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THE BALLET RUSSES: PLAYING WITH THE PAST

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Abstract

Diaghilev seemed to be the nemesis of traditional ballet, but he was ready to draw on the rigorous classical schooling of his dancers whenever it suited him. Once ugliness had been established as a legitimate option, he was happy to bring back beauty on many occasions alongside the new neoclassical music that he had begun to promote. Stravinsky and Balanchine's *Apollo* was one such ballet, which managed to strip Greek antiquity from the exoticism often present in earlier "Greek" ballets.

La Pavillion d'Armide (1909)

Story: *Omphale* by Théophile Gautier (1834)

The Viscount of Beaugency seeks refuge in a mysterious pavilion during a storm. He is transfixed at the sight of a tapestry portraying the beautiful Armide, and dreams that he falls in love with her.

Design: Alexander Benois

Reflects three enthusiasms of Russian Symbolist artists: Versailles, its opulence and decadence; ETA Hoffman and the supernatural; Tchaikovsky/Petipa's *Sleeping Beauty* (1890) as the last word in escapist art

Music: Nikolai Tcherepnin (1873-1945)

Tcherepnin was the staff conductor and composer at the Mariinsky. He had brilliant technique and a great talent for pastiche. The music of this ballet contains many echoes of Tchaikovsky (e.g. when the tapestry comes to life, he almost quotes the analogous moment of transformation in *The Nutcracker*).

Choreography: Michel Fokine

Only partially survived; a good example of Fokine reforming the classical principles

- Premiered 1907 at the Mariinsky
- Presented 18 May 1909 in Paris by Diaghilev (his first balletic production)
- Last performance in 1916

Les Sylphides (1909)

- Has the look and feel of a "ballet blanc" (in which the female corps de ballet are all dressed in white)
- A conscious reference to the first true "ballet blanc", which was *La sylphide* (1834), starring Maria Taglioni
- While *La sylphide* was a full-scale narrative ballet, *Les sylphides* is the opposite: one-act and non-narrative
- Music by Chopin already orchestrated by Glazunov back in 1893 was used for the Mariinsky production; the Paris production was given a new orchestration
- Set design by Benois
- Costumes designed by Bakst (long tutu based on the costume worn by Maria Taglioni in the 1830s)
- Choreography by Fokine



Fokine thought of this as one of his “reform ballets”: “From the outset I myself pictured the ballet as most varied in content and form, expressive of life. I recognized the dramatic, the abstract, the character, and the classic dance; and I believe that, in this ballet, I expressed my sentiments more clearly than in any other, more clearly even than in my own programme of reforms”. Fokine’s original version at the Mariinsky (1907) had national costumes and national dances, e.g. Polish aristocratic style for the Polonaise, or peasant style for the Mazurka. The male dancer was made up to look like Chopin. In Diaghilev’s version, all the elements suggesting narrative and drama were removed”.

The choreography for the Waltz in C-sharp minor was always more abstract, designed as an expression of the Waltz’s general sentiment. It was added under the influence of Isadora Duncan, who had this waltz in her repertoire. Fokine: “The choreography differed from all other pas de deux in its total absence of spectacular feats. There was not a single entrechat, turn in the air, or pirouette. There was a slow turn of the ballerina, holding her partner’s hand, but this could not be classified as a pirouette because the movement was not confined to the turn but was used for a change of position and grouping. When composing, I placed no restrictions on myself; I simply could not conceive of any spectacular stunts to the accompaniment of the poetic, lyrical Waltz of Chopin. I was totally unconcerned whether this romantic duet would bring applause or satisfy the audience or the ballerina, for I did not think of methods for guaranteeing success”.

La Boutique Fantasque (1919) and Pulcinella (1920)

In both these ballets, modern arrangements of classical music were combined with non-classical sets and costumes, creating a deliberate stylistic clash

- *La Boutique Fantasque* – The Magic Toyshop
- Music by Rossini/Respighi
- Choreography by Léonide Massine
- Design by André Dérain and Picasso
- Exceptionally successful in London, received as a symbol of the more carefree mood of peacetime following WWI

- *Pulcinella*, based on an 18th century play “Four Identical Pulcinellas”
- Pulcinella is a character from the *commedia dell’arte* – a genre revived in the 1910s and 20s to counteract theatrical “realism”, “illusionism”
- Music by “Pergolesi”/Stravinsky
This is regarded as Stravinsky’s first essay in “neoclassicism”, even though the music is taken almost note-for-note from the originals and only a few grotesque touches added, such as repetitions and overlapping harmonies, but it is largely the orchestration that draws attention to the piece’s modernity
- Choreography by Massine
- Design by Picasso: cubist sets

The Sleeping Princess (1921)

- Born out of Diaghilev’s idea to create “a ballet that would run forever”, but also out of his own youthful fascination with Tchaikovsky/Petipa’s *Sleeping Beauty*
- Full-length ballet
- Music by Tchaikovsky, partially re-orchestrated by Stravinsky
- Sets and costumes by Léon Bakst
- Original choreography by Marius Petipa, revived by Nikolai Sergeyev, with additional dances by Bronislava Nijinska
- Premiered 2nd November 1921, Alhambra Theatre, London
- A revival of *Sleeping Beauty*, which had been premiered at the Mariinsky in 1890
- Ran for 105 performances
- A catastrophic financial failure because the company was unsuited to running the same ballet every night and required a triple or even quadruple cast
- Diaghilev was well aware that this was a risky move, aesthetically speaking, and asked both Bakst and Stravinsky to write articles in defence of the project



- He even considered the use of a framing device: a boy and a girl in modern dress would introduce each scene, with a text to be written by George Bernard Shaw (abandoned).
- The critical response was mixed

“There are many ways of enjoying the Russian Ballet and people find so many different things in its performance...”; but most people “regard it primarily as visualized music” where “the mental images which belong to the tunes and rhythms of the composer take shape and colour before our eyes.”

THE RUSSIAN BALLE
'THE SLEEPING PRINCESS'
BY FRANCIS E. BARRETT

M. Diaghilev and his Russian Ballet have returned to London, and, I am glad to see, in chastened mood. The weird and wild has been abandoned in favour of the classic, and an uncommonly fine classic it is. The work presented at the opening of the season at the Alhambra was nothing less than the great example of the Ballet's most glorious development in the shape of Tchaikovsky's 'The Sleeping Princess.' It was given at Petrograd thirty years ago, and that production M. Diaghilev has reproduced by the light of his own genius. The choregraphy is that of Marius Petipa, which is retained as the foundation for some of the most perfect dancing ever seen in London. The production, in five scenes, is simply wonderful. I have never seen such beautiful dresses and colouring as that provided by M. Leon Bakst, who has designed them, and the execution is of the finished order such as only a master-hand and one genuinely imbued with the divine fire could offer. Mlle. Lopokova delights once more, this time as the Good Fairy, and the Princess' chief exponent has been Mlle. Spessiva, a most accomplished dancer whom we have not seen before. She differs considerably from the others, and provides an element of novelty that is highly attractive. But the whole thing is a stupendous production that definitely replaces the Ballet in its right position as one of the most glorious of the arts. Tchaikovsky's music has been overhauled by M. Stravinsky, but he has practically touched nothing, and has contented himself with scoring some extra and unscored

Les Noces (1923)

- The Russian title is *Svadebka* - a homely way of referring to a wedding
- There was a long period of gestation starting in 1913. The short score was only finished in 1917, with instrumentation to follow. Between these dates, the aesthetic of this “Russian ballet” underwent a major transformation.
- Stravinsky's music was originally to be scored for a huge orchestra, as in *The Rite of Spring*. An interim version included harmonium, pianola and some specially constructed cimbaloms.
- The final version consists of voices (solo and choir), four pianos and percussion
- The libretto (published in 1911) was composed by Stravinsky himself, and it was based on traditional Russian wedding ritual.
- The music seeks to represent the “authentic”, unadorned peasant singing of laments and other ritual songs or folk-influenced religious chants. Accordingly, simple elements are superimposed in such a way as to produce dissonance and complexity. The rhythms are drawn from typical patterns in folk recitations of texts, where the stress often shifts when a word is repeated.
- The orchestration is often bell-like, symbolizing the Christian aspect of a peasant wedding (as opposed to the paganism of *The Rite*).
- The set and costumes were designed by the modernist painter Natalia Goncharova, and the conception was changed several times. The final black-and-white sets corresponded to the removal of the original rich orchestral colour from the scoring. The peasant costumes were streamlined and stylized.

Goncharova on the original designs from 1915 (not the later black-and-white version):

“At that time, it was the festive, folk aspect of weddings that stood out for me, the colourful costumes and dances that connect weddings with holidays, enjoyment, abundance and happy vitality. Therefore, the costumes I designed were derived from peasant forms and vivid colours, harmonized sometimes in unison,



sometimes by opposites, almost without intermediates, and this applied to decorations and curtains as well.”

“Often, while I worked, I remembered a great village wedding festival, which I attended while still a child. There were too many guests for the *izba* (log hut), and they were crowded round a large table, the first row seated, the others standing, wiping their large faces with embroidered towels. They were all shouting, eating and, above all, drinking. I can still see this picture. I also thought of the days when the air was buzzing with bees, scented with honey, ripe strawberries and newly cut hay. In order to cut and turn the hay, the whole village was working together, dressed in their best clothes, in gay prints and beautiful hand-woven materials. The women and young girls had their heads covered with scarves of all colours.”

- One of the interim versions was set in the suburbs: the colours were still gaudy, but the female dancers were more austere and elongated, in corsets and long skirts. She next considered the use of pastel shades in a further step towards the black-and-white version.
- The idea of black-and-white sets and costumes came from Mikhail Larionov (her husband) after the final, austere instrumentation was already established
- Goncharova:
 - “Pattern might perhaps have accorded better with the expressively complicated rhythm of the music but only against a uniformly plain background for all the costumes. However, it would have assumed so much importance, that it would have cancelled out the line of the movements completely and would have destroyed all the solemn meaning of the rite. I decided that the costumes must be uniform in tone.”
 - “People living on the land, and off it, unite to prolong human life on it and in order to be able to bear the burden imposed by it better together. They must wear its brown colour, unconscious and simple, and they must wear the colour of innocence white. Therefore, their dress on the great day must be white and brown and simple in line. It must be like working clothes, simple not to hinder their movements and of strong material. I used aviation cloth (parachute silk). The men had white shirts and brown trousers and the girls had white blouses and brown skirts, based on Russian peasant wear. This enabled the grouping of the choreography to be clearly seen.”
- The impersonality of the ritual is familiar from *The Rite of Spring*, but the barbaric is replaced with grace and dignity.
- This still accords with Stravinsky’s broad aesthetic principle of “non-expression”
- The choreography, by Bronislava Nijinska, reintroduces pointe work but in a startlingly new context: the birth of a truly neoclassical choreography.
- Goncharova wanted the choreography to evoke the figures on Greek vases, as a return to symmetry in groupings and patterns.

Apollo (Apollon Musagète, 1928)

- An American commission but the European premiere still within the Diaghilev season.
- The characters are the Greek god Apollo and three muses: Terpsichore (dance and song), Polyhymnia (mime) and Calliope (poetry).
- The story is minimal: the ballet begins at the birth of Apollo and ends with the ascent to Parnassus; the subject seems to be self-referential: the genre of ballet itself and the idea of classicism in its various incarnations (classical verse, the classicism of Greek statues, classical ballet, etc.).

Music by Stravinsky

The pinnacle of his neoclassical style: idioms borrowed not only from the Classical period but also from Baroque and Romantic periods, including references to typical “ballet music”. These idioms are detached from their original context and thrown together. The overall impression is that of deformation and desiccation, although there is nothing shockingly dissonant, but rather a cool and expressionless grace. There is wide range of rhythms; Calliope’s variation, for example, is based on the traditional Alexandrine of French verse. The orchestration is specified as “strings only”, in reference to Lully’s scores for the first ever French ballets. After Stravinsky played him the first half, Diaghilev wrote his description in a letter to Serge Lifar (who danced Apollo in the Diaghilev production):



“It is, of course, an amazing work, extraordinarily calm, and with a greater clarity than anything he has so far done; a filigree counterpoint of transparent, clear-cut ideas, all in the major key; somehow music not of this world, but from somewhere above. It seems strange that, though the tempo of all this part is slow, yet at the same time it is perfectly adapted to dancing.”

Stravinsky on the rhythms:

“The real subject of *Apollo*, however, is versification, which implies something arbitrary and artificial to most people, though to me art is arbitrary and must be artificial. The basic rhythm patterns are iambic... the rhythm of the cello solo with the pizzicato accompaniment is a Russian Alexandrine suggested to me by a couplet from Pushkin... the remainder of the Calliope variation is a musical exposition of the Boileau text that I took as my motto...” [Que toujours dans vos vers, le sens coupant les mots Suspende de l'hémistiche en marque le repos]

Choreography: George Balanchine

Stravinsky envisaged it as another “ballet blanc” and Balanchine described Stravinsky’s music as “pure white”. The choreography contained many elements of classical ballet such as plié or pirouette (bending of the knees or turn), but again, these were taken out of context and reconceived. There was a deliberate avoidance of fluidity, as if the dance was constructed from fragments, with sharp and geometric lines.

Costumes by André Bauchant, later by Coco Chanel

Deliberately old-fashioned ballet costumes, but with symbolic patterns

- Set design deliberately “conventional” to the point of tawdriness

Conclusion

Diaghilev’s dancers never abandoned classical technique despite the constant drive for innovation. It served them well in many novel takes on the classical style. Around 1920, an intense interest in the music of the past (as material for modernist preconceptions) led to the establishment of neoclassicism in music. Neoclassicism in choreography developed in parallel, and the two found a perfect synthesis in the Stravinsky/Balanchine collaboration on *Apollo*.

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