

**BALLET IN THE HANDS OF THE RUSSIAN MASTERS:
A COMPARISON OF BALLETS OVER TIME**

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When we think of ballets that have been drawn up by the pens of Russian composers we automatically think of *The Nutcracker*, *The Rite of Spring*, or *Swan Lake*. If you look and listen closely, you will notice that all of them are very different from each other. Each of them come from a different turning point in the history of music. The art form that is ballet has been drastically transformed in the hands of the Russians.

Ballet was originally a part of the structure of an opera. It wasn't until 1672 that the first dance troupe was institutionalized in Paris, the Académie Royale de Musique (also known as the Opéra).¹ From around this time, until the turn of the 18th Century, ballet was a type of entertainment that was meant to be relief from the narrative of the opera, or a divertissement. When the 18th Century came, ballet had become an independent art form despite still being used in operas.² Ballet as an art form was not the only thing that changed during that period. Originally, ballet was meant to be danced by men only. The Opéra did not allow female dancers to perform publicly on stage until Jean-Baptiste Lully's ballet *Le triomphe de l'Amour* opened in Paris in 1681. Despite all of this, men continued to play female roles until the number of female dancers increased.³ In keeping with the segregated genders within the ballet, only the men were given virtuosic choreography.

During this period of transition in the 18th Century, the Russian ballet took its roots in the imperial theaters in St. Petersburg and Moscow.⁴ Due to the Empress Anna Ivanovna's (1693-1740) devotion to ostentatious amusements, she appointed Jean-Baptiste Landé to be the

¹ "Ballet." Oxford Music Online. Accessed October 4, 2016.
<http://www.oxfordmusiconline.com.proxy.kennesaw.edu/subscriber/article/grove/music/46700?print=true>.

² "Ballet."

³ "Ballet."

⁴ Sergei Lifar, "The Russian Ballet in Russia and in the West," *The Russian Review* 28, no. 4 (1969), 396.

dancing-master in the Military Academy.⁵ It would be a difficult journey for Landé to finally establish a ballet company. The Empress and her court circles were very devoted to foreign manners and amusement, and they neglected to see the local talent. Landé would continue to train young Russians, and when the Italian opera company came in 1736, he would be able to hand over his pupils to their ballet-master, Antonia Fusano.⁶ In 1738, Landé was appointed as the court ballet-master, and was charged with creating a ballet school, “Her Majesty’s Dancing School”.⁷ Due to the governments fascination with all things foreign, choreographers, ballet-masters, teachers, and performers were still a large part in Russian ballet. For the years to come, the Russians would absorb all the best qualities of French, Italian, and German ballet to create their own Russian style.⁸ Not only would this Russian style continue to grow, but the use of strictly Russian dancers and composers would also gain ground. In the 19th Century, the first notable ballet written by a Russian composer was performed.

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893), before writing his first ballet *Swan Lake* (*Lybyedinoye azyera*), had already written many works for the theatre. These works included four operas and incidental music for five plays. For all of them, as far as we know, dance was an important part in their production. In the spring of 1875, Tchaikovsky had been commissioned by the Directorate of the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow to write his first ballet *The Lake of Swans*.⁹

When comparing the structure of *Swan Lake* to ballets of the same period, such as *Coppélia* and *Sylvia* composed by Léo Delibes (1836-1891), there are many similar qualities.

⁵ Samuel H. Cross, “The Russian Ballet Before Dyagilev,” *The Slavonic and East European Review*. *American Series* 3, no. 4 (1969), 20

⁶ Cross, “Russian Ballet Before Dyagilev,” 20.

⁷ Cross, “Russian Ballet Before Dyagilev,” 20.

⁸ Lifar, “The Russian Ballet in Russia,” 396.

⁹ “Letter 409,” last modified March 4, 2016, http://en.tchaikovsky-research.net/pages/Letter_409

The first is a structure that is made up of individual parts that all contribute to a greater story. *Swan Lake* is made up into movements that can all be played, to some extent, separately from each other without seeming out of place, for example:

Introduction

- I. Scene
- II. Waltz
- III. Scene
- IV. Pas de trois:
 - a. Intrada
 - b. Andante sostenuto
 - c. Allegro semplice
 - d. Moderato
 - e. Allegro
 - f. Coda¹⁰

This structure is similar to the ones we find from around the same time (late 1800s). The ballets of this period are written by Léo Delibes (*Sylvia* and *Coppélia*), Adolphe Adam (*Giselle*), and early Glazunov (*Raymonda*). When *Swan Lake* was being composed, it were close to the end of this period.

Musically, the ballet's individual movements are also very structured. Movements labeled as dance types, like mazurka, waltz, or czardas, are automatically recognized as having specific structures and sounds. Here is an example from the first few measures of the ballet's No. 23. Mazurka:

¹⁰ Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky, *The Swan Lake Ballet* (New York: Broude Brothers, 1951), 3-115.