

THE PRODIGAL SON:
A RETURN TO EMOTION

THE DEHUMANISATION OF ART

ORTEGA Y GASSET THE DEHUMANISATION OF ART (1925)

Art must not proceed by
psychic contagion,
for psychic contagion is an
unconscious phenomenon,
and art ought to be full
clarity, high noon of the
intellect



ORTEGA Y GASSET THE DEHUMANISATION OF ART (1925)

Grieving and rejoicing at such human destinies as a work of art presents or narrates is a very different thing from true artistic pleasure... Preoccupation with the human content of the work is in principle incompatible with aesthetic enjoyment proper



I CONSIDER THAT MUSIC IS, BY ITS VERY NATURE, ESSENTIALLY POWERLESS TO EXPRESS ANYTHING AT ALL, WHETHER A FEELING, AN ATTITUDE OF MIND, OR PSYCHOLOGICAL MOOD, A PHENOMENON OF NATURE, ETC... EXPRESSION HAS NEVER BEEN AN INHERENT PROPERTY OF MUSIC. THAT IS BY NO MEANS THE PURPOSE OF ITS EXISTENCE

MOST PEOPLE LIKE MUSIC BECAUSE IT GIVES THEM CERTAIN EMOTIONS SUCH AS JOY, GRIEF, SADNESS, AN IMAGE OF NATURE, A SUBJECT FOR DAYDREAMS OR – STILL BETTER – OBLIVION FROM “LIFE”. MUSIC WOULD NOT BE WORTH MUCH IF IT WERE REDUCED TO SUCH AN END. WHEN PEOPLE HAVE LEARNED TO LOVE MUSIC FOR ITSELF, WHEN THEY LISTEN WITH OTHER EARS, THE ENJOYMENT WILL BE OF A FAR HIGHER AND MORE POTENT ORDER AND THEY WILL BE ABLE TO JUDGE IT ON A HIGHER PLANE AND REALISE ITS INTRINSIC VALUE

Stravinsky, Chronicle of My Life (1935)

JEAN COCTEAU
LE COQ ET L'ARLEQUIN
(1918)



EMOTION RESULTING FROM A CERTAIN WORK OF ART IS ONLY OF VALUE WHEN IT IS NOT
OBTAINED BY SENTIMENTAL BLACKMAIL.

NOTHING IS AS ENERVATING AS TO LIE AND SOAK FOR A LONG TIME IN A WARM BATH.
ENOUGH OF MUSIC IN WHICH ONE LIES AND SOAKS.

OEDIPUS REX (1927)

OEDIPUS REX (1927)

- Prepared in secret from Diaghilev for the anniversary season
- Cocteau's text was translated into Latin
- The gist of the plot was related by the Narrator in French
- A dramatic work that is extremely static
- Costumes built into the set

CREON

OEDIPUS

TH. STRAWINSKY

à JEAN

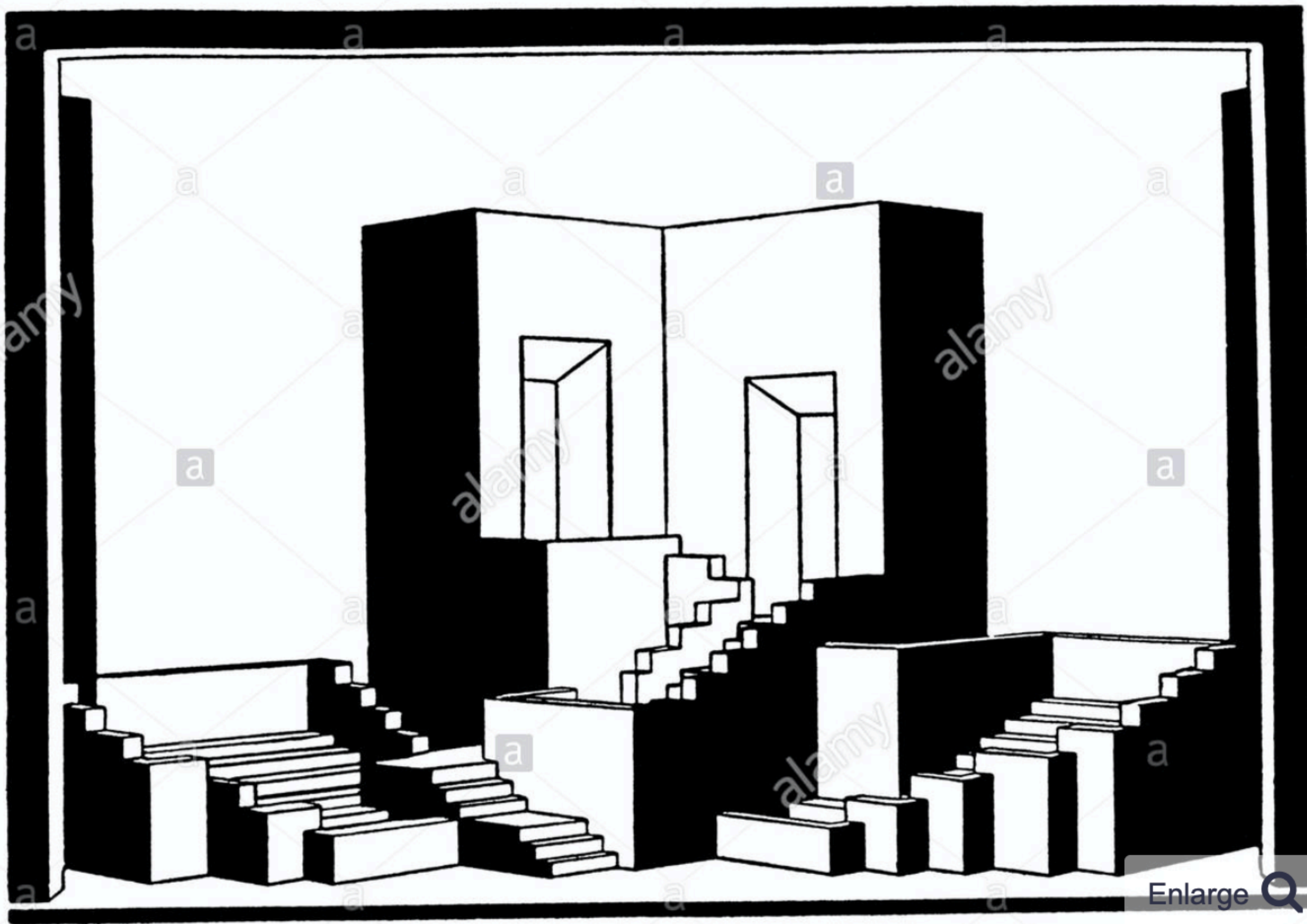
dir. amicalement (13 Juin 1927)

JOCASTA



TIRESIAS

CHORUS



1992 Seiji Ozawa

Jessye Norman as Jocasta



PROKOFIEV VS STRAVINSKY



PROKOFIEV VS STRAVINSKY

- 1927: *Oedipus Rex* vs *Le pas d'acier*
- 1928: *Apollon musagète*
- 1929: *Renard* (restaged) vs *L'enfant prodigue*

PROKOFIEV ON THE MUSIC OF *APOLLON MUSAGÈTE*:

"PITIFUL" MATERIAL "STOLEN ... FROM THE MOST
DISGRACEFUL POCKETS: GOUNOD, AND DELIBES, AND WAGNER, EVEN MINKUS

DIAGHILEV ON *FAIRY'S KISS*:

AN ILL-JUDGED CHOICE OF MUSIC BY TCHAIKOVSKY, TIRESOME AND LACHRYMOSE, ALLEGEDLY
BRILLIANTLY ORCHESTRATED BY IGOR. I SAY "ALLEGEDLY" BECAUSE TO ME IT SOUNDS GREY,
AND THE WHOLE STYLE IS MORIBUND".

Renard, ballet burlesque (1921/29)



L'ENFANT PRODIGE (1929)



THE PRODIGAL SON (1929)

- Scenario: Diaghilev and Boris Kochno
- Music: Sergei Prokofiev
- Design: George Rouault
- Choreography: George Balanchine

Boris Kochno (1904-1990)



SCENARIO

- “The parable of the Prodigal Son, to be transferred onto the Russian soil”
- Prokofiev was given a very short page of instructions by Kochno and wrote most of the music before receiving a more detailed scenario
- Prokofiev’s hostility towards Kochno and argument about the royalties
- SP: “I assume that Kochno will have some influence on Diaghilev’s productions, but I want to eliminate this so as to be left with the Biblical story and my music”.
- Balanchine: I think this is one of the best of all ballet libretti. It is simplicity itself, in the form of A-B and then A again. It is a story of someone who has everything, who throws it all away to have nothing, and then has everything again... it seemed relatively simple to portray the roles of father and son: no one would mistake their identity. The story of the older son was not interesting for the dance and we wisely omitted it from idea of the ballet”.

Scheme
“Tale of the Prodigal Son”

Cast of Characters

Prodigal Son

Father

Seductress

12 Friends (comrades)

2 Female servants (or sisters)

2 Male servants

1. Departure of the Prodigal Son from home (middle part trio) and farewell with father 4 minutes
2. Meeting of Prodigal Son with 12 comrades and preparation for feast 3 minutes
3. Appearance of “Dance of Seductress” 2½ minutes
4. Dance of 2 male servants 2 minutes
5. Dance of Prodigal Son with Seductress 3 minutes
6. Getting Drunk of Prodigal Son 2 minutes
7. Comrades, Seductress and 2 male servants rob the sleeping Prodigal Son and steal away 1½ minutes
8. Awakening and “Dance of the Prodigal Son” 2 minutes
9. (After the exit of the Prodigal Son)—appearance and passing by (carousing) of the Seductress, comrades and male servants (in the cloak of the Prodigal Son)—who at the sight of the approaching Prodigal Son scatter 2 minutes
10. Return of the Prodigal Son to [his] father 4 minutes

Total 26 minutes

May be longer by 1 minute

[signed] Kochno

PROKOFIEV AND CHRISTIAN SCIENCE

- Prokofiev “converted” to CS in mid-1920s and used it mostly in an attempt to control his state of health and his mood, to perfect himself
- SP: “When we think only of good, of God and his Infinite ideas, harmonious conditions are externalised”
- the Christian parable had special significance for him
- In his piano pieces, *Choses en soi*, he was looking to create a purer style, and this quest continues in the ballet

THE MUSIC

"THE COMPOSITION... PROCEEDED WITH EXCEPTIONALLY LITTLE EFFORT, HELPED BY THE FACT THAT I HAD DECIDED TO COMPOSE *THE PRODIGAL SON* IN A SIMPLE STYLE ESCHEWING SOPHISTICATED ELABORATIONS. DIAGHILEV'S PARTING WORDS TO ME HAD BEEN: "YOUR PIANO PIECES ARE A SHADE ARID. I WANT THE BALLET YOU ARE WRITING FOR ME TO BE MORE STRAIGHTFORWARD".

"...THE TERM "MODERN" IN MUSIC USED TO BE ATTACHED TO THE SEARCH FOR NEW HARMONIES, THEN MOVED TO THE SEARCH FOR BEAUTY IN ALL KINDS OF INSINCERE CONTRIVANCES AND COMPLEXITIES. MORE PERCEPTIVE COMPOSERS SOON TIRED OF THIS AND WENT BACK TO SEEKING SIMPLICITY – NOT, HOWEVER, THE OLD SIMPLICITY, BUT A NEW ONE. DIAGHILEV OF COURSE WAS WITH THIS NEW WAVE..."
(PROKOFIEV'S DIARY)

THE MUSIC

- Diaghilev heard the ballet seven times as work-in-progress and gave detailed advice and criticism
- Prokofiev “overfulfilled the plan” and composed a symphony out of the same material plus the overflow
- The most problematic character was The Siren: Diaghilev wanted the music that was more explicitly erotic

THE MUSIC

“MY CONCEPTION HAD BEEN OF A SHADOWY, MYSTERIOUS BEING, SEEN THROUGH THE EYES OF AN INNOCENT YOUTH, SEDUCTIVE BUT AS YET UNKNOWN. DIAGHILEV, HOWEVER, WANTED A SENSUAL CREATURE, WHOM HE PROCEEDED TO DESCRIBE IN A STRING OF GRAPHICALLY OBSCENE EXPRESSIONS”
(ON THE MUSIC FOR THE SIREN, SP’S DIARY)

No. 3 The Siren



THE MUSIC

"I FEAR IT IS NOT QUITE WHAT DIAGHILEV WANTED; IT'S NOT PASSIONATE ENOUGH. HE NOW WANTS THE EXACT OPPOSITE OF WHAT HE WAS ADVOCATING TO ME IN ROME IN 1915. A TRAIT HE SHARES WITH STRAVINSKY IS TO INSIST WITH UNASSAILABLE CONVICTION THAT ONLY SUCH-AND-SUCH MUSIC IS WORTH COMPOSING, AND THEN A YEAR LATER TO MAINTAIN THE OPPOSITE".

(ON THE PAS-DE-DEUX, SP'S DIARY)

THE APOTHEOSIS

"I HAD NOT YET CONCEIVED THE END OF THE BALLET. I SAID, 'IN THIS LIBRETTO THE END IS ENVISAGED AS A KIND OF APOTHEOSIS, BUT THIS IS INAPPROPRIATE: WE NEED SOMETHING MORE NUANCED'. I SUGGESTED BORROWING A THEME FROM THE SECOND *CHOSE EN SOI*, WHICH I LOVE VERY MUCH, BUT DIAGHILEV WAS RELUCTANT TO ACCEPT THIS. 'IT SHOULD BE SIMPLER, ', HE SAID. 'SOFTER AND MORE TENDER.'" AND INDEED I FELT MYSELF THAT THE THEME I HAD SUGGESTED WAS NOT QUITE RIGHT. WE PARTED ON GOOD TERMS, DIAGHILEV HAPPY WITH WHAT HE HAD HEARD OF THE BALLET. LATER THAT NIGHT, FALLING ASLEEP, I WAS STILL SEARCHING FOR A NEW THEME, LIMPID AND UNCLOUDED. I THOUGHT THAT A MELODY ILLUSTRATING A PARABLE FROM THE GOSPELS SHOULD SEEM TO BE COMING FROM ON HIGH. ABOUT ONE O'CLOCK AT NIGHT I GOT UP AND JOTTED DOWN TWO BARS".

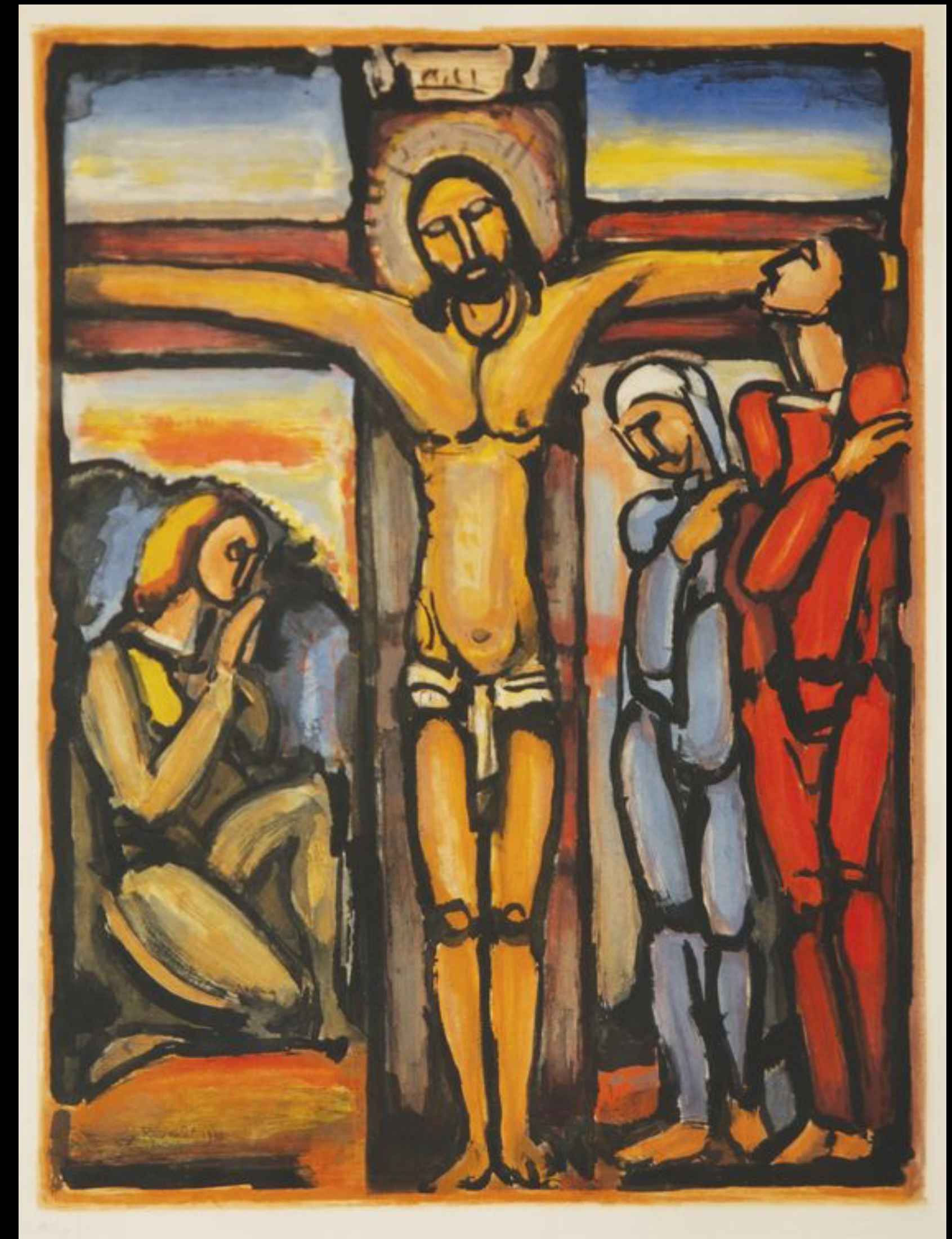
THE APOTHEOSIS

"STRAIGHT AWAY IN THE MORNING I WORKED ON THE IDEA THAT HAD COME TO ME LAST NIGHT, THE CONCLUDING SCENE OF THE BALLET WHEN THE FATHER EMBRACES HIS SON. MY AIM AS I WORKED WAS TO PRESERVE THE ESSENCE OF THE PREVIOUS NIGHT'S AFFLATUS. THE RESULT WAS AN ABSOLUTELY SUPERB THEME, AND ALL DAY I WAS WALKING ON AIR AS IF IT WAS MY NAME-DAY."

No. 10 Apotheosis



Georges Henri Rouault (1871-1958)



ROUAULT WAS THE SECOND CHOICE AFTER MATISSE WHO WAS UNAVAILABLE. HE WAS PARTICULARLY FAMOUS FOR HIS CHRISTIAN SCENES. HE HAD A TRAINING IN STAINED GLASS MAKING, AND THAT HAS INFLUENCED HIS STYLE OF PAINTING.





DESIGN

- Rouault's sets: produced at the last moment, but very impressive
- Expressionism/primitivism
- SP: "very powerful and biblical in feeling"
- The transformable prop was Balanchine's idea (fence/table/pillar/boat) - an element of constructivism



CHOREOGRAPHY

- Serge Lifar as the Son, Felia Dubrowska as the Siren
- Balanchine: "Prokofiev was a bastard, so I had to invent to fill [out] the music; the big prop is my invention to fill time"
- "In designing the choreography, I had in mind the Byzantine icons that are so familiar to all Russians".
- Influence of the early Soviet avant-garde (Balanchine's past): Goleizovsky, Foregger, FEKS (Eccentric Actor Factory)



CHOREOGRAPHY

- The Son: virile virtuosity, neoclassical elements, towards the end mime and highly expressive movements (partly improvised by Lifar)

1979 televised production with Baryshnikov and NYC Ballet



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CHOREOGRAPHY

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- The Companions: grotesque dancing, an updating of Fokine's ideas towards the more mechanistic presentation
- The Siren: highly virtuosic, on pointe, with acrobatic elements, influenced by the act of Mitti and Tillio (music-hall revue)



Mitti and Tillio, 1921



CHOREOGRAPHY

FELIA DUBROWSKA:

“THE STEPS WERE EASY BUT THE STYLE WAS DIFFICULT, BECAUSE I EXPECTED TO BE COQUETTISH. BUT DIAGHILEV SAID NOT TO SMILE OR SHOW ANY EMOTION. I HAD TO SPEAK WITH THE LEGS AND TO HYPNOTISE THE SON LIKE A SNAKE, HOLDING HIM WITH MY EYES. I LIKED VERY MUCH DOING SOMETHING SO NEW. I WAS ONLY A LITTLE EMBARRASSED WHEN THE REST OF THE COMPANY FIRST CAME TO SEE IT”.

CHOREOGRAPHY

- The pas de deux: explicit but impersonal
- The Siren's height represents domination





"THE CHOREOGRAPHY DENOTES A SET PURPOSE OF TORTURED INVESTIGATION. THIS SET PURPOSE ONCE ADMITTED, THE IMPRESSION IS STRANGE AND PROFOUND".

"THERE WAS NOT A HINT OF VOLUPTUOUSNESS IN THIS SCENE. THE PRODIGAL WAS FASCINATED BY THE SIREN'S INHUMAN CONTORTIONS".

"BALD AS EGGS, DRESSED IDENTICALLY, MOVING IDENTICALLY, CROWDED TOGETHER AS CLOSELY AS POSSIBLE, THE DANCERS HOP OVER ONE ANOTHER'S BACK, CIRCLE AROUND ALTERNATELY SQUATTING AND RISING . . . SCRAMBLE ABOUT SIDEWAYS IN RIDICULOUS POSITIONS LIKE CRABS."

(FROM VARIOUS REVIEWS)

"THE PATHETIC AND THE CARICATURE"
(ANDRÉ LEVINSON)

LYDIA SOKOLOVA:

"IN RECENT YEARS THE RUSSIAN BALLET HAD FOUGHT SHY OF THE DRAMATIC AND PASSIONATE WORKS FOR WHICH THEY HAD ORIGINALLY BEEN FAMOUS, AND BALANCHINE'S SPECIALTY WAS A KIND OF UP-TO-DATE CLASSICISM. NOW HE HAD TO DO SOMETHING TO MATCH THE GRANDEUR OF THE PARABLE AND THE FORCE OF PROKOFIEV'S MUSIC ... (SERGE) LIFAR WAS GIVEN AN OPPORTUNITY TO LET HIMSELF GO IN AN EMOTIONAL ROLE, THE LIKE OF WHICH HAD NOT BEEN SEEN IN BALLET SINCE THE DAYS OF FOKINE"

DIAGHILEV'S DEATH

...Yesterday *Le Sacre* was a real triumph...

The imbeciles finally grasped it.
The Times says that *Le Sacre* is for the twentieth century what Beethoven's Ninth Symphony was for the nineteenth! At last!

(Diaghilev to Markevich, 23 July 1929)





WHAT HAVE THE BALLETS RUSSES EVER DONE FOR US?

- Completely overhauled the ballet genre, making it a cutting-edge artistic enterprise without losing the core audience
- Re-imagined ballet as synthesis of the arts, where each one can come to the fore at different points
- Explored a huge variety of modernist ideas
- Created a hothouse for experimentation among leading international artists, who were often placed in competition with each other
- Drew attention to Russian culture as an exotic newcomer to the international stage, then raised its status so that it became an essential component of international modernism



