

# ROOTS, ORIGINS AND DEVELOPMENT OF RHYTHMIC GYMNASTICS: A HISTORICAL INSIGHT

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## Abstract

*Rhythmic gymnastics is a sport that was designed to be the more feminine sister discipline of women's artistic gymnastics. Its roots, however, are embedded in a male hegemonic European history that manipulated elements of dance, physiology and pedagogy. Key role players were François Delsarte, Émile Jaques-Dalcroze, Isadora Duncan and George Demeny who greatly influenced the development of rhythmic gymnastics. These individuals extended previous work of the earlier gymnastics pioneers – Johan Guts Muths, Ludwig Jahn and Per Ling. Since its inception as a competitive sport in the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics during the 1940s, rhythmic gymnastics expanded greatly until it was officially recognised by the International Federation of Gymnastics (FIG) in 1962. In 1963, the first World Championship competition was held and the sport gained increased international traction. This study aims to investigate social and political factors that contributed to the development of rhythmic gymnastics, from its origins in the European systems up to its recognition as an independent sport in 1973. We conclude our article with the supposition that the sport did not directly challenge male hegemonic systems, but that women in this sport started shifting gender expectations and norms.*

**Key words:** European systems, rhythmic gymnastics, male hegemony, femininity

## INTRODUCTION

Rhythmic Gymnastics (RG) has been recognised by the International Gymnastics Federation (FIG) since 1962 (Jastrejskaya, 1995). It remains one of the few sports still exclusively practised by women, distinguished by its aesthetic nature. RG requires well-developed strength, power, endurance, flexibility, balance, and coordination, integrating gymnastics and dance elements. Performances, set to music, involve the use

of a hand-held apparatus such as rope, hoop, ball, clubs and ribbon, and can be individual or group events (Hamza, Zahraa, & Wahed, 2020; Schmid, 1976). Routines encompass balances, rotations, jumps or leaps, integrated into body difficulties, apparatus challenges, dynamic elements with rotation, and sequences of dance steps (Coppola, Albano, Sivoccia, & Vastola, 2020). Judges evaluate performances during competitions according to the Code of Points (CoP) set

out by the FIG. The sport underwent several name changes. It was initially referred to as “modern gymnastics” (1961-1971) to indicate its departure from other forms and becoming a new discipline with its own independent characteristics (Quin, 2016; Schmid, 1976). From 1971 to 1973, it was called “modern rhythmic gymnastics” and from 1975 to 1998 it was known as “rhythmic sportive gymnastics”. Since then it has been known as “rhythmic gymnastics” (RG) (Quin, 2016). This study ends with 1973, and future work will focus on the later period.

RG emerged as a gender-specific alternative to Women’s Artistic Gymnastics (WAG), which was becoming increasingly masculinised. This article illuminates this transformation and traces the historical route of modern-day global RG from 19<sup>th</sup> century European gymnastics systems to its organisational foundation years of 1963-1973, when it gained international recognition as a competitive sport. The article also explores the extent to which the evolution of RG both supported and challenged male hegemony. Additionally, the study examines the level of socio-political agency women possessed in this context, with a particular focus on 20<sup>th</sup>-century northern hemisphere regions such as the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR), Bulgaria, and Canada. The scarcity of material related to the global south underscores the northern hemisphere dominance of the sport. Such an investigation necessitates an intersectional analysis of performance and broader gendered societal norms.

## RHYTHMIC GYMNASTICS’ ORIGINS

Conventional thought attributes the origins of modern gymnastics to the work of the Prussian Friedrich Ludwig Jahn (Cervin, 2021). Jahn, in turn, was influenced by the male schoolteacher, Johann Christoph Friedrich Guts Muths (1759-1839) at Schnepfenthal from 1785 onwards (Cuddon, 1980; Obholzer, 1939). Guts Muths, a prolific writer, set the tone for later genderised gymnastics practices. These include: *Gymnastik für die Jugend* (1793); *Spiele zur Uebung* (1796); and *Turnbuch für die Söhne des Vaterlandes* (1817) (Guts Muths, 1793; Guts Muths, 1796 & Guts Muths, 1817). These works promoted male gymnastics which strengthened hegemonic European nationalism that lasted well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Guts Muths categorized gymnastics into “natural” and “artificial” streams. “Artificial” gymnastics, akin to 20<sup>th</sup> century artistic gymnastics, included activities such as mounting and dismounting horses, relevant for military service. Conversely, “natural” gymnastics focused on a healthy body, resembling the later Swedish gymnastics system. These methods laid the foundation for gymnastics as training programmes to strengthen male soldiers and cultivate healthy citizens (Cervin, 2021).

However, it was the Swede Pehr Henrik Ling (1776-1839) who, during the early 1800s, linked gymnastics to physiology and anatomy (May, 1969). Ling and his followers developed physical exercises rooted in scientific principles, known as Swedish gymnastics. This system incorporated movements with and without apparatus, as well as individual and partner exercises under the guidance of an

instructor, with the goal of perfecting the rhythm of movement. Despite this scientific basis, Swedish gymnastics, like Guts Muths' methods, remained militaristic in nature (McKenzie, 1924; Van der Merwe, 2007).

The history of gymnastics is inseparable from broader societal issues of gender and class. Swedish gymnastics, for instance, was embedded in a class-based hegemony that separated middle- and working-class girls (Pfister, 2003). Sport historian Else Trangbæk (1997) linked the Swedish system to 19<sup>th</sup> century European society's perceptions of gendered bodies. These perceptions emerged as advances in science promoted the existence of two biologically different sexes in which one was inferior to the other sex. As a result, women were not encouraged to focus their energy on anything other than their reproductive capabilities. This contributed to the construction of a male dominant social order, based solely on body characteristics.

From the mid- to late 19<sup>th</sup> century, sport became associated with masculinity and played a pivotal role in constructing rites of passages from boyhood to manhood. Sport was also aligned with capitalist principles, featuring individualism, entrepreneurship and a marketplace economy (Trangbæk, 1997). Conversely, gymnastics was practiced in closed, private spaces such as training halls, reflecting women's expected roles of domesticity and confinement to the private sphere of the home. This was particularly evident in Swedish gymnastics, increasingly linked to 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup>-century constructs of femininity. These constructs, supported by scientists (mostly men) in terms of physiology and anatomy, served as justification for women's involvement in

gymnastics. Initially performed as a collective group effort, Swedish gymnastics emphasized 'correct' movements and timing under the instructor's supervision, fostering a culture of collective group subordination to an instructor—fitting the societal expectations for 19<sup>th</sup>-century women (Trangbæk, 1997).

Madame Martina-Bergman Österberg played a pivotal role in introducing Ling's gymnastics from Sweden to Britain starting in 1881 among women (May, 1969). Ling's gymnastics further spread to the European mainland through individuals like the Frenchman François Delsarte and Swiss composer Emile Jaques-Dalcroze (Cervin, 2021; Vertinsky, 2009). Delsarte (1811-1871) claimed his system to be a scientific approach designed to accompany oratory, emphasizing "gestures as the direct agent of the heart" (Vertinsky, 2009). The Delsartian system, primarily focused on women, was exported to America around 1873 by Steele Mackay, a fellow student of Delsarte in Paris (Toepfer, 1997). Mackay's system gained popularity among America's middle- and upper-class women as expressive dance (Vertinsky, 2009). Individuals such as Genevieve Stebbins, Hedwig Kallmeyer, Dora Menzler, and Gertrud Leistikow further developed this system into the realm of modern dance (Toepfer, 1997).

However, it was the American dancer Isadora Duncan (1878-1927), a follower of the Delsarte system, who influenced the emergence of the gymnastics discipline, Rhythmic Gymnastics (RG). Duncan, through reinterpretations of classical music, experimented with expressive body movements that departed from Ling's geometric-linear constructions. Rejecting the strict confines of ballet, she introduced a free-spirited dance style that challenged

the reserved nature of dance and societal ideals about appropriate physical activity for women. Duncan's incorporation of walking, running, jumping, and various arm and trunk movements as exercises contributed to the formation of RG as known today (Jastrejevskaya, 1995).

Jacques Dalcroze (1865-1950), a music teacher and conductor influenced by Delsarte and others, developed a movement system called eurhythmics, initially designed to teach rhythm to his musical students at the Geneva Conservatory (Jastrejevskaya, 1995; Vertinsky, 2009). Dalcroze's eurhythmics became a key component of the syllabus at the Educational Institute for Music and Rhythm in Hellerau, Germany, where he served as director from 1910 onward. This technique involved execution of movements attuned to music rhythms, with variations sound reflected through corresponding body movements. Dalcroze himself later introduced this technique to the USSR by. However, Dalcroze was not the sole contributor to spreading this technique to the USSR. Delsarte and Duncan also played significant roles in disseminating new ideas of expressive movement to the USSR, as well as to Europe and North America (Jastrejevskaya, 1995).

George Demeny (1850-1917), a French physiologist and photographer, also played a crucial role in the development of female gymnastics. Through scientific analysis of the sharp and angular movements present in existing European gymnastics systems, he advocated for women to engage in exercises that are dynamic, natural, and flexible. Consequently, his exercises emphasized aesthetic movement as a means of physical development, incorporating classical ballet and various apparatuses such as clubs,

garlands, sticks, and hoops. Demeny's methods, alongside those of Delsarte, Duncan, and Dalcroze, laid the groundwork for 20th-century Rhythmic Gymnastics (RG). Dance emerged as a central element in women's gymnastics systems, providing a gateway to sports that highlighted expressiveness, gracefulness, and aestheticism, inherently considered feminine. Notions of expressive femininity propagated and were internalized by women worldwide. As Ruth Schnepfel, a lecturer at the first department of physical education in Africa at Stellenbosch University, remarked in 1939: "... Rhythmical movement [for women] is more suited for women [implying not for men] because it is much more in accordance with nature and expressive of feeling" (Schnepfel, 1939).

Isodora Duncan opened schools in Germany in 1904, and later in France, the USA, Greece and Russia (Toepfer, 1997; Vertinsky, 2009). In 1912, a school for RG was established in St. Petersburg, Russia, following Dalcroze's presentation of his system during his visit there (Jastrejevskaya, 1995). Three years later, K. Isachenko-Sokolova opened a school on expressive movements in Russia under the inspiration of Duncan, Delsarte and Dalcroze. Towards the end of the 1920s in Leningrad, Russia, the Association of Workers of Expressive Movements was formed, collaborating with the Peter Lesgaft Institute of Physical Culture. This collaboration led to RG becoming a compulsory subject at the Institute and the establishment of the High School of Artistic Movement (HSAM) in 1932, widely recognised as a cradle of RG. The curriculum of HSAM was shaped around the teachings of Duncan, Dalcroze, Delsarte and Demeny. By 1936, an artistic

movement program for athletes became a compulsory component of the USSR high school curriculum. Simultaneously, organisational structures were put in place, establishing RG as a sport for women and girls (Jastrejevskaya, 1995). The first graduation of specialists in RG occurred at HSAM in 1938. On 8 March 1939, the first RG competition was held in Leningrad, dedicated to International Women's Day. The HSAM graduates - Julia Shishkareva, Anna Larionova, Tatyana Varakina, Ariadna Bashnina, Lydia Kudryashova, Tatyana Markova, Sofya Nechaeva and Lev Orlov, the first head of the gymnastics department and teacher, are considered pioneering figures for RG.

After the Second World War, the first All-Soviet Union RG group competition was held in 1947 in Tallinn, Estonia, an event marked by misunderstanding between competitors and the competition rules. In the following year, the second RG competition in the USSR was held in Tbilisi, Georgia, featuring individual and team competitions. Since 1949, yearly RG championships were held in the USSR (Jastrejevskaya, 1995).

## INTERNATIONALISATION OF RHYTHMIC GYMNASTICS

During the late 1940s, RG was introduced to Bulgaria, Romania, Czechoslovakia and Poland after delegates visited a championship in Leningrad. In 1947, friendly competitions were arranged between gymnasts from Leningrad, Sweden, and Finland, primarily influenced by Soviet experiences. In the following year, The USSR affiliated with the FIG in 1948. However, the FIG recognised RG as an official discipline only in 1962, with limitations, offering RG as an optional

event at FIG-sanctioned competitions (Jastrejevskaya, 1995).

In 1950, the first RG handbook, *Rhythmic Sportive Gymnastics*, compiled by Yulia Shishkareva, was published. This publication played a significant role in popularizing the sport in Western Europe, Bulgaria, China and Romania (Jastrejevskaya, 1995). In the following year, the USSR affiliated with the International Olympic Committee (IOC). Women's Artistic Gymnastics (WAG) entered the Olympic Games in 1952 as a competitive event. At these Games and the subsequent one, an event known as "portable apparatuses" was part of the WAG program, alongside the individual competition. After the 1956 Olympic Games, the "portable apparatuses" event was separated in its own discipline, RG (Cervin, 2021). In the previous year, Soviet gymnasts introduced RG to Belgium, Yugoslavia, France, Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria, further popularising the sport (Jastrejevskaya, 1995). The 1956 Olympic Games played a pivotal role in the international expansion of RG, with people like Bertha Villancher from France and Valérié Nagy Herpich from Hungary advocating for its international recognition as a competitive sport (Schmid, 1976).

During a 1961 Gymnaestrada in Stuttgart, West Germany, Soviet specialists compiled and presented a report on RG for national representatives attending the Gymnaestrada, hoping to secure a place for RG in official FIG-sanctioned competitions. Despite pleas from top Soviet gymnasts, the sport was considered too complex by the FIG and merely received general recognition. As mentioned previously, it did, however, receive official recognition by the FIG at the 41<sup>st</sup> Congress in Prague, Czechoslovakia in June 1962

(Jastrejskaya, 1995). Consequently, in 1963, the first official RG competition, the European Cup, was held in Budapest, Hungary. Here, twenty-eight gymnasts from ten European countries competed. Upon processing the results, it was discovered that competitors were not exclusively from Europe. Hence, the competition was the first World Championship, with Lyudmila Savinkova from Moscow being crowned the first world champion. Three routines were included in this competition, two with apparatus (rope, hoop and/or ball) and one without apparatus ("free"). Since there were no standardised rules, judging was conducted according to the WAG CoP. The FIG decided that the RG World Championships were to take place every two years henceforth (Jastrejskaya, 1995; Schmid, 1976).

In the same year, the Bulgarian Rhythmic Gymnastics Federation was established. Bulgarian gymnasts soon became known for their expressiveness, and in the early days of competitive RG, almost every international-level elite gymnast had received training in Bulgaria (Anon., n.d.). At the Tokyo Olympic Games of 1964, delegates from Japan, Korea, China and the Philippines met to discuss the inclusion of gymnastics at the Asian Games, which effectively lead to the formation of the Asian Gymnastics Federation (AGF) (Anon, n.d.). The following year, three months before the second RG World Championships in Prague, Czechoslovakia, the FIG conducted the first international judges' clinic for RG in order to standardise competition judging rules. A FIG Committee of Women provided the guidelines that an independent RG should follow. The committee made it clear that RG should have its own style; not in the form of modern dance or ballet but based on

self-expression and natural movement. Thirty-two gymnasts from twelve countries competed in the second World Championships in 1965 (Jastrejskaya, 1995). The program consisted of four events: a compulsory free routine to establish the standard for future RG, and three optional routines (rope, ball, free). Czechoslovakia dominated the event with first, third and fourth places. As a consequence, Czechoslovakia shaped the direction of RG styles in the following years with effective combinations of ballet techniques and whole-body movements into flowing routines (Schmid, 1976). The FIG executive remained a European male-privileged enclave for many years. In 1966, the Swiss Arthur Gander became the next president of the FIG. Before him, another Swiss, Charles Thoeni, served in this position from 1956-1966. The executive committee included Klas Tharsson, Max Bangerter, Nicolai Popov, Mario Gotta - all male - and one woman, Bertha Villancher - an advocate for RG on the FIG executive (FIG, n.d.).

During the third World Championship held in Copenhagen, Denmark, 1967, group routines were included in the competition. Individual routines consisted of one compulsory rope routine and three optional routines, namely, rope, hoop and "free". Groups comprised six gymnasts performing their routine with an equivalent number of hoops. The competition marked the beginning of the rivalry between the Russians, with their "graceful, clean lines" based on their training in Russian ballet, and Bulgaria whose gymnasts outperformed the opposition with high throws and sophisticated catches and rotations. The Russians however won both the individual and group competitions (Jastrejskaya, 1995; Schmid, 1976). After this World

Championship, the FIG established the Commission for Modern Gymnastics in order to determine the international rules for competition. This included clarifications on deductions for possible errors, elements, and their respective techniques. Three apparatus routines were also approved for rope, hoop and ball (Schmid, 1976).

The spread of the sport to North America, and specifically across Canada, can be attributed to Evelyn Koop, a graduate from the Ernest Idla Institute in Sweden. Koop became known as the mother of RG in Canada, as she passionately worked to advance the sport throughout the country. From 1951-1964, Koop lectured at the University of Toronto, focusing on rhythmic gymnastics. Under her guidance, the Kalev Estonian Club was established in Ontario in 1951. During the 1960s, Koop accompanied teams from this club on tours throughout Canada and the United States of America (USA) in order to showcase RG. In 1968, Koop was appointed as the first national coach for Canada. The Canadian Modern Gymnastics Federation (CMGF) was established the following year, with her as president. Additionally, this was the first year that RG received a federal grant in Canada (Anon., n.d). Evelyn Koop, the official Canadian coach during the 1950s and early 1960s, played a pivotal role in many developments in RG in Canada. In 1971, the Hungarian rhythmic gymnast Maria Patocska arrived in Canada, where she conducted a workshop, performed in a gymnaestrada, toured the country and showcased the sport extensively. In the same year, Koop organised the first judging course presented by the Bulgarian Ivanka Tchakarova, and subsequently, Koop became the first RG judge in Canada.

During the 1969 World Championships in Varna, Bulgaria, gymnasts from eighteen countries competed, and Bulgarian Maria Gigova emerged as the overall winner. Bulgaria also outperformed the USSR in the group competition, as their routines received a higher rating due difficulty (Jastrejevskaya, 1995). This World Championships marked the last instance where free routines were allowed, as they had become too theatrical. This World Championship was attended by delegates from the USA who observed the competition and participated in judges' training. Subsequently, RG advanced in the USA. The chairperson of the United States Gymnastics Federation's (USGF) Modern Rhythmic Gymnastics Committee, Mildred Prechal, promoted the sport in the USA and published a series of routines for beginner gymnasts and organized the first RG workshop for female physical education teachers in the USA. These teachers became leaders in the development of RG. Internationally, the FIG's Modern Gymnastics Commission developed judging rules, introduced a list of difficulties, and published the first official RG Code of Points in 1970 (Schmid, 1976). Additionally, the first Canadian National Competition was held in Toronto in 1970, and Hungarian rhythmic gymnast Maria Patocska who ranked 5<sup>th</sup> at the 1969 World Championships, was invited to Canada.

At the 1971 World Championships in Havana, Cuba, the competition featured four routines, introducing a new apparatus: ribbon. The ribbon originated in China, and was first used in RG by Russians. The competition also marked the first-time attendance of representatives from Central America (Cuba), Asia (Japan and Korea), Australasia (New Zealand), North America (Canada), and South America (Mexico).

However, participant numbers were low due to financial challenges associated with travel expenses for gymnasts (Schmid, 1976).

In 1972, the FIG submitted a request for RG to be included in the Olympic program, aiming to restore gymnastics as a conduit for femininity, given the p[erceived masculinization of WAG (Cervin, 2021; Schmid, 1976). However, the IOC refused, and RG had to wait until the Los Angeles Olympic Games in 1984 to make its Olympic debut. In the 1973 World Championship, clubs were introduced as a compulsory apparatus routine. In the same year, the USA staged its first RG national competition and entered its team in the World Championships (Anon., n.d.; Schmid, 1976). In the same year, RG was also introduced to Great Britain by the British Amateur Gymnastics Association (BAGA) chairperson, Jenny Bott (Anon., n.d). However, it was Evelyn Koop, a key figure in establishing RG in Canada, who played a significant role in giving the sport its international footprint.

## CONCLUSION

This research primarily focuses on the organizational development of Rhythmic Gymnastics (RG), but it acknowledges the presence of underlying socio-political influences. The USSR shared similarities with the capitalist West in initially utilizing gymnastics for military training, emphasizing cohesiveness and cooperation (Cervin, 2021). While the competitive involvement of women in sports was a source of concern in the West, viewed as potentially compromising femininity, the Soviet Union embraced the participation of both women and men in sports (Cervin, 2021; Quin, 2016). By the 1940s,

gymnastics in the USSR ranked as the fourth most practiced sport among both genders. The USSR's commitment to gender equality in sports was evident, serving as a strategic approach to win medals and demonstrate sporting superiority during the Cold War (Cervin, 2021).

RG provided women gymnasts with a platform to showcase their competitiveness and other attributes associated with muscular dominance while maintaining their femininity. Scholars such as Cervin (2021) and Trangbæk (1997) argue that such displays not only empowered women, but also prompted a broader societal re-evaluation of prevailing gender ideals, questioning what was considered appropriate and acceptable for women in sport. Despite RG's original design that was aligned with traditional constructs of femininity (Quin, 2016), the sport has evolved over time, influenced by rivalries between schools of RG, such as the USSR and Bulgaria, and broader geopolitical tensions like the Cold War rivalry between the USSR and the USA. This has contributed to RG's dynamic, complex, and entertaining nature, gaining popularity worldwide (Cervin, 2021; Jastrejskaya, 1995). Innovation and creativity, inherent values in Soviet culture, have shaped RG as a sport, and it continues to evolve, exemplified by unconventional developments like Japanese Men's Rhythmic Gymnastics (MRG) challenging traditional gender norms in sport (Cervin, 2021; Jastrejskaya, 1995).

## LIMITATIONS

The development of RG has still many secrets to unlock. This study has only begun to scratch the surface, yielding somewhat



ambiguous results. While RG originated within a male-dominated framework and maintained some aspects of male hegemony even at the end of the study period in 1973, women played a significant role in shaping and advancing the sport, challenging existing gender norms imposed by men. One limitation of this study is its focus on the organizational history of RG. Future research could delve into the FIG's motivations for hesitating to officially recognize the sport, exploring the philosophical foundations behind women's participation in gymnastics in the USSR, and unveiling dynamics of inclusion and exclusion. A more extensive study may be necessary to determine whether RG truly represents a domain dominated by women.

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