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THE BALLETS RUSSES: COURTING THE EXOTIC

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Abstract

Diaghilev realised that Russian composers' oriental style matched Parisians' taste for the exotic, and as a result, commissioned and masterminded a series of exciting new ballets that exploited Eastern themes. These were so thoroughly absorbed by Parisian culture that the costumes were imitated by famous fashion houses. Yet Russia itself, seen through a prism of folk-inspired art, was equally exotic to the Parisians. Diaghilev's accidental discovery of Stravinsky served him extraordinarily well in transforming the old tropes of nationalism and exoticism into something distinctively new and modern.

1. The first ballet season: 1909

Diaghilev was planning to bring members of the Imperial Ballet to Paris as early as 1906, with the encouragement of the writer and designer Alexander Benois. The main assets were Mikhail Fokine (choreographer and dancer), Anna Pavlova and Vaslav Nijinsky (dancers). Nothing came of this in the 1907-08 seasons, and even the original plan for the 1909 was focused on opera: Rimsky-Korsakov *The Maid of Pskov* (renamed *Ivan the Terrible*, featuring Chaliapin in the title role), Glinka *Ruslan and Liudmila*, Borodin *Prince Igor*, Serov *Judith* (with Chaliapin as Holofernes, Felia Litvinne as Judith). Although there was, finally, an evening of ballet planned, to feature *Le pavillon d'Armide* with *Les sylphides* and *Cléopâtre*.

The loss of Russian court subsidies forced Diaghilev to tighten his belt, and three of the operas were reduced to only one or two acts. The resulting programme, which played at the Châtelet Theatre, was much more heavily balletic, with an impressive collection of dancers from the Imperial Ballet. These are the premieres for each of the four shows:

18*/19 May	<i>Le Pavillon d'Armide</i> (Tcherepnin/Fokine/Benois) <i>Prince Igor</i> (Act II) (Borodin/Fokine/Roerich) <i>Le Festin</i> (Feast) incl. the Lezghinka from <i>Ruslan and Liudmila</i> (Glinka/Petipa/Bakst), excerpts from <i>The Sleeping Beauty</i> (Tchaikovsky/Gorsky/Benois), etc.
24*/26 May	<i>Ivan the Terrible</i>
2*/4 June	<i>Ruslan and Ludmila</i> (Act I) <i>Les Sylphides</i> (Chopin/Fokine/Benois) <i>Cléopâtre</i> (Arensky et al./Fokine/Bakst)
7 June	<i>Judith</i> (Acts IV and V)

*dates of public dress rehearsals

Debussy, obviously unused to ballet, was quite scathing: "As for the ballet, I have probably forgotten this sort of spectacle altogether, since it bored me. All the same, what a peculiar way to dress people! But I think we manage better than that at the Folies-Bergère." But when Diaghilev approached Debussy with talk of a commission, this mockery melted away, and he began thinking a ballet of his own.



Ballet, as it turned out, was more successful at the box office, and also cheaper to stage. From then onwards, it became the core of Diaghilev's enterprises.

2. The lure of the Orient

The first season contained both classical and exotic ballets, and both were successful, but Diaghilev decided that exoticism had greater potential, for several reasons:

- Russia and France were both empires with far-flung colonies, and there was already a fascination with their very different cultures during the previous century.
- In France: a fad for all things Egyptian after Napoleon's campaigns; Delacroix visited North Africa and Morocco; musical Orientalism emerged in Félicien David's *Le Désert* (1844), raised to greater artistic heights in Saint-Saëns's *Samson and Delilah* (1877); the Paris Expositions showcased colonial culture, and exposed Debussy (in 1889) to the influence of Javanese gamelan music.
- In Russia: Orientalist interests followed the order of Imperial conquests: first the Caucasus, then Central Asia (Borodin's *Prince Igor*). Russian interest in the exotic also ranged far beyond the Imperial borders, as in Glinka's Spanish pieces.
- "The Orient" was a flexible concept, geographically imprecise, but also a repository for several colourful stereotypes (such as wild masculinity and sensuous femininity).
- Orientalism in the arts became a laboratory for new colours and new means of expression. In music: new instrumental timbres, rhythms, and sinuous chromatic lines. In choreography: character dances opened the way for greater freedom and innovation within classical ballet. In painting and design: new combinations of bright colours, a prevalence of ornament, decoration over expression
- For Russian composers, Orientalism not only served as exoticism, but also as a self-defining trait, since the West saw the Russians themselves as exotic. This worked together with the barbaric "Scythian" motif in some currents of Russian nationalism, which emphasised differences between Russia and Western civilisation.

3. The second ballet season: 1910

- No more operas, but instead **new** ballets commissioned specially for Paris
- Three ballets with Oriental elements vs two non-Oriental (*Le Carnaval*, *Giselle*)
- *Scheherazade* (Rimsky-Korsakov/Fokine/Bakst)
- *Les Orientales* (Glazounov, Grieg et al./Fokine/Bakst and Korovin)
- *The Firebird* (Stravinsky/Fokine/Bakst and Golovin); Benois collaborated on the scenario

4. *Scheherazade* and its impact

- Use of existing music by Rimsky-Korsakov (who had died after appearing at the season of 1907). Although the symphonic suite was programmatic, the plot was invented by Fokine and Bakst. The lurid storyline ended with an orgy and a massacre

The Shahriyar, the Sultan of ancient Persia, is enjoying the pleasures and entertainment of his concubines and his favorite wife Zobeide. His brother suggests that Zobeide is unfaithful and recommends that they pretend to go on a hunting trip.

As soon as the Sultan and his brother have departed, the concubines bribe the Chief Eunuch with gifts and flattery to unlock the gates and free the male slaves. Their release ignites an orgy within the harem. Zobeide chooses the handsome Golden Slave, and they fall into a passionate embrace. To everyone's surprise, the king returns early and, in a rage, orders that all be killed. The rampage ends, and only Zobeide remains alive. She begs his forgiveness, but seeing that this is futile, she stabs herself, and falls lifeless at the feet of her husband.



- Rimsky-Korsakov's widow protested against "this unauthorized and anti-artistic" production that exploited her late husband's music
- The Director of the Imperial Theatres, Telyakovsky, also began objecting to the use of his dancers abroad
- The artist Valentin Serov, however, wrote a letter in defence of Diaghilev:

"to my mind, the only thing that could be watched with any pleasure in Paris last spring was precisely these ballets at the Grand Opéra... Russian theatrical productions are generally are far ahead of anyone else's at the present time ... the finest artists are set to work on them, which has not been seen before in Europe.

It was, of course, a blasphemy to produce Sheherazade against the grain of the programme that Rimsky-Korsakov provided for his symphonic suite, but once this blasphemy has actually been seen on the stage, the crime is mitigated. There is so much true beauty in these dances, in the clothes, in the background, and in the beings who move to Rimsky-Korsakov's captivating music, so that we forget how different it all is from Rimsky-Korsakov's programme, while we still recognize that same Orient, and accept it as another fairy tale from the 1001 Nights."

- Fokine's choreography set aside the conventions of classical dance: he took the ballerinas out of their pointe shoes, and introduced a range of less studied movements, borrowing from dances of various nations, from Greek and Egyptian art, from wrestling, etc. Isadora Duncan, who had toured Russia in 1905, was an important individual influence for her barefoot dancing, her simple movements, and her direct approach to the expression of the music. The upper body was choreographed as carefully as the lower body. Instead of the classic corps-de-ballet, Diaghilev created elaborate mass dances which audiences found very exciting, and the closing bacchanal or orgy soon became one of his trademarks. Every new ballet had a different choreographic idiom and each major character was given his own expressive language of movements.
- Bakst's spectacular stage-curtain entered the annals of decorative art: the combination of green and blue hues was taken up by everyone from Matisse to Cartier's jewellery designers. The costumes were seen as bordering on the scandalous, and they started a new turn in Parisian fashion, especially owing to Paul Poiret, who introduced turbans, pantaloons (harem trousers) and "lampshade" tunics to Parisian high society.
- The music of *Scheherazade* became iconic for the Ballets Russes, to the extent that when Diaghilev commissioned Maurice Ravel to write the ballet *Daphnis et Chloe*, the composer allowed the desire for orientalism to trump the needs of the classical Greek story. In his final dance, he managed to blend *Scheherazade* with the Polovtsian Dances.

5. Stravinsky and *The Firebird*

- *The Firebird* was the first Diaghilev ballet with a newly commissioned musical score.
- It was Benois who conceived the ballet, seeing it as a Russian nationalist fantasy, and concocted the scenario from several different fairy tales

Prince Ivan Tsarevich is wandering in a garden at night. He sees the Firebird eating golden apples and captures her. He releases her, however, when she offers him a magical feather. The Firebird warns Prince Ivan that he is near the castle of Koshei the Immortal, a fearsome sorcerer.

The next morning, Prince Ivan, hiding in the undergrowth, watches thirteen captured princesses enter the garden and dance. He falls in love with one of them and decides to rescue them all.

But Koshei has vowed to turn any attempted rescuer to stone. Prince Ivan confronts him, using the Firebird's feather to cast a protective spell. Koshei and his retinue, under the effect of the spell, dance uncontrollably until they drop. Ivan leads the princesses to safety and marries his beloved.



- The plot returns to various situations already familiar from Russian nationalist opera: the need to defeat an Oriental enemy to rescue the bride (*Ruslan and Liudmila*), procuring help from a seductive supernatural being (*Sadko*), casting a spell to make the enemy dance (*Sadko* again), closing with a hymn of glorification (most Russian nationalist operas, starting with Glinka). The same legendary sorcerer had already appeared as the central character in Rimsky-Korsakov's opera *Koschei the Immortal*
- Liadov and Tcherepnin were initially canvassed as potential composers, but in the end, the task fell to Stravinsky, who was then only an up-and-coming young former student of Rimsky-Korsakov
- Stravinsky produced a score that relied heavily on the innovations of his teacher, but which also drew from idioms used widely by the Russian nationalist school. In the same way as his predecessors, he used these idioms to distinguish between the real and the supernatural, and between the Russian and the Oriental. He even surpassed Rimsky-Korsakov's already luxuriant orchestration, with still more elaborate layering in the score and with unusual combinations of instruments under the influence from the French school (who were themselves indebted to the Russian nationalists). He used a quadruple orchestra with extra onstage instruments and a huge percussion section (particularly rich in the shimmering, glittering timbres of the celeste, glockenspiel and xylophone).
- Reception: The critics admired the novel degree of artistic unity; all aspects of the ballet being conceived together. The style and details of the choreography closely matched the music, often finding visual counterparts for musical figures, while the shimmering back-cloth matched the shimmering orchestral score.
- Constant Lambert: "In *L'Oiseau de Feu*, Stravinsky applied the rejuvenating influence of Debussy's impressionism to the by-now-somewhat-faded Russian fairy-tale tradition, in much the same way that one pours a glass of port into a Stilton."
- In *The Firebird*, Oriental and Russian exoticism were knowingly brought together and packaged as a highly attractive product
- Yet at the same time, the value of everyone's contribution in this perfect artistic collaboration rejuvenated ballet as a genre and prompted other leading artists of the time to involve themselves in Diaghilev's projects, resulting in productions that combined cutting-edge artistry with popular success.
- Despite the financial loss of almost half-a million dollars (in today's money), public demand allowed Diaghilev to convert his troupe into an all-year-round touring company, no longer wholly dependent on Paris, nor on the patronage of the Russian Imperial Theatres.

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