



# **Tribute to Ballets Russes**

**September 2013**

**Teacher's Study Guide**

## The Plot



The **Ballets Russes** was an itinerant ballet company based in Paris that performed between 1909 and 1929 throughout Europe and on tours to North and South America. The company never performed in Russia, and (after its initial Paris season) had no formal ties there.<sup>[1]</sup>

Originally conceived by Sergei Diaghilev, the Ballets Russes is widely regarded as the most influential ballet company of the 20th century,<sup>[2]</sup> in part because it promoted ground-breaking artistic collaborations among choreographers, composers, designers, and dancers, all at the forefront of their several fields. It involved composers such as Igor Stravinsky and Claude Debussy, and artists such as Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse and Coco Chanel.

The company's productions created a huge sensation, completely reinvigorating the art of performing dance, bringing many visual artists to public attention, and significantly affecting the course of musical composition. The influence of the Ballets Russes lasts to the present

day.

Our school performance will include *Les Sylphides* originally choreographed by Michel Fokine in 1907 and an excerpt from *The Rite of Spring* originally choreographed by Vaslav Nijinsky in 1913. *Les Sylphides* had its premiere in Saint Petersburg at the Mariinsky Theatre and then later premiered in at the Le Chatelet Theatre in Paris. The principle dancers for those performances were Tamara Karsavina and Nijinsky. It is considered also as one of the white ballets because all of the dancers were dressed in white like in other ballets such as *Giselle* and *Swan Lake*.

The inaugural presentation of Nijinsky's *Rite of Spring* at the Theatre des Champs Elysees in Paris, France, incited a riot and over 40 audience members were expelled from the theater. *The Rite of Spring* is a work centered on "...the mystery and great surge of the creative power of Spring" which has baffled man throughout history. The choreography deals with how we relate to the environment and one another in it. According to early scores, the first episodes of *The Rite* depict the Adoration of the Earth (*L'Adoration de la Terre*) expressed by ancient civilizations. This musical masterpiece with its primal pounding rhythms has forever changed music and is considered the mother of modern music.

## **Tribute to Ballets Russes**

### **Les Sylphides: Choreography by – Michel Fokine**

Michel Fokine was a Russian choreographer known for staging over 70 ballets in Europe and the United States. Among these ballets, some of the most famous were Chopiniana (later evolved into what we know today as Les Sylphides), The Firebird, and Petrushka. In 1909, Fokine was invited by Sergei Diaghilev to become the resident choreographer for the Ballets Russes. After moving his family to New York, Fokine became a citizen of the United States in 1932.

### **Rite of Spring: Choreography by – Luis Dominguez**

The excerpt of The Rite of Spring (Le Sacre du Printemps) that you will be viewing has been choreographed by the Lexington Ballet's Artistic Director, Luis Dominguez. Mr. Dominguez has been the Artistic Director of the Lexington Ballet since 2003. He has choreographed over 50 original ballets and has staged six full length ballets for the school and company.

### **The Costumes**

Modern ballet costumes are different from those used by theatre companies at the turn of the century. Today's costumes are specially designed to allow the dancer maximum freedom of movement. As costumes age they need replacement. While some of older costumes are irreplaceable and quite valuable due to their historic significance, newer costumes often cost in excess of \$500 each.

### **The Music**

The music for Les Sylphides was composed by Frederick Chopin and was first written for the piano. Later, other musicians such as Alexander Glazunov adapted this music for a full orchestra making the sound much richer and exciting. The version you will hear today was orchestrated by Scott Vuzza and was adapted to the number of instruments in the ensemble directed by Cesar Leal, our conductor.

The music for The Rite of Spring was composed by Igor Stravinsky. Music historians agree that Stravinsky's score is considered "the most important single moment in the history of 20th century music", and its repercussions continue to reverberate in the 21st century.<sup>[127]</sup> The music historian [Donald Jay Grout](#) has written : "*The Sacre* is undoubtedly the most famous composition of the early 20th century ... it had the effect of an explosion that so scattered the elements of musical language that they could never again be put together as before".<sup>[19]</sup> The version you will hear today was orchestrated by Scott Vuzza and was adapted to the number of instruments in the ensemble directed by Cesar Leal, our conductor.

### **What is Ballet?**

The English word "ballet" comes from the French, who adopted it from the Italian, who originally used the word to refer to dancing of any kind. Over time, classical ballet came to be defined as an intricate group dance, which uses pantomime (which is derived from the Latin word meaning to mimic) and conventionalized movements to tell a story. These features helped distinguish ballets from popular dancing performed by ordinary people. Some ballets have been continuously performed since the early 19th century as generations of ballet companies have passed down well-defined sequences of steps and gestures set to specific pieces of music.

The sequence of steps and gestures in each of these ballets is called choreography. The English word combines the Greek words for dance and writing, therefore choreography literally means, “dance notation.” Imagine the difficulties before film and video of recreating past performances of a particular ballet. Choreographers used to employ elaborate notational systems to record the exact sequence of dance. Nonetheless, the classical ballets inevitably evolved over time as various choreographers arranged, and rearranged, the dances according to their memories, notes and personal artistic ambitions. Even today ballet companies perform the classics in different ways depending upon the inventiveness of the company’s own choreographer, the skills of the company dancers and so on. However, since the invention of film, it has become possible for companies to perform a dance exactly the same as the first recorded production.

Great dance should seem effortless, displaying certain physical lightness – an expression of freedom, or longing for freedom. Dancers should perform with ease, confidence, bravura and freedom. Assured of technique and properly rehearsed, a good dancer will let go, forgetting about particulars, only thinking about the human body moving through space. Great dancers, perhaps, will not be thinking at all, but will become the very dance they perform. Many subtleties separate a good ballet performance from the truly inspirational. Watch for: (1) variations in speed, (2) direction changes, (3) the height of leaps, (4) quiet landings, (5) body extensions, and (6) smooth movement between partners. Also watch for the dancers ability to create mood or emotion, the movement in connection with the music and the ability to make it all look easy.

### **A Brief History of Ballet**

The story of ballet began five hundred years ago in Italy, during the Renaissance. In those days the Italian nobles entertained important visitors with elaborate pageants of poetry, music, mime and dance. When an Italian woman named Catherine de Medici married King Henry II and became Queen of France, she introduced this type of entertainment to the French Court.

Almost a hundred years later, in 1643, Louis XIV became King of France at the age of five. Louis loved to dance and performed in many of the court ballets. He created the Royal Academy of Music and Dance in 1661. It was then that the five basic positions of the feet were developed and ballet began to develop a set technique. This is why French is the language used to describe ballet steps.

At that time women were not allowed to perform in ballets. Their roles were taken by men wearing masks and women’s clothing. The first ballet with parts played by women was in 1681. One of the first female dancers was Maria Camargo. Maria thought the women’s costumers of the time were too heavy and bulky, so she shortened her skirts to be able to move better and wore flat shoes so she could do simple jumps.

In the late 1700s the world of dance experienced many changes, thanks mainly to Jean-Georges Noverre. Born in 1727, Jean-Georges was a great dancer and choreographer who believed dancing should be more than just pretty movements. It should tell a story. He did away with the singing and the masks and taught dancers how to use mime and facial expression to tell a story. Jean-Georges’ creation of the ballet d’action (ballets that tell a story) changed ballet forever.

Beginning with the production of *La Sylphide* (different than *Les Sylphides*) in 1832, the Romantic Era of ballet introduced more changes. Women became the important figures in the stories and began dancing on their toes in what are now called “pointe shoes.” The number of steps increased and the movements became more expressive and lyrical. Even the subject matter of the ballets changed.

Instead of stories about heroes and myths, fairy tales and folk legends were used. The costume became a long, flowing skirt call the “romantic tutu” and women took on a more graceful appearance.

Ballet was very popular in Russia in the mid-1800s and the Imperial Ballet in Moscow and St. Petersburg became known all over the world. Many French composers and dancers went there to St. Petersburg to work with them. One was Marius Petipa. During his time in Russia, he created 60 full-length ballets. Many of which are still performed today and Petipa is considered the father of classical ballet.

The modern era of ballet started in the early 1900s when a young Russian named Sergei Diaghilev moved to Paris to try out some new and exciting ideas he had about art, music and dance. He introduced a young choreographer named Michel Fokine. Fokine was a rebel who broke with tradition and changed ballet from a pretty entertainment into a work of art. In 1911, Diaghilev formed his own company, the Russian Ballet, which was usually known by its French name, Les Ballets Russes.

Ballet emerged in America in the mid-1900s. The two most important American companies, American Ballet Theater and New York City Ballet, were both established in the early 1940s and other regional companies, including the Pennsylvania Ballet in Philadelphia, soon followed. New York City became the dance capital of the world and George Balanchine, artistic director for the New York City Ballet until his death in 1983, became the most influential choreographer of the 20th century. Today, millions of Americans enjoy live ballet performances all over the country.

### **Before Attending the Performance**

The following activities are designed to acquaint students with the story of Les Sylphides as well as the idea of ballet itself as movement without words. Activities incorporate writing, drawing and/or class discussion. As in the production of Les Sylphides, imagination is the key to these activities! It would be helpful for you to read the story or view a videotape of Les Sylphides to become familiar with the elements of the story before you begin any of the following activities. A videotape can also play an important role after the performance, as a reference tool, to recall and highlight what the students saw at the production.

### **Music and Imagination**

Remind students that music is a powerful inspiration of their imagination. Play selected pieces of music from Les Sylphides and let the music inspire imagery, mood and the imagination.

Tell students you are going to play music that can take them on a journey. They are to sit quietly, close their eyes, listen to the music and let what they hear become colors, places and people in their mind’s eye. While the students are listening to the music with eyes closed ask the following.

- What if the walls of the school opened up and you could fly out into the sky?
  - Where do you go?
  - What colors do you see?
  - What is the weather like?
  - Are there people or buildings?
  - Have you found a new land?
  - Who is in your newly discovered world?

Students can write or draw the places, people and other things they see on their imaginary journey or even make collages from magazine pictures.

**After the Performance**

Ask students to select their favorite dance or dancer and explain why they chose that particular dance or dancer. Lead a discussion in which students interpret or mimic a pose or poses to the best of their ability that they saw during the performance. Have the students describe why they liked or didn't like to have a live ensemble performing during the ballet.

**Activities for younger students**

Children might be asked to play a game in which they have to communicate a specific idea to other children using only gestures, i.e. charades. After playing this popular game, the teacher might ask the students how it is they know how to interpret the gestures the other students were using. A general discussion could follow, about how human beings communicate all the time using only body movements and facial expressions. The teacher might even want to ask students to act out different types of emotions, anger, love, etc., and perhaps even play a game in which students try to tell a story that passes from one extreme emotional state to another without speaking.

### **Research / Open-ended Questions**

1. The first ballerinas made their appearance as professionals in 1681. Prior to that men wearing appropriate costumes and masks portrayed female characters. What was the perception of women on stage in the early 17th century? Who was the first known prima ballerina?
2. Fashions of dress for ballet changed dramatically in the 18th century. Corsets and hoop skirts were out and high waists and flowing draperies were in. Heeled shoes were discarded for flexible slippers or even sandals. Explain how these changes affected dance techniques and movements for dancers.
3. The dancers today have inherited tier technique, style and much of their repertoire from the previous generation of dancers, who learned from their predecessors in an unbroken line back to ballet's very beginnings in the Renaissance courts of Italy. Why is the study of the history of ballet essential for current dancers? What other areas or occupations require past knowledge to build upon for current practice? Explain.

## **A Glossary of Ballet Terms**

**Adagio** – slow and sustained movements; a slow and sustained dance

**Arabesque** (ara-besk) – a frequently used classical ballet position. The weight of the body is supported on one leg while the other is extended in back, the knee straight. The arabesque may be varied in many ways by changing the position of the arms, the angle of the body and the height of the leg in the air.

**Allegro** (uh-leh-gro) – fast running and jumping movements; a fast dance

**Attitude** – a classical position similar to the arabesque, except that the knee of the raised leg is bent

**Ballet shoes** – soft slippers made of flexible leather with thin, flexible soles

**Battement** (baht-mahn) – an extension of the leg

**Bourree** (boo-ray) – a rapid run, like a trill on the points of the toes, with the feet in fifth position. The feet move so quickly that the transfer of weight is almost imperceptible. The ballerina seems to skim across the stage.

**Chaine** (sheh-nay) – a series of turns, executed in a line or in a circle, in which the feet remain close to the floor and the weight is transferred rapidly and almost imperceptibly from one foot to the other as the body revolves

**Chass** (shah-say) – a slide in which the weight is transferred from two feet to one, or from one to another

**Choreographer** – the person who creates, or composes, the dance

**Corps de ballet** (cor-de-bah-lay) – the supporting dancers of the ballet company

**Danseur** (dan-sir) – any professional male dancer

**Developpe** (day-vel-oh-pay) – a smooth, gradual unfolding of the leg toward the front, side or back

**En pointe** (on point) – the ballerina rises as far from the floor as she possibly can by dancing on the tips of her toes. She carries her weight not merely high on the balls of her feet but literally on the top of her toes. Originally, dancers did this in soft slippers; today toe shoes are blocked across the front to give added support

**Entrechat** (ahn-treh-shah) – a jump beginning and ending in fifth position. While the body is in the air, the feet are rapidly crossed

**Fouette** (fweh-tay) – one of the most brilliant steps in ballet. The dancer turns on one foot (usually en pointe) while at each revolution the working leg whips sharply into second position en l'air (in the air)

**Glissade** (glih-sahd) – a sliding step, beginning and ending in fifth position



**Jete** (zheh-tay) – a jump from one foot to the other

**Pas de deux** (paw de duh) – literally “step for two”; a duet, often in several positions

**Passe** (paw-say) – a passing position or movement

**Phrase** – a series of steps or patterns, which constitute part of an idea; a sentence in movement

**Pirouette** (peer-oh-wet) – a turn in place, on one foot. A good dancer can execute four or five continuous revolutions; a virtuoso, as many as a dozen

**Plie** (plee-AY) – a bend of the knees

**Pointe shoes** – see toes shoes

**Rond de jambe** (rohn de jahm) – a circular movement of the leg, accomplished either with the toe on the floor or with the working leg raised

**Toe shoes** – soft fabric (usually satin) slippers blocked across the toes with a hard pad to give support when the dancer rises en pointe

**Tour en l’air** (tour ahn lair) – a complete single, double or triple turn in the air, usually beginning from and ending in fifth position. It is almost always executed by male dancers.

**Tutu** – the traditional ballet skirt usually made of many layers of gathered tulle. The length of the tutu varies according to the period or style of the ballet being performed.

## Be a Student Critic!

Reviewer Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Title of Performance  
\_\_\_\_\_

To the student reviewer:

See if you can evaluate the performance you saw as thoroughly and descriptively as a professional critic. You might enjoy going to a newspaper or magazine to read a review of another performance. Students need not address all the questions listed below. These simply serve as guidelines of things to consider in your reviews. If you need more space to write, use the back of this paper.

1. What did you feel was the most important mood in the dance? (Circle one)  
serious    playful    somber    determined    romantic    other (describe)
2. In what form or style was the dance performed? (Circle one)  
ballet    modern    jazz    tap    ethnic
3. In your opinion, did the music compare or contrast with the movement? Briefly explain.
4. Was the movement (circle one)  
staccato                      legato                      a combination?
4. Was there a particular color or color scheme used in the costuming?
5. Give two details you liked or disliked about the costumes?
6. Describe the purpose of a gel for the lighting.
7. Did the dancers carry any props?

8. At what energy level was the dance mostly performed? (circle one) strong weak sharp soft  
Explain:

9. Did the dance have a regular or irregular rhythm?

10. What did you feel the choreographer was trying to say in this performance?

11. Did the performance have a story line, or was it abstract?

12. Did you notice if the dancers followed any particular floor plan or pattern? Draw it if necessary.

13. Explain how the choreographer utilized the dancers

Group piece

Soloist(s)

Duet

Trio or quartet

Combinations

14. Were there any special features that you have not already mentioned that made this dance stand out? Explain.