

**EDWARD GREEN***Manhattan School of Music, New York City, United States*  
ORCID: 0000-0002-7643-1187, edgreenmusic@gmail.com**Rhythm Contradicts Contempt:  
Aesthetic Realism and *The Rite of Spring***

This essay, which studies the rhythms of Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring*, does so from a new perspective: the philosophy of Aesthetic Realism, which was founded in 1941 by the great American scholar and poet Eli Siegel (1902–1978). The central principle of Aesthetic Realism – the key to understanding the relation of Art and Life – is his statement: “All beauty is a making one of opposites, and the making one of opposites is what we are going after in ourselves.” In his many lectures and writings, Eli Siegel commented often about the technical necessity in successful rhythms (whether in music, poetry, any of the arts, and life itself) for opposites to be made one. Among these are Slowness and Speed; Change and Sameness; Obstruction and Flow; the Expected and the Unexpected; Foreground and Background (in the sense, musically, of accented sound and unaccented sound). Stravinsky's great composition illustrates all this; it illustrates the primal meaning of rhythm as a making one of opposites. A second core idea of Aesthetic Realism, likewise explored in this essay, is that the greatest enemy of art, and of happiness in life, is the tendency in people to build a personality for themselves by having contempt for reality rather than respect for it, and for other people. Contempt, Eli Siegel explained, is the “disposition in every person to think we will be for ourselves by making less of the outside world.” It is the viewpoint of Aesthetic Realism – which the author of this essay fervently agrees with – that every successful instance of rhythm is a powerful refutation of the contempt state of mind. How this is true of the rhythms of *The Rite of Spring* is pointed to in this essay.

**Keywords:** Stravinsky, *The Rite of Spring*, Rhythm Aesthetic Realism, Eli Siegel.

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ORCID: 0000-0002-7643-1187, edgreenmusic@gmail.com**Ритм опровергает высокомерие:  
эстетический реализм и «Весна священная»**

В статье анализируются ритмы «Весны священной» Стравинского с новой позиции: в аспекте философии эстетического реализма, основанной в 1941 году великим американским учёным и поэтом Эли Сигелом (1902–1978). Основной принцип эстетического реализма – понимание близости искусства и жизни – заключается в изречении: «Вся красота состоит в единстве противоположностей, и единство противоположностей – это то, к чему мы стремимся в душе». Во многих своих лекциях и публикациях Эли Сигел часто заявлял о важности ритмической техники (будь то в музыке, поэзии, различных видах искусства и самой жизни), благодаря которой противоположности объединяются. Сюда относятся Спокойствие и Движение, Изменение и Сходство, Преграда и Течение, Ожидаемое и Неожиданное, Передний план и Фон (в музыке – акцентируемые звуки и безакцентные). Выдающееся сочинение Стравинского иллюстрирует все эти параметры; оно показывает главенство ритма в достижении единства противоположностей. Следующая стержневая идея эстетического реализма, также рассмотренная в данной статье, заключается в том, что величайшим противником искусства и счастливой жизни является склонность человека формировать себя как личность через высокомерие по отношению к реальности вместо уважения к ней и другим людям. Как объяснял Эли Сигел, высокомерие есть «свойство каждого человека – думать, что мы останемся самими собой, отгородившись от внешнего мира». Именно это является точкой зрения эстетического реализма, горячо поддерживаемой автором данной статьи: удачно найденная ритмика опровергает высокомерие как состояние ума. Как это проявляется в ритмике «Весны священной», – рассматривается в статье.

**Ключевые слова:** Стравинский, «Весна священная», ритм в эстетическом реализме, Эли Сигел.



There has been a great deal of thought over the centuries about the subject of rhythm, especially how rhythm shows itself in music. It is a subject I love, and – as I hope to show in this short essay – one which profoundly brings together Art and Life.

I believe the central meaning of rhythm has been described for the first time by the great American philosopher Eli Siegel (1902–1978), the founder of Aesthetic Realism – with whom I had the honor to study.<sup>1</sup> He showed that rhythm embodies and expresses the permanent structure of the world: reality’s opposites – the same opposites which are in every person, and which we need to make one for the happiness of our lives.

“The world, art, and self, explain each other,” Mr. Siegel taught, – “each is the aesthetic oneness of opposites” [5, p. 1]. Through this grand principle, something decisively new has been brought to the fields of music theory and music education. For the first time, the ethics implicit in music have been made clear and practical; we can learn from music how to have lives that have integrity – lives that are kind and deeply useful. At long last, the study of rhythm has become what it has always been capable of being: an education both in beauty and in good sense<sup>3</sup>.

### Where Does Rhythm Begin?

My illustrations will come from the music of Igor Stravinsky, because as much as any composer he stands for what rhythm can do. And of his compositions, the one seen as having the most powerful and also the most subtle of rhythms is his score to the ballet *The Rite of Spring*, which premiered on the 29th of May, 1913.

In an Aesthetic Realism class of February 1966, in which he was speaking about music, Eli Siegel explained that “Rhythm begins with sound as accented and unaccented.”<sup>4</sup> And he added, “Anything that seems to be given more insistence than something else in the field of sound is the beat accent of that sound. Beat is what stands out.”<sup>5</sup>

A simple example of this principle is the phenomenon of triple meter, where – as everyone knows – there is a steady pulse which receives an accent every three counts. It is “simple” precisely because the relation of accented and unaccented is consistent.

One of the most famous moments in *The Rite of Spring* is the music for the dance that follows the rise of the curtain in Act I, “The Dance of the

Adolescents.”<sup>6</sup> Here, Stravinsky employs the idea of a consistent and steady pulse, but instead of accenting the pulse in regular units, as in triple meter, he accents it in a way that has astonishing and tremendous syncopation. On first hearing, it almost seems wild:

Example 1 Igor Stravinsky. *The Rite of Spring*. Act I, “The Dance of the Adolescents”

Technically, Stravinsky begins with a series of identical chords in the strings – 12 in all – coming in a strict and even pulse of eighth notes. To this series of chords he brings six sharp accents, produced by the sudden sound of eight French horns. However, the accents divide the 32 pulses not into any regular or predictable pattern, but into the highly irregular pattern of 9, 2, 6, 3, 4, 5 and 3 counts.<sup>7</sup> It is one of the most syncopated designs in the history of music.

Syncopation, essentially, is sound being accented when you don’t expect it to be accented.<sup>8</sup> It works best, naturally, when we are aware *at once* of something steady and something defiant of – even at war with – that steadiness. Syncopation, Mr. Siegel said in that class of 1966, is “contradiction, and also a kind of inner rebellion.”

### Syncopation – and the Art of Ethical Contradiction

The desire to be contradictory, to be rebellious, is in people. It is an aspect of inner freedom. It has a good side, which is not to accept ugliness, but instead to be as honestly and as usefully critical as we can be of that ugliness.

It also has a bad side, and that was present in my life, as well: the desire to rebel against anything that “threatened” to have too much meaning for me. It could take many forms – from insisting on making jokes that “made light” of the things other people were taking seriously, to finding reason to convince myself that “social life” was a waste of time, and I was better off alone.

These two kinds of rebellion have purposes that are utterly different. The first, the beautifully critical

way, is motivated by a hope to like the world – which Aesthetic Realism says is everyone’s deepest desire. The second kind of rebellion is against our deepest desire; it assumes the world *cannot* be liked; it follows a warped (but popular) notion of freedom which can be put in these words: “In the end, nobody can be a better friend to me than myself.” There is a desire to prove to oneself that it is smart to be separate from, and superior to, the world and other people; smart to have as little to do with them as possible.

This kind of rebelliousness is contempt. It is against life. It is the desire to keep the depths of the world at arm’s length; a desire to have less, rather than more feeling for what is different from oneself. It is, in short, a preference for coldness.

Contempt, Eli Siegel has said, is the great enemy of art. It is “a lessening of what is different from oneself as a means of self-increase as one sees it” [12]. It is also, he once observed, “the greatest temptation of man”<sup>10</sup> [13]. Taken far enough, the hope for contempt is the cause of all the greatest evil in the world, including war, racism, and economic brutality.<sup>11</sup>

Now the question facing a composer as he works with sound and writes in an intricate, syncopated way – as Stravinsky does – is parallel to the ethical question (or series of questions) a person faces in everyday life when we are in a rebellious state of mind: “*Why* do you want to contradict this thing? Is it good for that thing or that person to be contradicted? Will rebelling against it help your life? Will it make the world itself more beautiful?”

In the note to his poem, “The World of the Unwashed Dish,” Eli Siegel wrote: “The undesirable, made speedy, seems to be different”<sup>12</sup> [11, p. 105]. Of itself, the chord Stravinsky reiterates 32 times is exceedingly painful. It is deep, thick, dissonant.

Example 2



It does seem to represent, in sound, a world that is undesirable – full of impediment. Every note in this chord is contradicted by another note in a strongly dissonant manner.

Had Stravinsky accented that series of chords in a regular way, say every four counts, it would have sounded like this.

Example 3



Without the syncopation of the original version, without its surprise and its speed, what we are most conscious of is the ugliness of that chord. But when that chord is gone at in a syncopated manner, and is therefore contradicted, the feeling we get is ever so different: it no longer seems to represent a world bogged down in pain, but, on the contrary, a world with exhilaration in it – and a feeling of release, freedom.

The surprise in the syncopation makes for energy and speed, and the speed, in keeping with Eli Siegel’s poem about that unwashed dish, *does* make the undesirable seem different. This is contradiction in behalf of finding the world likeable. It has a beautiful, ethical purpose.

### Rhythm is Never Just “Abstract”

An important technical point to note here is that the thrill of this particular set of syncopations depends on the fact that it is contradicting something muddy and ugly.

We often think of syncopation only from a “formal” perspective: in terms simply of the mathematics of rhythm. This is an error; there is always “content” present – sonic content – in the actual experience of music. To illustrate this point, consider the emotional impact on us had Stravinsky used exactly the same syncopations, but applied them to a pure major chord. The result is – well – laughable!

Example 4



This imaginary transformation of Stravinsky’s music sounds, almost, like a child petulantly insisting: “I won’t like sunshine, I won’t, I won’t, I won’t!”

## Rhythm, Defined – as Fact & as Value

In his essay “The Aesthetic Center,” Mr. Siegel wrote: “Rhythm is any instance of change and sameness seen at once”<sup>13</sup> [7, p. 3]. The passage from *The Rite of Spring* we’ve just been considering – and certainly the larger dance of which it is a part, let alone the ballet as a whole – is a true exemplification of that fact.

This same musical passage can be employed to see the profound ethical and educational value for our lives which successful rhythm always has. As Eli Siegel explains in his essay “Conflict as Possibility”: “Conflict may be regarded as two things making up the same whole or thing seen as two, as different, and as in opposition. The notion of conflict cannot be understood apart from the notion of rhythm. Rhythm, in fact, can be seen as conflict completed”<sup>14</sup> [9, p. 11].

Stravinsky, as we just saw, presented a set of intense conflicts within that single musical event. We hear what is sluggish, impeded, bogged down, *together* with what has tremendous impetus. We experience, in an inseparable way, what is completely predictable – those repeated chords – and what has the power, no matter how many times we’ve heard it before, to take us by surprise: those astonishingly syncopated accents!

We hear the oneness of opposites: something that satisfies our desire for security and for freedom; for dignified orderliness *and* for wild abandon. It is true rhythm; it is “conflict completed.”

## Asking Ourselves “Rhythmic” Questions

The power to create, and respond to, rhythm is a power we all have, simply by being human. We have that power from birth, and it can grow: the more we consciously study what makes for rhythm, the more richly and confidently we will have it. And here we reach again the main point of my essay: grow not just as musicians; our lives can become more richly and confidently rhythmic.

We can – for example – ask ourselves *aesthetic questions* at any moment, questions which correspond to the structure of opposites which makes true rhythm possible. For example: Am I now accenting things correctly? Or am I for reasons of ego supremacy and vanity giving far too much emphasis to less important matters, and neglecting, even making light of, what is truly important?

We can ask another set of questions: Am I welcoming enough diversity in my life, while

simultaneously doing everything I can to make sure there’s unity in my life? The coming together of these opposites – diversity and unity; change and sameness – has to do with *integrity*: the ability to coordinate all one’s activities in behalf of a single purpose that looks good to oneself.

As Aesthetic Realism sees it, integrity is not only an ethical matter, and a matter having to do as well with our happiness; it is also an aesthetic matter, a rhythmic matter. The ethical and the aesthetic are two perspectives on the same reality.

The conscious use of art to make life more sensible – the seeing that all the questions we face in life have their parallel in the technical questions artists engage in as they work – is something that is not yet a universal study, but I am sure it will be in the future as the philosophy of Aesthetic Realism is widely known.

A keynote in that study, I believe, will be this wonderful statement by Eli Siegel, from his lecture “Aesthetic Realism as Beauty: Music” – “There is not one thing which music does which does not say something about how we should organize ourselves, too” [8, p. 2].

## Two Ways of Rhythm

Now rhythm, like any other element in music, can be either assertive or muted, and used rightly both ways are beautiful. In the first example I gave from his great 1913 ballet Stravinsky went for an *intensified* sense of accent. In my next example, he does just the opposite – he *suppresses* our sense of accent. The opposites of strong and weak are still here, but how close they have become, how hard it is to distinguish them.

Example 5 Igor Stravinsky. *The Rite of Spring*. Introduction



This, of course, is the famous opening of *The Rite of Spring*: the music before the curtain rises, evoking the beginnings of Spring. The melody is played high in the bassoon, in a register of that instrument which makes the sound seem both impinging and remote, both strained and quiet. (Timbre – like rhythm – can be both overt and subtle, can present reality as accented and unaccented.)



Where my first excerpt from Stravinsky's score had angles and edges, this, with its muted sense of the beat, is fluid; at times it seems even slippery. Listening to these measures, we feel sameness and change – we feel rhythm – but how differently the world is present in this, the more subtle type of rhythm.

What Stravinsky does here, making sure that no great or jarring differences of strong and weak are heard in the sounds, is deeply akin to how rhythm is present in Gregorian Chant, or in Eastern Orthodox Chant – and likely was influenced by it.<sup>15</sup> Imagine now, if Stravinsky had treated the fluid bassoon melody as he treated the intense music of my first example – that is, with a clear-cut, definite sense of strong and weak. The result might have sounded like this.

Example 6



### Speed and Slowness – Motion and Pause

In “The Aesthetic Method in Self-Conflict,” a chapter from his classic book *Self and World*, Eli Siegel wrote: “An aspect of rhythm, or of form in time, is the feeling of speed in slowness, slowness in speed. When music is good, there is a sense of motion and of pause”<sup>16</sup> [14, p. 120].

Comparing the two versions of this melody, the more subtly rhythmic one – Stravinsky's original – and the second, more obviously metric one, we can ask: Which is more beautiful? Which has more of a oneness of speed and slowness, of motion and pause?

I think the first does, clearly, even though the second version is surely lovely on its own merits.

The surprising thing is, Stravinsky actually began with the second, rhythmically more blatant version (which I've presented for you as Example 6) and then transformed it. Eric Walter White writes in *Stravinsky: The Composer and His Works*: “...the opening [bassoon] melody... he borrowed from a collection of Lithuanian folk music”<sup>17</sup> [16, p. 210].

“The purpose of an artist,” Eli Siegel told me in the first class I had the honor to attend with him, on July 2, 1974, “is to get an arrangement of sounds in such a way that the possibility of reality as both ordinary and surprising is shown.”<sup>18</sup> By itself, that

folk song is certainly likable, but as Stravinsky altered it, making the ordinary more surprising – as he stretched it out and made it more limber – how he deepened its meaning! Through his great rhythmic imagination, Stravinsky brought out its possibility of expressing a large emotion: a sense of the mystery of reality.

As I've been indicating in this essay, I firmly believe that the questions a composer faces as he or she organizes *sounds* in *time* is fundamentally akin to the ethical questions every person faces daily.<sup>19</sup> For example: Do I want to do all I can today, as I meet ordinary, familiar things to feel, within them, the mystery as well as the surprise of the world? Do I want to use my imaginative energy to find new depths in reality and in the objects and persons around me? Or am I determined to spend my time complacently: flattering myself? – acting as if I have already discerned all the meaning life can provide?

Should I, in short, be pleased simply to go along with my prior notions of how things and people are and not ask more of them or of myself; or should I enjoy the lovely, thrilling effort to become pleased with myself precisely because I want never to stop looking for more meaning – in life, in objects, in people?

In summary, we can ask: What is music's answer to the question of whether life is, in truth, everyday and surprising at once? Relaxed and intense? Comforting and instigating? A sincere relation of dissatisfaction and satisfaction?

The whole history of music, and specifically of rhythm, says: Life certainly is both at once! – we just need to see it that way. And rhythm helps us do that; no one ever created a great rhythm in music without feeling the aesthetic nature of the world; without bringing opposites together.

“Through rhythm,” Eli Siegel noted in a 1951 lecture on the art of dance, “we get to what our deepest unconscious is about.”<sup>20</sup>

### Rhythm – and the Definition of Happiness

So far we've looked at rhythm in *The Rite of Spring* through two short examples. For my final example, I'd like to look at “The Glorification of the Chosen One,” a dance from Act II.

In the 1966 class I've been quoting from, Mr. Siegel said: “As you hear sound you either get what you expect or you don't; but since happiness is getting both what you expect and what you don't, the best rhythms have both.”



That fact can be heard very clearly in this dance. It is very economical: it certainly gives you “what you expect” as it repeats two motions over and over again. It begins by pounding the ground with an 11-fold repetition of a chord, and then it contradicts that heaviness by flying up, suddenly, into the air.<sup>21</sup> Here is the opening of that great dance.

Example 7 Igor Stravinsky. *The Rite of Spring*. Act II, “The Glorification of the Chosen One”

These in essence, are the two motions of this music: a treading in place, and a sudden burst of change. But even as you come to expect these two motions and their alternation, the way Stravinsky composes this dance, as you listen to it in its entirety, you can never quite say just when that alternation will take place. You get “what you expect” and “what you don’t.”

### The Power of Rhythm

I think the beauty here, as elsewhere in *The Rite of Spring*, has a very large meaning, for it is beauty presented within dissonance. To see meaning in the world when the world seems harsh and forbidding is never easy, but it is necessary. It is not enough just to approve of the world when it presents itself to us as “nice.” Stravinsky, throughout *The Rite of Spring*, gives powerful, courageous, *rhythmic* evidence that even in the shrieks, the thuds, the howls of reality, beauty can be found – and this beauty is reality seen truly.

### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> A biographical sketch of Eli Siegel, which I authored, can be found at <https://aestheticrealism.org/knol-on-eli-siegel/>.

<sup>2</sup> For a compact presentation of other central concepts of his philosophy, see my article in: [3].

<sup>3</sup> This is true for the other central elements of music. See, for example, “Harmony and the Oneness of Opposites: Teaching Music Theory through Aesthetic Realism,” which appeared in the *Hellenic Journal of Music, Education, and Culture* [2].

<sup>4</sup> From my notes of the lecture, confirmed by the notes of others who were present.

<sup>5</sup> The same principle applies to rhythm elsewhere; in our experience of the visual world, for example, some objects “stand out” relative to others.

<sup>6</sup> Here, and for the other musical examples, I include, where appropriate, Stravinsky’s Rehearsal Numbers. My reductions are based on the 1965 score published by the State Music Publishing House, Moscow, 1965.

<sup>7</sup> For a startling explanation of the logic behind these seemingly random placement of accents – an explanation that relates Stravinsky’s rhythms to the intervallic structure of his harmonies – see: [6].

<sup>8</sup> In his classic poem “Hymn to Jazz and the Like,” written in 1966 and which appears in his 1968 book of poems, *Hail, American Development* [10, pp. 62–63, 147–148], there are these lines about the fundamental meaning of syncopation:

Sound is looking for new illustrations showing the might, glory, findingness, and abandon of man.

Yah, and Oh, Lord, there was the St. Louis Blues.

Sounds were made to fall into different places in this.

Notes behaved otherwise.

Something in you expected a note here, and it was there.

Something in you expected a note to be this way and it was that.

Ha, what Jazz does to the this and that of notes, the isness and wasness and might-be-ness of chords.

<sup>9</sup> Cited in: [9].

<sup>10</sup> Cited in: [13].

<sup>11</sup> On the homepage of my personal website ([www.edgreenmusic.org](http://www.edgreenmusic.org)) there are links to various essays in which I deal with these matters in relation to important historical figures, including Felix Mendelssohn, John Lennon, and Adolf Hitler. (These essays appeared, respectively, in journals published in Croatia, Russia, and the United States.)

<sup>12</sup> The poem, itself, was written in 1929.

<sup>13</sup> “The Aesthetic Center,” published in *Definition: A Journal of Events and Aesthetic Realism*, Vol. 10 [7]. A substantial portion of the essay, including the context for this sentence, is on-line as part of the essay “Aesthetic Realism: A New Foundational for Interdisciplinary Musicology,” authored by myself and Arnold Perey for the 2004 conference of ESCOM. URL: <http://www.edgreenmusic.org/1-ESCOM.htm>.

<sup>14</sup> From *Eleven Aesthetic Realism Essays* by Eli Siegel. Published by the Aesthetic Realism Foundation, 1974, p. 11.

<sup>15</sup> Despite its most often not having clear meter, chant *does* illustrate the beginning principle in rhythm – that of some sounds being more accented than others. The accents, however, are usually tonal; even syllabic (since some vocal sounds are “heavier” in their impact than others).

<sup>16</sup> The chapter was originally written circa 1942.

<sup>17</sup> White notes that Stravinsky found this melody in *Litauische Volks-Weisen* by Anton Juskiewicz (Cracow, 1900); example No. 157.

<sup>18</sup> Personal notes, confirmed by others present.

<sup>19</sup> Sounds organized in time is how Stravinsky, following Hanslick, defines the essence of Music. It is a fundamentally *rhythmic* conception. See: [15, p. 27].

<sup>20</sup> From “Aesthetic Realism as Beauty: The Dance,”

a lectures delivered on July 13, 1951. The quote is taken from a transcription of the recording of the lecture.

<sup>21</sup> In the dance lecture just cited above, Eli Siegel notes that dance is about “lightness and stamp.” Every textbook on musical meter points to the necessity of relating lighter and heavier beats. Throughout this ballet, in innumerable ways, Stravinsky dramatically brings these opposites together. In this particular dance, he does so in a “hypermetric” way. That is: entire measures stand either for the principle of lightness or the principle of heaviness. (And this particular hypermeter is very “syncopated” in terms of the placement of “heavier” and “lighter” measures.) In keeping with the core point of this essay, I’ll ask the reader to consider: Can a life be happy which does not have in it what Stravinsky has here – an exciting and sensible relation of weight and lightness, seriousness and fling?

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