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Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes*: Turning French

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Modernity kept seeping into ballet, a genre that had traditionally looked to a distant, mythical or magical past. First, the tutu gave way to an everyday tennis costume in *Jeux* by Debussy/Nijinsky, then ragtime rang out in *Parade* by Satie/Picasso, and in the 1920s Diaghilev decided staged a series of ballets drawn from contemporary life, and in particular, the French high society in which Diaghilev moved. Milhaud and Poulenc provided the sparkling scores, while Coco Chanel added her sparkling costumes.

L'après-midi d'un faune (1912)

Conception: Diaghilev, Nijinsky, Bakst

Music: Debussy's symphonic work from 1894, based on a poem of Stéphane Mallarmé

The French Symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé portrayed the afternoon reveries of a "faun", who feasts on grapes and recalls his pursuit of charming nymphs in a famous work of 1876. The language is allusive, a kind of word-music rather than a transparent medium for narrative. Here is a short passage that is relatively easy to grasp, in a translation by Alan Edwards:

Too bad! Others will lead me to happiness
By their tresses knotted to the horns upon my brow:
You, my passion, know that, purple and perfectly ripe,
Every pomegranate bursts open and murmurs with bees;
And our blood, in love with whoever will seize it,
Flows for the whole eternal swarm of desire.

Debussy's piece is languorous, with themes that are designedly vague, and an almost imperceptible pulse. It employs a rich array of instrumental combinations that slowly shade into one another. Although the piece is modest in size (performances usually take a little over ten minutes), it is often hailed as the beginning of musical modernism, although it could equally be viewed as a Wagnerian, and specifically Tristan-like representation of sexual desire. Debussy does not try to track Mallarmé's poem in detail, but tries to match the general atmosphere. He does, however, open with a mysterious flute melody, using the instrument that Mallarmé gave to his faun. Out of the hushed mystery come moments of greater agitation (the faun's pursuits), and there is a longer melody in the middle of the work (the faun's ecstasy).

Choreography: Vaslav Nijinsky (developed in secret from Fokine)

Ninety rehearsals were required for this brief, single-scene ballet due to the unprecedented choreographical ideas. There is no dancing in any conventional sense, and only one jump (where the Faun crosses a stream). The characters walk across the stage in a stylised way, often sideways, as if they belong to an ancient frieze. The movements are in no way a visual correlate for the music, and even the erotic climax on stage does not coincide with the musical climax, which occurred earlier in the piece.

Sets and costumes: Leon Bakst

Influenced by the Greek vases, and by Egyptian and Assyrian frescoes that Bakst examined in the Louvre

The set is more stylised and vaguer than earlier Bakst sets.



Reception

There was, as often with Diaghilev, an aspect of scandal on the account of the Faun's autoeroticism at the end. This was quite possibly the reason for the stunned silence among the audience at the end of the dress rehearsal; the silence, though, was not hostile, and the whole ballet was encored. At the premiere, the reception was mixed, and the whole ballet was presented again so that the audience could see that the mismatch of music and movement was intentional, and freed from their earlier puzzlement, they could savour the very particular beauty of the piece.

To assist in the critical reception of the ballet, Diaghilev elicited responses from the eminent artists Odilon Redon and Auguste Rodin:

"I could not help regretting, amid the delights of this evening's performance by your company, that my illustrious friend Stéphane Mallarmé was not with us. More than anyone, he would have appreciated this wonderful evocation of his thought." (Redon)

"Nijinsky has never been so remarkable as in his latest role. No more jumps – nothing but half-conscious animal gestures and poses. ... Form and meaning are indissolubly welded in his body, which is totally expressive of the mind within... His beauty is that of antique frescoes and sculpture: he is the ideal model, whom one longs to draw and sculpt. ... I wish that such a noble endeavour should be understood as a whole..." (Rodin)

Daphnis et Chloé (1912) and Narcisse (1911)

Narcisse is based on Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. It was developed in great haste as a replacement for Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloé* which had been scheduled for 1911 but was not yet ready.

The music for *Narcisse* was written by Diaghilev's "staff composer" Nikolai Tcherepnin, following the style of French "impressionism". It is likely that Tcherepnin had some knowledge of Ravel's as-yet incomplete *Daphnis*, since there are various similarities, including a wordless choir. *Narcisse* was effectively a "spoiler" for *Daphnis*, and brought tensions between Diaghilev and Ravel to the surface.

Sets and costumes for *Narcisse* was by Bakst (appropriating the set that had already been made for *Daphnis*).

Choreography for *Narcisse* was by Fokine (not preserved) had to be created in haste; Fokine was unhappy about the time constraints.

The premier of *L'après-midi* just before *Daphnis* proved to be an even greater "spoiler": unlike *Narcisse*, the music was a masterpiece, and Fokine's radical innovations in the choreography were now familiar; after *Narcisse* and *L'après-midi*, *Daphnis* arrived as yet another Greek/antique ballet, even though it had been conceived first.

Jeux (1913)

Conception: Diaghilev, Bakst, Nijinsky

The inspiration came from a game of tennis they had watched in Bedford Square Gardens in London.

Nijinsky's original concept was that "there should be no corps de ballet, no ensembles, no variations, no pas de deux, only boys and girls in flannels and rhythmic movements". He originally envisaged a tennis game being interrupted by the crashing of an aeroplane(!).

The sexuality of the plot was shaped by Diaghilev, but since homosexuality among male characters could not be presented on stage, it was replaced by hints of lesbianism (following the model Proust had provided in the later volumes of *À la recherche du temps perdu*)

The scenario is minimal; the idea of "games" instead of traditional balletic numbers is shared with *The Rite of Spring*, in spite of the extreme difference in the atmosphere of the two works.



Debussy on the scenario: “There is a park, a tennis court, a chance meeting of two girls and a young man seeking a lost ball, a mysterious nocturnal landscape, and together with this, the suggestion of something sinister in the darkening shadows of night”.

The music was commissioned from Debussy. This is an unusually fluid score: it has more than sixty tempo markings for each of the succession of brief musical moments. Some claim that it is just as innovative in its own way as *The Rite of Spring*, which admittedly overshadowed it when it was performed in the same season.

Debussy to his publisher in 1907: “Music is not, in essence, a thing which can flow within a rigorous and traditional form. It is all about colours and rhythmically organized time”.

Debussy on his creative process: “A cinematography of instants through which the author moved while he was composing this piece”.

Choreography by Nijinsky (lost; reconstructed by Millicent Hodson in 1996 from very few sources)
Athletic moves, symmetrical figures, a succession of arrested poses, danced on three-quarter point

Debussy: “This fellow [Nijinsky] adds up triplet crotchets with his feet, checks them on his arms, then suddenly, half-paralyzed, he stands crossly watching the music slip by. It’s awful. It’s even Dalcrozian – for I consider Monsieur Dalcroze as one of the greatest enemies of music and you can imagine what havoc his method can create in the head of a young savage like Nijinsky!”

Design by Bakst

The use of modern everyday dress was a startling move.

The white costumes on dark background created a cinematic effect.

Reception

Premiered in May 1913, two weeks before *The Rite of Spring*. Reception was mainly uncomprehending:

“The new art, of which M. Nijinsky is the prophet, manages to turn even the insignificant into absurdity. What could be more ungraceful than the meaningless, pretentious contortions dreamt up by this nimble aesthete... It is said that M. Nijinsky’s intention was to provide, in this ballet, an apologia in plastic terms for the man of 1913. If this is so, we have nothing to be proud of.” (*Le Figaro*)

The idea of modernity (tennis, electric lights, the rejected aeroplane)

The idea of the everyday (flannels)

“Love becomes a game in the 20th century” (Romola Nijinsky)

Les biches (1924)

The title was variously translated as “The Does”, “The Hinds”, “The Darlings”. There was “No subject – just songs and dances” (Poulenc).

Inspiration from Watteau’s *fêtes galantes* and also from contemporary Paris fashions. Poulenc located some mildly obscene 18th-century texts.

Music by Poulenc

Merged 18th-century idioms with the contemporary “syncopated music” of popular dances, as, for example, in the “Rag-Mazurka”

Choreography by Bronislava Nijinska (she also danced The Hostess)



The set and costumes designed by Marie Laurencin

The Hostess's dress is a nod in the direction of Chanel's LBD

Performed as part of the Festival Français with spectacular success

Neoclassicism + popular idioms, a synthesis adopted both in music and choreography

Le train bleu (1924)

Scenario by Jean Cocteau

Cocteau suggested a sport-centred plot after seeing the English dancer Patrick Healey-Kay (aka Anton Dolin) practising acrobatics

Cocteau: "The first point about *Le Train Bleu* is that there is no blue train in it. This being the age of speed, it has already reached its destination and its passengers have disembarked".

Inspired by celebrity culture in general, and by some real celebrities, including a tennis star, the Prince of Wales (a keen golfer), and the Savoy dancers Marjorie Moss and George Fontana

Music by Darius Milhaud

Like other members of Les Six, Milhaud used a variety of popular idioms but spiced them up with Stravinskian devices

Designer: Coco Chanel

The ballet is set in Deauville, the casino resort on the Normandy coast where Chanel had opened her first boutique in 1913, selling deluxe casual clothing for leisure and sport, made from tricot (unusual fabric for the time).

In 1920, she met Stravinsky, and he stayed in her suburban Paris residence for a while. She undertook to cover any losses made by the new production of *The Rite of Spring* (1920)

Curtain by Pablo Picasso, set by Henri Laurens

Choreography by Bronislava Nijinska

Extremely successful: "It is as difficult to get a seat for 'The Blue Train' as it is to get a seat for the thing itself during the height of the Riviera rush." (a London critic)

La Chatte (1927)

Scenario by Boris Kochno

After an Aesop fable: a cat is transformed into a woman, but to test her love for her the young man she falls for, a mouse is sent to tempt her. The mouse causes her to neglect the young man, and she is transformed back into a cat.

Design by Naum Gabo and Antoine Pevsner

A futuristic/constructivist set and costumes, billed as "architecture and sculpture":

The transparent structures "flashed their message of the amazing new plastic age to an incredulous and blinking public. ... The shining, transparent armour worn by the dancers gave [the ballet] a heroic, interplanetary quality, as if the little tragedy was taking place in a society of godlike pioneers on a newly subjugated star." (contemporary critic)

Music by Henri Sauguet

Seems to hark back to Satie's deliberate simplicity, but is less "contrarian"

Diaghilev was quite lukewarm in about the music, saying to the composer: "Well, it works..."



Choreography by George Balanchine

A further take on neoclassicism

Danced by Massine and Spessivtseva

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