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## **Prokofiev's Prodigal Son: A Return to Emotion**

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Diaghilev would often look at great art from the past and then do just the opposite. He playfully abandoned plot, elaborate costumes, emotional expression, and even meaning, but reinstated them whenever he felt like it – this was his undogmatic approach to modernism.

In this final lecture, we will focus on one of the best-preserved of Diaghilev's productions, *The Prodigal Son*, a strikingly beautiful ballet by Prokofiev, Balanchine and Rouault. It could have been a new beginning, but it was to be Diaghilev's final word, since he died in the summer of 1929.

### **The Dehumanisation of Art**

In 1925, the Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset published an essay under the title "The Dehumanisation of Art", which was soon translated into many European languages. While the title may sound like a condemnation, Ortega intended it neutrally, as a description of the new aesthetic of modernism. He even saw positive aspects to this "dehumanisation":

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

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

Ortega's essay discusses not only the visual arts, but also music, and his chief model for this new aesthetic is Igor Stravinsky. And indeed, Stravinsky himself became famous for his radical pronouncements about emotional expression:

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 learnt 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.

Another proponent of this new aesthetic was Jean Cocteau, the author of the famous manifesto *Le coq et l'Arlequin* (1918)

The emotion resulting from a certain work of art is only of value when it is not obtained by sentimental blackmail.



Nothing is so enervating as to lie and soak for a long time in a warm bath. Enough of music in which one lies and soaks!

Enough of clouds, waves, aquariums, water-sprites, and nocturnal scents! What we need is the music of the earth, an everyday music.

Enough of hammocks, garlands, and gondolas! I want someone to build me music that I can live in, like a house.

### **Stravinsky and Cocteau: Oedipus Rex (1927)**

*Oedipus Rex* was supposed to be a “gift” for Diaghilev to celebrate 20 years of the Saisons Russes, so the work proceeded in secret and Diaghilev was not involved until the last moment.

The idea was Stravinsky’s. Cocteau agreed to the commission on condition that his text would be translated into Latin: he felt that translation into a sacred language would assure the monumentality that he sought for the work. Stravinsky was happy to treat the text as purely phonetic material without any attempt to elucidate its meaning through the music.

A dramatic work which was deliberately and perversely static.

The set, conceived by Cocteau and sketched out by Stravinsky’s son Theodore, was supposed to provide no illusion of depth. The characters were to be dressed in costumes that were built into the set, allowing only arms heads to move, to create the impression of living statues.

The Narrator was supposed to be dressed in tails and speak like a master of ceremonies, explaining the plot in French. Cocteau had hoped to take this role himself, but much to his annoyance, Diaghilev engaged someone else. Years later, Stravinsky disparaged the device of the Narrator, and mocked the libretto’s last words, “Adieu, Oedipe; on t’aimait”, as “a journalist’s caption and a blot of sentimentality wholly alien to the manners of the work”.

For financial reasons (or, according to Cocteau, because Diaghilev rejected the designs), *Oedipus* was presented in an unstaged form, as a concert performance, between two (staged) ballets. It failed to win the sympathy of the audience, and Diaghilev called it “un cadeau très macabre”. A staged version was finally produced in 1928 in Berlin and travelled on to Paris. Stravinsky was satisfied with this.

### **Prokofiev vs Stravinsky**

- 1927: *Oedipus Rex* vs *Le pas d’acier*
- 1928: *Apollon musagète*  
Prokofiev on the music of *Apollon musagète*: “pitiful” material “stolen... from the most disgraceful pockets: Gounod, and Delibes, and Wagner, even Minkus...”
- 1929: *Renard* vs *Le fils prodigue*

Diaghilev on *The Fairy’s Kiss* (Stravinsky’s ballet for Ida Rubinstein’s company): “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”.

### **Le Fils Prodigue – The Prodigal Son (1929)**

- Scenario: Diaghilev and Boris Kochno
- Music: Sergei Prokofiev



- Design: George Rouault
- Choreography: George Balanchine

[The main primary source here is the text of Sergei Prokofiev's Diaries, marked as SP]

## Commission

SP

“Diaghilev arrived back on the 22 October [1928] and opened discussions about 1) commissioning a ballet from me; 2) ditto from a Soviet composer to be recommended by me.” [he settled on Gavriil Popov rather than Shostakovich]

“I played the two *Choses en soi* to Diaghilev; he liked them but found them on the dry side.”

SP

“In the course of a third meeting, Diaghilev and Kochno set out for me a subject of the desired ballet: the parable of the Prodigal Son, to be recast on Russian soil”.

### 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

## Libretto

SP: “Lunch with Meyerhold, Diaghilev and Kochno. To the latter I returned the libretto with an elegant bow, saying that it had arrived after the music had been composed and was therefore probably more useful to him than to me. Kochno hesitated, but accepted it”.



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 the story of someone who has everything, who throws it all away to have nothing, and then has everything again... it seemed a relatively simple task to portray the roles of father and son: no one could mistake their identity. The story of the older son was not interesting for the dance and we wisely omitted it from the idea of the ballet”.

## **Composition**

Prokofiev “read C.S. every morning before settling down to work” [Christian Science]. Although he does not directly speak about it, he liked the fact that this was a Biblical story and tried to sideline the intermediary (Boris Kochno) who, he felt, tried to interpose himself between Prokofiev and the Bible.

SP: “When we think only of good, of God and his Infinite ideas, harmonious conditions are externalised”.

Prokofiev’s style of this time is influenced by his engagement with Christian Science: in the piano pieces he played for Diaghilev he tried to capture some special purity to represent his religious thoughts, and the style of the *Prodigal Son* also seems to be affected by this search for simplicity and purity.

SP: “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”.

SP on the pas-de-deux: “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”.

## **First Audition**

SP: “Today Diaghilev was at his most engaging, youthful and alive. ... He was tremendously taken with the first and second numbers, the robbing and the awakening of the Prodigal, and the music for his return. But he was a lot less keen on the Siren and her pas-de-deux with the Prodigal, and he suggested dispensing altogether with the Romanov *Matelote* [referring to a piece from an earlier unrealised ballet project that Prokofiev had initially intended to reuse]. ‘You obviously haven’t noticed that this is in an altogether different style. You write with such tenderness these days, but then you were so given to hammering in nails’”.

## **Writing the Apotheosis**

SP: “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 myself felt 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”.

SP: “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".

## **Second Audition**

SP: "Diaghilev listened with great concentration and I could overhear him from time to time whispering to Kochno: 'Very beautiful... splendid...' But we had a real disagreement over the third number, the Temptress. 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. However, although I not the least bit inclined to involve myself with creating sensuous music I did not say as much to Diaghilev, contenting myself with observing that I had conceived the ballet in distinctly more aquarelle terms than those he was now suggesting, from which it followed that voluptuous excesses of this sort would be out of place. Diaghilev grew heated: "then what sort of prodigal son is this? The whole strength of the story lies in the fact that he goes astray, then repents, and the father forgives. If all he had done was run away from home and got himself robbed blind by thieves, then his return would have been marked not by the outstretched arms of his parent but by a good thrashing". In the end this question was left unresolved, and I informed Diaghilev that I had completed the final number.

Diaghilev: "What? Completely finished? Foo, how alarming..."

The implication was that Diaghilev was staking everything on the final number, and if I had fallen flat with it then the whole ballet would be written off as an unmitigated disaster. But I knew the ending was good, and was able to play it reasonably calmly. Diaghilev was pleased, and even suggested I play it more slowly so that the melody would sing out more beautifully. He also made me play the triple counterpoint combination slowly and judged it successful. Overall, Diaghilev departed highly satisfied, and going down the stairs announced that his dream was to have a spring season without including a note of Stravinsky. Incredible! Hitherto Stravinsky has been a god for Diaghilev, who never made any secret of his preference for him over me. Is this yet another sign of the god's fall from grace?

## **The style**

SP: "...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..."

## **Third audition**

SP: "The new Woman and the plundered plumage of the final number were rapturously approved. Of the men's dance, which for some reason Diaghilev insists on calling the dance of the clowns, and of the drinking scene, I played only fragments..., and Diaghilev made some very pertinent suggestions which I shall adopt. He also suggested a sensible cut in the final number just before the concluding theme. Both he and I were euphoric over the meeting; Diaghilev gave it as his opinion that his ballet was one of my finest achievements."

SP "I was pleasantly surprised as I had feared the pas-de-deux would be judged too amoroso, also I was expecting to be told that a sonata-allegro had no place in a ballet. Diaghilev did have some pertinent observations on the pas-de-deux, namely that it should have a slower tempo and therefore its material would need to be shortened, which I said I could do. ... Kochno then proceeded to think up aloud a scenario for the fourth number which had so unexpectedly come into existence. In this endeavour he had several 'genius ideas' which, however, he just as precipitately retracted. Light was dawning, gradually but clearly, that the genesis of a subject was not such a simple matter after all, and in consequence, there ensued voluble protestations about there being something, somehow, not quite right about the music, that in short it was not really danceable. The problem seemed to be



the distinctly feminine character of the second subject. But the Siren, who at that time was already on stage, could not be introduced into it, because the whole idea of the number was to separate her two dances. And to bring in another woman would be to divert attention from the first...”

## **Design**

- George 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. Expressionism/Primitivism.
- SP: “very powerful and biblical in feeling”
- Elements of constructivism – the fence/table/boat/pillar (apparently invented by Kochno)

## **Choreography**

- Serge Lifar as the Son
- Felia Dubrowska as the Siren
- Influence of the Russian avant-garde: the Factory of the Eccentric Actor (FEKS), Goleizovsky, Foregger
- The ballet was produced in a fortnight, and Serge Lifar made a contribution to his part by almost improvising on the spot

Balanchine: “Prokofiev was a bastard, so I had to invent in order to fill the music; the big prop [the table] is my invention to fill time. The piece was never right, but I left it”.

Balanchine: “In designing the choreography, I had in mind the Byzantine icons that are so familiar to all Russians”.

Doubrowska (The Siren):

“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”.

- The Siren’s height is to represent domination
- Explicit yet impersonal pas de deux
- Acrobatics being used for dramatic purpose

The Siren coils tightly around the Prodigal’s body like a “belt”, gradually sliding to the ground – from Mitti and Tillio’s act (music-hall revue)

The Companions: grotesque and mechanistic dances. Contrast between the dehumanised and the humanised.

SP: [about the rehearsal which he was conducting] “I did not watch what was happening on stage, but Ptashka [his wife] reported that the women’s dances contained more than a little indecency, which certainly does not conform to the biblical account. This is the result of Diaghilev spending his time swanning about Paris with Markevich, while Kochno and Balanchivadze were unable between them to devise any movements other than suggestive ones. This is completely at odds with my music and with Rouault’s scenery, which is very powerful and biblical in feeling.

SP: “... the penultimate number, for which the music is all leaps and syncopations, has been constructed with flowing movements; in the second number there is no correlation between the entrance of a character and the emergence of a new theme, and so on. I said it would be desirable to moderate the lasciviousness of the Siren’s dance: a loose woman in biblical times would not have behaved in the same way as a modern prostitute...”





SP: “Rouault reported that he had tackled Diaghilev about the bare behinds but his representations had made no impression at all. ‘I keep hearing about this’, said Diaghilev, ‘and I must tell you that I very much like this bare bottom. The choreographer does not presume to interfere with your music, and you should not interfere with his dances’”.

## **Reception**

“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 each other’s backs, and circle around, alternately squatting and rising . . . scramble about sideways in ridiculous positions like crabs."

“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. Yet how differently Balanchine and Fokine set about things! It was interesting to consider the contrast between the orgy in *Sheherazade* with its sprawling girls and bounding Negroes, and the orgy in *Le Fils prodigue* with its weird atmosphere and acrobatic groupings. In the first ballet there were cushions, wine and fruit; in the second the only props were a hoop and a trestle table".

## **Diaghilev’s Death and Legacy**

Diaghilev died in Venice in August 1929. There were attempts to keep the company intact and functioning, but these all failed. Stravinsky asked to be buried nearby.

The Ballets Russes:

- Completely overhauled the ballet genre, making it a cutting–edge artistic enterprise without losing the core audience
- Re-conceived ballet as a more equal synthesis of the arts (rather than just a vehicle for dance), where each art 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

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