

## Theater and Dramatic Studies, No. 48

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# *Le Sacre du printemps* Seven Productions from Nijinsky to Martha Graham

by  
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*Le Sacre du printemps*  
Seventy-fifth Anniversary of the Premiere  
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*Reigen*

The Ballets Russes began its eighth season in Paris in May of 1913. The adulation the company had inspired in its first seasons had begun to wane and there was a growing sense of disillusionment with the "phalanx of Russian geniuses" who invaded Paris every summer.<sup>1</sup> Jacques-Emile Blanche noted that the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées had opened its box office to a seemingly blasé public who had no patience and were already complaining.<sup>2</sup> The season's programs announced only three or four new ballets, among them *Jeux* and *Le Sacre du printemps*, both with choreography by Nijinsky.

The opening night of the 1913 season included the premiere of *Jeux*, which, as previously noted, was not well received. Although *Jeux* proved unsuccessful, Diaghilev had great expectations for his pagan Russian ballet, *Le Sacre du printemps*. Indeed, the success of the work was so important to him that the completion and polishing for *Jeux* had been neglected in deference to *Le Sacre*.<sup>3</sup>

The final rehearsals for *Le Sacre* took place in essentially three stages: rehearsals for the dancers with piano accompaniment, rehearsals for the orchestra and five full rehearsals. The last included the *répétition générale*, or invitation-only dress rehearsal, on 28 May, the eve of the official premiere. The final stages of the choreography had been completed in Monte Carlo, during the Russian Ballet's annual spring season.

Most of the more than one hundred rehearsals for the dancers in *Le Sacre* took place with only piano accompaniment. Stravinsky appeared sporadically at these run-throughs, keeping an anxious vigil over both Nijinsky and pianist Maurice Steiman.<sup>4</sup>

Monteux, however, conducted the initial full orchestra rehearsals of *Le Sacre* in late March of 1913, without the composer's supervision. At that time he wrote to Stravinsky that *Le Sacre* sounded at least as good as *The Firebird* and *Petrouchka*. "What a pity you could not be here," wrote Monteux, "above all that you could not be present for the explosion of *Le Sacre*."<sup>5</sup>

The composer appeared, however, for the final seventeen orchestra rehearsals in what became known as the "Comédie des Champs-Élysées."<sup>6</sup> Many of the players were overwhelmed by Stravinsky's orchestration and the music's strange sonorities. "When we saw the parts for the first time we couldn't believe they could be played," wrote oboist Louis Speyer.<sup>7</sup> Some of the musicians even stopped Monteux to ask if their parts were correctly printed. The chaos among the ninety-seven orchestra members increased. Monteux realized that they thought the music was crazy, not to say unplayable, but he persevered. "We rehearsed over and over the small difficult parts," recalled the conductor, "and at last we were ready for the ballet."<sup>8</sup>

Whether the dancers were ready for the sonic hurricane of *Le Sacre* is a different matter. As previously noted, the ballet company had been rehearsing solely to a piano reduction of the score, which gives little indication of the unprecedented sonorities, harmonies and the formidable polyrhythms of the music when it is played by an entire orchestra. The five full rehearsals were held on the stage of the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, the first on 18 May, and the last, the *répétition générale*, on 28 May. The dress rehearsal, according to Nijinska, went smoothly and irreproachably, an ideal execution, with perfect harmony between stage and orchestra. "All of us and particularly Vaslav were confident about the performance."<sup>9</sup> Double bassist Henri Girard, reflecting the view of the musicians, was less sanguine. "Despite work, care, and good will from everyone, nobody was sure of the outcome on the day of the first performance," said Girard.<sup>10</sup> Speyer noted that when the musicians saw the savage dancing and the strange scenery and costumes, they were at a loss. "Already *Le Sacre* was the talk of the town," he recalled, "so many telling stories making it even bigger and more impossible."<sup>11</sup>

Diaghilev had made certain that *Le Sacre du printemps* was the focus of the advance publicity for the 1913 Ballets Russes season. Always superstitious, he had reserved the first anniversary of the premiere of *L'Après-midi d'un faune*, 29 May, for *Le Sacre*. A promotional article in *Comoedia* on 16 May prominently featured an announcement of the ballet. Stravinsky, it declared, would complete his balletic trilogy with the most striking work of all, *Le Sacre du printemps*, and promised a visual presentation of "interest and astonishment."<sup>12</sup>

The spring performances of the Ballets Russes were part of the *Grande Saison de Paris*, along with other concert and art festivals. For Gabriel Astruc, a shrewd businessman as well as an impresario, the importation of the Diaghilev companies was part of his campaign to attract a subscription audience to the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées.<sup>13</sup> In devising these seasons, Astruc aimed for the tourists who descended on Paris in the late spring and summer and the aristocratic *clientèle mondaine*, who determined

to do and see whatever was in vogue. In addition, the audience at the Théâtre included the requisite artists, aesthetes, intellectuals, students (particularly Russian ones) and critics, all of whom were part of the hard-core theater habitués in Paris.<sup>14</sup>

Both Diaghilev and Astruc were famous for their ability to "orchestrate" audiences. They were careful to invite a number of influential critics, as well as artists, writers and "the most cultured representatives of society" to the *répétition générale* in order to gauge their reaction. The run-through, according to Stravinsky, "went off peacefully."<sup>15</sup>

On 29 May, a number of influential newspapers featured a lengthy announcement, laced with superlatives, about *Le Sacre*. Termed "the most amazing creation" ever attempted by the Ballets Russes, it promised "the most startling polyrhythms ever produced by the brain of a musician," but warned that this "new sensation" would provoke "heated discussions."<sup>16</sup>

For many who attended the first night of *Le Sacre du printemps*, the event itself was to prove more memorable than the actual ballet. Jean Cocteau observed that the theater on the Avenue Montaigne was crammed on that hot, humid night; "all the elements of scandal were present. . . . The audience played the role that was written for it."<sup>17</sup>

Diaghilev planned the evening's program carefully, interspersing ballets that were romantic and introspective with works that were quintessentially "russki." *Les Sylphides*, Fokine's elegiac homage to Romanticism, opened the performance. *Le Sacre* was next on the bill, followed by *Le Spectre de la rose*, another of Fokine's excursions "into the world of spiritual ecstasy."<sup>18</sup> The "Polovtsian Dances" from *Prince Igor*, the most popular ballet in the company's repertoire, concluded the evening.

By framing *Le Sacre* with two traditional ballets in the style of the classical *danse d'école*, Diaghilev heightened the contrast between Nijinsky's raw, uncompromising movement style and Fokine's more conventional—and more familiar—choreography. By following *Le Sacre* with *Le Spectre de la rose*, Diaghilev also allowed the audience an emotional respite before the onslaught of the "Polovtsian Dances." Here, too, the audience could compare Nijinsky's vision of Slavic pagan rituals with Fokine's Symbolist primitivism. The arrangement of the program was brilliantly conceived.

In the thirty-four minutes following the rise of the curtain on *Le Sacre du printemps*, a work was revealed for judgment which had taken three artists to create, forty-six dancers and over one hundred rehearsals to realize, and two impresarios to produce. The riot that the ballet provoked has been documented exhaustively.<sup>19</sup> The artist Valentine Gross looked back "in delight" on the uproar of that evening. "The theatre seemed to be shaken by an earthquake," she recalled. "It seemed to shudder. People shouted insults, howled and whistled, drowning the music. . . . I thought there was something wonderful about the titanic struggle which must

have been going on in order to keep these inaudible musicians and these deafened dancers together, in obedience to the laws of their invisible choreographer."<sup>20</sup>

After the opening bars of the Prelude, the curtain rose on Roerich's first scene, "an expanse of wild hilly countryside intersected by innumerable streams."<sup>21</sup> The initial measures of the score were listened to in silence by the audience, and then the tempest broke. Monteux had specific instructions from Diaghilev not to stop on any account. Stravinsky's most vivid memory was of Monteux's back. "He stood there apparently imperious and nerveless as a crocodile," observed the conductor.<sup>22</sup> Monteux, however, was fully aware of the battles raging both on and offstage. He recalled that the audience remained quiet for the first two minutes, but that boos and catcalls soon erupted from the gallery and the stalls. "The anger was concentrated against the dancers, and then, more particularly, against the orchestra as the direct perpetrators of the musical crime. Everything available was tossed in our direction, but we continued to play on. The end of the performance was greeted by the arrival of the *gendarmes*."<sup>23</sup>

The pandemonium increased as the performance continued. Astruc recalled that, at one point, he stood and shouted with all the strength in his lungs, "Listen first! You can hiss afterwards!" Carl Van Vechten, then the Paris music critic for the *New York Times*, became aware that the young man standing behind him was drumming with his fists on the top of Van Vechten's head.<sup>24</sup> Rambert, dancing with the group of small girls on stage, heard Diaghilev's voice calling, "I beg you. Let the performance finish."<sup>25</sup> In an attempt to alleviate the chaos, either Astruc or Diaghilev ordered the house lights turned on, probably between the first and second scenes. According to Girard, Astruc came before the curtain and requested that the audience restrain themselves during the playing of the second act.<sup>26</sup> "Many in the auditorium are not antagonistic," declared Astruc, "and would like to see and hear the performance without interruption, in order to be able to form an opinion on the value of this new departure in dance, pantomime and music."<sup>27</sup> Astruc further offered to refund the price of a ticket to anyone willing to leave at that instant. No one made a move.<sup>28</sup>

On the other side of the footlights, the scene was at least as chaotic. Diaghilev had rushed backstage, where Nijinsky stood with his sister Bronislava. She recalled that Nijinsky appeared to be on the verge of rushing onstage to restore some kind of order in case the dancers went to pieces. "I wanted to grab Vaslav to prevent him from rushing out, but fortunately this was not necessary."<sup>29</sup> Stravinsky apparently thought otherwise. He had been sitting near the orchestra, but after the protests in the auditorium he left the hall "in a rage" and arrived "in a fury" backstage. "For the rest of the performance," he wrote, "I stood in the wings behind

Nijinsky holding the tails of his *frac*, while he stood on a chair shouting numbers to the dancers."<sup>30</sup> Lydia Sokolova vividly described the commotion on the stage itself. "We were all terrified that we were doing the fourth or fifth or sixth steps, while somebody else was doing the second; Nijinsky was in the wings stamping and trying to count for different groups all at once. . . . We must have been a lovely picture for the audience, racing round, jumping, turning, and wondering when the whole thing was going to collapse."<sup>31</sup>

By the end of the ballet, the violence that had erupted in the audience very nearly exceeded the frenzy of the spectacle enacted on the stage. Everyone present bore witness to the birth of a legend. There were four or five curtain calls for Nijinsky, Stravinsky and the dancers, all the artists receiving "vigorous applause from one side and . . . protests from the other."<sup>32</sup> Diaghilev's only comment is said to have been: "Exactly what I wanted."<sup>33</sup> He was quick to realize the publicity value of the scandal, and *Le Sacre* was presented four more times in the course of ten days. The second performance was received more calmly, and Diaghilev seized the chance to put the ballet before the public at every available opportunity.<sup>34</sup> To the end of his life, *Le Sacre du printemps* remained one of Diaghilev's favorite works. When, in 1929, the Ballets Russes ended their Covent Garden season with a performance of Léonide Massine's version of *Le Sacre*, an ailing Diaghilev applauded its success. It was one of the last ballets he ever saw.

The Nijinsky production of *Le Sacre du printemps* received only nine performances, six including *répétition générale*, in Paris and three during the Russian Ballet's London season in July 1913. Extant records consist of contemporary reviews, a few rehearsal photographs, a series of sketches by Valentine Gross, Dame Marie Rambert's rehearsal score and the memoirs of those who saw or performed the ballet. The actual movement that Nijinsky devised to correspond with the libretto has been lost.<sup>35</sup> Nijinsky studied Stepanov dance notation at the Imperial Ballet School in St. Petersburg and a partial score of his notations for *L'Après-midi d'un faune* still survives.<sup>36</sup> There is also reputed to be a choreographic notation score for Nijinsky's *Le Sacre*, but if so it remains undiscovered.<sup>37</sup> Today's almost routine method of preserving dance works on videotape or film was not, of course, possible in 1913.<sup>38</sup> As with dance forms of preceding centuries, the ballets of the Diaghilev era were handed down from choreographer to company, from ballet master to dancer. The immense complexity of *Le Sacre* made it a difficult work to rehearse and, therefore, to revive. Because Nijinsky's *Le Sacre du printemps* was a seminal work, a harbinger of modern dance, indeed the ballet "that broke the ground of twentieth century choreography," it has attained the status of legend.<sup>39</sup> Over the years, a mythology has evolved regarding the creation and per-

formance of *Le Sacre*, sometimes shrouding the importance of the work itself. Choreographers, critics and historians, fascinated by its mystery, regard the few remaining artifacts connected with the ballet as relics of a lost masterpiece. But while there is no definitive documentation of *Le Sacre*, it is possible to have some idea of what the ballet looked like by piecing together descriptions from various sources.

With the aid of Dame Marie Rambert, Igor Stravinsky, Mme. Romola Nijinsky and other members of the Diaghilev company of the time, dance critic and historian Richard Buckle has developed one of the most complete descriptions of the ballet's dance sections, as they correspond with the score. There have been numerous "libretti" for *Le Sacre*, with Stravinsky himself having written at least three, which differ to some degree in minor details.<sup>40</sup> Buckle's account, according to Rambert, is the most complete and intelligible account of the original Nijinsky ballet. Robert Craft has provided commentary, based on Stravinsky's musical sketches and choreographic notes for Nijinsky, in his description of the stage action in "*The Rite of Spring: Genesis of a Masterpiece*."<sup>41</sup> In her efforts to reconstruct Nijinsky's choreography for *Le Sacre*, dance historian Millicent Hodson has uncovered material that adds additional details to the description cited above. The following account of *Le Sacre* is a composite, drawn from the sources cited above.

Following the "Introduction" in the score, the first violin pizzicato sets the pace for the opening dance, which leads into the "Auguries of Spring." The boys are taught certain spells and divinations to be performed every spring.<sup>(a)\*</sup> A witch manipulates the forces of the earth, teaches fortune-telling and how to make spells.<sup>(c)</sup> Groups of boys dance and sit in turn. A Greek-like dance tune on the alto flute is followed by a Russian chorale melody on four trumpets. Gradually the whole orchestra joins in, the music building to a Bacchanalian frenzy, as the dancers fall to the floor. A presto in the orchestra signals the beginning of the "Ritual of Abduction." Two groups of red-clad girls enter and the sight of the boys induces sexual panic. The groups of challenging men and jumping women confront each other from opposite sides of the stage. As the orchestra emits staccato clashes of brass and drums, the men grasp the women in

\*The material used in this description will be drawn from three sources: (1) Richard Buckle, *Nijinsky* (New York: Atheneum, 1979), pp. 293-99; (2) Robert Craft, "Genesis of a Masterpiece," in I. Stravinsky and R. Craft, *The Rite of Spring Sketches 1911-1913* (London: Boosey & Hawkes, 1969), pp. xx-xxiii; (3) "Restoring a Lost Work: Nijinsky's *Sacre* and Nijinska's *Noces*," transcript of a symposium at the Dance Critics Association Conference, "Reconstruction and Revival: Which Dance Is This Anyway?" New York, 18 June 1982. Chaired by Anna Kisselgoff, with Millicent Hodson and Irina Nijinska. For the purposes of identification the above sources will be marked by the following superscription: (a) Buckle; (b) Craft; (c) Hodson.

a gesture of stylized rape; the section is briefly elaborated on by two pair of dancers.<sup>(a)</sup> There are groups of three women who stand shivering and trembling beside the couples.<sup>(c)</sup> There is a tremendous sense of adolescent fear radiating between the men and women in this act.<sup>(c)</sup>

The "Spring Rounds" or "Khorovod" describes a form of singing and dancing in a circle, "Khor" meaning "chorus" and "vod," leading.<sup>(b)</sup> This section is introduced by flutes and alto flutes, against a primeval melodic sequence played by the clarinets. The Russian chorale tune reappears in slightly different form. As the entire orchestra takes up this melody, men and women come together and revolve in circles.<sup>(a)42</sup> As Stravinsky envisioned the first part of this section, five small circles of dancers slowly gyrate, then, in the orchestral tutti, coalesce into a single large circle. During what the composer calls the "Khorovod Chant," the women stand apart from the men, extending their arms in gestures of exorcism. The women then leave the stage and the men dance to the orchestral coda alone. The men then divide, thus establishing two tribes for the ritual games.<sup>(a)</sup>

The "Ritual of the Two Rival Tribes" begins with short bursts of warfare between the men. They perform a ritually game in which a contest of strength is determined by, for example, a tug-of-war. These rites alternate with pleading gestures from the groups of swaying, clapping women, who have reentered the ceremony. A sequence of competitive dances concludes the section. A barbaric melody on the tubas weaves into the "Procession of the Oldest and Wisest One—the Sage." A clearing is prepared at the center of the stage.<sup>(b)</sup> The Elders lead on the Sage<sup>(a)</sup> with the women of the tribe following in his train.<sup>(b)</sup> An orchestral tutti signals the gathering of all the people.<sup>(b)</sup> The Sage lays himself spread-eagled face-down on the ground<sup>(a)</sup> and bestows his sacramental kiss on the earth in time with the chord of string harmonics.<sup>(b)43</sup> The tribe senses the presence of a god, and runs to form a square to represent a tribal compound.<sup>(a)</sup>

After the Sage completes the ritual, "Kiss of the Earth," the dancers begin the "Dance Overcoming the Earth," which concludes the first scene of the ballet. This section is a frenzied celebration by the tribes in anticipation of the coming spring.<sup>(a)</sup> Stravinsky has said that he imagined the dancers "rolling like bundles of leaves in the wind" and "stomping like Indians trying to put out a prairie fire."<sup>(b)</sup> As the movement ends, to syncopated shrieks on the brass and woodwinds, the dancers, arranged in asymmetrical clumps, leap and fall convulsively to the ground,<sup>(a)</sup> with each cluster of dancers jumping repeatedly to a different set of musical counts.<sup>(c)44</sup> The curtain is lowered on the first scene.

Part Two was begun in darkness.<sup>(b)</sup> The introduction to the second scene concludes with a gentle Russian folk tune on alto flute and solo

violin. The curtain rises on the "Mystic Circle of Virgins."<sup>45</sup> All the maidens are standing, trembling, as if welded together in a circle, facing outward, knees bent, toes pointed inward. Each has her right elbow resting on her left fist, while her right fist supports her chin. This is a characteristic posture in the women's folk dances of Byelorussia and the Ukraine. Their dance once again is *khorovod*-like in character.

One of the girls will be chosen for the traditional sacrifice to Yarilo, the god of spring. The men and the Elders watch.<sup>(a)</sup><sup>46</sup> The ring of girls slowly moves round, and on specific counts, they rise on tiptoe, dropping their right hands to their sides and jerking their heads to the left.<sup>(a)</sup> The dancers describe the perimeter of a circle (drawn on the ground) which represents the cycle of nature and in which the Chosen One is to die.<sup>(b)</sup> As a circuit of the ring is completed, every other girl leaps out of the circle and back again. To a melodic Russian tune, the girls begin to walk with a bell-like swinging gesture—starting and stopping.<sup>(a)</sup> "One of the maidens is chosen by lot to fulfill the sacrifice; from this point to the 'Sacrificial Dance' the Chosen One stands motionless."<sup>47</sup>

The next section is the tribe's "Naming and Honoring of the Chosen One." During the ensuing orchestral crescendo, the men appear at the sides of the stage, as though poised for an ambush.<sup>48</sup> Stravinsky imagined this dance as a choreographic ricochet of movement from stage left to stage right. The tribe divides into five groups, male and female, leaping and stamping convulsively. They approach and surround the Chosen Virgin.

The "Evocation of the Ancestors" is a male dance, a celebration of the ancient ritual of the consecration of the Chosen One. As the young women leave, the Elders appear, dressed in bearskins, and squat before the sacred circle like a court of judges.<sup>(b)</sup> The tribe recalls their forefathers in a slow reflective dance. To staccato shrieks and percussive chords the final ritual begins as the tribe stamps around the Chosen Virgin. She first assists and then leads her fellows in the celebration of her own sacrifice. The members of the tribe repeat a motif of jumps over and over, turning to the left and to the right—an emotional ritualistic counterpoint to the Virgin's movements. Her leaps become increasingly frenzied, until she falls exhausted. She tries to rise but falls again and, to a final chord, she dies and is raised at arm's length by six men and borne away.<sup>(a)</sup><sup>49</sup>

The choreography that Nijinsky devised for *Le Sacre du printemps* may be viewed as an anthology of innovation, breaking completely with conventional precepts of classical ballet. Inspired both by Roerich's paintings portraying "the awakening of the spirit of primeval man," and by the rhythmic complexities of Stravinsky's score, Nijinsky created a ballet of unexpected beauty.<sup>50</sup> Indeed, the radical choreographic style of his *Le Sacre* anticipated many of the reforms in technique and theory associated with the development of modern dance.

In an interview in the *London Daily Mail*, Nijinsky stated that he detested what he termed "conventional 'nightingale-and-rose poetry'" and declared his own inclination to be "primitive."<sup>51</sup> In painting and sculpture, he noted, when suavity led to "banality" a revolt was always the result. "Perhaps something like this has happened in dancing," Nijinsky declared.<sup>52</sup>

Nijinsky was to apply to dance the dictums of the "revolt" that already had stirred the visual arts in Paris. Cubism developed with extraordinary rapidity between 1907 and 1914. With Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque as its leading exponents, the aesthetic of Cubism was viewed as "the conscious determination to establish in painting the knowledge of mass, volume and weight," as well as line and void, color and value.<sup>53</sup> Among these artists' resources for experiment was the art of other cultures, particularly the forms and motifs of African art. As art historian Robert Hughes notes, this interest on the part of Picasso and Braque brought to a climax "a long interest which nineteenth-century France had shown in the exotic, the distant, and the primitive."<sup>54</sup> Diaghilev's Ballets Russes had been exploiting this very fascination since 1909 by presenting Fokine's "oriental" and "russkii" ballets. But these works had their roots in *fin-de-siècle* Russian Symbolism, rather than in any modernist aesthetic. It was Nijinsky, with his avowed preference for the "primitive" and his assertion that he himself would make Cubist art, who was to apply the precepts of Cubism to the medium of dance.

It may seem paradoxical that a breakthrough in modernism, both in dance and in music, should come in the form of a ballet which portrayed the arcane rituals of a prehistoric Slavic tribe. But it is likely that Stravinsky and Nijinsky took note of the primitive source of much of the Cubist painters' early inspiration. Picasso had looked to African art as an untapped wellspring, to renew his vision of the vitality of form and perspective in art. He saw the masks and figures as "emblems of savagery [and] violence," prototypes to be reinvented from the Cubist perspective.<sup>55</sup> Similarly, the creators of *Le Sacre du printemps* wanted to produce something "new, beautiful and utterly different" through their evocation of primitive Slavonic rituals.<sup>56</sup> But while the ballet's theme was rooted in ancient folklore, this musical and choreographic "language" of its realization was emphatically modern.

At the time of *Le Sacre*'s composition, Stravinsky was concerned with "ethnological authenticity as the first step toward 'creating reality.'"<sup>57</sup> (The development of a new perspective about realism was also a crucial subtheme in Cubist artistic theory.)<sup>58</sup> Stravinsky "drew from life" in collecting folk melodies for *Le Sacre*, and Nijinsky used his knowledge of Russian folk dance as raw material for the choreography. His parents were superb character dancers, his father especially accomplished in the *lez-*

*ghinka*.<sup>59</sup> The traditional forms and steps of dances such as the Polish *mazurka* and *cracoviennes*, the Ukrainian *hopak*, and the Russian *prissyatka* and *kazatchok* were ideal for stylization and adaptation to Nijinsky's needs in *Le Sacre*. The positions he devised for the women's hands and arms are especially evocative of their folk dance counterparts; in some instances, for example, the women rest their cheeks against the open palms of their hands, or lay their chins on their lightly clenched fists.<sup>60</sup> At one moment, the women clasp their hands behind their necks with the elbows pulled sharply forward. Valentine Gross described this gesture in her notes and sketched it in her quick hieroglyphiclike drawings of the ballet's performances.<sup>61</sup> It is a powerful image that has worked its way into the very bloodstream of twentieth-century dance.<sup>62</sup> This movement is characteristic of Russian folk dances, especially of the Ukraine. It is a gesture employed when a woman wants to "show off" her *kokoshnik*, or headdress, and display the ribbons that hang down her back. Performed by an individual woman, it is a sign of feminine coquetry and pride; done *en masse*, as Nijinsky used it in *Le Sacre*, it becomes a poignant image of vulnerability.

Many of the steps and postures that Nijinsky devised for both the men and women have reverberations in the vernacular of Russian folk dance. The "harvesting" movement for the women is especially typical. The legs and feet are held parallel, with the knees slightly bent and the body folded forward at the waist. The accompanying movement usually is a gentle, pulsing, sidestepping motion, found in many folk dance styles.<sup>63</sup> The dancer reaches down with her arms, gently "turning the earth," the hands first twisting in toward the body and then opening forward, with the palm flat and open.<sup>64</sup> A shuntlike skip, moving either forward or back, is another distinctive folk dance movement. The dancer holds the body erect, while one leg is drawn up in parallel alignment in front of the body, like a hook, with the knee and foot flexed. Nijinsky invented a number of variations on this spare motif for both the men's and women's dances.<sup>65</sup>

The Gross drawings and a number of written descriptions of *Le Sacre* emphasize the blocky, angular impression created by the choreography. The dancers were compared to "puppets on wires," "strange troglodytes," and "cells under a microscope."<sup>66</sup> The critics saw neither "light movements of the body nor graceful use of the limbs" in the heavy, awkward movements and austere gestures of *Le Sacre*.<sup>67</sup> Nijinsky had deliberately reordered and objectified the perception of the human figure in dance, as Picasso, in *Les Femmes d'Alger*, had radically altered the conventional depiction of human anatomy in painting. For Picasso, the primitive sculptures of African art exemplified the "freedom to distort anatomy" for the sake of developing a rhythmic structure capable of creating new shapes. At the same time, its suggestion of a "supernatural presence" seems to have been equally stimulating.<sup>68</sup> Nijinsky found a



Valentine Gross, Scenes from Nijinsky's *Le Sacre du printemps*  
The top sketches show Maria Piltz in her final solo. The bottom shows a group of men, probably from the first scene.  
(Courtesy of the Theatre Museum, London. Copyright ARS NY/SPADEM 1987)

similar inspiration in the ethnography of the ritual ceremonies of ancient Russian tribes. In *Le Sacre*, by applying the precepts of Cubism to the dynamic image of the dancer, Nijinsky was able to reveal this new aesthetic as the visual artists never could—in movement through time and space.<sup>69</sup>

Like the Cubist painters, Nijinsky achieved the effects of distortion and fragmentation in a variety of ways. Critics had referred to the choreographer's "stylization of gesture" in *Jeux*, and this phrase reappeared in a number of reviews of *Le Sacre*.<sup>70</sup> A key element in Nijinsky's choreographic method was to establish a distinctive body posture for each ballet. In *Le Sacre*, he derived the grounded stance and "stylized" look of the movement by adapting the characteristic motifs and postures of Russian folk dance to the hieratic, two-dimensional body alignment he had first essayed in *Faune*. Folk dance forms provided the stylistic baseline in *Le Sacre* in the same manner as the action of a tennis game served as the foundation for the movement in *Jeux*.

The audiences that saw *Le Sacre du printemps* were treated to "profiles of faces posed on full-front shoulders . . . elbows glued to the body . . . horizontal forearms, rigid and open hands."<sup>71</sup> Gestures were fragmented and economical, facial expression was blotted out. The dancers' movements were heavy and awkward, their anatomies seemingly reduced to geometric lozenges of grotesque proportions. The arrangement of their limbs was designed to look foreshortened rather than extended. Poses looked fixed and deformed rather than symmetrical and designed. The fluidity associated with classical ballet had been replaced by splintered, percussive movements, the familiar vocabulary of the *danse d'école* was rejected in favor of agitated trembling, frozen stillness and spasmodic jumps. The dancers did not simply attack a movement; they wreaked violence upon it. Rivière felt that in *Le Sacre*, "the body is the real speaker. It moves only as a whole, it forms a totality and its manner of speaking is to leap suddenly with arms and legs outspread, or to move to the side with knees bent and the head on the shoulder."<sup>72</sup> Nijinsky saw his dancers as abstractions, vessels for the enactment of a ritual, "the incarnation of Nature—not human nature."<sup>73</sup> "One would think," wrote Rivière, that "he is witnessing a drama beneath a microscope . . . large turning masses of protoplasm, germinative slabs; zones, circles, placentae."<sup>74</sup>

The tribal ceremonies portrayed in *Le Sacre* were intended to mirror the violent beginnings of the Russian springs which Stravinsky remembered from childhood and wanted to express in the score. Nijinsky concentrated on the "driving power of the group," exploring the properties of mass and weight as elements in dance.<sup>75</sup> The movement vocabulary of the ballet was composed of technically simple steps—walking, running, skipping, jumping, stamping, together with a few more complex sequences.<sup>76</sup> Nijinsky

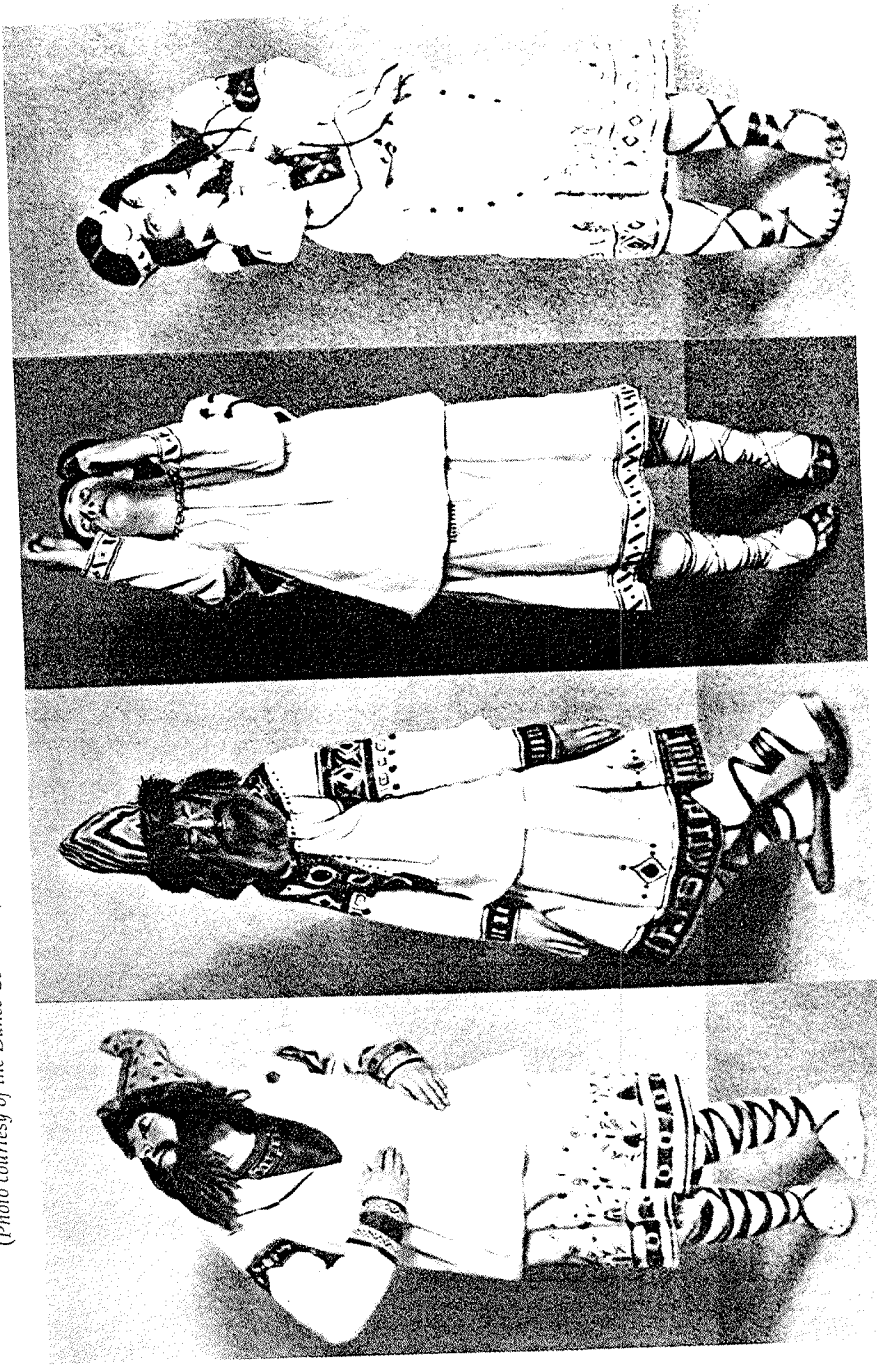
achieved the sense of volume and density that is one of the principal characteristics of the ballet's choreography by having large groups of dancers clustered together repeatedly perform their *pas mouvements* in unison, canon and counterpoint. The lack of symmetry in these formations increased the sensations of tumult and chaos. As if hypnotized by some hidden force, the dancers executed the same steps over and over, "rough-hewn, stumbling, sinister. . . . Bereft of all personality and individual desire, these groups of liturgic dancers, pressing close upon each other, changed places, turning and winding, dominated by an overwhelming compulsion that seemed almost to disjoint their limbs and weigh heavily upon their bent necks."<sup>77</sup>

In order to achieve a starkly primitive quality in his choreography for *Le Sacre*, Nijinsky had to convert a company of highly trained ballet technicians into a "tribe of dancers." Stravinsky and Roerich had designed the ballet's libretto with particular attention to the ethnography of ancient Russian cultures. Nijinska has stated that her brother frequently discussed the pagan rites depicted in *Le Sacre* with Roerich, who was a recognized scholar and authority on the rituals of prehistoric Slavic cults. Roerich was Nijinsky's most important source of information on these matters and it is likely that some of the painter's ideas regarding ritual dance became integrated into the patterns, gestures and even steps of *Le Sacre's* choreography.<sup>78</sup>

The very elements inherent in ritual dance—the sense of detachment, the repetition of movements, the pared-down gestures—forced Nijinsky to use the body in a nonliteral, nonrepresentational manner. The massed energy of the group became a metaphor for the "terror and 'panic' that accompanies the rising of the sap."<sup>79</sup> The dancers were compelled to reestablish contact with the earth, with gravity, to sense and exploit the weight of their bodies; a concept that was anathema in classical ballet. The angularity of Nijinsky's dance gesture directed the observer's eye toward the body's center, rather than outward to the limbs. Tension was cultivated rather than released. By using repeated percussive movements and avoiding graceful transitions between phrases, Nijinsky made the choreography appear unremittedly stark and austere. "In breaking down movement," wrote Rivière, "in bringing it back to simple gestures, Nijinsky has brought expression back to the dance."<sup>80</sup>

The influence of ritual dance forms is especially marked in the spatial designs of the ballet. The sense of being surrounded and encircled is a central theme in *Le Sacre*. The geometry of the first act is based essentially on circles, files and lines, with the exception of the formation of the tribal square at the conclusion of "The Kiss of the Earth." The first scene of *Le Sacre* was strategically conceived as a ceremonial preamble to the ballet's climax, the sacrifice of the Chosen Virgin to the god of spring. "The Mystic

Four Studies of Dancers from the Ballets Russes in Vaslav Nijinsky's 1913 Production of *Le Sacre du printemps*  
 (Photo courtesy of the Dance Collection, The New York Public Library at Lincoln Center, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations)



Circle of Virgins," which opened the second scene, was described by André Levinson as "blooming with the sense of lyricism: young girls lead a 'bramble,' shoulder to shoulder, with all the angelic affection of Byzantine saints. They designate and greet the Chosen Virgin, the victim of the sacrifice. In the magic circle, the victim is almost immobile; pale beneath her white headband, she executes her macabre dance."<sup>81</sup>

From the ancient circle, the ring, the maiden was chosen to perform a dance which celebrates both her death and her apotheosis.<sup>82</sup> Nijinsky used circular floor patterns throughout *Le Sacre*, but never with greater impact than in "The Mystic Circle of Virgins" and the "Danse sacrale." The use of form as metaphor—the circle representing the cycles of life and their constant renewal—is part of the ethnography of many ritual dance forms. Philosopher Susanne Langer has observed that the circle dance, or *Reigen*, symbolizes an important reality in the life of primitive man—the sacred realm, the magic circle. "The *Reigen* as a dance form . . . fulfills a holy office, perhaps the *first* holy office of the dance—it divides the sphere of holiness from that of profane existence. In this way it creates the stage of the dance."<sup>83</sup>

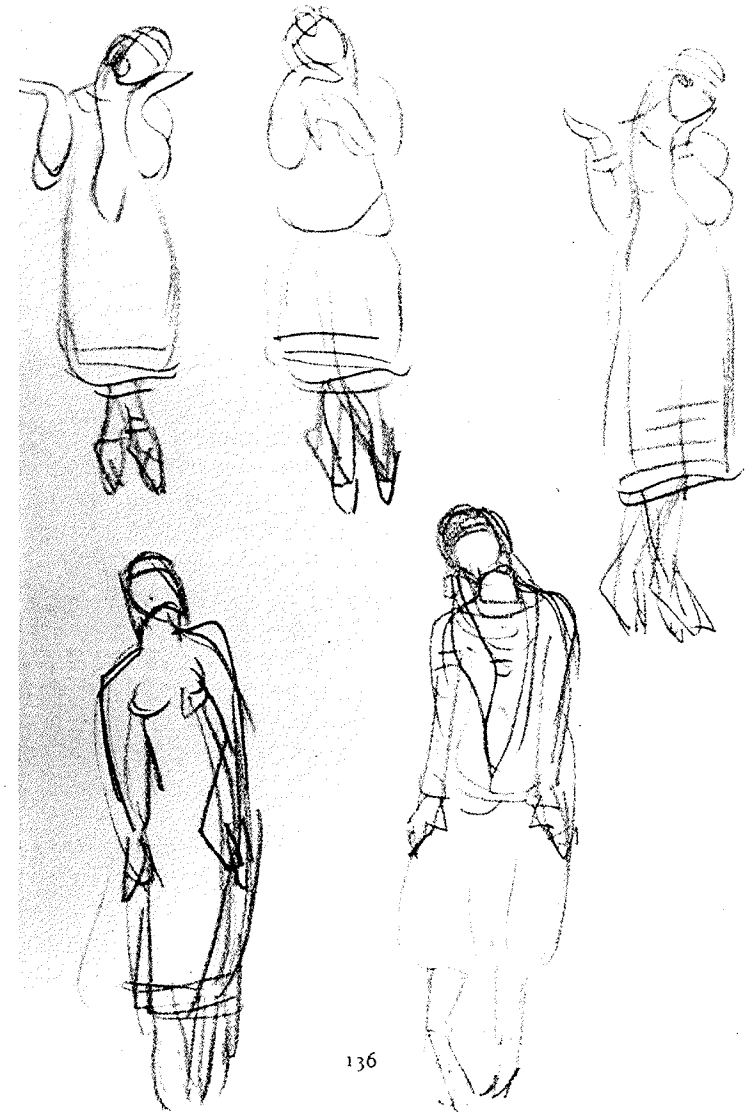
Together, Nijinsky and Stravinsky had set the stage for the only solo dance in *Le Sacre du printemps*—and one of the most extraordinary solos in the ballet repertoire. Its lineage can be traced to ceremonial ecstatic dances of ancient peoples. In the "Danse sacrale," Nijinsky attempted a feat of choreographic stamina and complexity which staggered the dance world. Marie Rambert described the solo as the greatest tragic dance she had ever seen. The role of the Chosen Virgin was originally intended for Nijinsky's sister, Bronislava, who would have been ideal in realizing both the dramatic and dance potential of the solo. But by the time *Le Sacre* was in rehearsal, Bronislava was pregnant, and Maria Piltz, a young solist, was selected to dance the role. Rambert, who was sometimes present when Nijinsky rehearsed Piltz for the part, was dismayed at the choice. "She didn't in any way suggest a Russian peasant," said Rambert, who noted Piltz was unable to absorb Nijinsky's style. "More weight was needed for the role; it was [implicit] in the music. When Nijinsky showed a jump, it was as though he had fire under his feet [and] he tried to jump away from it. Of course, she couldn't do anything like that."<sup>84</sup>

Nijinsky was insistent about emphasizing the dancer's experience of weight as a positive use of gravity. The attempt to escape the ground was equaled by the emphatic implosion of physical force into the earth. He demanded that the dancers strive for an uncontrolled, heavy descent from jumps, as though they were being pulled to the ground by unseen hands. This was an audacious and unprecedented command from a choreographer who himself had seemingly conquered the physical laws of gravity. Nijinsky's use of movement was the very antithesis of that seen in classical

ballet—the conquest of the air. For the “Danse sacrale,” he insisted on the “obvious desperation of physical energy to proclaim the gross cost of psychic exhaustion. A girl’s body was to dance itself out of humanity, transmitting its virtue into the soil, in order to renew fields, grain, the year.”<sup>85</sup> Rambert recalled the dance as being “terrifying, very frenzied, incredible.” Certainly the dance made brutal demands on the dancer’s physical resources. The final jump sequence, with the knees tucked up and the upper body twisting on the spine, straining away from the legs, was executed at least five times in succession.<sup>86</sup>

Nijinsky composed the “Danse sacrale” first and its choreography became the conceptual matrix of the whole ballet. The strongly two-dimensional appearance of the movement and the emphasis on the angularity of knees, elbows and hands are clearly illustrated in the Valentine Gross sketches of the solo. The Gross drawings of the “Danse sacrale” emphasize the exaggerated inclination of the dancer’s head, giving the images an eerily mechanical, disjointed appearance.<sup>87</sup> The suggestion that the Chosen Maiden is “possessed,” that her movements were being manipulated by a supernatural power, occurred to more than one observer. To André Levinson, she seemed to dream, “her knees turn inward, the heels pointing out—inert. A sudden spasm shook her body out of its corpse-like rigor. . . . She trembled in ecstatic, irregular jerks.”<sup>88</sup> Rivière was moved by the aura of devotion and self-sacrifice evoked by the dance. “She accomplishes a rite, she is absorbed into a function of the society,” he wrote, “and, without giving one sign of comprehension or interpretation, she reacts to the powers and the shaking of a being more vast than she, of a monster full of ignorance and cravings, of cruelty and darkness.”<sup>89</sup> Calling the “Danse sacrale” “the most overwhelming theatrical spectacle I have ever seen,” Jean Cocteau saw in this “dance of an insect, of a doe fascinated by a boa, of a factory blowing up”—indeed, in the whole theme of *Le Sacre du printemps*—the prodromes of war.<sup>90</sup>

*Le Sacre du printemps* was both symptom and manifestation of the progressive, restless spirit that pervaded the arts in the year preceding the outbreak of the Great War. “Looking back upon it now,” wrote Mabel Dodge Luhan in 1936, “it seems as though everywhere, in that year of 1913, barriers went down and people reached each other who had never been in touch before.”<sup>91</sup> It was an eventful year: Marcel Proust and D. H. Lawrence each published important works, *Du côté de chez Swann* and *Sons and Lovers*, respectively; Edmund Husserl’s treatise *Phenomenology* first appeared in print, as did Sigmund Freud’s *Totem and Taboo*. The Armory Show aroused scandal in New York, and Vorticism, the English version of Cubism, appeared in London. The tumultuous premiere of *Le Sacre du printemps* marked a watershed in twentieth-century music and dance, and the critical reaction to the ballet reflected both admiration and dismay in terms of public response.



Valentine Gross, Sketch of Nijinsky’s *Le Sacre du printemps*, Scene 2, “The Mystic Circle of Virgins”

The two drawings at the bottom of the page are of Maria Piltz as she waited to begin the “Danse sacrale.”

(Courtesy of the Theatre Museum, London. Copyright ARS NY/SPADEM 1987)

For some of the French critics, neither the music nor the dance elements of *Le Sacre* was successful, for others one succeeded while the other failed and for a few critics both aspects were praiseworthy.<sup>92</sup> The reviews ranged from earnest and painstaking evaluations to contemptuous or skeptical dismissals. Several critics viewed *Le Sacre* as a daring experiment rather than a polished production; some even questioned the artists' sincerity in presenting this "almost bestial ballet."<sup>93</sup> Gustave de Pawlowski dubbed the work the "Massacre du printemps," declaring the collaborators had brought off an improbable *tour de force*, a display of "the unconscious, childish frenzy of primitive tribes, awakening to the mysteries of life."<sup>94</sup>

Leon Vallas wondered whether the music of *Le Sacre* was an example of "music of the future," a sentiment echoed by not a few of his colleagues.<sup>95</sup> The critic of *Le Figaro* compared watching and listening to the ballet to "torture," the Russian Ballet season to "occupation" by hostile armies and found Nijinsky "a kind of Attila of the dance."<sup>96</sup>

For many observers, Roerich's costumes and *mise-en-scène* represented the most obviously "russki" element in the ballet. The women's silk dresses and the men's white robes were painted with dozens of vivid colors—scarlet, orange, turquoise, magenta, golds and greens.<sup>97</sup> The weight and design of the costumes contributed to the sense of mass and volume which Nijinsky was trying to achieve in the choreography. Roerich's contribution to *Le Sacre* reinforced the ballet's link with the traditions of Russian folk art that he and other Neofuturist artists had championed. While one critic saw the dances as merely a "gymnastic meet in carnival costume," others allied the creation of the "unholy triumvirate" of Russian artists with similar contemporaneous movements in the visual arts and literature.<sup>98</sup>

Jacques Rivière, Maurice Touchard and Jacques Jary all referred to the "musical Cubism" of Stravinsky's score. Jary noted that composers, painters, sculptors and authors were following parallel paths, and that the attempt by Stravinsky to "render" solids could be found in all their works.<sup>99</sup>

Several critics recognized that the choreography of *Le Sacre* was a significant departure from the "dizzying virtuosity" of classical ballet. Louis Schneider lauded Nijinsky for trying to discover "new forms of movement, to imagine poses and gestures which had not yet found a place in the history of dance."<sup>100</sup> Others, including Jean Marnold and Octave Maus praised the choreographer for his dramatic, even heroic struggle to "liberate" the art of dance.<sup>101</sup>

The first London performances of *Le Sacre du printemps* took place on 11 July 1913, at the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane. Mindful of the uproar the ballet had created in Paris, Diaghilev made efforts to make the ballet more

acceptable to London audiences—or, at least better understood. Edwin Evans, the distinguished English music critic, appeared in front of the curtain before the start of the ballet to explain the music and the intention of the new work.

Pierre Monteux later wrote to Stravinsky that "the London public are better students" than the Parisian, and that the ballet had "considerable success," receiving six or seven curtain calls.<sup>102</sup> The critical response indicates that while *Le Sacre's* London reception was more sedate than the Paris premiere's, the ballet's impact was no less controversial. *The Daily Telegraph* thought the work "a whirlwind of cacophonous, 'primitive' hideousness," while *The Standard* felt "the subject—primitive man—is ugly, and his movements are ugly as the ugliest duckling."<sup>103</sup>

In an effort to categorize Nijinsky's choreography, Richard Capell, in the *Daily Mail*, repeated someone's observation that *Le Sacre* was akin to "Cannibal Island Dancing." He deduced, however, that the dancing was "allied to recent manifestations in the other arts, and may be called 'Cubist dancing.' (According to a recent definition—'twenty-four dances performed by twenty-four dancers to twenty-four tunes played simultaneously.')<sup>104</sup>

In London, too, *Le Sacre* was associated with modernism—*French* modernism, according to the critic of *The Sketch*, thus divorcing the arts of music and dance "from beauty as we conceive beauty."<sup>105</sup> Some of the English artistic vanguard agreed. Lytton Strachey termed *Le Sacre* "one of the most painful experiences of my life," while Charles Ricketts stated that the ballet made him want to "howl like a dog."<sup>106</sup> For the most part, London received *Le Sacre* with somewhat bewildered restraint, a decided contrast to the French *battage*. For one young American poet, John Gould Fletcher, *Le Sacre* was a revelation. He found the score "perfectly futurist" and felt that the performance of the ballet "more than anything else I have ever seen in life confirmed me in my determination to risk everything in order to become a modern artist."<sup>107</sup>

With *Le Sacre du printemps*, Stravinsky and Nijinsky resolutely declared themselves modern artists. The ballet itself was both a summing-up and a beginning; it was, in Jean Cocteau's phrase, a "work which opened and closed an epoch."<sup>108</sup> Its creators shared a cultural heritage, and each artist made his individual contribution to this paean to their homeland. Roerich's knowledge of ancient Slavic rituals and cultures, Stravinsky's use of Russian folk tunes, and Nijinsky's abstraction of Russian folk dances combined to make *Le Sacre* a potent metaphor for the ultimate revelation of *âme slave* in the prewar Ballets Russes repertoire. Yet beneath this evocation of primitive rites, Jacques Rivière saw something more profound, "more secretive and more hideous. This is a biological ballet. It is not only the dance of the most primitive man, it is also the dance before

man."<sup>109</sup> Florent Schmitt saw, prophetically, a "dying humanity staggering once more through all the actions of life. Or perhaps of humanity being born from chaos and beginning the rhythm [of life] and all its actions."<sup>110</sup> The year after the premiere of *Le Sacre du printemps*, the world was engaged in the war to end all wars and a generation who had thrilled to Stravinsky's hurricane of sound became accustomed to the whine of zeppelins and the rattle of guns.

Diaghilev and Nijinsky were growing increasingly estranged and after *Le Sacre du printemps*, it became clear that the two were no longer seeing eye to eye. The Ballets Russes sailed for South America in August 1913, without Diaghilev. On the Atlantic crossing, Nijinsky met Romola de Pulszky, whom he married in Rio de Janeiro that September. Thus began his final separation from Diaghilev, and his decline into mental illness began shortly afterward. His mind began to disintegrate in 1917 and his condition was diagnosed as schizophrenia in 1919.

Although the Diaghilev company performed in Europe and America during World War I, Nijinsky and his wife were interned as prisoners of war in Hungary from 1914 to 1916. *Le Sacre du printemps*, that big, complex, controversial ballet, was never again performed with Nijinsky's original choreography. When Diaghilev wanted to revive *Le Sacre* in 1920, no one could remember the steps, although five dancers who had performed the ballet were still with the company. Perhaps recalling the difficulty of learning Nijinsky's choreography and how strange and uncomfortable they found the movement, no one wished to remember. Seven years after its creation, *Le Sacre du printemps* became a "lost" ballet.

Over the decades following the ballet's premiere, *Le Sacre du printemps* acquired the patina of legend. The drama enacted at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées has acquired all of the embellishment, contradiction and mythology that tend to envelop unexpected moments in history. The story of the riot has been recorded and retold by many who witnessed or participated in the event and Stravinsky's monumental score has become a landmark in twentieth-century music. The extant artifacts connected with the ballet—the few photographs, sketches and costumes—remain pieces of an incomplete and mysterious puzzle. The original production of *Le Sacre du printemps* was mythologized as soon as it appeared, an extraordinary tribute to its impact on this century's cultural history.

## 5

## Counterpoint

In the summer of 1914, few people foresaw the lengthy agony of the world war which lay ahead. But when the British Foreign Secretary, Lord Grey, gazed at the lights of London from his Whitehall window, he grimly prophesized that "the lamps are going out all over Europe; we shall not see them lit again in our lifetime."<sup>1</sup> A war of unprecedented dimensions erupted, and when the armistice was signed on 11 November 1918, "la belle époque" had ended. A generation of artists and intellectuals looked toward the touchstones of civilization—literature, art, music, drama and dance—for stimulus and inspiration.

Serge Diaghilev had succeeded in the gigantic task of keeping the Ballets Russes intact during the years of the Great War. Few people in 1915 thought the war would be a long one, and Diaghilev might well have bided his time and "allowed his Ballet to fall into abeyance."<sup>2</sup> The impresario had, however, good reasons for reassembling whatever company he could and continuing to work. Along with the everpresent need for money, Diaghilev knew the importance of maintaining the company's repertoire and keeping the Ballets Russes in the public eye. Moreover, he had an unending supply of new ideas.

After Nijinsky's departure in 1913, the Ballets Russes needed a *premier danseur* and choreographer to fill the void. New ballets had to be created to satisfy the appetite of a public that had come to expect a sensation every season from the Russian Ballet. With Nijinsky gone, there seemed no immediate alternative but the reengagement of Fokine. His new ballets for the Diaghilev company during the 1914 season, *Les Papillons* and *Midas*, as well as his dances for the Rimsky-Korsakov opera *Le Coq d'or*, were not up to the standard of his prewar works.<sup>3</sup> Although Fokine was also engaged as *premier danseur*, Diaghilev had reserved the right to "employ outside choreographers, after consultation, should the need arise."<sup>4</sup>

The most important work of the 1914 Ballets Russes season was to be *La Légende de Joseph*, with a score especially commissioned from Richard Strauss. Originally it had been intended that Nijinsky would both choreo-