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Dance

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Just the way he was

by [Laura Jacobs](#)

On George Balanchine and "Symphonie Concertante."

When George Balanchine's *Symphonie Concertante* was revived in 1983, it had not been seen since 1952, the year Balanchine let it drop from the New York City Ballet repertory. It was American Ballet Theatre that brought the work back to the stage, not, as one would expect, the New York City Ballet. And it was a ballet that even in its day divided viewers: you either got it (Edwin Denby: "delicate girlish, flower-freshness") or you didn't (John Martin: "perhaps Balanchine's most boring work"). Because of these facts, the revival of *Symphonie Concertante* was controversial. Why was the ballet going to ABT, a company that couldn't hope to perform it as young Balanchine dancers had? And if Balanchine chose to let it go, some argued, why shouldn't we? After all, he'd choreographed it as a one-off for a single student performance in 1945, a program with the National Orchestral Society called *Adventure in Ballet*. True, two years later, in 1947, he set it on Ballet Society (which would become the New York City Ballet in 1948), but as Maria Tallchief has said of *Symphonie Concertante*'s introduction into the repertory, "I was the only one who had danced professionally. Tanaquil Le Clercq was a student, and everyone in the corps de ballet was a student. What he was doing was making the clarity of Mozart's music visible: he was teaching us how to dance. The style is very pure. There is no margin for error. You can't veer the tiniest bit. It's exact." The dancers called it *Symphonie Concentrate*.

So the ballet was danced by the fledgling company for five years and then shelved, as if Balanchine decided the dancers had learned its lessons of precision, musicianship, esprit de corps. And look at the other ballets he was making: *La Sonnambula* and *The Four Temperaments* in 1946, *Symphony in C* and *Theme and Variations* in 1947, *Orpheus* in 1948. It was one masterpiece after another, a stunning explosion of imagination, with Balanchine's classicism taking not one form but many: the narrative theater of *Sonnambula* and *Orpheus*; Petipa prismatically distilled in *Theme* and cushion-cut in *Symphony in C*; and the outdoor Vorticism of *4Ts*.

Little *Symphonie Concertante* of 1945 was so indoor, so programmatic, a classroom ballet meant to show young eyes in the audience how a musical score might open like a pop-up book, a standing visual structure made of rhythm, repeats, and shapes blossoming in space. It was the conscious embodiment of Balanchine's mantra, "see the music, hear the dance." And the dancers were right: the ballet *is* concentrated, so full of invention, bursting with it really, that Balanchine took some of its best bits and used them in *Symphony in C* and *Theme*. Such overlaps alone may account for his laying the ballet to rest. And yet, even amid these postwar masterpieces, *Symphonie Concertante* remains special. Not just because it's a snow flurry of genius, a choreographic mind solving spatial puzzles to a stopwatch. And not just because of its Euclidean precision, the Edenic beauty of teeming white tutus, and a slow movement that plunges into profundity. *Symphonie Concertante* is a

portrait of the artist as a middle-aged man. Balanchine was 41 when he made it, and on the threshold of immortality.

To see this ballet a first time is to behold an overwhelming display of geometric brio, especially in the first and third movements, the Allegro maestoso (“majestic”) and the Presto. Balanchine starts simple. He brings on his corps of sixteen girls, four at a time, with *piqué* (“pricked”) arabesques—in layman terms, arabesques that step right onto pointe: quick, bright, instantly vertical. The up-down of these arabesques—and all the other *piqué* steps we see—speaks to the second-hand sweep that animates Mozart’s score, as if a timer had been set. (When Tallchief said of *Symphonie Concertante*, “There is no margin for error,” she meant there was no time.) From the beginning, Balanchine uses the corps as architecture: shifting, vivid, usually rectilinear; now stately, as when it forms a box-like proscenium space; now mirrored, as in two rows along the sides; here kaleidoscopic, an X that opens into kinetic diagonals; and here an M—for Mozart. You feel he’s having the time of his life, shuffling and reshuffling the deck, building cloisters and corridors of cards.

Six demi-soloists further define space, but also act as a chorus, suggesting metaphors. For instance, Balanchine first presents them to the audience like an unfolded panel of paper dolls, alternately swinging their legs forward and back while holding hands. Near the end of the second movement, two dimensions become three when the demis cock forward like mechanical dolls, a motif picked up and elaborated in the third movement Presto, when the entire corps forms a circle and ratchets up and down in stiff-legged bows, the automatons of Dr. Coppelius.

The demi-soloists also split into pairs, acting as shadows and refractions of the two lead women who enter with the violin and the viola, the virtuoso voices they embody. Just as these two string instruments circle and echo each other, singing closely in rounds and embellishing each other’s melodic lines with trills and sighs, so Balanchine’s two virtuosos move in circlets, wheels within wheels, their charming shoots and orbits cozy within the clockwork corps, and their scalloping *ronds de jambe* loosening and tightening like inner springs, a sort of self-winding infinity.

In such imagery one sees E. T. A. Hoffmann, the writer from whose stories two classic ballets derived, *Coppélia* and *The Nutcracker*, and who himself added the initial A to his name—for Amadeus. For this reason I’ve always regarded *Symphonie Concertante* as Balanchine’s tick-tock homage to the German Romanticism of Hoffmann, with his alchemists and automatons, and Heinrich von Kleist, with his puppets and gods. It’s a breathless genre of fevered artists and elusive muses, a vision taut with the distance between reality and dream, prose and poetry. *Symphonie Concertante* was indeed a ballet made for the purpose of turning girls (students) into dolls and dolls into ballerinas. The *Ballet Review* editor Francis Mason remembers what the ballet did for the young Diana Adams, who took the viola role after Tallchief: “It woke her up,” he says. “It had zip.” All these sparking associations form a harmonious whole, a sort of celestial map of aesthetic affinities—Mozart, Hoffmann, Balanchine.

And then there is the affinity between the two lead females, who are newborn ballerinas and seem to be in friendly competition. Musicologists point out that Mozart’s score asks the violist to tune each string a half step higher so as to brighten the tone, bringing it in parity with the violin, and also distinguishing it from the violas of the tutti. As a consequence, the violist is put in the precarious position of playing an instrument that could slip out of key. Balanchine, as well, built slippage into his Allegro. Toward the end of the movement each lead must perform a double pirouette with a difficulty built in: the violin adds a fouetté leg; the viola’s second spin takes an attitude derrière. These are among the most exposed pirouettes in Balanchine, and it’s the rare dancer who doesn’t show nerves in her preparation. Why, I’ve wondered, would he put something so treacherous near the end of a movement, at its climactic moment actually, and risk ruining an upward trajectory of sustained delight with a potential glitch or fall?

Well, this was a teaching ballet, and Balanchine wanted his leads to feel the heat of the spotlight. He found vulnerability to the moment (and the risks inherent in such moments) interesting in a dancer and vital to a dance. And he is musically compelled: these pirouettes come in the cadenza, a point both stripped down and heightened. But something else is achieved. By pitching these two into harm's way Balanchine prepares them for a more complex and precarious place, the Andante to come. Once the pirouettes are completed, the two girls link hands and the violin girl supports the viola in a long attitude balance on point, which she then carefully circles in *bourrées*. It's the kind of odd thing two girls might do in a studio, practice their partnering in front of a mirror. In this moment one realizes that no male dancer has been onstage. He will soon appear.

Mozart wrote his Sinfonia Concertante for Violin and Viola, in E-flat major, K. 364, in 1779, when he was twenty-three, and its second movement Andante is one of the glories of his early maturity. As the musicologist Neal Zaslaw has written, "The key shifts to C minor, and the whole takes on a demeanor of the utmost seriousness. In fact, the grave atmosphere of this movement transcends anything found in the other works for violin and orchestra." Maynard Solomon, in his masterful biography of 1995, *Mozart*, writes, "With Mozart's Paris sonatas and his Sinfonia Concertante ... there is a shift toward quite unexpected conceptions of beauty, which now embody a sense of restlessness and instability, and even of the dangerous or uncanny." It is in the Andante that Balanchine absents the corps and introduces a male dancer (in 1947, Todd Bolender), tightening his lens on the relationship between this man and these two women. The six demi-soloists join them from time to time, providing glimmers of imagery and, like watchful children, innocence.

Balanchine's Andante is a *pas de trois* of such elegant mirroring, such swelling interiority, it can begin to feel more like a *pas de deux* for three people. In a chapter called "Fearful Symmetries," Solomon describes the Andante's beginning thus:

Against a murmuring *amoroso* ["loving"] figure in the divided violas a tender questioning figure is offered three times by the violins... . But instead of the expected reply in measure 6 to prepare for a symmetrical close, a *sforzando* on the downbeat springs a hinge, breaking off the flow of thought and exposing a suppressed undercurrent of feeling, compounded of anxiety and longing.

On this floating carpet of mixed feelings, Balanchine's threesome emerges from the wings in a strange yet splendid configuration—one that is an expansion of that intimate moment in the Allegro, when the ballerinas partnered each other. With the man in the middle, holding the hand of each woman, the three move as one, their own curvaceous little world: the viola *bourrées* away and back, away and back, a calm pulse; the violin steps from *developés* to arabesques, an unfolding path that begins to bracelet the man; at which point the viola circles them both in *bourrées*. It's as if Balanchine has moved from the simple Salzburg of the Allegro maestoso to sophisticated Vienna in the Andante, creating yet another timepiece, one of those life-size Viennese clocks in which human mannequins glide on tracks, emerging from hidden doors to mark the chiming of the hour, only this one chimes silently.

Balanchine doesn't dispel this introverted entrance, but develops it in a long phrase that travels downstage, the three still holding hands, the women, each in turn, crossing the man's path in *croisée* lunges and twirls that scroll in and around, in and around, like a braid. We seem to be witnessing a private dialogue of whispers and promises. No one is letting go. And then they do let go. The women take opposite sides of the stage and the man must move from one to the other, partnering each—my turn, now my turn—in adagio. The sharing is polite, formal. But this spring season at the Metropolitan Opera House, in the performances of ABT's Veronika Part and Michelle Wiles, there was more. One felt those undercurrents of emotion, a complicated yearning which suggested another

level of allusion in the ballet.

These undercurrents were generated by Part. That a dancer of her height and amplitude can fit herself to Mozart's tight metrics in the Allegro and the Presto, and with such buoyancy, is amazing. But it was in the Andante that she opened up new meanings. By giving herself over to the viola's sensual tonalities, dancing *amoroso*, she brought a breathing, beating heart to the ballet. Talk about "see the music." It was there in the plangent pull of her back; in the rich rosewood timbre of her arabesque *penchée*; in the deep (riskily so) *plié* she brings to *rond de jambe à terre*, so deep, wide, and round it seems to be feeling for the future. Since the 1983 revival of *Symphonie Concertante*, the leads have been beautifully danced, both at ABT and the School of American Ballet, primly, imperiously, coolly, and dutifully, by students and soloists and principals. But none have heard Mozart as Part does, understanding that this pulling, pooling dialogue is steeped in sadness.

Wiles has watched Part, and answers in dancing that is her best in a Balanchine ballet to date—quick but softer at the edges, light but listening. These two dancers, both statuesque, both stars, yet coming from such different backgrounds—Part from the Kirov's Vaganova Academy and Wiles with a training that blends Russian, English, and American schools—are often cast as adversaries. A week before their *Symphonie Concertantes*, Part was the guileless temple dancer Nikiya to Wiles's jealously plotting Gamzatti. In *Symphonie*, the adversarial relationship is a mere hum under the surface as these two, one after the other, beckon the male lead, pulling him into partnership. Wiles might be *Der Rosenkavalier*'s Sophie to Part's Marschallin, for it is Part who foresees a loss.

Mozart's mother, Anna Maria Mozart, died in 1778. Mozart was there at her bedside, dreading the moment when life would leave her body. "Indeed," he wrote, "I wished at that moment to depart with her." When it was over, in a childlike act of magical thinking, he wrote to his father and sister that Anna Maria remained ill but hope was not lost. In his next letter he undeceived them. A year later, when he composed his *Sinfonia Concertante*, the imaginative space between life and death, staying and leaving, hope and truth formed itself into the musical vaults of the Andante. Writing about meaning in Mozart, Maynard Solomon focuses on what he calls the "adagio/andante archetype"—the incomparable slow movements of which this Andante is one. Solomon sees in the archetype "a matrix that constitutes an infancy-Eden of unsurpassable beauty but also . . . a state that inevitably terminates in parting." He goes on to write, "One pervasive slow-movement model—often in C minor—is derived from opera seria, using copious dramatic gestures and recitative-like interjections to impart a sense of the tragic or pathetic." The Andante's violin and viola, imploring and reasoning, lifting in hope and luminous in sorrow, are voices measuring the gravest matters of life: love and death.

For Mozart, of course, we need only look to the death of his mother to explain the intimation of mortality in κ . 364. But Balanchine, too, lost his mother early, not to death but to distance. When he was fourteen his family moved to Tiflis (Tbilisi), Georgia, leaving him behind in St. Petersburg, a city ravaged by revolution, so he might continue his studies at the Imperial Ballet School. He never saw his mother again. "She was no sooner gone from his life," writes Francis Mason in his collection of interviews, *I Remember Balanchine*, "than Balanchine began making ballets for young goddesses." Mason pinpoints a critical nexus. In Balanchine's *Symphonie Concertante* we feel the dark wing of a different loss, a different mortality.

When Balanchine brought *Symphonie* into Ballet Society repertory in 1947, the two leads were Maria Tallchief as the viola and Tanaquil Le Clercq as the violin. They were at that time, respectively, his wife and the woman he would leave her for. Three years later, when the New York City Ballet was performing in London in 1950, Tallchief learned of Balanchine's affair with Le Clercq and moved out of the London apartment they were sharing with none other than Le Clercq. When Diana Adams joined the company that same year, it was Le Clercq, still the violin, and Adams who were cast in the leads: again, Balanchine's wife-to-be (he and Le Clercq married in 1952) and

the new muse who would fill his eyes and eventually pull him onward.

Balanchine once said that the story of his life was “all in the programs,” and in *Symphonie Concertante* he discloses a truth about himself. Not, as the ballet’s surface imagery seems to say, that he was constantly beset by ballerinas who wanted ever more attention from him, though this is obviously a fact of any choreographer’s life. It was that he could not be faithful to any one woman for very long; his life as an artist, his own fevers and needs, left him ever susceptible to a continually revised ideal. The male lead in *Symphonie Concertante* might be the poet Hoffmann in Jacques Offenbach’s opera, his infatuation moving from the doll Olympia to the courtesan Giulietta to the opera singer Antonia. And he might be someone else. During that 1950 London tour the English critic Richard Buckle asked Balanchine, What is your favorite opera? His answer: *Don Giovanni*, by Mozart.

Balanchine had made dances for this “opera of all operas” (as Hoffmann called it) three times in his life: in 1928, for the Opera de Monte-Carlo; in 1938, for the Metropolitan Opera; and in 1948, for the New York City Opera. That Balanchine was a bit of a Don Juan himself is inarguable. “Nobody escaped George,” says Marie-Jeanne in *I Remember Balanchine*. “He had so many girls in the beginning. I think he went through all of them.” Reading the biographies and memoirs, hearing the lore, one feels that Balanchine was as much in love with the chase as he was with the object of his pursuit: his ideal woman. “Once he attained,” Natalie Molostwoff has said, “he lost interest.” And Balanchine himself told his longtime friend Lucia Davidova, “I know the stimulus. In order to continue working I have to follow my love.”

For some time I have puzzled over a particular choreographic choice in the Andante: a magisterial promenade that is so musically perfect and powerful it seems to carry the ballet into another world. But what world? It comes when the violin and viola rest and the orchestra pulses with an ecstatic sonority, a passage of *sforzandos* flaring like a torch in the dark: the three leads turn their backs to the audience and arms held high, holding hands, they walk slowly, momentously, upstage. It’s a walk in the underworld, I’ve often thought. And yet, there is also a visual echo of *The Sleeping Beauty*’s coda, the point when Aurora and Prince Desiré turn their backs as they walk toward a throne upstage. So along with a sense of death, there is something of love—*only it’s three people, not two*. The promenade repeats with the music twice more, the second time by the man alone, and the third time, the women only. In the performances of Part and Wiles, with Maxim Beloserkovsky as their cavalier, the scale was looming, operatic. They seemed prima donnas in invisible gowns, a mezzo and a soprano sweeping upstage, full of the same knowledge: that one of them is passing out of the man’s heart, and the other is entering in. They are subject to this knowledge, and they are complicit in it.

When *Symphonie Concertante* was revived in 1983, Alan M. Kriegsman of *The Washington Post* spoke to Ann Hutchinson, the woman responsible for notating a group of Balanchine ballets in the late 1940s. She said that Balanchine had become interested in Labanotation, and that he’d commissioned the notations himself, “about a dozen in all, including *Symphony in C*. And *Symphonie Concertante* was among them, too.” We know Balanchine could be blithe about the lifespan of a ballet, often calling them “butterflies—they live for a season.” But if he really didn’t care about *Symphonie Concertante*, and believed it shouldn’t survive its season, would he have put it on the list? In fact, thirty years later, in the spring of 1982, it was Balanchine who gave ABT and its director Mikhail Baryshnikov permission to stage the ballet, Balanchine who approved the coaches and the costume design. Baryshnikov said to Kriegsman, “[Balanchine] told me he’d always been very fond of *Symphonie Concertante*. He said he’d had to compose it very quickly, but was much pleased with the result.” And in *Ballet News*, the critic Susan Reiter questioned the notion, often suggested, that with the white ballet *Symphony in C* in repertory, and the addition in 1952 of the Mozart ballet *Caracole*, there was no need for *Symphonie Concertante*. “One seldom hears of one ballet

‘replacing’ another,” Reiter mused, “and certainly there is room for more than one Mozart ballet. No one ever suggested there is a quota on Tchaikovsky or Stravinsky.”

One is drawn back to the Andante, that shadowy realm of shimmering tumescence, anxiety spiraling into release, and those two string voices with their hourglass shapes. Solomon titled his chapter on Mozart’s adagio/andante archetype “Trouble in Paradise,” and at first glance it might seem a fitting subtitle for the ballet’s second movement. But the important point is this: the Andante’s threesome leaves the stage not only in the same way it entered—linked up in that gorgeous timepiece of desire—it leaves encircled, bowered, by the six demi-soloists. It’s as if these three are in a bubble, a womb—Paradise Intact! And the Andante itself is encircled, bowered, by the Allegro maestoso and the Presto, both with their flower-fresh gardens of twenty-two girls. One might call this threesome Balanchine’s “eternal pas de trios,” and it goes to the very quick of his creativity, its need for a revolving door, an evolving emotion—the simultaneous letting go and gathering in which is so literally expressed in the Andante.

For Balanchine, the moment of overlap that resulted in these threesomes *was* a kind of paradise, a world where death—the death of desire—is eternally linked to life—a new muse and renewed inspiration. Certainly he knew that Mozart had loved two sisters: first, the opera singer Aloysia; and then Constanze, whom he married. But of the many characteristics shared by Mozart and Balanchine, constancy was not one of them. And for Balanchine, in the words of Don Giovanni, *No, no, ch’io non mi pento*, there was no repentance. Balanchine moved on when he had to; his ballerinas accepted it. “People came in and out,” Diana Adams has said of his love life, “but dancing was the thing. . . . It was just the way he was.” Nimble, witty, full of fresh love for the form and dark knowledge in the Andante, *Symphonie Concertante* is a portrait of art’s privilege over the human heart. It is also a look into the mirror, Balanchine surrounded by twos ad infinitum—the one he would leave, the new one he loved, round and round, pain and pleasure forever bound. Perhaps this truth itself was painful, a likeness he didn’t want to see. In any case, *Symphonie Concertante* disappeared.

Laura Jacobs's most recent novel is *The Bird Catcher* (St. Martin's Press).

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