

THE BIRTH OF SYMPHONIC BALLET



Set to Tchaikovsky's *Fifth Symphony*, Léonide Massine's *Les Présages* heralded the birth of 'symphonic ballet' and provoked a storm of controversy. Valerie Lawson looks at this pivotal moment in ballet history.

Monte Carlo, winter, 1933. The idle rich congregated at the Café de Paris, newly redecorated in the art deco style. They wondered if summer would bring the regulars to the casino town by the sea – Coco Chanel's lover, the Duke of Westminster, Winston Churchill or the Aga Khan. But at the back of their minds, impossible to ignore, were much bleaker thoughts – the political tide in Germany and the economic fragility of the western world. Hitler was newly installed as chancellor, the Reichstag had gone up in flames and in the United States, Franklin D Roosevelt said of the Depression, "The only thing we have to fear is fear itself." In a decade, the principality of Monaco would be invaded, first by the Italians, then by the Germans. René Blum, the co-founder of the Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo, would be deported and end his life in Auschwitz.

Early in 1933, Blum and his associates were planning the ballet company's grand spring season at the Salle Garnier, named in honour of its architect, Charles Garnier. The opening production was to be *Les Présages*, a revolutionary new creation in four movements by the Russian choreographer and Ballets Russes' maitre de ballet, Léonide Massine. The cast was as starry as a cloudless night. Led by Nina Verchinina as Action, the second movement, Passion, was danced by fourteen-year-old Irina Baronova and David Lichine. Next was Tatiana Riabouchinska as Frivolity and Leon Woizikowsky as Fate, a figure whose frantic, martial movements anticipated the war to come. With its avant-garde decor by André Masson and a Tchaikovsky score, the premiere on April 13 was a triumph.

Massine's choreography for *Les Présages* blended devilishly difficult ballet steps with daring lifts, and stylised, angular movements of the arms and hands in the manner of Martha Graham and Mary Wigman, a dancer who formed part of the German expressive movement along with her teacher, Rudolf Laban and Kurt Jooss. Articulating the theories of Laban, Nina Verchinina explained that when she danced *Les Présages*, she was conscious that "space exists and one must feel it as a presence, and every movement is executed inside the space". But all this was merely detail in comparison to the mini volcano that erupted two months later, when the ballet was presented at the Théâtre du Châtelet in Paris.

There, *Les Présages* sparked a controversy worthy of the old Diaghilev Ballets Russes days, simply because it was danced to a symphony. Critics, musicians and angry balletomanes proclaimed that the use of a symphony for a theatrical dance work was sacrilegious. A symphony, they grumbled, was a complete and pure thing in itself. Dance despoiled its intent and perfection.

Ballets Russes historian Katherine Sorley Walker recalled the controversy as "one of the most serious pro and con discussions involving music and ballet critics and devotees that has ever resulted from any choreographic development". The debate and discussion raged for years as factions formed for and against what came to be known as 'symphonic ballet'. Choreographers Serge Lifar and George Balanchine argued that a symphony required no choreographic elucidation, although from the 1940s they used symphonies and concerti for their own ballets.

In July 1933, *Les Présages* was presented in London. There, the leading British music critic Ernest Newman was overwhelmingly in favour, finding: "It is really the music of the symphony that (Massine) has translated into a ballet, and this in such a way that, incredible as it may appear to anyone who has not seen *Les Présages*, the inner life of the work, as an organic piece of musical thinking, is not diminished but actually enhanced".

Les Présages had evolved from a few tentative, experimental ideas. In 1916 in St Petersburg, choreographer Fyodor Lopukhov maintained that dance steps could parallel and reflect musical structure and tonality. In 1923 at the Maryinsky Theatre, he presented *Dance Symphony* to Beethoven's *Fourth Symphony*. Among the dancers was George Balanchine.

Early twentieth century dance pioneer Isadora Duncan used concert music as the foundation of her work, although the use of such 'pure' music, written to be played and heard, was considered "radical, offensive, and even sacrilegious to traditionalists", wrote Duncan's biographer, Peter Kurth.

The creation of an abstract choreographic counterpart to the structure of music had a precedent in Massine's *Perpetomobile* of 1928, according to Massine's biographer Vicente Garcia Marquez. "Indeed many of his earlier ballets contained the seeds that blossomed into *Les Présages*: choreographic counterpoint, asymmetry, juxtaposition of styles, contrast between the qualities of weight and lightness, mass movement, abstraction".

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Massine himself explained how he drew his inspiration for the ballet from a visit to ancient Sicilian ruins. In his autobiography *My Life in Ballet*, he wrote of his interest in the mass and volume of the structures, along with their blending of rounded and angular forms. "Ever since my visit to Sicily I had been pondering over the problem of how one could create a correct ballet interpretation of a symphonic work. I felt that Tchaikovsky's Fifth Symphony ... could provide me with the right material on which to base my experiment."

"I envisaged my interpretation as corresponding in balletic form to the symphony in musical form. In short, I was taking on myself the responsibility of interpreting the meaning of Tchaikovsky's symphony through plastic statement, exposition and denouement".

In the words of Massine's biographer, *Les Présages* was "ballet's turning point, ushering in the currently accepted aesthetic of abstraction and non-representational dance". Massine went on to create two more ballets to symphonic works, the first being *Choreartium*, danced to Brahms' *Symphony No. 4 in E Minor*. British writer Arnold Haskell believed that *Choreartium* represented "the birth and the triumph of pure dancing ... now no music is beyond the reach of ballet".

Massine's third symphonic ballet *Symphonie Fantastique*, to Berlioz's symphony of the same name, followed three years later. Again, the critics argued passionately for and against the use of symphonic music for ballets. The most sympathetic, Fernau Hall, wrote that Massine's innovation was already making an impact on such choreographers as Agnes de Mille and Antony Tudor.

Les Présages came to Australia with the first Ballets Russes tour of 1936, where it was an immediate success. *The Argus*, the newspaper of the day, pronounced it a "virile, provocative, iconoclastic ballet" and "a thorough going piece of callisthenic abstraction" which roused the audience to a pitch of frenzy.

Choreartium and *Symphonie Fantastique* followed in the 1938 Ballets Russes tour, with the latter chosen by public ballot to be among the ballets in the final performance of the Melbourne season. Sorley Walker, who wrote a history of the Ballets Russes, saw Massine's "gift to the future as ballets that had no purpose other than to parallel or extend the subtleties of the score, a novel approach that has become a commonly accepted definition of choreography ..."

Les Présages also set a precedent in its second movement pas de deux, lighting the way for countless twentieth century romantic pas de deux that have no raison d'être but the dancing itself. Among the choreographers who created such pas de deux for symphonic or concerto ballets was Frederick Ashton, a former student of Massine.

PREVIOUS PAGE
David Lichine as The Hero (on floor), Tatiana Riabouchinska as Frivolity & Nina Verchinina
Photography – Hugh P. Hall collection 1939-1940
National Library of Australia nla.pic-vn3915162

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Curtain call with David Lichine, Tamara Toumanova, Tatiana Riabouchinska & Nina Verchinina in *Les Présages*, Colonel W. de Basil's Covent Garden Russian Ballet, Melbourne 1940 • Photography – Hugh P. Hall collection 1939-1940 National Library of Australia nla.pic-vn3915167

Choreartium The Australian Ballet archive
Photography – Nanette Kuen

Those who know Ashton's choreography will be fascinated to see in *Les Présages* one of his trademark movements – the ballerina being lifted by her partner and walking on air. Some critics have also seen echoes of *Les Présages'* arm movements in Ashton's *Symphonic Variations* and Balanchine's *Stravinsky Symphony in Three Movements*. One footnote on the influence of *Les Présages* is the spectacular moment when the ballerina stands in profile, in arabesque, and is lifted in that position into the air. Forever after, this lift was known as the 'présage' lift.

Like many of Massine's ballets, *Les Présages* was mothballed for decades – until Rudolf Nureyev invited Tatiana Leskova to revive it for the Paris Opera Ballet in the 1980s. The Joffrey Ballet in the United States followed suit, along with the Dutch National Ballet. Now, The Australian Ballet is showing how Massine's once risky choices led to the harmonious marriage of music and dance for future generations.

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Kirsty Martin, *Les Présages* – Photography Justin Smith