A RITE REVISITED: ANALYZING CHOREOGRAPHIC INTERACTIONS WITH MUSIC INSIDE PINA BAUSCH'S LE SACRE DU PRINTEMPS

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CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

Igor Stravinsky’s musical composition *Le Sacre du Printemps* has created an almost irresistible lure for dance choreographers since it first premiered in 1913. Most view creating their own interpretation of the music as a kind of choreographic “rite” of passage, while some see it as a monumental challenge waiting to be met—others are simply commissioned to try their hand. Although it has been almost a century since *Le Sacre du Printemps* first premiered, it continues to provoke and interest modern dance choreographers and music composers. Of the nearly two hundred versions created, Pina Bausch’s 1975 version for the Tanztheater Wuppertal has been often heralded for the intensity and striking interactions that Bausch created between her choreography and Stravinsky’s score. Why is this? Through analysis of *Le Sacre du Printemps*’ score, its recorded music, and video documentation of the Tanztheater Wuppertal performing *Le Sacre du Printemps*, I hope to uncover how Bausch choreographically interprets Stravinsky’s music.

The idea for *Le Sacre du Printemps*, whether it was a vision, dream, or premonition, was first recorded by Stravinsky in 1910. In his autobiography he writes, “I saw in imagination a solemn pagan rite: sage elders, seated in a circle, watched a young girl dance herself to death. They were sacrificing her to propitiate the god of spring.” He began working on this new project with Nicholas Roerich, a frequent Diaghilev collaborator and expert on Russian culture. When Diaghilev approached Stravinsky about creating another work, Stravinsky revealed the ideas that he and Roerich had been developing for the new ballet. The project received Diaghilev’s full

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1 Hill, *Stravinsky: The Rite of Spring*, 3-4.
support, and soon enough the Ballet Russes’ star dancer and budding choreographer Vaslav Nijinsky was assigned the task of creating movement for the new work.

*Le Sacre du Printemps* tells the story of an ancient tribal sacrificial rite that celebrates the coming of spring. The first half of the piece begins with a celebration of the earth; the music is swelling and building to reflect the “pagan fear of nature and significance of the Birth of Spring.” The music changes as genders within the tribe are exposed – even when the groups are mingled together, the rhythms are slowly changing to reflect the coming separating of genders and groups. These games of struggle are interrupted by the entrance and profession of the Sage, the oldest within the clan. The Sage gives “a benediction to the Earth, becoming one with the soil,” and signaling an eruption within the music as the tribe explodes into a dance of the earth.²

The second half of *Le Sacre du Printemps* begins with dances of adolescent girls and premonitions of the election to come of a “Chosen One,” a young girl who will be sacrificed to consecrate spring. When she is chosen, the tribe members evoke their ancestors and purify the soil to mark where the sacrifice will take place. The ancestors surround the Chosen One, who marks the ritual with the beginning of her sacrificial dance to death. When the dance reaches its peak (her final exhaustion), the music climaxes, signifying that the “annual cycle of forces which are born again…is accomplished in its (the music’s) essential rhythms.”³

The ballet premiered at Paris’ Théâtre des Champs-Élysées on May 29, 1913. Nijinsky had brought the sacrificial dance to life through his choreography, presenting

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² Stravinsky, “What I Wished to Express.”
³ Stravinsky, “What I Wished to Express.”
the dancers with turned in feet, heavily weighted movements, and angular and sharp body positions. Nicholas Roerich clothed the performers in atypically long and modest costumes—even their faces were covered in paint and long wigs. These factors, combined with the driving, primal rhythms in Stravinsky’s music, proved to be too much for the audience to handle. The premiere resulted in an audience riot, producing an event historically significant to both the fields of dance and music.

In the world of dance performance, choreography is inevitably tied to sounds it uses and is performed to. How do choreographers react to these sound scores, and what kinds of relationships are created between the two elements? How does this relationship affect the audience? *Le Sacre du Printemps* creates an excellent opportunity to begin this type of questioning thought towards music used for dance. As choreographers continue to recreate the piece as a dance work, so too do orchestras continue to perform it in concert settings separated from movement and choreography.

Of the nearly two hundred versions created, Pina Bausch’s 1975 version of *Le Sacre du Printemps* for the Tanztheater Wuppertal has, in the almost forty years since the piece first premiered, continued to strongly affect audiences through the ways her choreography interacts Igor Stravinsky’s music. This type of audience reaction to the relationship between the work’s musical score and choreographed movement is incredibly intriguing. How can a viewer truly define whether or not choreography embodies a piece of music, and how do these supposedly successful embodiments apply to Bausch’s approach to Stravinsky’s iconic music?

Bausch, born in 1940, first studied ballet and in 1955 began training with Kurt Jooss at the Folkwang School in Essen. There she was immersed in the ideas of
Ausdruckstanz, a dance tradition formed in Germany before World War II. Ausdruckstanz, led by figures such as Rudolph Laban, Mary Wigman and Kurt Jooss, heavily emphasized the idea of dance expression.  In 1960 Bausch moved to New York City to study dance at the Juilliard School under Antony Tudor, Jose Limon, Anna Sokolow, Alfredo Corvino, Margret Craske, Louis Horst, and La Meri, among countless others. In addition to her studies, she danced with the Paul Sanasardo-Donya Feuer Dance Company, the New American Ballet, and the Metropolitan Opera, and collaborated with Paul Taylor during her time in New York City. In 1962 Bausch returned to Germany to work as a soloist and choreographer in the Folkwangballett, directed by her former teacher Jooss; in 1969 she became the artistic director of the Folkwangballett (now called Folkwang Tanzstudio). Her early exposure to Ausdruckstanz and its emphasis on expressive dance as well as her experience with American modernism informed and shaped her work. These elements would later contribute additionally to her highly theatrical approach to choreography, and indeed are distinctly evident in the term that Bausch used to define her work: “Tanztheater,” translated literally as “dance theatre.”

Bausch died in 2009, still active as a choreographer and director of the Tanztheater Wuppertal. The company is still actively touring and performing her work, including Le Sacre du Printemps. An obituary posted in the UK newspaper Telegraph addressed Bausch’s work on Le Sacre du Printemps, citing, “Her epic version of Stravinsky's Rite of Spring, in which the sacrificial victim is effectively lynched by the crowd, is thought by many to be the finest of the 180-plus versions that exist. Drawing

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4 “Pina Bausch.”
5 Fernandes, Pina Bausch...Aesthetics of Repetition, 3-4.
on classical music, she made radically modern choreographies to Gluck’s *Iphigenie auf Tauris* and *Orpheus und Eurydice*, Bartók’s *Bluebeard’s Castle* and her 1975 *Rite of Spring*, one of the few Pina Bausch works lent to other companies, notably in 1997 to Paris Opera Ballet.” The resetting of this piece on classically trained ballet dancers was chronicled by writer Alan Riding in an article for the *New York Times* through both interview and observation. On first meeting with the dancers of the Paris Opera Ballet, Bausch explained, “‘The first thing I did was to talk to them about what ‘Sacre’ means to me…the starting point is the music. There are so many feelings in it; it changes constantly.’” The importance that Stravinsky’s music holds within Bausch’s interpretation of *Le Sacre du Printemps* is defined not only by audiences, critics, and dancers, but by the choreographer herself.

The Tanztheater Wuppertal’s *Le Sacre du Printemps* contains a mass of dancers (there have been between twenty six and thirty six depending on when and where it was performed) that fill the stage: half are women, half are men. The choreography uses movements that are a mixture of pedestrian motions (running, stomping, falling to the ground) and balletic grace (wide second positions, flowing arms, use of the full range of motion of the upper torso). The choreography is exaggeratedly gender specific—dramaturge and dance author Norbert Servos wrote of the piece, “Men and women are characterized very differently, using a vocabulary of movement strongly linked to *Ausdruckstanz* (the men, for example, via aggressive leaps). Here too, however, both sexes are entranced by an overpowering, compulsive rhythm.”

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6 “Pina Bausch.”
Music and movement can interact in many different ways, from classical ballet to contemporary to experimental work performed in silence. Stravinsky is unique as a composer and Bausch unique as a choreographer in that both heavily emphasized the choreomusical relationship. The choreographer George Balanchine, one of Stravinsky’s greatest collaborators, lauded Stravinsky’s compositions as drawing dance into musical language, and as extending musical range in dance. Balanchine stated, “When I listen to a score by him I am moved—I don’t like the word inspired—to try and make visible not only the rhythm, melody and harmony, but even the timbres of the instruments.”

The choreography in Bausch’s *Le Sacre du Printemps* correlates to the music, but in a symbiotic fashion: the two elements seem to be furthering each other rather than the choreography simply trying to keep up with the music as the piece rolls on.

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RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

I attempted to undertake this research project with a clear view of my own limitations. I do not have a background in music or in music analysis – I can read music but do not play or analyze it. I have not been able to see the Tanztheater Wuppertal perform *Le Sacre du Printemps* live nor hear a live performance of the music. The video that I analyzed was produced for television; therefore, the dancers are not always all visible due to editing and different camera shots. As a dancer and dance enthusiast, I have a personal preference for Bausch’s interpretation of Stravinsky’s music. My fascination with her version led to my initial curiosity about the piece’s history and background, and subsequently developed into this project. Finally, this paper is not meant to serve as a final and total analysis of the work, but instead as a possible gateway to future examinations of how choreography and music can interact.

My first step was to investigate the historical background of *Le Sacre du Printemps*. I researched Stravinsky’s background and his process in creating *Le Sacre du Printemps*, as well as the historical context of his work at the time. Additionally, I researched Pina Bausch’s choreographic process and her life as director of the Tanztheater Wuppertal. I found that there was extensive writing on Stravinsky’s experience with the work but that most of the writing about Bausch’s choreographic method focused on her general body of work or on other pieces rather than specifically on *Le Sacre du Printemps*. Therefore, most of my background information and analysis of Bausch’s history and methods draws from a general pool of information instead of writing specific to the piece. I spent a period of time repeatedly listening to recordings of
the music and watching videos of the choreography in order to thoroughly familiarize myself with the work.

After completing my background research, I then compared the musical score to the video of the choreography and analyzed what connections were visible and audible between the two elements. I was attempting to find a base layer of the minute interactions between the choreography and the music through this analysis. When I had gathered these more individual notes, I used them as a platform to extract further overarching observations about the choreographic and musical interactions created between Bausch’s movements and Stravinsky’s music. After these two stages of observations had been gathered, I synthesized my findings in order to draw conclusions about the work from my research.
SYNTHESIS

Le Sacre du Printemps

Part I: The Adoration of the Earth

Introduction. pg. 1. 0:37

The Augurs of Spring. pg. 12. 4:13

Ritual of Abduction. pg. 32. 7:34

Spring Rounds. pg. 45. 8:58

Ritual of the Two Rival Tribes. pg. 54. 12:52


The Dance of the Earth. pg. 74. 15:35

Part II: The Sacrifice

Introduction. pg. 86. 17:18

Mystic Circles of the Young Girls. pg. 96. 21:00

The Glorification of the Chosen One. pg. 102. 24:42

Evocation of the Ancestors. pg. 115. 26:14

Ritual Action of the Ancestors. pg. 119. 26:55

Sacrificial Dance (The Chosen One). pg. 129. 30:31

Structurally, Bausch's version very closely follows the original sections of the music and the format that Stravinsky had laid out in collaboration with Roerich and Nijinsky. Her choreography reflects the changes in the music – when the piece moves
to a new musical part, the audience hears the switch in the music while also seeing it reflected onstage. The titles of the sections are literally interpreted in the scenes that Bausch choreographs. For example, when the piece opens with the introduction of the first half, titled “Part I: The Adoration of the Earth,” the opening image revealed to the audience is that of a women laying face down on the earth covered stage – she appears to be almost worshipping the ground. When “Spring Rounds,” begins, the dancers form a large circle that fills the stage; in the “Ritual of the Two Rival Tribes,” the men and women separate into gender segregated group movements. Bausch uses her choreography to interpret each new section of Stravinsky’s music and produces literal physical manifestations of their titles onstage.

The first half and second half of the piece contain movement sections that are reminiscent of each other but are not exact reproductions. “Spring Rounds” and the “Mystic Circles of the Young Girls” both feature a circle with counterclockwise steps and a reach across the outside of the circle with the right arm. In “Spring Rounds,” the circle alternates men and women, and the shape of their circle is centered and fills the entire stage; their movements seem more calculated and ritualistic. However, in “Mystic Circles of the Young Girls,” the circle is comprised of all females and placed stage right, with the Sage watching their movements from center stage; under the gaze of the Sage, the women huddle in their circle, diminishing its size, and perform the same movements from the earlier section with a sense of dread rather than a feeling of ritualistic purpose.

The opening section of “Part I: The Adoration of the Earth,” reveals a woman laying downstage left on the red dress as the initial bassoon solo begins – we see individual and small groups of women running out onstage to open the piece with
various subtle movements and walking patterns as other instruments’ solo lines are introduced in the music. In the beginning of “Part II: The Sacrifice,” a similar structure is introduced with one major change: the men are present onstage. Now the Sage is the one laying downstage left on the red dress, and as the same groupings of women perform their motions and walking patterns, it is all done with an acute awareness of the presence of the Sage and the men huddled in the upstage left corner.

Once the selection of the Chosen One has been made, the choreography for the ensemble becomes de-emphasized and transitions into almost exactly matching the impulses and rhythms of the music. When the compositional emphasis shifts in this way, the corps of dancers nearly blend completely into the background of the audience’s mind by becoming so wholly intertwined with the music – they highlight even more starkly the solo movements of the female Chosen One and the male Sage. New movements are no longer introduced for the group; they repeat sequences and phrases from earlier in the piece, while in the Chosen One’s final “Sacrificial Dance,” we see her repeat almost every phrase that has been introduced into the choreography and danced by the ensemble. This repetition of the general tribe’s movements could be interpreted as a way to show that the sacrificial rite represents the tribe and its history as a whole. It functions like a summary of how time has progressed throughout the piece; the audience recognizes earlier phrases but sees also how their purpose has been altered to contribute to the Chosen One’s sacrificial dance to the death.

One of the most prevalent elements within Bausch’s choreography is repetition; she utilizes many of the same phrases throughout the piece. Some, such as the male female duets in “The Glorification of the Chosen One,” are tied to specific phrases within
the music. Other phrases, such as the four counts of choreography introduced in the opening sections of the piece, return throughout *Le Sacre du Printemps* but are reintroduced with different rhythm and timing or are associated with a new musical section; they are danced by altered groupings of people or by the opposite gender. Bausch also places repeating phrases directly next to each other. For example, in the introduction of Part II of the piece, we see a trio of women performing the same phrase in a ripple pattern: they move immediately after each other, not perfectly in sync with the music but instead shifting between different elements within it. When Bausch uses immediate repetition of a movement phrase, she usually places the movement outside the rhythmic groupings in the music – we see the same phrase and hear the same melodies, but the movement overlaps the structure of the music to show that the sections are not separated. This produces a different rhythmic emphasis each time the dancers repeat their phrases and creates a new way for the audience to “see” the rhythms in the music.

Almost every section of choreography consists of a smaller quantity of dancers (usually an individual or small group) and a large ensemble. The qualities of the general mob are contrasted with those of the individual using either fast or slow speeds to create visual contradiction; if the corps of dancers is moving in a frenzy, a female soloist is highlighted by her slow and sustained movements, or vice versa. This opposition is most emphatically highlighted in the final section, the “Sacrificial Dance” of the Chosen One. As the solo woman progresses through her frantic dance to the death, the ensemble lines the stage behind her, watching; their only movements throughout her solo are slow walks that serve to adjust their spatial pattern. They have no other
“danced” movements and become more observer than performer. Their lack of movement creates contrast that emphasizes the frantic and desperate nature of the Chosen One’s final sacrificial dance.

Just as Nijinsky had done with the original version of *Le Sacre du Printemps*, Bausch clearly distinguishes male and female gender roles through her choreography – one of the ways she assigns gender is by associating the women and men with specific groups of instruments. The women are most often portrayed with the strings and woodwind instruments, while the men are most often portrayed with the brass instruments, bassoon and contrabassoon, and timpani. These gender-instrument associations are not exclusive or maintained for every section, but they are very prominent and used consistently throughout the piece. Later, when the Chosen One is executing the sacrificial dance, we hear in the music a synthesis of brass and strings within the music – this could be interpreted as an intended portrayal by Stravinsky and by Bausch of the synthesis of the tribe as a whole that the sacrifice represents.

The females most often gaze down, fearfully to their sides, or look pleadingly up. They often perform softer and more pliant movements, using plié to a greater extent than the men and gesturing with rounded arms; their movements indicate compliancy and a sense of weakness. When they do execute harsher movements, they seem more desperate than domineering. The males, on the other hand, have a very direct and focused gaze – their intentions are clearly stated and understood. They move sharply and strongly, creating a sense of dominance and aggressiveness through their motions. In some sections, the men repeat phrases introduced earlier by the women – however,
upon this interpretation by the opposite gender, the previously fluid movements become more forceful and are initiated with greater strength.

Physical contact within *Le Sacre du Printemps* is presented choreographically with very clear guidelines. When contact is between two women, the touch they use is nurturing and supportive. They lead each other gently by the hand or lightly clasp another women’s shoulders in solidarity and support. We see these interactions plainly demonstrated both in “Part I: The Adoration of the Earth” the opening section of the first half danced only by the women, and in “Part II: The Sacrifice,” the opening section of the second half again danced only by the women.

Female-male physical interactions fluctuate between two qualities on opposite ends of the spectrum. When the women are touching the men in “Spring Rounds”, their contact retains the same traits demonstrated in the female-female interactions: the women gently hold the men’s shoulders from behind and lean upon their backs. However, unlike the all female interactions, the men do not acknowledge or respond to the women’s touch in any way, and these gentler interactions are choreographically in the minority. For the most part, when the two genders make physical contact, the men are extremely aggressive, direct, and even oppressive with their touch, and contrary to their own female-female interactions, the women respond with wild movement and reactions. In the “Ritual of Abduction,” the men forcefully grab a female soloist and throw her onto the Sage’s shoulders, while in the later section “The Glorification of the Chosen One,” the women leap onto the men’s shoulders in the same pose that the earlier soloist had been thrown into. They run and jump onto the men, straddling their
waists and flailing their limbs about the male bodies in highly sexualized and ritualistic motions.

The roles of the two soloists, the Chosen One and the Sage, are revealed choreographically in contrasting ways. The male Sage is almost immediately identified among the group of men, even before the formal “Procession of the Sage” in the second half of the musical work is introduced. The audience knows who among the men has the position of power, and the sense of dread that is created around this character as *Le Sacre du Printemps* develops increases and is reinforced by the male ensemble’s deference to the Sage figure. The female Chosen One, however, is not clearly identified from among the group of women until “The Glorification of the Chosen One,” twenty-five minutes into the thirty-six minute long piece. The ambiguity of this solo female part is emphasized, for the featured roles and soloists among the women in the previous sections are constantly shifting. It is not clear until the final moment of selection who exactly among the females the Chosen One will be. The sense that it could be any of the women builds tension and suspense throughout the piece, especially as the male Sage role is reinforced and the audience begins to understand that the election of a chosen female must be made.

The stage design for the Tanztheater Wuppertal’s *Le Sacre du Printemps* emphasizes simplicity and stark, muted colors: the stage is covered with brown earth, the women wear nude-colored slips, and the men are bare-chested and wear black pants. The only presence of color onstage is that of a red slip; the dress is used as a symbol of the sacrifice throughout the piece and is later worn by the Chosen One during the sacrificial dance. Bausch draws attention to the red dress by attaching its presence
to building tension in the music and changes in rhythms and melodies. Often, when the music is building to a crescendo towards the end of one section, the activity around the dress increases and as the score transitions into a new part, the audience’s attention is drawn back to the red garment. Bausch makes sure the dress is not forgotten – it functions symbolically as a forecast of the eventual ritual sacrifice. Among the performers, whoever carries the dress is entranced by it, and the presence or movement of the dress often attracts the notice of the other dancers. As the piece progresses, the image of the red dress creates a growing symbolic significance through the ways it is placed within the music structure.

In *Le Sacre du Printemps*, Bausch emphasizes certain key relationships between her movement and the music. She fluctuates between contrasting, matching, and echoing the score with her movements; the interactions she creates between the choreography and music are clear, but they are approached in multiple ways and so refrain from becoming stale or predictable. For example, when the music is rhythmically frenzied or uneven, as with the string section in the “Augurs of Spring,” she creates a choreographic contrast by using a pulsing, four count movement phrase. In a sense, this even, simple phrase “keeps time” within the changing rhythmic emphases of the music, for although the music is in a 2/4 time signature, the accents fluctuate and alter throughout the measures.

The body often reflects percussion from within the music, most notably in the group section of “Spring Rounds” and the male solo at the beginning of the “Ritual of the Two Rival Tribes”; however, this percussive reflection in the body is displayed not on the downbeat, with the rhythm, but more frequently shown with the upbeat, creating a
lingering sense in the rhythm. By adjusting how the movement is interacting with the
music, Bausch is also adjusting how the audience hears the music. The choreography
is extremely musical, but this piece does not create meaningful relationships with
Stravinsky’s music through constant literal embodiment of the score. Rather, by playing
with and against the music, sometimes aligning, other times creating tension against,
Bausch’s choreography for Le Sacre du Printemps gains significance and becomes
more memorable and visually striking.
CONCLUSIONS

Through my analysis of Bausch’s choreography, I discovered that the methods she used in creating the piece are not necessarily overly complex; indeed, how she interprets the different sections within the music is extremely clear cut and much closer to Nijinsky’s original version than many modern interpretations choose to be. She takes the titles of the musical sections and places them literally onstage and stays close to the original narrative of the ritual sacrifice of a young girl through a dance to the death. However, she also builds on the original structure and takes ownership of the work by presenting an in depth look at the emotions of the tribe’s women.

The music vacillates between extreme complexity and sparse simplicity – Bausch reflects these two differing notions in her choreography. Perhaps one of the reasons audiences respond so strongly to Bausch’s version is because she matches the complexity of the music within her own choreography while at the same time creating a great deal of contrast through simple patterns and slower, sustained movements. This contrast is used further to emphasize the differences between the two genders as well as the difference between the individual and the general tribe. She does not place every nuance of the music within her stage, but her choreography is aware of them and remains extremely musical.

Repetition is used throughout the work as a way to develop how the audience perceives the movement and hears the music. As dance critic Ann Daly writes of her experience as a Tanztheater Wuppertal audience member, “Bausch’s work brilliantly embeds powerful dramatic imagery in formal repetition. In sequences when I realized that something would happen again and again and again, I experienced a very
unsetting but at the same time pleasurable suspension of time. Instead of going forward, time expanded in another dimension.¹⁰ This idea – of time expanding past reality and tangibility – is an apt summation of the work as a whole. Although the piece is only thirty-six minutes, during that time the interactions created between the choreography and the music reveal the inner workings of an ancient tribe and the experiences of its individuals. Rather than running a parallel track to the music, Bausch’s Le Sacre du Printemps creates instead a fluctuating mixture of tension and release – her choreography meets Stravinsky’s music with the contradictory elements of simplicity, discord, and harmony.

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¹⁰ Daly, Critical Gestures, 17.
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