

Music on the Stage



6. On Point

October 23, 2024

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BALLET, LIKE CLASSICAL MUSIC, IS BUILT ON A FORMAL FRAMEWORK of precisely-defined elements compiled over the course of several centuries, elements which require hours of daily practice from even the most seasoned performers. Also like music, ballet is an abstract art that works without words or precise references to the real world—yet it is capable of great expressivity. In the first hour, we will look at the rise of Romantic ballet in the early 1800s, and the changes that brought it about: shifts in subject-matter, the invention of new steps, developments in costume and footwear, and the rise of the female virtuoso.

We begin the second hour with Marius Petipa's Tchaikovsky ballets, looking at his use of an elaborate language of gesture in place of dialogue, and tendency to vary the pace with highly-specific character numbers—both ways of circumventing the limitations of formalism mentioned above. Finally, we see ballet doing precisely the opposite, establishing clear formal structures even for its most expressive *pas-de-deux*, and eventually moving to 20th-century abstract ballets in which form is all. *rb.*

A. Getting off on the Right Foot

To get orientated for what is to follow, we watch the beginning of an 1845 ballet bringing together four of the leading ballerinas of the day, followed by samples from *Giselle* showing the two main directions ballet was taking in the earlier 19th century.

Perrot: *Pas-de-Quatre* (1845), opening

Perrot & Corrali: *Giselle* (1841), samples from each act

B. Rural Retreats

One of these directions was the depiction of the supposed simplicity of village life. We see this reflected in the first act of *Giselle* and Frederick Ashton's reconstruction of the late-18th-century *Fille mal gardée*.

Perrot & Corrali: *Giselle*, Act I mad scene (Alina Cojocaru)

Ashton: *La fille mal gardée* (1960), Act I *pas-de-deux* (Marianela Nuñez and Calos Acosta)

C. Raising the Dead

The other direction is the Romantic interest in the supernatural. We see it *La sylphide* and Act II of *Giselle*, and look into the development of *pointe* technique which made these effects possible.

Hoche: Nuns' ballet in *Robert le diable*, excerpt (Royal Opera)

Taglioni (after): Nuns' ballet in *Robert le diable*, excerpt

Lecture-demo: Ursula Hageli on Marie Taglioni (Yasmin Naghdi)

Bournonville: *La sylphide*, opening of Act II (Bolshoi)

Bournonville: *Konservatoriet*, Royal Ballet School video

Perrot & Corrali: *Giselle*, Act II *adage* (Cocojaru, Johan Kobborg)

D. Tchaikovsky Anatomy

This section focuses on three aspects of the great ballets made by Marius Petipa to the music of Tchaikovsky: mimed gesture, the introduction of character numbers, and the formal conventions structuring the big *pas-de-deux*.

Petipa: *Sleeping Beauty*, Carabosse scene with supertitles

Petipa: *Sleeping Beauty*, White Cat and Puss in Boots (Elizabeth Harrod and Paul Kay)

Petipa/Ivanov: *Swan Lake*, Act III *pas-de-deux*, opening, *adage*, and finale (Marianela Nuñez, Vadim Muntagirov)

E. Form Transcendent

Finally, we look at three plotless ballets from the first half of the century where form is all.

Balanchine: *Apollo*, original ending (Matthew Ball, Royal Ballet)

Balanchine: *Apollo*, revised ending (Mikhail Baryshnikov, NYC Ballet)

Balanchine: *Serenade*, opening

Ashton: *Symphonic Variations*, beginning and end (Royal Ballet)

Adolphe **Adam** (1803–56, *French composer*), Sir Frederick **Ashton** (1904–88, *English choreographer*), George **Balanchine** (1904–83, *Russian-American choreographer*), August **Bournonville** (1805–79, *Danish choreographer*), Jean **Coralli** (1779–1854, *French choreographer and composer*), César **Franck** (1822–90, *Belgian composer*), Ferdinand **Hérold** (1791–1833, *French composer*), Lev **Ivanov** (1834–1901, *Russian choreographer*), Herman Severin **Løvenskiold** (1815–70, *Norwegian-Danish composer*), Giacomo **Meyerbeer** (1791–1864, *German-French composer*), Jules **Perrot** (1810–92, *French choreographer*), Marius **Petipa** (1818–1910, *French-Russian choreographer*), Cesare **Pugni** (1802–70, *Italian composer*), Igor **Stravinsky** (1882–1971, *Russian-American composer*), Filippo **Taglioni** (1777–1871, *Italian choreographer*), Peter Ilyich **Tchaikovsky** (1840–93, *Russian composer*)

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