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Onegin:

The choreography and the music



The Choreographer

John Cranko (1927–73) was born in Rustenberg, South Africa, and brought up in Johannesburg. He entered the Cape Town University Ballet School in August 1944, at about the time of his 17th birthday, and immediately began work on his first ballet, *The Soldier's Tale*, for the Cape Town Ballet Club. Though young and inexperienced, he had prepared himself by imagining ballets to the music he listened to on gramophone records, and by creating dances for remarkable puppets of his own invention. The ballet's success won it further showings, and during the following year Cranko made two works for the University Ballet.

Cranko left South Africa for London in February 1946, joining Sadler's Wells Theatre Ballet as a dancer. He took every chance to choreograph, but it was not until the success of Sadler's Wells Theatre Ballet's performance of *Tritsch-Tratsch*, one of his ballets from South Africa, in 1947, that he began to receive new commissions.

Cranko was then appointed resident choreographer for Sadler's Wells Theatre Ballet's 1950/51 season, aged only 23. His first big success was *Pineapple Poll* (1951) and major new commissions followed, including *The Prince of the Pagodas* (1957), for The Royal Ballet to a new score by Benjamin Britten, and *Romeo and Juliet* (1958) for La Scala Ballet. In 1960 Cranko was invited to stage *The Prince of the Pagodas* for Stuttgart Ballet and a few months later was appointed ballet director of the company. He proved an outstanding company director, with exceptional skill in choosing and developing dancers, many of whom became international stars. He also helped many choreographers, among them John Neumeier, Jiří Kylián, Peter Wright and Kenneth MacMillan.

But the chief factor in making Stuttgart Ballet world famous was Cranko's own continuing development as a choreographer. His greatest works range from the abstract *Jeu de cartes* (1965) to full-length narrative ballets such as *The Taming of the Shrew* (1969) and *Onegin* (1965).

Cranko's death at only 45 (resulting from the rare side-effect of a mild pill, prescribed to help him sleep on a plane) robbed Stuttgart and ballet



generally of a great talent. But his ballets remain to serve his chief purpose as an artist: 'I always want people to enjoy themselves'.

The music

All the music in the ballet *Onegin* is by Pyotr Il'yich Tchaikovsky – but none of it comes from Tchaikovsky's opera *Eugene Onegin*, not even a bar. Instead, the arranger Kurt-Heinz Stolze drew all the music from various other, less famous works by Tchaikovsky, stitching them together to create a whole new score.

Stolze used all sorts of other pieces by Tchaikovsky, always making sure that the music would be especially good for dance. Tchaikovsky's short compositions for piano, simple and elegant, were particularly useful for Stolze, and all together provide about three quarters of the musical material.

Another major source was Tchaikovsky's little performed opera *The Tsarina's Slippers*. For Tatiana and Onegin's dream pas de deux in Act I Stolze used a duet from the opera *Romeo and Juliet*, while their pas de deux in Act III draws on the tone poem *Francesca da Rimini*. Stolze felt one of the most important things the music needed to do was to support the great story at the ballet's heart.

To do this he wanted to create a sense of continuity through the score. He reuses certain tunes, weaving them into other parts of the score so that they overlap and intertwine with other bits of music.

See if there are any you can recognize!