Class 6 : On Point

A. Getting off on the Right Foot

1. Class title 1 (*La sylphide*)
2. Section title A (*Pas-de-Quatre* print, animated)
3. — still from the above

I started last week in London, around 1725. Now I'm in London again, but 120 years later, 1845—though the class will range a lot further than that. The lithograph illustrates a special ballet performance arranged for Queen Victoria and Prince Albert. The choreographer **Jules Perrot** (1810–92) persuaded four of the leading ballerinas of the day—**Marie Taglioni**, **Carlotta Grisi**, **Fanny Cerrito**, and **Lucille Grahn**—to appear together in a piece that would showcase their individual qualities, in four solos framed by opening and closing sections for all four. He called it *Pas-de-Quatre*. I don't have time to play the individual sections, but here is the opening. Don't be alarmed by the culture shock; these dancers are all Japanese, but it is by far the best of the clips out there. The music is by **Cesare Pugni** (1802–70).

4. Perrot: *Pas-de-Quatre*, opening
5. *Pas-de-Quatre* lithograph (repeat)

What would you say are the outstanding qualities of what you have just seen? For me, it is its grace; there is a softness and charm, even when the ladies are executing some pretty exacting footwork. And one more quality that you may simply have taken for granted: all four dancers—the stars of their day—are women. The court dances we had seen 150 years earlier at Versailles all emphasized the male dancer, with women in strictly supporting roles if they appeared at all. But during the 18th Century, three things happened: ballet moved out of the court and into the theater, the focus turned more and more to the women, and the subject-matter expanded beyond classical mythology in new directions.

6. Carlotta Grisi, the first Giselle (1841), in Acts I and II

In the rest of this hour, I shall look at two of these new directions particularly. They can be summed up by these prints of **Carlotta Grisi** (one of the *Pas-de-Quatre* four) in her most famous ballet, *Giselle* (1841). The choreography was also by **Jules Perrot**, in collaboration with **Jean Coralli** (1779–1854); the music was by **Adolphe Adam** (1803–56), also in collaboration with Coralli. The two acts of Giselle are totally different in feel, as these pictures might suggest. I'll give you a brief sample of each to compare.

7. Perrot & Corrali: *Giselle*, clip from Act I
8. Perrot & Corrali: *Giselle*, clip from Act II
9. Grisi as Giselle (repeat)

What did you find? Both are the product of the Romantic era; one claims to be a view of village life, very much idealized; the other deals in ghosts, graves by moonlight, and the supernatural. Both genres are relatively new, the rustic mode having its origins in the later 18th century, the supernatural a product of the 19th. I'll play longer scenes from each of these acts in *Giselle* as anchors for the rest of the class.

B. Rural Retreats

10. Section title B (Lancret: Camargo dancing, c. 1730)

The painting is a portrait of the French dancer **Marie Anne de Cupis de Camargo** (1710–70), whose claims to fame included the introduction of the flat slippers and shorter skirt now common in ballet today. These broke with court etiquette and allowed her to perform roles of simple country girls—but it was highly idealized version of country life, as you see, akin to **Marie Antoinette** retreating to her fake farm with her ladies-in-waiting to play shepherdesses whenever she wanted a break from Versailles.

11. Justine Favart as Ninette and Gaetan Vestris as the Prince in *Ninette à la cour* (1755)

The music, though, was the overture to a 1777 ballet-pantomime called *Ninette à la cour*, or Ninette at Court, adapted from an earlier play. Basically, the plot involves a prince of royal blood who becomes attracted to a simple country girl and takes her back to court. She enjoys these new experiences, but realizes that their worlds are ultimately incompatible, so goes back to her village, her virtue apparently still intact. There is a similar set-up in the first act of *Giselle*. **Prince Albrecht**, disguised as a peasant, falls for the village girl **Giselle**. But when the court arrives with the Princess whom he is engaged to marry, he has to confess the truth. Giselle is heart-broken and, to reminiscences of music from earlier in the act, goes mad and dies. Here is the Royal Ballet production with **Alina Cojocaru** in the title role.

12. Perrot & Coralli: *Giselle*, mad scene
13. *La fille mal gardée*

As I said already, the move to rustic settings began in the later-18th Century. In fact, one of the earliest ballets in existence, *La fille mal gardée* (The Ill-Guarded Daughter), is a comedy set entirely on a farm. The original choroegraphy is lost, but in 1960 **Sir Frederick Ashton** (1904–88) prepared a version that was as close as possible to the spirit of the original, but also unmistakably his own; I think you'll find it a fun breath of fresh air. Of all the classic ballets, *La fille* is virtually unique in having no prior literary source. Instead, it is based on a painting, or rather an engraving of a picture now lost: *The Reprimand* by **Pierre-Antoine Baudouin** (1723–69). The situation is simple: a young girl is chastised by her widowed mother for not doing her work around the farm, while the reason for her neglect—a visiting boyfriend—is seen escaping up the stairs at the back. Here is the scene from the ballet itself, with **Marianela Nuñez** and **Carlos Acosta** as the young lovers and **William Tuckett** in the drag role of the Mother. The music is later, nominally by **Ferdinand Hérold** (1791–1833), but with added bits by Rossini and others.

14. Ashton: *La fille mal gardée*, Act I pas-de-deux

C. Raising the Dead

15. Section title C (*Robert le Diable*)

Well, I lied; I do have a bit of opera—but it is essential to the history of ballet. Those that have taken other classes from me may recognize this picture. It is the infamous ballet from *Robert le Diable* (1831) by **Giacomo Meyerbeer** (1791–1864) in which the ghosts of dead nuns who have broken their vows of chastity rise from their graves. You may also remember the recent staging I showed you from the Royal Opera House, with choreography by **Lionel Hoche**.

16. Hoche: Nuns' ballet in *Robert le diable*, excerpt
17. The convent scene in *Robert le Diable*

It is difficult now to recognize the shock of this scene in 1831, when it was choreographed by **Filippo Taglioni** (1777–1871), featuring his daughter **Marie Taglioni**, who would be the star attraction in Perrot's *Pas-de-quatre*, as we have already seen. Now, it looks like a bunch of ballerinas in white flitting across the stage *en pointe*. But this was the first time. Here is a rather grainy reconstruction.

18. Taglioni: Nuns' ballet in *Robert le diable*, excerpt
19. Marie Taglioni as Flore

This was essentially Marie Taglioni's debut. Apparently, she lacked the classical body for ballet, having a rounded back, for example. So she concentrated on style: how to give her body the flexibility of a creature not of this earth, and how to use the recently discovered trick of rising completely onto the toes, so that she would seem to float rather than tread on the floor. As **Ursula Hageli** of the Royal Ballet explains in this lecture-demo, *pointe* shoes were not the reinforced boxes they are today; the ballerina's foot had to do all the work, so Taglioni's dancing would have been soft rather than spiky.

20. Ursula Hageli talks about Marie Taglioni
21. Marie Taglioni as *La sylphide*

The year after *Robert le diable*, Filippo Taglioni built an entire ballet around Marie, using a story written by **Adolphe Nourrit**, the tenor who had taken the title role in Robert. This was *La sylphide*, about a young Scotsman, **James**, who is engaged to marry a nice local girl, **Effie**, but instead becomes infatuated with this sylph who visits him from another world. Of course it all ends in tragedy. The ballet was a sensation, and made Marie Taglioni an undisputed star. But both the choreography and the music have been lost. Fortunately, the Danish choreographer, **August Bournonville** (1805–79) created his own version in 1836, commissioning a new score from **Herman Severin Løvenskiold** because he could not afford to rent the original one. His original ballerina was **Lucille Grahn**, another of the *Pas-de-quatre* four. This is the version that has lasted, and is still in the repertoire of international companies today. Here is an excerpt from Act II from the Bolshoi Ballet. Bournonville's choreography has been faithfully reproduced by a ballet master from the Royal Danish Ballet; the soloists are **Ekaterina Krysanova** and **Vyacheslav Lopatin**. Note the distinctive style of very soft, graceful exchanges, alternating with quicker movements that seem to float or flow.

22. Bournonville: *La sylphide*, excerpt from Act II
23. August Bournonville

Bournonville is a key figure in the history of ballet for another reason. Ballet is intrinsically a perishable art. Notation systems are imprecise, and even with the use of film, the only sure way of preserving a legacy is by maintaining an unbroken chain of former dancers who become teachers and pass on their first-hand knowledge to a new generation. And nowhere has this principle been put into practice more thoroughly than in the **Royal Danish Ballet**, which not only keeps Bournonville's creations intact, but requires all its dancers, from students to stars, to take part in several hours of classes each day on a curiculum created by Bournonville to ground the company in all the steps and combinations necessary to execute his ballets. He even wrote a ballet, *Konservatoriet*, or The Conservatory, the first act of which consists of just such a class. Here is fun clip alternating shots of the students of the British Royal Ballet rehearsing and performing it

24. Bournonville: *Konservatoriet*, rehearsals at White Lodge
25. *Giselle* Act II

Which takes me back to where we started, with Act II of *Giselle,* set at Giselle's grave in the forest. This act has the title *Les Wilis*, **Wilis** being the spirits of brides who have died before their wedding. The men who have betrayed them are forced to dance themselves to death. Albrecht comes in, mourning for Giselle; the **Queen of the Wilis** pronounces her sentence. But just as he is about to drop from exhaustion, Giselle intervenes to plead for him. We shall play just the *adage* section, which ends in some beautiful traveling lifts, but in the end her pleas will be successful; Albrecht returns to the palace unharmed, and Giselle is able to go to her grave in peace. **Alina Cocojaru** is joined, as in the first act, by **Johan Kobborg**, the former dancer from the Royal Danish Ballet who revived the Bournonville *Sylphide*; he is also her real-life husband.

26. Perrot & Coralli: *Giselle*, Act II *adage*
27. Class title 2 (still from the above)

D. Tchaikovsky Anatomy

28. Section title D (Tchaikovsky portrait)

I thought we might look at a couple of Russian ballets from the end of the century to the music of **Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky** (1840–93) to see what goes into them. I will focus on three elements: **mime**, **character**, and **form**.

29. Some mime gestures

I didn't comment at the time, but I'm sure you noticed in both the longer clips from *Giselle* that the characters kept "talking to each other" using physical gestures rather than words. In fact, the language of mime in ballet is a very old one, going back to the so-called *ballets d'action* of the mid-18th century, when people were exploring ways of telling stories in dance alone. It may seem rather archaic, but this narrative language continues through the end of the 19th century at least. A few years ago, I took a scene near the beginning of *The Sleeping Beauty*, the first of the big ballets made by **Marius Petipa** (1818–1910) to the music of Tchaikovsky, and subtitled it as though it were an opera in a foreign language. The situation is this. It is the christening of **Princess Aurora**. All the Fairies have been invited to the celebration, and have brought suitable presents. All except one, the evil fairy **Carabosse**, who has not been invited, but turns up anyway to exact her revenge….

30. Petipa: *The Sleeping Beauty*, Carabosse scene with supertitles
31. Carabosse

Classical ballet is not all lyrical *pas-de-deux* for pricipals linked with passages of mime to tell the story. Most 19th-century ballets, absolutely including the big Tchaikovsky ones, contain semi-comic dances for minor characters intended as light relief. So-called character dancing is a major part of the repertoire, and there are many excellent dancers who may not have the physique for the heroic roles but make a career out of these parts. Character numbers, *pas de charactère*, can be slipped in anywhere, but they are a special feature of the *divertissements* put on to celebrate a wedding, for example, as in the last act of *The Sleeping Beauty*, or most of Act II of *The Nutcracker*. Aurora in the *Sleeping Beauty* is entertained by characters from other fairy stories, such as **Puss-in-Boots and the White Cat**. The dancers are **Elizabeth Harrod** and **Paul Kay**.

32. Petipa: *The Sleeping Beauty*, the cat *pas-de-deux*
33. Breakdown of a typical *pas-de-deux*

Finally, something about **form**. The individual numbers of a 19th-century ballet are as closely structured as the arias and ensembles of a 19th-century opera. The structures ensure an even division of attention among the two principals, giving them time to work together and alone, varying the tempo and character, and providing opportunities for each to show off their technical skills. Of course, the narrative continues, but it is no longer happening in real time; the music and dancing take over the normal function of the clock, and in an *adage* such as the one we are going to see here, time is almost frozen. I

am moving now to *Swan Lake*; it was written in 1877 but we normally see in the 1895 revival in which Petipa was joined by **Lev Ivanov** (1834–1901). If I were to play Acts II or IV, you would see something very similar to Act II ot *La sylphide* or *Giselle*, white-clad dancers floating across the moonlit stage. And Act II has another long *pas-de-deux*, as **Prince Siegfried**, the hero, falls in love with **Odette**, who has been turned into a White Swan by the evil **Rothbart**, though she may resume her form as a woman by night. In Act III, which is a celebration of the Prince's birthday, Rothbart arrives with his daughter **Odile**—the Black Swan, always danced by the same ballerina. He has made her look as much like Odette in appearance as she is her opposite in character, and Siegfried is smitten. So we come to the grand *pas-de-deux*, entirely controlled by Rothbart; you will see some telling moments of acting in the middle of the long *adage*, including his failure to notice the real White Swan beating at the window. [In case you think otherwise, these slow numbers are every bit a difficult to execute as the fast ones.] The dancers are **Marianela Nuñez** (whom we saw in *La fille mal gardée*) and **Vadim Muntagirov**.

34. Petipa/Ivanov: *Swan Lake*, Act III *pas-de-deux*, opening
35. Breakdown of a typical *pas-de-deux* (repeat)

There would now be extended solos for each principal, but they are almost 3 minutes each, so I have to omit them. In any case, each character gets a further solo at the start of the closing section, much quicker than before, and showing off the dancer's virtuosity. I would call your attention to two points. When Odile comes in, she does nothing but stand in place and execute the notorious series of 32 *fouettées*—unsupported spins on one leg, energized only by the whiplash action of the free foot. They serve no purpose other than to wow the audience—although this spiky mastery is absolutely true to Odile's nature. Then at the very end, note the impeccable timing with which Nuñez executes the final pose. It is something I have not seem in other performers. What do you think it means?

36. Petipa/Ivanov: *Swan Lake*, Act III *pas-de-deux*, ending

E. Form Transcendent

37. Section title E (Balanchine's *Apollo*)

That is the iconic image that ends the revised version of the ballet *Apollo* by **George Balanchine** (1904–83). The ballet, to a 1928 score by **Igor Stravinsky** (1882–1971), tells of the birth of Apollo, his interaction with the Muses, and his ascent to Mount Parnassus as their leader. The original production had more or less representational sets and a few properties. Balanchine revised it after coming to America and, as he often did, simplified it considerably, getting rid of all the scenery except for a staircase representing Parnassus. Here is the ending of this version, with **Matthew Ball** and members of the Royal Ballet. You will notice the "peacock pose" coming in about halfway through.

38. Balanchine: Apollo, original ending
39. Balanchine teaching in New York

When Balanchine revived the ballet for **Mikhail Baryshnikov** in 1979, he made a significant change to that ending. Can you see what it is, and can you guess why?

40. Balanchine: *Apollo*, revised ending
41. Balanchine: *Apollo*, the peacock pose

You saw the change, I'm sure: no more Parnassus. But why end with that pose? I think that, at this stage in his career, Balanchine was no longer interested in the narrative. What was important to him was the formal emblem, the visual summary of male strength complemented by feminine grace, the union of Apollo and the Muses—and perhaps a symbol of his own career. In fact, although Balanchine made a fair number of story ballets, he is best known for those that are purely abstract, nothing but form. Here is a passage from near the opening of *Serenade* (1935), the first such ballet Balanchine created in America. The music is again **Tchaikovsky**, his *Serenade for Strings*, not one of his ballet scores. Balanchine's visual form is guided entirely by the music; you will see its shapes traced out on the floor; you will also see his fondness for closely-integrated figure-groups like those in *Apollo*.

42. Balanchine: *Serenade*, opening
43. Ashton: *Symphonic Variations*, still

The first ballet I was taken to was a story ballet, *Giselle*, and there were many other narrative ballets to follow; children are supposed to like stories. But the first ballet that I saw on my own was abstract, and it impressed me enormously. This was *Symphonic Variations*, set to a miniature piano concerto by **César Franck** (1822–90). **Sir Frederick Ashton** choreographed it in 1946 to celebrate the six leading dancers of the company, all of whom remain onstage throughout. He was also celebrating the sweep of the Royal Opera House stage, much larger than the theatres in which his company had previously been working. I can't play it all, but I wanted to give you the stunning moment at curtain rise with that striking abstract design by **Sophie Fedorovitch** and the six dancers, motionless at first but beginning to move as the music unfolds. I then cut to the middle of the closing *allegro*, which gets a lot more virtuoosic before ending in the same pose as at the start. The principal couple are the same as we saw in *Swan La*ke, **Marianela Nuñez** (for the third time) and **Vadim Muntagirov**.

44. Ashton: *Symphonic Variations*, beginning and end
45. Class title 3 (*Symphonic Variations*)