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# Ballet Review



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**Elizabeth Souritz on the Young Balanchine in Russia**

On the cover: Mark Morris' *Festival Dance*.

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Cover photo by Tom Brazil: Mark Morris' *Festival Dance*.

# Balanchine in Russia

Elizabeth Souritz

Balanchine, as we know, left Russia in July 1924. The years 1921-1924, which were his formative ones, were also an important period for Russian art in general. Even during the first years after the revolution of 1917, when everyone suffered terrible deprivations – cold and hunger – artistic life was never interrupted. On the contrary, avant-garde artists took advantage of the new freedoms. Even greater opportunities were offered when the NEP (new economic policy) was inaugurated in 1921. That was the moment when Balanchine graduated from the Imperial Theaters school.

Balanchine's years in Russia have been well researched in the United States. *Ballet Review* has published several articles, including in 1975-76 a substantial piece by Yuri Slonimsky, who knew Balanchine personally. I think these reminiscences were never published fully, even in Russia: only the small part that Slonimsky inserted into his 1984 book *Chudesnoye Bylo Riadom s Nami* (The Miracle Was Right Next to Us). Some portions of the Mikhail Mikhailov book, *Life in Ballet* (1966), have also been published in the States.

A lot of investigating by people in different countries (including Russia) was done for the early dances listed in *Choreography by George Balanchine: A Catalogue of Works* (1984, now on the Internet). We have in English the memoirs of Tamara Geva and of Alexandra Danilova. Solomon Volkov interviewed the choreographer for *Balanchine's Tchaikovsky*, and Francis Mason published *I Remember Balanchine* (which reprints the Slonimsky). There is not much to add to this.

Of course the most important influence on the young Balanchine was the ballet school and the Theater of Opera and Ballet, now once again called Maryinsky. At the time the company still had in its repertory many of the

great nineteenth-century ballets: the Tchaikovsky and Glazunov ballets, also *Giselle*, *Le Corsaire*, and *Esmeralda* plus Fokine's ballets. And during the time that Balanchine worked in the company, there were important revivals of the ballets that suffered during the difficult years of civil war, when most of the great dancers of the Imperial Ballet went abroad.

Balanchine had the opportunity to dance in the Fyodor Lopukhov revivals of the *The Sleeping Beauty* and *Raymonda* (both 1922) and *The Nutcracker* (1923). He also not only watched performances by the great Olga Spessivtzeva, but danced with the lovely Elisaveta Gerdt, whose style must have had a strong influence on him. It was classical dancing at its purest, all beauty and harmony, performed with no attempt at dramatization.

Balanchine thus acquired the best in ballet that Russia possessed, but he also had the opportunity to watch, and even participate in, important experiments. The time just before Balanchine left Russia was extraordinarily rich in achievements in all the arts. It is important to remember that during the time Balanchine worked at the GOTOB (Maryinsky), Lopukhov staged some of his important work: *The Firebird* (1921), the dance-symphony *Magnificence of the Universe* (1923), and *Night on Bald Mountain* (1924).

I went through the Petrograd newspapers to discover what Balanchine might have seen during 1921-1924. At the beginning of the 1920s there were many exhibitions by avant-garde artists, for example, at the Museum of Art Culture at Isaakiyevsky Square. This museum hosted concerts of modern music, Casimir Malevich and Vladimir Tatlin spoke there, and performances by theater groups were given: Sergei Radlov's group performed a play by Velimir Khlebnikov, *Zangesi*, with sets by Matiushin and Malevich, in October 1922.

Balanchine worked with Radlov in 1923 on a play by Ernest Toller, *Hinkemann* (called in Russia *Eugene the Unfortunate*). Balanchine also probably saw productions staged by the three greatest Russian theater directors of the time – Vsevolod Meyerhold, Alexander Tairov, and



Lydia Ivanova and Nicholas Efimov in a Balanchine pas de deux, c. 1923.

Evgeny Vakhtangov – whose companies performed in Petrograd in 1922–1924 with important plays: *The Magnanimous Cuckold* and *Give us Europe* (Meyerhold), *Phèdre* and *Giroflé-Girofla* (Tairov), *Turandot* and *The Dybbuk* for the Jewish Habimah Theater (Vakhtangov).

We know that Balanchine was associated with the FEKS (Factory of the Eccentric Actor) that staged plays in Petrograd in fall 1922 and in 1923. Balanchine and his dancers worked with Vsevolod Vsevolodsky-Gerngross, who had an experimental Ethnographical Theater that used the hall of the former Duma in the Nevsky Prospect. It is in this hall that Balanchine's Young Ballet gave some of its own

performances, including participation in the chanting of Alexander Blok's poem "The Twelve" in 1923.

Of course, just as important for Balanchine were the dance performances by groups that worked in studios and did experimental choreography. There were an especially large number of these in Moscow, which Balanchine may have seen when he traveled there, but some troupes came to Petrograd and gave performances there. Also he must have heard about groups such as Vera Maya's, with her acrobatic dances in the early 1920s; Inna Chernetskaya, who flirted with Ausdruckstanz; and Ludmila Alexeyeva, who developed Isado-

ra Duncan's ideas. Isadora herself danced in Petrograd in February 1922, while her school (under Irma) performed there in May 1923.

Another group Balanchine very likely saw because we know that they gave performances in Petrograd was Lev Lukin's Free Ballet, in April 1924. Lukin was a dilettante in dance (he had had no academic training) but a professional musician who used Skriabin and Prokofiev for his études. They were highly emotional, with a hint of eroticism, for which he was soon to be strongly attacked.

Working alongside Balanchine in Petrograd were the Heptachor group, which derived from Duncan, and the studios of Tamara Glebova and Zinaida Verbova. But the greatest influences on Balanchine were two groups: Kasian Goleizovsky's Chamber Ballet, which came in 1922 with a large repertory of the most famous Goleizovsky works, like *The Faun*, *Salome*, and so forth; and to perhaps a lesser extent Nikolai Foregger's Mastfor (Workshop) with its "machine dances."

The years 1921-1923 were rich in experimental dance, but by 1924 one senses official pressure becoming stronger. On August 24, 1924 (about six weeks after Balanchine had left Russia) a decree was issued that mandated the closing of all private dance schools and studios. Of course, many managed to survive by attaching themselves to state institutions. In Moscow, one of these was GAKhN (State Academy of Art Science), which did a lot of research on experimental dance. It, too, was closed five years later.

Lukin's company did not survive 1924; Goleizovsky's closed in 1925. Other choreographers had to change to a different kind of dance or movement, for example, Vera Maya to folk dance and comic sketches, and Ludmila Alexeyeva to so-called "harmonious gymnastics." (Sports were acceptable while experimental dance was not.) What a blessing then that Balanchine already had left for the West.

\*

For the next forty years, ballet in Russia and ballet in the West developed quite independently. In the 1960s, when things in Russia be-

gan to change, sometimes it meant reverting to ideas from the 1920s. What Bernard Taper, probably using Balanchine's own account, tells us about Balanchine's 1962 visit to Russia is very important: He saw the Goleizovsky *Skriabiniana* and was profoundly disappointed. It was more or less the same as what had been performed in the 1920s, and for Balanchine it was incredibly old-fashioned, obsolete. He had moved so far in those forty years, but Goleizovsky, because of his circumstances, had hardly any opportunity to develop his style.

Balanchine's return in 1962 was to a country that had little in common with the one he knew in his youth. He had come at an important moment in Russian politics, Russian art, and Russian ballet. The end of the 1950s was the time of the so-called "thaw" (*ottepel'*), the first years after Stalin's death in 1953, after the Twentieth Party Congress in February 1956, when Khrushchev denounced the "cult of personality" of Stalin. Things were changing, but the changes went rather slowly, especially in foreign affairs.

In the 1960s, the Cold War that began at the end of the 1940s was still in force, even at its height. It was in 1962, exactly at the time when New York City Ballet was in Russia, that the Cuban Missile Crisis occurred. To understand the tenor of the times, I looked through newspapers that appeared in autumn 1962, especially *Pravda*, the principal paper of the Communist Party. Now, all these years later, we have forgotten the journalistic style of the time, the rhetoric used. It is a very special language, which is now bewildering, a kind of Soviet slang. Enormous headlines: "Hands Off Cuba!" "Stop the Imperialist Plot!" "Pirate Aggression That All Free Nations Condemn," "Destroy the Schemes of the War-Mongers!" and so forth.

At the same time, new ideas were emerging in Russia, especially among the intelligentsia, although some events of 1962 show that all kinds of people believed that the changes had brought them new freedom, and they dared take advantage of it. I am referring

to the uprising of the workers in the town of Novocherkassk to protest the rise of prices. They soon found out that it was not as they expected because they were shot at by troops and several demonstrators were killed.

More or less the same thirst for freedom was happening in the arts. People connected with art wanted to see beyond the Iron Curtain, while the officials were trying to stifle them. There was a strong desire to investigate, to understand, to discuss. The movement of the so-called “dissidents” came into being. Young people gathered at the monument to Mayakovsky and poets read their poems. One listened to the radio broadcasts of Svoboda (Freedom) and “German wave.” One read the *samizdat* (self-published books of forbidden works like Pasternak’s novel *Doctor Zhivago*) and passed the copies on. One listened to the songs of Bulat Okudjava and Vladimir Vysotsky. There were important events in officialdom, too. Stravinsky came to Russia for the first time in forty years, and his music was played (it had not been played there since the 1930s). Of course, the choice of the music performed was supervised and had to be approved by the officials.

Also in 1962 the first Solzhenitsyn story, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (about the Gulag), was published in a Soviet magazine, *Novy Mir* (New World). But this was an exception, which happened because the editor of the journal, Alexander Tvardovsky, known as one of the most influential Soviet poets, managed to open his magazine to the freethinkers of the 1960s. Just two years earlier, Pasternak had died still persecuted, and *Doctor Zhivago*, which had been published abroad in 1957 and for which he was forced to refuse the Nobel Prize, was still banned in Russia, and not published there until 1988.

For the first time in nearly forty years there were at last some exhibitions of foreign modern painters that in the past were hardly ever mentioned, as they were considered “non-realistic.” The very year Balanchine came there was an exhibition of Fernand Léger and at some point also one of Marc Chagall.

But on the whole the changes were slow and, what is more, the end of the “thaw” was soon to come. One important event in 1962 was the exhibition at the hall of the Manezh in December, which celebrated the thirtieth anniversary of the Moscow department of the Artist’s Union. For the first time in many years, works of avant-garde artists were exhibited: old ones who had been banished from everywhere for years, like Robert Falk or Vladimir Tatlin, and young ones trying to work in a style different from the officially proclaimed Socialist Realism.

Of course, there were people in the Artist’s Union (especially some of the most famous from the previous period who had benefited from their adherence to the Communist Party) who wanted the exhibition to be denounced as harmful. They knew Khrushchev’s taste and his ignorance in arts, and whispered in his ear that “terrible trash” and some anti-Soviet kind of art was being exhibited.

Khrushchev came and made a scene, shouting, “You really mean *this* to be painting?! What does that sculpture represent? I don’t understand! This is Kremlin? Then where are the merlons on the walls? Why does this factory have three chimneys?” He declared that “instead of painting, all these people should work at tree-felling.” Khrushchev was not alone, there were other officials and someone even said that this is “pederasty in art. And if pederasts get ten years in prison, why not these artists?”

In ballet we did not have such events because ballet was confined to state theaters, and there it was not possible to show works very different from the ones approved by the Ministry of Culture. (A performance could be shown to the public only after a special “commission” had given permission.) Nevertheless, things were happening in ballet.

Since the end of the 1940s and especially in the 1950s there were two groups fighting. Quite a large number of choreographers, dancers, and especially critics and researchers were not satisfied with the *drambalet* (a full-length story ballet where dance was allocated a sec-

ondary place and the plot presented exactly as it would be in a drama performance). This was the kind of ballet that not only prevailed throughout the 1930s and 1940s, but was also considered the only acceptable form.

Those who criticized *drambalet* found strong opposition from its adherents and party officials. The most active and aggressive person was the choreographer Rostislav Zakharov, who not only staged ballets and operas, but also wrote books and articles, insisting that this was the only type of ballet in accordance with the method of Socialist Realism. And of course, everything that was not Socialist Realism should be condemned – especially the “decadent” Western art.

Zakharov also often used political weapons against his opponents. Those who thought differently were called worshippers of the West, imperialist accomplices that undermined the Soviet ideology. And these accusations, while ridiculous, at a certain point could become quite dangerous, for example, in the years 1948 and 1949 at the time when there was a crusade against the so-called “cosmopolites.”

Certainly in the 1960s the situation was different. But still Zakharov was quite influential, not so much owing to his productions as to the speeches he gave and the articles he wrote. He was also the powerful head of the choreography department of the Theater Institute (GITIS). He produced many accusations against the articles and books by Vera Krassovskaya, Yuri Slonimsky, Poel Karp, and others. He also criticized the first ballet dictionary compiled in Russia (*Vse o Ba-lete*, All About Ballet, 1965), on which I worked with Slonimsky. We were reproached for giving too much information on foreign ballet and not enough on Soviet companies.

There were also at that time official discussions arranged by the Theater Union or the Ministry of Culture, where the confrontation between these two groups – those clinging to the *drambalet* and those who demanded change – was apparent. One can read in a brochure, “The Musical Theater and Contemporary Life,” some of the statements made during

these sessions. (The booklet was published in 1962. Neither Balanchine nor any other foreign choreographer is mentioned. It would not do to refer to foreign productions as an example of what Soviet ballet was striving to achieve.) But in the 1960s the *drambalet* approach met with increasingly sharp criticism by dance writers, choreographers, and dancers. One said that the importance of a ballet production was not only in its plot, but also in its dancing.

Those who insisted on changes were at last given the opportunity to show what they could do. The breakthrough came when Yuri Grigorovich produced his *Stone Flower* (1957) and *Legend of Love* (1961), and at nearly the same time Igor Belsky his *Coast of Hope* (1959) and *The Leningrad Symphony* (1961). Of course, all these ballets were produced before New York City Ballet came to Russia and were the result of processes going on in Soviet ballet. But the influence of the companies from the West was also of some importance.

These companies began coming in the late 1950s, the Paris Opera Ballet being the first in 1958, then American Ballet Theatre in 1960 and the Royal Ballet in 1961. As a matter of fact, two of these companies had Balanchine works in their repertory: the Paris Opera Ballet’s *Le Palais de Cristal* and ABT’s *Theme and Variations*. The first was very well received; the second left the audience indifferent. That was all that could be seen of Balanchine’s works before 1962. Likewise, if one wanted to read about him, there was next to nothing, or only criticism.

What did we know at that time about Balanchine? Not much. I think it was very seldom that the newspaper connected with art, *Sovietskaya Kultura* (Soviet Culture), reviewed any ballet productions in the United States. I have come across one review of a Balanchine work, *Till Ulenspiegel* (from April 2, 1952), and quite a revealing one. A photo was published of Jerome Robbins in the title role dancing with a skeleton. The accompanying text said, “This production of the New York City Ballet, which the reactionary newspaper the *New*

*York Times* claims to be a success, is a vivid example of the depth of degradation to which bourgeois art has fallen. These American ignoramuses in the arts treat with contempt the great works that mankind is proud of [meaning probably Charles de Coster's eponymous novel]."

If one wanted to get information about Balanchine one had to turn to the *Theater Encyclopedia* (published in 1961). In its article on Balanchine (signed by Natalia Roslavleva) one reads about *Concerto Barocco*, *The Crystal Palace*, and *Ballet Imperial* that they are "distinguished by the sharpness particular to Balanchine and at the same time have a formalistic character" ("formalistic," by the way, was very strong criticism!). About his abstract ballets of the 1950s, "they are over-refined, sophisticated and erotic." About his versions of the Tchaikovsky ballets, that he "distorted the meaning of the music."

The New York City Ballet tour was part of the official cultural exchange between the United States and the Soviet Union, part of Cold War politics. While the Americans danced in Russia, the Bolshoi dancers performed in America. For this reason, the press had to abide by certain rules. You could not write anything like the above-quoted insulting paragraph, nothing abusive; you had to remember that they were official guests. At the same time there was the Soviet ideology to be taken into consideration. You had to impress upon the reader that here was something not as good as our own product, but also that any good part was the result of past Russian influence.

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On October 9, 1962, the New York City Ballet tour began. We all looked forward to it. I remember perfectly well the long lines in the square by the Bolshoi where we stood for hours, talking to friends who were also all there and making new friends. Seats were cheap, even for foreign tours, so the problem was not of having the money to buy a ticket, but of getting one, if possible a good seat because what was offered for sale were gener-

ally not the best: those went to ministries, embassies, and the like. Still, the audience, especially when the company moved from the Bolshoi to the Palace of the Congresses, was quite democratic: people really interested in seeing something new, not just the bosses.

I have looked through many reviews written during the tour (one I myself wrote). The first program (on October 9 at the Bolshoi) consisted of *Serenade*, *Agon*, *Western Symphony*, and *Interplay*. Of course, *Pravda* was the first to give a signal to every other newspaper and critic, so that they would know what they should write.

The next day *Pravda* offered its pronouncement by asking two famous artistic personalities (who were sure to say what they were asked to say!) – the ballerina Olga Lepeshinskaya and the composer Aram Khatchaturian – to give their opinion about what they had seen. Both claimed to be interested and praised the company on its dance technique, but had reservations about the content of the ballets: "Of course we cannot accept everything that was shown. Many things are not close to our heart," said the ballerina. "The only shortcoming of the American company is the lack of a story line," said the composer.

Thus the pattern was set: you could praise the dancers, even say that the choreographer was skillful in imagining movements, especially if you stressed that he has been brought up "in the great Russian tradition," but you should criticize him for adhering to the plotless kind of ballet.

This was what most critics wrote, some because they were told to do so, many (and this I want to stress) because they really did think it was "alien to our art." In every city in which the company performed (Moscow, Leningrad, Kiev, Tbilisi) there were many reviews. The most important reviewers were Zakharov (in *Vechernyaya Moskva*, *Evening Moscow*), Mikhail Gabovich (in *Sovietskaya Kultura*, *Soviet Culture*), Boris Lvov-Anokhin (in the appendix to *Izvestia-Nedelya*, *The Week*), musicologists like Marina Sabinina (in *Soviet Music*) and some less-eminent critics like Nikolay Eliash



or Anna Ilupina. (In the Soviet era we did not have critics attached to newspapers. Whenever a review was needed, the editor chose the person he thought would be the best – a professional critic or someone working in the field.)

Balanchine gave a long interview at the end of October to the newspaper *Sovietsky Artist* (Soviet Art Worker), an organ of the Bolshoi Theater. Later it was reprinted in *Sovietskaya Musika* (Soviet Music, January 1963).

It is clear that the one who spoke most harshly against Balanchine's ballets was Zakharov, on October 11 after the first program. Compared to what he wrote in his books about young Soviet choreographers and critics, it was rather mild criticism. He noted the precision and discipline of the dancers, their fine technique. But to him Balanchine's works were a "vivid example of Western 'modern ballet'" (a favorite phrase he always used as an accusation, an expletive). He condemned Balanchine for "adhering to the principle of purely formal quests unacceptable in Soviet ballet." He insisted that ballet should be based on subject matter, a dance plot. With *Serenade* he found it impossible to describe the content of the work. *Agon* for him was "closer to mathematics than dance" and "addressed the mind, leaving the heart cold."

Of the same opinion were some of the older dancers of the Bolshoi who wrote in the Bolshoi's *Sovietsky Artist*. Nikolai Gerber, on October 26, said that Balanchine's dances were just "a collection of movements that have no content." Others also wrote about the "dehumanization" of the dance and that "the objectivity that Balanchine advocates is alien to us," that "many of his aesthetic convictions raise strong objections."

The most thoughtful newspaper reviews were by Mikhail Gabovich, who is not well known in the West. He was a dancer at the Bolshoi who often partnered Ulanova (for example, in the film *Romeo and Juliet*). But he also wrote about classical dancing and published many articles in support of the young choreographers of the 1960s. He published two ar-

ticles, after the first program (October 13) and at the end of the tour (November 1). He gives an explanation of the Balanchine style and shows its place in the history of ballet: the Petipa ensembles, *Les Sylphides*, Lopukhov's works. He speaks of Balanchine's "creative genius," of the "meaningful beauty" of the plotless ballets, saying that ballets made on symphonic music have a right to exist. Yet even for him, in *Episodes* some poses and movements are "antiaesthetic."

This shows to what point we were imbued with official ideology. That is why I said that what the critics wrote was not always because they were not allowed to give any other opinion, but also because that really was the way they thought. I know this from my personal experience.

I was asked by the magazine *Teatr* (Theater) to write about New York City Ballet after the end of the tour was over. In preparation, I interviewed Balanchine, Lincoln Kirstein, and some of the dancers. About my conversation with Balanchine I remember that it was in his hotel room, and there were flowers on the table. To the inevitable question, "What are your ballets about?" he showed me a rose and asked, "What is this rose about? It is just a rose and it is beautiful. Same with ballet." I was very excited about what I heard from him – not realizing it was something he repeated to everyone – but at the time it probably did not add much to my knowledge of his art.

Now that I have reread my own article, I am amazed at what I wrote, and at my lack of understanding. On the whole, the article contains much praise, but also it has remarks that point to complete ignorance. For example, I wrote that *Theme and Variations* was a failure because the choreographer did not show through dance the emotions contained in the music. *Episodes* was an interesting experiment but just a sketch for some future ballet, and I thought it should not yet have been shown to the public.

I can't remember that I was told to write this or that. *Teatr* was one of the most independent and professional magazines, not like

a newspaper meant for a broad public. So probably these really were my impressions. I mention this article of mine not because it is of any value, but because it shows what we were taught to think and what our mentality was.

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A few words about the influence of Balanchine on Soviet ballet. The 1960s and 1970s were a very important period in Soviet ballet. Young choreographers took over and produced many new works: Grigorovich with the ballets that succeeded *The Stone Flower*, such as *The Legend of Love*, *Spartacus*, and his new versions of the classics; Belsky with *Coast of Hope* and *Leningrad Symphony*; Vinogradov with his new version of *Romeo and Juliet* and with *Yaroslavna*; Natalia Kassatkina with *Heroic Poem*, *Le Sacre de Printemps*, and *The Creation of the World*; Nikolai Boyarchikov, Georgy Alexidze, and many others.

Choreographers of the older generation who were not encouraged during the 1930-1950s because their ideas were not in accordance with *drambalet* got the opportunity to do new works: Fyodor Lopukhov, Kasian Goleizovsky, and Leonid Yakobson with *The Twelve* after Alexander Blok, *The Bed-bug* after Mayakovsky, and his *Choreographic Miniatures*.

Many of the works produced during these years are of real importance to Russian ballet. Certainly the influence of Balanchine's choreography had something to do with it – not only Balanchine's, but all the works shown in Russia during the 1960s when foreign companies began touring there. They opened new horizons to Soviet choreographers, dancers, and even audiences, liberalized the artistic effort of those working in the arts toward new forms of expression.

The influence was even greater because some of the choreography that was seen corresponded to what the new Russian genera-

tion of choreographers was already aspiring to: ballets where music was of prime importance, ballets of one act, ballets that were all dance. What was the result of this influence? To begin with, one saw that there are different kinds of ballets, different kinds of dance (because soon “modern dance” companies also came to Russia), and that there was freedom of choice. This was important in itself. Then, some choreographers started to imitate what they had seen.

Unfortunately, this did not always produce good results. At a certain point, especially in the 1970s, dozens of plotless ballets emerged. Second-rate choreographers found it much easier to take any music and make dancers move to this music in indifferent patterns, as in any ballet exercise. That way, the choreographer did not need a writer for the libretto, a composer to compose music, leotards would do in place of costumes, and at the same time he was considered “up to date” and probably really imagined himself another Balanchine.

This was what went wrong with the idea of imitating New York City Ballet with a paucity of imagination, choreographers not being capable of “thinking” in terms of dance. There were only a few who understood Balanchine's style and were talented enough to work in it. One of them, Georgy Alexidze (also a Georgian), produced on the Leningrad Chamber Ballet from 1966 to 1968 several programs of various sixteenth- to eighteenth-century composers, for the Kirov Ballet Prokofiev's *Scythian Suite* and a concerto by Vivaldi, and in the 1980s, when he worked in Perm, he also choreographed his own *Mozartiana*.

As to companies introducing Balanchine ballets into their repertory, that came much later, in the 1980s. Now, of course, Balanchine's ballets are danced all over Russia – especially in Petersburg and Perm.