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The Dancer's Heritage

A Short History of Ballet

Ivor Guest





*Some other books published
by Penguins are described
on the following
pages*

THE DIAGHILEV BALLET

1909-1929

S. L. Grigoriev

1411

‘Serge Leonidovich Grigoriev’, wrote a well-known critic in 1940, ‘is probably the only man living who knows the history of the [Diaghilev] troupe from its first performance to its last. . . . It is extremely unlikely that he will ever write his memoirs. . . .’

That prediction, fortunately, proved wrong, and this celebrated ballet company found its natural historian in Grigoriev, who administered the company for the whole twenty years of its existence. Here is the full story of one of the most fabulous adventures in the whole world of art.



A NEW DICTIONARY OF MUSIC

Arthur Jacobs

R 12

A New Dictionary of Music is a basic reference book for all who are interested in music. It covers orchestral, solo, choral, and chamber music; it likewise covers opera and (in its musical aspects) the ballet. There are entries for Composers (with biographies and details of compositions); Musical Works well known by their titles, such as operas and symphonic poems; Orchestras, Performers, and Conductors of importance today; Musical Instruments (not forgetting those of the dance band and brass band); and Technical Terms. English terms and names are used whenever possible, but foreign terms in general use are cross-referenced. Particular importance has been attached to bringing the reader abreast of new musical developments: there are entries for Concrete Music and Electronic Music as well as references to several works which had their first performances in 1958.

What is a fugue? What is the difference between a saxophone and a saxhorn? When did Sir Thomas Beecham become a knight and when a baronet? Who, besides Puccini, wrote an opera *La Bohème*? These and thousands of similar questions are answered in this book.

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THE DANCER'S HERITAGE

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IVOR GUEST



The Dancer's Heritage

A SHORT HISTORY OF BALLET

WITH A FOREWORD BY

DAME MARGOT FONTEYN, D.B.E.

AND TWENTY-FOUR PLATES



PENGUIN BOOKS

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This book is dedicated to
DAME ADELINE GENÉE, D.B.E.

Contents

FOREWORD BY

DAME MARGOT FONTEYN 9

TO THE READER 11

1. WHEN KINGS AND PRINCES DANCED 13

2. BALLET ENTERS THE THEATRE 24

3. THE RISE OF THE CHOREOGRAPHER 31

4. THE ROMANTIC BALLET 44

5. THE DECLINE OF BALLET IN THE
WEST 58

6. THE AGE OF PETIPA 65

7. DIAGHILEV 76

8. PAVLOVA 98

9. THE BALLETS RUSSES OF THE
NINETEEN-THIRTIES 102

10. CONTEMPORARY BALLET 110

A CHRONOLOGY 151

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING 158

INDEX 161

Foreword

BY DAME MARGOT FONTEYN, D.B.E.

MR GUEST has given us a wonderful book full of interesting historical details. There is much here for young dancers to learn, particularly in relation to style, which is the most important single aspect of ballet in need of attention, now that the technical standard is so generally high and there is such a wealth of good ballets to be danced.

The contemporary ballets are the least problem of course, because the living choreographer conveys his personal conception of the ballet vocabulary while creating his works. But even then they are difficult to preserve intact for long periods without very careful supervision. Little touches get lost here and there with each change of cast, and only the choreographer himself can really re-inspire the production.

As for the great ballets of the past, there is often no one at all to guide us on the sometimes tiny details of movement, without which we cannot re-create its true atmosphere.

It seems increasingly important for dancers to develop in themselves a greater awareness of the different choreographic styles they may encounter in a normal ballet repertoire.

In the case of the old traditional ballets which have been handed down from generation to generation, often unrecorded, particular thought and attention should be given to the conditions surrounding their original creation. No one can be sure of the exact steps, but one can form some idea of their presentation by considering the social and artistic life of the time and the prevailing system of training. To this end we should study the general history of ballet as well as the lives of those immortals who have contributed to its evolution as an art throughout the centuries.

Each period demands a subtly different style.

FOREWORD

The accent on gracious charm in the Romantic ballets reflected the manners of the time, just as Fokine's far greater freedom of expression was born of an age that also produced Isadora Duncan. Our own day seems to bring forth many ballets of violence and blue jeans tempered by the exacting, glacial, abstract ballet – these at least are the important new trends among many excellent but less adventurous works.

We should be inherently aware of this historical aspect of our art, and project each role within the framework of its time, otherwise all ballets become a meaningless series of steps arranged in various combinations. On the dramatic plane too the same rules apply. Giselle's mad scene for instance, although it has to be completely convincing, must remain within the bounds of nineteenth-century romanticism. It would lose its pathos if performed with the distressing realism of some of the more contemporary ballets.

The public today show an unprecedented interest in ballet which only the highest artistic levels will be able to maintain for long. It is therefore a key moment, now, for dancers to assimilate their great heritage from the past whilst developing the extraordinary opportunities of the present, so that they can pass easily from one to the other displaying the full richness of this wonderful art. Only then will we be worthy of the immortals who are so faithfully re-created for us in this book.

To the Reader

THE purpose of this book is a modest one. It is to provide an introduction to the history of ballet and to give an idea of how the art which flourishes today on the stages of Covent Garden and other theatres throughout the world has been built up over the centuries. The work of countless choreographers, dancers, teachers, musicians, and others of the past has lived on to form the tradition that is every dancer's heritage. This tradition is the backbone of ballet. Dance technique, for instance, has become what it is today through having been passed on from generation to generation, becoming all the time more and more elaborate and complex. And in the same way the repertory of ballets that are performed is continually being enriched by works which will become classics in their turn; today we can see ballets that were first performed by the Paris Opéra Ballet and the Royal Danish Ballet of the Romantic period a hundred years and more ago, by the Imperial Russian Ballet, and by the Diaghilev Ballet, and no doubt several ballets that have been created in recent years will continue to be danced for the pleasure of future generations.

This tradition is not a dead thing, for what is being done today will become the history of tomorrow. History should not, therefore, be looked upon as a useless subject. It is, in fact, of great value both for the dancer and for the spectator. The dancer it can help to understand the styles of the various ballets in the repertory, while for the spectator it will sharpen his critical faculty and give him a background of knowledge against which he can appreciate what he sees. History need not be dull and dry-as-dust, for it is mainly about men and women who lived, worked, and loved in days gone by, who had much the same feelings and reactions, qualities and failings, as those who make up the ballet world today. Approached in this way, it can come alive and acquire a special significance.

TO THE READER

The aim of this book is no more than to introduce the reader to some of the people who have helped to make ballet history and to tell a little of their triumphs, their struggles, and their ideas. In the hope that it will whet the reader's appetite and tempt him to delve further into the subject, I have added at the end a selected list of more specialized books in English which are either in print or should be obtainable from a public library. For those who want to inquire still more deeply, some of these books contain more exhaustive bibliographies including works by foreign writers. For there is really no end to this sort of research; to the imaginative reader the study of history can be as exciting and rewarding as a voyage of discovery.

CHAPTER ONE

When Kings and Princes Danced

To trace the origins of dancing, if that were possible, we should have to go back, certainly, far beyond the beginnings of history and into the mists of prehistoric times. Probably we should arrive at the moment when a living creature developed the first glimmering of what was to become the mind and soul of man, and even then our quest might not be ended. The art of the theatre which we call ballet, however, is of much later origin. It is in fact an art of recent times, and emerges some five hundred years ago during the period known as the Renaissance – the very starting-point of modern history.

The word renaissance, which means rebirth, aptly describes the development in man's outlook that was gathering force in Italy when England was struggling through the Wars of the Roses. During the Middle Ages individuality had counted for very little, but in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries new lines of thought – which we call humanism – were beginning to be explored that were concerned more with the affairs of man than with the abstract conceptions which had obsessed the older school of thinkers. As a result the most astonishing progress was made, not only in philosophy but in the sciences and the arts and indeed in every branch of human endeavour.

Italy, where this development first bore fruit, was in those days a patchwork of states, some large, some small, whose rulers were as cunning in intrigue and diplomacy as they were adept in furthering their own personal prestige. It mattered greatly to these rulers that they should appear important and imposing in the eyes of their neighbours, and so they made every effort to give brilliance to their courts, particularly when there was question of a marriage that involved an alliance with another ruling house. In this way the more enlightened