, performances continued after the initial disturbance at the premiere, which, when combined with other evidence, makes it seem reasonable to assume that the interruption may not have been as severe as history has gone on to remember.


Critical Voices: The University of Guelph Book Review Project is part of the curriculum at the School of Fine Art and Music, University of Guelph, Ontario, Canada.
Taking all this into account, Buch’s essay is well crafted and is a good example of how the book provides new information on *Le Sacre*.

It is puzzling why Vaslav Nijinsky was not included with the rest of the “Team” in the first section but he is the subject of Claudia Jeschke’s essay “‘… retrouver la source de variété…’: Nijinsky’s Choreographic Textures” found in the book’s second section. Jeschke points out that there are some problems when it comes to assessing Nijinsky’s contribution to *Le Sacre*. First, is that his choreography only ever received nine performances, six in Paris and three in London, before being lost for more than seventy years. When a revival of *Le Sacre* was staged in 1920, it was with new choreography by Leonid Massine. This relegated Nijinsky’s choreography to obscurity. Nijinsky was hailed as a genius for his portrayal of *Petroushka* in 1912, but by 1920 had succumbed to schizophrenia and remained institutionalized until his death in 1950, making it easier to discredit his choreography for *Le Sacre* as that of a madman. One such source for the negative reception of Nijinsky’s choreography came from Stravinsky himself, when he voiced displeasure with the choreographer in 1960, chiding him for not trying to understand Stravinsky’s vision of the dance. Nijinsky’s choreography was obviously influenced by Stravinsky’s music but also by Roerich’s knowledge of art, literature, and antiquity. The virtuosity and genius of Nijinsky is repeated in dance literature with his choreography of *Le Sacre* being called a masterpiece and revolutionary. Jeschke’s vivid description of Nijinsky’s movements paired with the explanation of it being an extension of traditional ballet principles augments the discourse of Nijinsky as a pioneer of modern dance.

“Milestones in Dance” by Stephanie Jordan is in *Avatar*’s fourth section, “Toward Histories of Interpretation,” and is another essay that adds to an understanding of *Le Sacre* by exploring non-musical aspects of the work’s history. Whereas Shelly C. Berg’s *Le Sacre du printemps; Seven Productions from Nijinsky to Martha Graham* looks at a selection of choreographies, “Milestones in Dance” is an overview of the dance community’s response to the music of *Le Sacre*. The number of full choreographies listed by Jordan is...
staggering as is the breadth of variety and experimentation. Millicent Hodson has likened Le Sacre to a crucible of the profession, and the numbers support this.\footnote{Hodson, Nijinsky’s Crime against Grace, vii.} Jordan’s essay comes across as specifically aimed at professional dancers and scholars and seems a pointed effort to include the dance community in the reconsidering of Le Sacre.

The second set of essays, “Revolutionary Potential”, begins with Tobias Bleek’s essay “‘...du la musique sauvage avec tout le confort moderne!’ The Orchestral Design of Le Sacre du printemps” which is an examination of the orchestration used in Le Sacre. Bleek asserts that no one has produced a study that deals exclusively with the orchestra used in Le Sacre. Most theoretical writings treat the orchestration in a peripheral manner, which is odd because the ballet contains so many instrumental peculiarities. The opening bassoon line is the most obvious example but the use of the strings as a percussive element is one of many points raised by Bleek (60).

The book offers articles on many subjects common and uncommon in the writing about Le Sacre. Analysis is one element of Le Sacre scholarship that scholarship has handled at length, and Avatar looks to add to this corpus. There have been many attempts to identify a system Stravinsky used to create Le Sacre, Andreas Meyer’s essay “Disrupted Structures: Rhythm, Melody, Harmony”, in the book’s second section, “Revolutionary Potential,” outlines another possible construct in which traditional ideas of melody, harmony, and form are present in Le Sacre but are simply disrupted. “Le Sacre Analyzed,” by Jonathan W. Bernard, in Avatar’s fourth section, is a good synopsis of the prominent analytical models that have attempted to explain a system that Stravinsky used to write Le Sacre. Bernard specifically discusses Allan Forte’s application of set theory, Pieter van den Toorn’s work with octatonic models, and Richard Taruskin’s research into the folk melodies contained in Le Sacre and the work’s historical context. “Revolutionary Potential’s” final essay “Rewriting The Rite: Creative Responses to Le Sacre du printemps” is a good investigation of the wealth of music that takes its inspiration directly from Le Sacre.

Avatar’s third section, “Reflections on and of Le Sacre,” deals more with the music of Le Sacre than the ballet. The essays found in this section look at Le Sacre’s history from different points of view. Stephen Walsh’s essay “Remembering The Rite of Spring or ‘Ce que je n’ai pas voulu exprimer dans Le Sacre du printemps’” details sixty years of Stravinsky’s interaction with Le Sacre and his thoughts on as well as his revisions to the score. David Schiff’s essay, “Everyone’s Rite,” discusses the music’s history from (1939-1946) and details Walt Disney’s dealings with Stravinsky as well as Disney’s use of “The Rite” in the animated film Fantasia. This essay was intriguing, because my first exposure to Le Sacre, like so many of my generation, was from watching the film Fantasia as a child.
Avatar’s fourth section, “Toward Histories of Interpretation”, is the largest, containing five essays, each of which examines a different facet of Le Sacre’s reception. The works exceptional reception as a piece for choreography is explained in “Milestones in Dance.” This essay has already been discussed in connection to Nijinsky and shows that the ballet’s co-creators are given space throughout Avatar. “Vesna svyashchennaya in Its Homeland: Reception of The Rite in Russia and the Soviet Union” by Svetlana Savenko is another essay which sheds new light on a reconsideration of Le Sacre. Savenko starts in 1910 with the Russian press circulating word that N. Roerich and M.M. Folkine had started work on another ballet, The Great Sacrifice, with “The content and staging of the ballet [being] the work of Mr Roerich” (241). The orchestral suite of Le Sacre premiered in Russia in 1926 and enjoyed some success before it fell out of favour around 1930 and was banned outright by Stalin in 1948. The ballet was premiered in 1965 when the country was led by Leonid Brezhnev. Arne Stollberg’s essay, “‘sim not dim’: Exécution and Interprétation in Recordings of The Rite since 1929,” is a good source for information on the historical recordings of Le Sacre with a fine discussion of interpretive variations in recordings and their possible sources. The final essay in Avatar’s fourth section is “Boulez’s Rite” by Robert Piencikowski, which deals with Pierre Boulez’s article “Stravinsky demeure” published in 1953. Piencikowski gives Boulez’s article context using the handwritten manuscript and the annotated score for four-hand piano which was used in Boulez’s analysis with Messiaen, and discusses the prominence of this early writing on Le Sacre by one of the twentieth century’s leading musicians.

The last section of the book, “Cultural, Historical, and Musical Contexts,” draws on details from the previous 300 pages to situate Le Sacre du printemps as the Avatar of Modernity. Jan Assmann’s essay, “The Cultural Memory of Le Sacre du printemps,” draws together an exhaustive list of creative and intellectual works created in the years surrounding the composition of Le Sacre, illustrating the cultural landscape in which the work was written. The number of enduring works of art and literature published in the years surrounding 1912 is surprising. Assmann speaks of 1912 as a watershed year in the progression of human thought. For instance, Carl Jung’s Wandlungen und Symbole der Libido was published that year, the same time when Picasso began to explore cubist theory. The next essay, “Mythic Sacrifices and Real Corpses: Le Sacre du printemps and the Great War” by Herfried Mückler, speaks of the ritual sacrifice of Le Sacre as a metaphor for the real sacrifices of World War I and the Russian revolution. He explains how violence is part of the process of political evolution and uses Le Sacre as a point where artistic ideas struck violently only a few months before the violence of war would descend on Europe. Mückler’s weaving Le Sacre into the reading of war as a part of the political process is a fine example of the editors including writing on aspects of cultural context which most Le Sacre scholarship ignores. John E. Bowlt’s essay “King-
“A piece belongs to a repertoire by virtue of its popularity: but belongs to a
canon through intertextual references in other pieces of music and, especially, through a
critical, explanatory, and didactic discourse that evolves around it.” – Jan Assman, 333.

For further reading:


Berg, Shelly C.. Le Sacre du Printemps; Seven Productions from Nijinsky to Martha Graham.


