**Olympics open in Sochi with extravagant pageant**

By [Kathy Lally](http://www.washingtonpost.com/kathy-lally/2011/03/02/ABxxvmP_page.html) and [Will Englund](http://www.washingtonpost.com/will-englund/2011/03/02/AB55GIQ_page.html) February 7, 2014

SOCHI, Russia — Glowing volcanoes, the planet’s oldest and deepest lake, great forests of birch, horses galloping in a 215-foot troika, Peter the Great, waltzing nobles, dazzling ballet, soaring opera, a cast of thousands and, yes, even revolution. The Winter Games’ Opening Ceremonies gathered the world into the great, chaotic, provocative embrace of Russian history Friday and wouldn’t let go.

The scale bordered on the colossal. If London on its modest isle would do buzz, Russia would do big — befitting the world’s largest country, twice the size of the United States. Swan Lake? Of course, with the swans turning into doves of peace in honor of the Olympics and prima ballerina Diana Vishneva onstage. The Olympic hymn? Sung by opera diva Anna Netrebko.

The cost? The most expensive Games ever, at an estimated $50 billion. The performance? Only one glitch in these problem-plagued Games, and it was quickly hidden. And the torch! Six former Olympic medalists — including tennis player Maria Sharapova and rhythmic gymnast Alina Kabaeva, who has been rumored to be romantically linked to President Vladimir Putin — carried the flame past several thousand cheering performers and hundreds of volunteers. Figure skater Irina Rodnina and Vladislav Tretiak, a former goaltender for the Soviet hockey team, bore it out of the stadium, across a plaza and to a small cauldron. They lowered the torch, and soon a burst of fire spread to the big torch above them, which burst into flame.

Thunderous fireworks resounded inside and outside the stadium, and there was no doubt the Games had begun.

If London was pop, Sochi would be poetry — in motion. History was imparted in a feat of light, 132 projectors and 2.64 million lumens turning the floor of Fisht Olympic Stadium into a raging sea bearing a boat where Peter the Great, the would-be navigator, was striding his way through history in seven-league boots.

Every part of the program was written in the superlative. The triumphal national anthem was sung by the choir of the [Sretensky Monastery](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/europe/moscows-sretensky-monastery-choir-visits-dc/2012/10/04/7268cf48-0a65-11e2-afff-d6c7f20a83bf_story.html), founded more than 600 years ago to celebrate Moscow’s escape from invasion by Tamerlane. The Olympic mascots — a snow leopard on a snowboard, a bear on ice skates and a rabbit on skis — would have dwarfed the balloons in a Macy’s parade.

Although a giant snowflake refused to morph into one of the Olympic rings as planned, the TV channel that broadcast the ceremonies throughout Russia quickly substituted tape from a Tuesday dress rehearsal showing all five rings in proper formation.

“This thing with the ring is bad, but it doesn’t humiliate us,” said Konstantin Ernst, the head of Russia’s Channel One television and the ceremonies’ producer. “And it was the simplest thing out of all the technical elements.”

The effect was majestic and even subtle. Foreigners saw a familiar if spectacularly executed emblem of Russia in the blazing-with-light troika flying in the air before them, pulling a fiery sun.

Russians were surrounded with cultural touchstones. The 19th-century writer Nikolai Gogol had burned the troika into every Russian heart in “Dead Souls,” comparing it to their nation: “The roaring air is torn to pieces and becomes wind; all things on earth fly by and other nations and states gaze askance as they step aside and give her the right of way.”

The empire flowered before the spectators’ eyes. Peter’s epauletted, gray-clad soldiers marched in smart formation before turning into graceful waltzing gentry at Natasha Rostova’s first ball, a scene out of “War and Peace.”

Onlookers gasped as 14 marbleized columns rose out of the floor toward the ceiling. Liveried footmen held candelabra. This was the era that nurtured ballet, and modern stars, including Svetlana Zakharova and Vladimir Vasiliev, danced in celebration, a scene within a scene.

The tempo quickened, the columns disappeared, the dancers huddled together, bending and swaying, arms stretched upward in despair. Snow fell and darkness descended, interrupted by frenetic streaks of light. The dancers fled, or died.

And the revolution! The 40,000 spectators found themselves in the middle of a painting by Kazimir Malevich, an influential avant-garde artist of the early 20th century. First, a streamlined locomotive traveled through the air, suspended on cables from the vaulted ceiling, accompanied by geometric objects painted blood-red.

Then workers garbed in Malevich red and black marched, pursued by towering machinery in muted red — the luster of idealism had worn off. The workers hurried, bent and twisted, but got caught up in gears and wheels so huge they made the people around them small and insignificant. Soon they were nothing but cogs.

“You know that Russian avant-garde art and the Russian Revolution are very close, they go hand in hand,” said Ernst. “In fact, avant-garde art predicted the revolution in a way, and the revolution killed avant-garde art.”

It was an unflinching look at the Soviet system, absent of nostalgia or shame, viewed through the artistic vision of one of its victims.

The painting broke apart, drifting away. Skyscrapers rose on panels and huge familiar sculptured heads drifted toward each other and passed, vacant-eyed. They were the worker — disembodied hand carrying his hammer — and peasant woman — disembodied hand holding a scythe — built for the Soviet pavilion at the 1937 International Exhibition in Paris.

There was no mention of Stalin or terror. The emphasis, Ernst said, was on achievement. Then came the 1960s, a period remembered fondly by many adult Russians today. Men triumphantly carried red jets, then white rockets. The name of Yuri Gagarin, the first man in space, illuminated the floor. Buildings rose; old Soviet cars drove down the middle of the stage.

A frenzied but cheerful dance progressed from students to hipsters to lovers to weddings to children. It ended with a nod to the 1980 Summer Games in Moscow, with runners and the Olympic theme music from 34 years ago.

People loved it, even those who incessantly criticize the money spent. They said it made them proud. “It is beautiful,” Alexei Navalny, an opposition leader, said in a tweet. “But what I really like even more then the opening ceremony is the fact that everybody is tweeting about it. this is so unifying.”

The Fisht Olympic Stadium, designed to be a soccer arena, was plenty roomy. Two huge truss arches, bowed out from each other, support a high, dark ceiling almost 279 feet above the ground, from which hung the cables that began to move immense props as the evening began. The biggest piece of scenery weighed more than five tons. Nearly 10,000 people helped stage the ceremonies, and 19,000 safety pins were used.

[The athletes](http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/olympics/wp/2014/02/07/in-sochi-a-new-twist-on-the-parade-of-nations/) marched up from an underground ramp, the Earth and their home countries projected around them. U.S. athletes got warm applause. Ukrainians — who have been rising against their authoritarian leaders — were cheered. And Russia? The crowd went crazy.

The pageant took the form of a dream by a young girl [named Lyuba](http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/olympics/wp/2014/02/07/sochis-opening-ceremony-begins-a-child-awakes-and-putin-takes-his-seat/), played by 11-year-old Liza Temnikova. She reached out and grabbed for a kite tail, which pulled her up into a sky holding all of Russia’s immensity and contradictions.

Islands with birch forests and Arctic villages streamed past her. Inflated characters from folk tales gathered a congregation of cheery onion domes that floated away. Lyuba began by reciting [the alphabet](https://www.google.ru/search?q=russian+alphabet&amp;newwindow=1&amp;client=firefox-a&amp;hs=l7o&amp;rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&amp;tbm=isch&amp;tbo=u&amp;source=univ&amp;sa=X&amp;ei=bf30UobmIuTV4wT09YDYBg&amp;ved=0CC8QsAQ&amp;biw=1366&amp;bih=664), attaching a famous Russian name or achievement to each letter. Dostoevsky, Catherine the Great, Sputnik, the periodic table, Nabokov — the last a surprising acknowledgment of an emigre novelist.

The politics that have surrounded the Games — the controversy over Russia’s treatment of gay men and women, tensions with the West, concerns over security — went unaddressed.

The fireworks had begun to the strains of “The Nutcracker.” Ah, Tchaikovsky! No one mentioned he was gay.