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# Modernist Tradition and the Individual Choreographic Talent



Photo: Sterling Hyltin and Joseph Gordon in George Balanchine's *Orpheus*.  
Photographer: Erin Baiano. Courtesy of New York City Ballet.

THE 2022 STRAVINSKY FESTIVAL began with an orchestral performance of *Fireworks*, one of Stravinsky's early successes, which according to musicologist Charles M. Joseph in his book *Stravinsky's Ballets* first drew Diaghilev's attention to the composer in 1909. Joseph explains that the actual breakthrough piece for Stravinsky, however, was *Scherzo Fantastique*.<sup>1</sup> Leaving aside *Rite of Spring*, which does not feature in New York City Ballet's narrative of its relation to Stravinsky, *Fireworks* and *Scherzo Fantastique* initiated an extended temporal framework for Stravinsky's engagement with ballet in the US. From 1909, the year of the Paris debut of the Ballets Russes to the New York City Ballet's first Stravinsky Festival in 1972, and on into the

present, Stravinsky's music is integral to a sprawling era of ballet and modernist (specifically neoclassical) experimentation, bridging the Diaghilev and Kirstein periods. Neoclassicism innovates through its return to the past. And this is in no way a slavish return. As Lincoln Kirstein reminds us: "Stravinsky's method of revival is resuscitation through metamorphic transformation."<sup>2</sup>

Transformation is the very dynamic of tradition in modernism. Neoclassicism, as it is defined in ballet as a form of modernism, resists being classified merely as pastiche. Stravinsky proposed a method in 1923 whereby references to past composers embedded within his music came to constitute an avant-garde stance defined by its anti-impressionist qualities: "abstract, absolute, architectural, pure, concise, direct, and objective."<sup>3</sup> Fourteen years before the first Stravinsky festival Kirstein made choreographic inventiveness essential to avant-garde ballet and he connected both to the ongoing choreographic exploration of Stravinsky's music: "[Stravinsky] has led dancers since 1909; only those who follow him closely have been able to extend the repertory by amplifying the classical academic vocabulary."<sup>4</sup> The repertory whose vocabulary now must be extended is the corpus of works created by Balanchine and Robbins themselves.

The question for today is: does the relationship of Stravinsky and dance still hold the promise of a continuously innovative future for ballet? In the 1972 festival thirty-four Stravinsky works were given in one week. Balanchine created eight new works and in addition there were twenty-two premieres of ballets to Stravinsky scores.<sup>5</sup> The 2022 festival did not emulate this daring and some even said reckless enterprise. Yet it did suggest that Stravinsky is still the leader of the muses: the musical altar before which the individual choreographer must genuflect if innovation in the classical tradition is to be possible.<sup>6</sup> Why design a Stravinsky festival that includes new work, unless Kirstein's challenge to "follow" Stravinsky is still highly pertinent?

The one festival commission in 2022 was Silas Farley's *Architects of Time*. An acrostic poem Balanchine gave to Stravinsky for his birthday was set to a melody that Balanchine created and Stravinsky subsequently orchestrated. David K. Israel's score develops these materials into a new composition. This document of an exchange between the two artists, while an intriguing archival discovery, does not prove productive choreographically or conceptually. Farley does succeed in soliciting a more yielding expressive performance style of his danc-

ers, which makes them emerge on stage at times as individuals. Yet this unusual quality has no context to build upon within the framework of a limited and repetitious movement vocabulary.

One of Justin Peck's works on view in the festival, *Pulcinella Variations* (2017), although not a new commission, uses a seminal Stravinsky ballet score first choreographed by Léonide Massine. Balanchine and Robbins collaborated on their own version with an original scenario for the 1972 Stravinsky festival. The framework of *Pulcinella* is *commedia dell'arte*, and the theatricality of the Balanchine/Robbins version in 1972 is extravagant. Peck's choice of music would seem to be a very intentional gesture to place himself within the tradition to which Kirstein referred. Peck's *Pulcinella Variations*, however, does not seem to reflect upon this complex history or to work though it in a productive way. Despite the venerable score, and even because of it, the dance itself is particularly bereft of impact. Peck relies heavily on the costumes by Tsumori Chisato to do the leveraging. The many shapes and colors splashed across bodies in leotards and tights suggests the possibility of a circus or a group of acrobats, a familiar trope of this early neoclassical period. But nothing in the choreography supports this image as a lens through which to view the larger dance. This is more troubling in that Stravinsky's discovery of neoclassicism in 1919 is usually identified with *Pulcinella*. The problem is this: the crux of neoclassicism itself appears to have eluded Peck. An empty homage could be construed as the use of tradition in an exploitative sense. Has he choreographed to this score on this company simply because of his status as choreographer in residence? It is as though Peck's *Variations* ignore the neoclassical aim of revisiting an earlier century to reveal within it the core of the modern. How can these relationships be transposed to the present and how does Kirstein's call to "follow" the music facilitate this? Such associations are not explored and so nothing new takes their place, augments them, or comments upon them. The choreography, although well crafted, remains simply at the level of steps. A choreographic poetics is lacking that would orient the spectator to the work. Peck's *Scherzo Fantastique* (2016) is equally unmemorable, despite its colorful scenic design by Jules de Balincourt and its costumes by Reid Bartelme and Harriet Jung: it feels structured around a void. It lacks the phrasing so essential to Robbins's work and the musical counterpoint visualization central to Balanchine. As a dance it is highly conventional.<sup>7</sup>

It might be helpful here to think about a minor Balanchine work like the *Divertimento* from *Le Baiser de la Fée*. Drawn to musical echoes of nineteenth-century sentimentalism (Tchaikovsky as reenacted by Stravinsky), Balanchine nevertheless introduces certain gestural motifs—what Aby Warburg would call emotive formulas—able to touch a chord with the audience through their specific use of gesture in relation to the music, thus communicating an idea with a minimal narrative thread.<sup>8</sup> However well steps are put together, without some affective resonance, they communicate nothing. On the other hand, a choreographer could signal that the work is purely formal. But this was also not the case.

Kirstein defines ballet tradition in two distinct and almost contradictory ways. In one sense it means the “uninterrupted handing down of instruction.” But he also defines tradition choreographically as fundamentally interruptive: “Tradition in performance is, unlike teaching, discontinuous, always interrupted, depending upon shifts in the social structure, accidents of historic taste and revivals.”<sup>9</sup> Kirstein’s use of the term interruptive signals that choreography, unlike the ongoing study of technique, develops in a non-prescriptive manner that cannot be foreseen. If, from the dance technical perspective, ballet is a conservative discipline, it is a modernist one from the choreographic perspective. It invents unpredictably. While Kirstein implies that the modernist tradition in ballet is discontinuous because it is continuously innovative, he also recognizes that pressures from the external world play a role. In this sense, the modern is synonymous with the contemporary (a category that critics have tried desperately to wrest from the modern). Yet the modern is nonetheless the now of a previous era as well. Kirstein’s vision of choreographic progress is neither static nor academic. The goal of extending the choreographic agenda of Balanchine and Robbins into the future via Stravinsky is implicitly not only a matter of continuity with the past, but also one of overcoming past influence.

We must also put Kirstein’s remarks in their historical context. As dance historian Gay Morris argues, neoclassical ballet in the 1940s successfully challenged what was until then the vanguard status of modern dance. “[T]hrough Balanchine, ballet offered an aesthetic based on an antiliteral dance that was more stringent than what modern dance was offering by the mid-1940s.”<sup>10</sup> Dance critic Edwin Denby rejected the term neoclassicism for Balanchine in 1945: “[H]is [Balanchine’s] pres-

ent style is not an oblique neoclassicism. It is a direct new classicism.”<sup>11</sup> The idea of a new classicism epitomized the modernity of classical ballet in the postwar era by positioning it as a vanguard practice. This was credible to a large degree because of the modern and Africanist elements it appropriated. As Morris also points out, “while classicism ultimately unifies the disparate dance images, the *danse d’école* itself is constantly disrupted by anticlassical elements.”<sup>12</sup>

And when we add Morris’s observation about the dancers of the period struggling to meet the technical demands of the choreography, which was “transformed by Denby and others into American honesty and straightforwardness, and then into a national style,” one must recognize that the situation is substantially different today.<sup>13</sup> First, we don’t entertain the same unified relation to nationalism as existed in the 1940s. Second, the ambiguity between modernizing the classical and a classicization of the modern continues to be debated. Is the exchange of one for the other a sleight of hand still possible today? If not, what comes to substitute for it? The conditions under which a new classicism was trumpeted in the 1940s are not those of today from a dance technical viewpoint either. Over time dancers have learned to more than meet the choreography’s technical challenges, and it is precisely this familiarity with how to work with the music that brings our attention now back to the relation of the choreography to Stravinsky’s music. The relationship achieved at present is far more sophisticated than it was earlier, and it now calls attention to ever new possibilities. Therefore, the question of Stravinsky’s enduring importance to new work is not strictly an historical one.

Let us think for a moment about what the Balanchine/Stravinsky tradition comprises. If we consider several decades in mid-century (1928–1958), we see that Balanchine revised his choreographic approach to Stravinsky over thirty years. The *Apollo* on view today is quite different from the *Apollon Musagète* of 1928. *Orpheus* went through at least one earlier version in 1936 to the music of Gluck. In *Apollo* and *Orpheus*, Balanchine dealt with the poet in relation to dance and hence also with dance as poetry. *Agon*, the third piece of what is now performed as a trilogy, is about the contest (agon) with myth itself as it had been embodied in *Apollo* and *Orpheus*.

In *Apollo* and *Orpheus*, Balanchine stages the poet in relation to dance and hence also dance as a creative act (*poesis*). The lyre is present in both works. In *Apollo*, it is the allegorical property Terpsichore

carries above her head; in *Orpheus*, the much more imposing prop designed by Isamu Noguchi is carried about by Orpheus, so that it practically becomes a protagonist in the ballet. If Apollo relies upon his muses, Orpheus sings his poetry, thereby enchanting even the beasts: he is the poet as lyric self.<sup>14</sup> Hence, we have two myths of the poet (one a god and the other human) as well as two choreographies of the poet as dancer. But with *Agon* there is no poet personified—whether divine or human—and no myth. As is well known, a French dancing manual of 1621 served as inspiration for *Agon*. De Lauze's *Apologie de la Danse* suggested the importance of a burgeoning theatrical dance to the social order. In *Agon*, the performativity of the social order takes over from myths of origin. Kirstein wrote the following credo in 1985:

[Ballet's] active presence, artistically and economically world-wide, demands notice on the basis of its intention . . . Its floor is human morality: the consideration of men and women for each other in *action*. The extreme legibility of its language as metaphor of *order*, an ordering of humane factors, seldom visible in the workaday, external political public world, reassures and delights thinking and even apparently thoughtless audiences by the tangible results of youth disciplined as acrobats.<sup>15</sup>

In other words, dance exists in a world of human relationships where contest—agon—takes place in movement between men and men, women and women, men and women.<sup>16</sup> This formal contest is the very sign of society's order and civility. If there is a myth here, it is the myth of social order itself as served by dance.

These are the elements of what I am calling the choreographic poetics; frankly, it alone allows an audience to commune with a work. We are confronted with a contradiction. Given that choreographic poetics is virtually absent in any form from new and recent commissions but still experienced in the repertoire, we must ask whether the choreographic tradition established in the Balanchine-Stravinsky collaboration and other Balanchine works (as well as in those of Jerome Robbins) can continue to evolve, despite this absence? This question remains unanswered. The new Stravinsky works have until now been shots in the dark. Overcoming a past and moving toward a future cannot be accomplished without incorporation and digestion of the source material. If neoclassicism can be defined as an enlightened and transformative quotation, the commissioned choreographers seem by and large unequal to the task. And the absence of a choreographic

poetics further undermines these ballets.

To engineer ballet futurism in the most diverse sense may require another Kirstein at the helm: a leader who is pragmatic but takes strong aesthetic and philosophical positions, struggles to clarify ideas, excites and angers people, and in so doing orients choreography toward the future. Only such measures would serve to harmonize the conservative and avant-garde parts of the company's mission, which now appear to be at odds.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>Charles M. Joseph, *Stravinsky's Ballets* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2011), 24.

<sup>2</sup>Lincoln Kirstein, "What Ballet is About: An American Glossary," in *Ballet: Bias and Belief* (New York: Dance Horizons, 1983), 423.

<sup>3</sup>See Scott Messing, *Neoclassicism in Music. From the Genesis of the Concept Through the Schoenberg/Stravinsky Polemic* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 1988), 88.

<sup>4</sup>Lincoln Kirstein, "What Ballet is About: An American Glossary," in *Ballet: Bias and Belief* (New York: Dance Horizons, 1983), 424.

<sup>5</sup>None of the seven programs was repeated. In addition to Balanchine and Robbins, contributing choreographers included John Taras, Todd Bolender, Richard Tanner, Lorca Massine, John Clifford, and Kevin Higgenbottom (a student).

<sup>6</sup>The original Stravinsky Festival (June 18th and June 25<sup>th</sup>, 1972) was a tribute to the composer (1992-1971) one year after his death.

<sup>7</sup>Jerome Robbins choreographed a *Scherzo Fantastique* for the 1972 festival, but strangely this is passed over in silence.

<sup>8</sup>Emotive formulas are "[e]xtremes of gestural and physiognomic expression, stylized in tragic sublimity." Aby Warburg, *The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity. Contributions to the Cultural History of the European Renaissance* translated by David Britt (Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1999), 558.

<sup>9</sup>Kirstein, "What Ballet is About," 386.

<sup>10</sup>Gay Morris, *A Game for Dancers. Performing Modernism the Postwar Years, 1945-1960* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2006), 39.

<sup>11</sup>Edwin Denby, "A Note on Balanchine's Present Style," in *Dance Index* (February/March 1945), 37.

<sup>12</sup>Morris, *A Game for Dancers*, 49.

<sup>13</sup>Edwin Denby, "A Note on Balanchine's Present Style," in *Dance Index* (February/March 1945), 37.

<sup>14</sup>It might seem peculiar that the voice is a metaphor for the dancing body, but the interchangeability of voice and body was typical of thinking on dance in the early-modern period.

<sup>15</sup>Lincoln Kirstein, "Memorandum: The Future of Classical Dance in the United States" (February 4, 1985). Unpublished manuscript, Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Lincoln Kirstein Papers, ca.1913-1994, (S) \*MGZMD 123, folder 229.

<sup>16</sup>In these remarks I am grateful for conversations with Gabriele Brandstetter.