Fall 2012

Ballet Review

Cover Photograph by Costas: Karl Paquette in *Giselle* at Lincoln Center Festival 2012.

Serenade. (Photo: Paul Kolnik, New York City Ballet)

Serenade: From *Giselle* to Georgia

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George Balanchine's earliest surviving works, including *Apollo* and *Prodigal Son*, created for the Diaghilev ballet in 1928 and 1929, respectively, and *Serenade*, the first work created in North America (in 1934), look very different from the works Balanchine created in subsequent decades. It's no surprise to see stages of development in the work of a prolific creative artist, and especially one who would author some four hundred ballets.

Yet the mythology of Balanchine's genius has generally placed these early works in a rather undifferentiated drawer of early masterpieces, without bothering to speculate on the qualities that identify them as belonging to one period or style or another, or how they might differ from works created not long after them.

Leaving aside the question of costumes and decor – *de rigueur* in the Diaghilev ballet, but too costly to play a prominent role in much later Balanchine choreography – the three works I've mentioned are far more episodic than later ones. They have more stops and starts than one sees in the more seamless later choreography.

They are also more pictorial and contain an abundance of visual information: dancers grouped in poses on the stage (*Apollo*) and visual metaphors that function iconically in the works (*Apollo, Prodigal Son*). Many of these could be interpreted as intertextual references, but they also reveal much about Balanchine's transition from a more narrative style of choreography for Diaghilev and others in Europe to the pure dance or abstract works most associated with Balanchine's North American repertory.

In this context, *Serenade* functions as a kind of hinge between Balanchine's Diaghilev and American repertories. He created the work for his first group of North American students in 1934. The work debuted outdoors, and had premieres in Hartford in December and New York City in March of the following year. The work remains a repertory staple of Balanchine's company, New York City Ballet, and its genesis has been mythologized as a founding moment in the history of ballet in the United States.

Balanchine was careful to describe the choices he made in choreographing *Serenade* as born of necessity, from the numbers of dancers in each of the sections to the soloist's falls that punctuate the work. By the 1950s, Balanchine, and those who spoke for him, began to characterize this ballet as a quintessentially modernist work in which the choreographer made use of movement that functioned as "found" choreography, much as twentieth-century visual artists and composers incorporated ordinary objects and natural sounds in their artworks.

"It seemed to me that the best way to make students aware of stage technique was to give them something new to dance, something they had never seen before. I chose Tchaikovsky's *Serenade* to work with. The class contained, the first night, seventeen girls and no boys. . . .

"That was how *Serenade* began. The next class contained only nine girls; the third, six. I choreographed to the music with the pupils I happened to have at a particular time. . . . One day, when all the girls rushed off the floor area we were using as a stage, one of the girls fell and began to cry. . . . I kept this bit in the dance. Another day, one of the girls was late for class, so I left that in too. . . .

"Later . . . I elaborated on the small accidental bits I had included in class and made the whole more dramatic, more theatrical, synchronizing it to the music with additional movement, but always using the little things that ordinarily might be overlooked." (George Balanchine and Francis Mason, *Balanchine's Complete Stories of the Great Ballets*, 1977, pp. 531-32).

This excerpt tells us how the choreographer arrived at the number of dancers in some of

New York City Ballet at Covent Garden in 1950. (Photo: Roger Wood)

the ballet's sections and how the falls became part of the ballet's choreography. But the choreographer doesn't reveal how he made the ballet more dramatic or theatrical, or where motivation for many of the ballet's distinctive movements, groupings, or patterns originated.

One source for *Serenade*'s choreography – and especially its atmosphere – would be obvious to most balletgoers. The second act of the ballet *Giselle* takes place in a moonlit set-

ting with a corps of female dancers in long pale dresses. A few men enter the stage, as intruders, but the act's most important choreographic set piece – the *grand pas des Wilis* – is a dance for the female ensemble.

There is a clear choreographic allusion to *Giselle* when the first fall occurs in *Serenade*. A soloist in the first movement of the Balanchine ballet seems to swoon and falls to the ground, and the ensemble gathers around her in a semicircle. A similar grouping re-

of women around her clearly recall both the events and the choreography of *Giselle*, as well as the falls of numerous other ballet heroines, from Giselle's predecessor, the Sylphide, to the Chosen Maiden in Nijinsky's *Rite of Spring*. When a choreographer borrows and recombines bits of choreography from other ballets, as Balanchine does with his allusions to *Giselle*, new stories emerge, and devices like the falls in *Serenade* take on structural as well as narrative functions.

In the final moment of *Serenade*'s Russian Dance (Tchaikovsky's "Tema Russo"), a group of dancers runs from the stage, but one falls and is left behind. As the ballet's final section (the Elegy) begins, a man and woman enter the stage and approach the fallen dancer. The woman follows the man, but shades his eyes – a highly symbolic gesture seen in many later Balanchine works. When they reach the fallen dancer, they reach down to her, and she raises her arms to meet them.

Near the end of the ballet, this dancer falls once again. After she completes a series of turns her partner catches her and puts her gently down on the stage. The second woman returns, completing a stage picture very similar to the one they formed at the beginning of the Elegy. The musicologist Solomon Volkov has compared this second pose to the sculptural grouping on Tchaikovsky's tomb in St. Petersburg, where an angel with outspread wings grips the cross behind the bust of the composer.

Yet this grouping also recalls a moment in *Giselle*. Near the end of the ballet, when the Wilis force Albrecht, Giselle's beloved, to dance to his death, he collapses near the front of the stage. Giselle approaches him from behind to urge him to stand and continue dancing. In most productions, she presses his raised hand to her breast. Balanchine reverses this pose in *Serenade*: now the woman lies onstage while the man holds her raised arm.

At the end of *Giselle*, early morning light breaks the Wilis' spell and saves Albrecht from their curse; Giselle's love has saved him. At the end of *Serenade*, the woman who has

peats near the beginning and end of the grand pas of the Wilis in *Giselle*, when the corps de ballet forms a similar half circle on the ground.

The fall of the ballerina furnished a narrative climax in nineteenth-century ballets, much like mad scenes lent nineteenth-century operas their most melodramatic moments. And despite Balanchine's claims in *The Complete Stories* that *Serenade* has no "concealed story" (p. 532), the soloist's fall and the group

fallen is lifted by three male dancers and carried off into a shaft of light that shines from the rear of the stage. Like the poses discussed above, the ending of *Serenade* rewrites and reverses the ending of *Giselle*. The final stage picture in *Serenade* suggests death or transfiguration, but of the heroine, in the absence of a hero.

These falls that interrupt Balanchine's choreography – at the end of the first movement, at the end of the third, and finally, in the ballet's closing section – furnish more than mere subtexts to another work; they also give the ballet structure and closure. They arrest the work's flow, providing transitions to the slower tempi and the more intimate choreography that follows each fall. Even if we allow Balanchine's conceit – that these falls represent mere accidents, "found" objects incorporated into the work of art with no reference whatever to another, iconic ballet – as plot devices they represent an ingenious combination of spontaneity and order. They are formal devices masked as chance elements.

It is possible to read these moments in *Serenade* as a delightfully anachronistic example of romantic irony in the ballet, to borrow a term from literary studies, where romantic irony denotes authorial self-consciousness, an open acknowledgment of the author's role and a gentle mocking of the art form's conventions. Balanchine's choreographic intrusions are not dissimilar from those of *Tristam Shandy*'s narrator in their direct address to the reader. And although Balanchine likely never stepped out onstage during a performance of *Serenade*, he imposes himself onto our viewings and readings of the work through a series of statements about the work – an unusual practice for a choreographer who professed to loathe talking about his creations.

The choreographer's rearrangement of Tchaikovsky's score is a more obvious intervention that constitutes an unusual practice for a modernist choreographer and son of a composer who regularly affirmed his faithfulness to the score. The transfer of Tchaikov-

sky's finale to the penultimate place in the work provides the sense of flux that helps to define romantic irony as Anne K. Mellor does in *English Romantic Irony* (1980).

A conversation with Karin von Aroldingen, the German-born NYCB ballerina who became Balanchine's confidante in the last decades of his life, revealed that Balanchine kept a Russian translation of the arch-romantic German author E. T. A. Hoffmann's tales by his bedside table. That lifelong fascination with Hoffmann, and the sense, in Edwin Denby's terms, of the floor moving beneath one's feet in some of Balanchine's most fervidly romantic works, suggests that reading *Serenade* as romantic irony might not be far off, but the more intriguing feature of Balanchine's works is the multivalence of their symbols, the many layers of meaningful connections they offer the viewer.

There is another dance featuring a fall that surely inspired some of the choreographic devices Balanchine used in *Serenade*. This is a dance for men, and a traditional dance, not a ballet. It derives from the folk repertory of Balanchine's ancestral home, the Republic of Georgia. The dance is called khorumi, and seems a likely source for some of the formal devices, groupings, and steps that Balanchine used in *Serenade*.

The dance has a long history of staged performances, its earliest recorded theatrical presentation was in 1882 in Kuta'isi, the home of Balanchine's father. In 1935, the year of *Serenade*'s New York premiere, the dance was featured in a festival of folk dance in London, and incorporated into Vakhtang Chabukiani's choreography for *Heart of the Hills*, the first Georgian ballet on national themes, set to music composed by Balanchine's brother, Andrei Balanchivadze.

The dance derives from Ajara, the southwestern region of Georgia, and depicts the preparations for a battle, the battle itself, and the victory celebration. The setting is nighttime, and a group of warriors enters in a straight line. They move stealthily, and stop to look and listen for the enemy as they move

Heidi Vosseler and Charles Laskey of the American Ballet in 1935. (Photo: Vandamm)

across the stage. Their leader spies the enemy and whispers to his men. They continue to the enemy camp as another group of men spies on the enemy. At the command of the leader, the battle begins. Indecisive at first, the foes are eventually vanquished, and the warriors celebrate their victory.

The dance is in 5/4 or 5/8, and is traditionally counted by the syllables "chabuk-chak-chabuk." The name of the dance is derived from the Greek, thus "khor," as in the Russian khorovod or indeed the word choreography.

Like *Serenade*, the khorumi is an ensemble work. Individuals emerge from the group for short solos, but the work relies on precision dancing by the entire group to achieve its effects. The two dances share a number of compositional elements, including weaving patterns, round dances, highlighted entrances and exits, and groupings that emphasize shifts in spatial contrasts.

Versions of the khorumi proliferate on You-Tube, danced by professional folk-dance ensembles of long standing, such as the Geor-

gian National Ballet, and various local and expatriate groups, professional and amateur. The Georgian National Ballet's version of the dance (in its pre-2012 iteration) was clearly arranged for a proscenium stage and most readily reveals the correspondences to Balanchine's *Serenade*. I will refer to several other versions as well. Although most available versions of this traditional dance correspond in their constructions, slight variations can be seen.

One passage of the khorumi features a group of six dancers, holding hands, as they stealthily weave in and out of a moving group. In *Serenade*, five women perform a more lyrical version of this "weaving" choreography. But in both the Georgian dance and in *Serenade*, these sequences move in circles, ending in straight-line formations. (YouTube '3.Khorumi (Military dance)': http://youtube/CEijCIw2QaU 1:47)

Both dances feature group entrances and exits prominently. In the khorumi, they are performed with extreme precision, and like the weaving choreography, garner applause from the audience (YouTube: 3:15 and the final exit at 6:45). Balanchine's choreography for *Serenade* emphasizes straight-line formation, including the breathtaking exit in the first section, when the dancers briefly form a line, then break away from the diagonal in a spectacular departure from the stage.

This kind of line is made more impressive early in the khorumi by gathering the dancers in a knot upstage to prepare for the battle before unwinding the long line from it (YouTube: 4:20). The choreography of *Serenade* exploits this same spatial contrast: dancers gather in a small group at the rear of the stage early in the work, then peel off from it in a similar way. The dancers in *Serenade* retreat to the corner a second time as well, although the contrast in spatial volumes (and the similarity to the arrangement in khorumi) is less apparent this time.

Both dances feature another familiar folk dance form, the round dance, or khorovod. These occur repeatedly in the khorumi, at 3:45, 4:45, and most spectacularly at 5:20. At the end of this last circle dance, three soloists meet center stage. In choreography that recalls a moment from *Serenade*'s final movement, the three join, whirl in circles, until centrifugal force appears to break them apart (YouTube: 5:45).

One last connection between these two dances concerns a bit of "optional" choreography that is generally included near the end of the khorumi, as the battle concludes. The leader of the dance mimes injury and falls back, supported by the second dancer. This element is not included in the current filmed version of the khorumi by the Georgian National Ballet, but a promotional brochure includes a photo of it from an earlier staging, and film of a much-abbreviated version of the khorumi from the 1940s shows this now optional ending (YouTube: http://youtube/ExX-pC4aMA8 2:30).

Obviously, the placement of this element, near the dance's end, resonates with the falls in *Serenade*, especially the last one near the ballet's end. Yet another version of the khorumi, by a group called the Rustavi Ensemble, features an exit even more evocative of the one Balanchine devised for the finale of *Serenade* (a number of other groups perform this ending).

In the Rustavi version, a drummer and a warrior follow the exiting line of dancers, both borne aloft. The drummer stands upright on the shoulders of a dancer; the warrior's posture indicates a fallen soldier from the battle. Both these figures resonate with the transcendent finale of *Serenade*, where the fallen girl exits the stage standing on the shoulders of her bearers, into the light.

Could Balanchine, a St. Petersburg youth for the most part, have known this dance? And where could he have seen it? Despite the choreographer's enormous pride in his Georgian roots, his connection to his ancestral homeland was tangential at best. He wrote letters to his family in Russian, not in Georgian, and it seems unlikely that he spoke Georgian into adulthood. Balanchine probably saw the kho-

Drawing by Balanchine of his performance on the opening night of his *Mazurka from "A Life for the Tsar."* (Courtesy of the Balanchine Trust. BALANCHINE is a Trademark of The George Balanchine Trust.)

rumi and other Caucasian dances in Russia rather than in Georgia.

Yet as always with Balanchine, we should probe the musical connections first. Balanchine's father, Meliton Balanchivadze, who studied composition with Rimsky-Korsakov, was called "the Georgian Glinka" for his pioneering efforts in composing Georgian art music. Like many composers of his generation, Meliton collected folk music around Georgia

School of American Ballet students at *Serenade*'s preview on the evening of June 10, 1934.

and organized choirs to perform traditional Georgian music when he lived in St. Petersburg.

More to the point, Georgian music and Georgian dance – like the music and dance of most ethnic traditions – are generally performed together. The Georgian National Ballet's privileging of dance over music furnishes the exception to the general practice of folk ensembles in Georgia today: other Tbilisi companies regard the performance of music and dance as inextricably linked, and feature musicians and dancers more equally.

We know that the mature Balanchine attended rehearsals and performances of the Sukhishvili troupe when it toured the United States, first with the Moiseyev company in 1959, then independently the following year. The Georgian National Ballet's souvenir program includes a photograph of Balanchine with dancers from the troupe in those years. A decade before the visits of the Georgian Na-

tional Ballet, Balanchine drew a caricature of himself costumed as a warrior-dancer.

Better evidence for Balanchine's esteem of folk choreography may be found in the Summer 2003 issue of *Ballet Review*. In "Balanchine as I Knew Him," Ann Hutchinson Guest recalls advice Balanchine once gave to a young choreographer: "For choreographic devices, you can learn everything from watching the folk dances of different countries; they have done it all" (p. 66).

Confirmation of Balanchine's knowledge of the khorumi emerged in a casual conversation with the choreographer's nephew during the Maryinsky Ballet's Balanchine Festival in St. Petersburg in 2004. I spoke with him briefly at the party, without revealing my own interest in Georgian folk dance, and asked if he thought his uncle might have known this tradition. "Of course," he replied, "when he arrived in Georgia the first thing he asked was for musicians to come and perform the kho-

rumi" (conversation with the author, June 2, 2004, St. Petersburg).

It's easy to imagine how choreographic devices from folk dance, developed over centuries to serve minimal techniques to maximal effect, could provide useful training for beginning dancers and provide them with simple, but effective choreographic devices. Applause accompanies the simple weavings on the recording of the Sukishvili khorumi. The synchronized entrances and exits also elicit audience enthusiasm.

Obviously, there is considerable irony in staging a Georgian warriors' dance for seventeen American women in 1934, even though the outdoor setting of *Serenade*'s preview performance recalls the fields where dances like the khorumi were traditionally performed. Much as events in *Serenade* reverse the gender roles in *Giselle*, *Serenade*'s single-sex ensemble inverts the Georgian performance tradition, where dancing is mostly men's work and they are the bearers of virtuosity. (Male dancers in the Caucasus dance on a kind of "pointe" – on the knuckles of the feet wearing tight-fitting boots that support the foot much like pointe shoes.) More importantly, the vestiges of the Romantic-ballet tradition we typically identify in *Serenade* – the nighttime setting and the dancers' falls – refer to the Georgian khorumi no less than to Romantic-era works such as *Giselle*.

What can these two quite diverse sources tell us about Balanchine's creative method, and about his early works in particular? Essentially, we see a choreographer asking – and learning – how to tell a story at a time when telling stories had become unfashionable in the ballet. Balanchine cut his theatrical teeth on the ballets of Marius Petipa, with their complex mime dialogues that dancers of Balanchine's generation categorically rejected as old-fashioned and contrived.

Balanchine made his first works in an era of ballet reform and revolution in St. Petersburg and Petrograd, and danced in Fyodor Lopukhov's innovative *Tanzsymphonia*, to Beethoven's Fourth Symphony. With Diaghilev in Europe, Balanchine worked with famous easel painters, composers, and librettists. In New York and New England, he faced less luxurious resources. With *Serenade*, Balanchine continued to work in episodes and pictures, continuing a line evident in *Apollo* and *Prodigal Son*. They became modernist attempts to disrupt the surface – in painterly terms, to break with the *fini*, or "licked" surface of academic painting – but also to invest the works with meanings imported from other works.

From the subtexts of *Giselle*, or the *ballet blanc*, to the stage pictures formed in the khorumi – which, frankly, only Balanchine would have known at the time he was creating and refining the new ballet – *Serenade* borrows from two dance monuments of two very different dance cultures: a traditional work with a long history of stage performance, and perhaps the most frequently appropriated work of Western nineteenth-century theatrical dance. The borrowings from these two very diverse sources gives insight into that "hinge" moment in Balanchine's career as they also foreshadow the wide range of movement sources Balanchine would continue to mine.