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Dance

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Vaults & waters: the Kirov at City Center

by [Laura Jacobs](#)

On the Kirov Ballet in Manhattan.

When the Kirov Ballet came to New York in 2002, it pulled into the Met like the greatest show on earth. The company brought a this-is-how-it's-done *Don Quixote* and a *Swan Lake* with the lovely, dusty sheen of old velvet in stone castles. Its *La Bayadère*, like *The Sleeping Beauty* brought here in 1999, was an experiment in history retrieved, a ballet rebuilt from notated texts, and though not wholly satisfying as a work of art, it was a restoration with many fascinations. And then there were three splendid performances of George Balanchine's *Jewels*, which arrived with a newly designed set, still minimalist, but less the static parure that was the design for decades at New York City Ballet and more a swirling star shower from above, as if the vaults of heaven had opened.

When I think of the Kirov, I think of vaults. It's not just the rich history of this company, which reaches back into the eighteenth century and is an inheritance to be reckoned with. It's the arcing interior spaces that live in company style, the result of a shared technique learned in the Vaganova Academy, and a shared city of imperial raiments. All those golden domes against the moonstone-blue St. Petersburg sky, all those cupolas and colonnades. We see these architectural beauties in the dancing, nowhere more clearly than in Kirov women, in the celestial sphere balanced in their upper bodies, and in the Romanesque windows built into their *épaulement*. Kirov dancing at its best communicates an intense sensation of line imbued with deep space, a pregnant dimensionality. The company was originally named for a woman, Czar Alexander II's wife Marie, hence, the Mariinsky Theatre.

The Kirov that came to New York's City Center this past April was a reduced version of the company we've been seeing since the great days of the international tour. Even before it got here, fans were wondering how St. Petersburg scale would look on City Center's small stage, and how sets for the classical dances would sit. The answer to both questions is cramped. More than that, the company looked not so much matriarchal or magisterial as manic, with a strange hyperactivity at the top of the roster, from the coarse-cut matchstick dancing of Alina Somova (her *fouettés* could give you splinters) to the eager-to-please avidity of Ekaterina Kondourova (her huge but goosey extensions at first seemed game, then gaudy), to the here-there-and-everywhere casting of Leonid Sarafanov, the Kirov's baby Beardsley (he's a florid, tiny tornado, a tempest in a terrarium). Even Diana Vishneva, one of the world's most brilliant ballerinas, was oddly *in extremis* in the performances I saw—a freezing *La Bayadère*, an overwrought *Dying Swan*, a compulsively seductive *Don Q*.

Meanwhile, in the news and on the grapevine we'd been hearing about the rumored resignation—or was it a removal?—of company director Makhar Vasiev, who is usually quite visible on tour but

was not seen during the New York run. Add to that the closeness of the footlights, the dumpy tutus, the unattractive flats, the oppressive overcasting of a few anointed dancers (what a strange form of tightfistedness), and, well, some nights it seemed we were seeing a “Stars of the Kirov” satellite that just happened to have a corps de ballet along for the ride. So in terms of presentation it was a comedown for the Kirov.

And yet New York’s City Center is a wonderful house—the first home, after all, of Balanchine’s New York City Ballet, which danced here from 1948 until its 1964 move to Lincoln Center. City Center doesn’t have grand sight lines and deep vistas, but it does have intimacy, a cozy family feeling. The ballets that work well on this stage work very well. And the one that worked best for the Kirov was Michel Fokine’s *Chopiniana*.

This wasn’t surprising. Three years ago, when American Ballet Theatre performed *Chopiniana* at City Center—using the Western title *Les Sylphides*—it was the first time the ballet actually looked good on the company. At the Met, ABT’s *Sylphides* was logy and interminable, a landscape painting just barely come to life. It didn’t help that the stage was so far away. Sylphs, with their tiny wings, their snow-cricket transparency, their shadow play, are both hot and cold. You need to see them up close, like insects. They hover the way hummingbirds do, seemingly still yet heartbeat quick, every sense turned to their woodland sphere.

At City Center, almost close enough to touch, ABT’s *Sylphides* began to breathe and fly. Kirk Peterson staged the ballet and clearly set to animating the dancers, getting them to move. He was aided by the presence of the soloist Veronika Part, whose natural poetry and Kirov training made her an object lesson in every *Sylphides* she danced. Physicians call it “exquisite sensitivity” when the eye, the ear, the cilia, the skin are too acute in their readings, almost painfully so. The sole man in this ballet is exquisitely sensitive himself, a poet, and at one with these creatures, with their stillness, listening, and whispers, their passions welling up and floating off. In Part’s dancing of the Prelude, she showed her ABT colleagues just how soft and surging this welling and floating can be. You could see the other soloists looking and listening, and by the final *Sylphides* of the season the ballet was full of fresh new blooms.

The Kirov performance of *Chopiniana* is incomparable. Leaving aside the fact that Fokine created the ballet on this company in 1908 (the West saw it in 1909 on Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes), the stylistic coherence of these sylphs powerfully projects a fantasy. It’s the same thrill one gets seeing the Kirov women as the Wilis in *Giselle*, the swans in *Swan Lake*, and the Shades in *La Bayadère*—spectacles of esprit de corps in which drill meets metaphor and company style becomes a species in itself (think of the identical wing beats of birds in formation, their instinctual spatial rigor).

Here in *Chopiniana*, however, the sylphides are airy spirits, free, not a massed mental energy but an interlude of individual impulses. I loved the delight these dancers took in their little glade, with its sylvan rounds and waltzes. Sprite-like, tinsel-thin Ekaterina Osmolkina looked not like she was performing but playing—she had a pixilated charm. (She was wonderful, too, in *Diana and Acteon*: a cut-crystal goddess in a swirl of coral capes.) Yana Selina, so serene, her figure rather Paris Opera in its proportions—that artist’s-model musculature!—was a sylph of nuances (and, in the company’s all-Forsythe evening, the only woman who found a glowing place of poise inside the grim machinations). And in the Prelude, young Yulia Bolshakova, dark and pretty: one saw her feeling her way into the role, not yet there, and then all of a sudden ripplingly there, her eloquent back turned sighing to the audience as her arms rose hymnal to the sky. It’s one of those glorioso moments touched with the moon worship of Norma, the pagan pleasure of Isadora (who also danced to Chopin and whom Fokine had closely watched). You don’t get this feeling of worshipful pleasure from any other sylphs on earth, and no other company releases upward in such silken waves, from the tailbone through the delts and out the fingertips. It begins not in the lower back or pelvic girdle,

but in another century.

Chopiniana connects with *Serenade*, which was the opening ballet on the Kirov's Balanchine program. *Serenade* is Balanchine's 1935 update of Fokine's moonlit secret society. Its groupings are frequently sylphide-like, while late in the ballet there is a specific reference to *Giselle*: when one of the dancers falls to the ground her hair falls loose as well, a signal of fate and loss. Then too, just as Fokine had seen and channeled Isadora Duncan, one can't help feeling in Balanchine's *Serenade*, not echoes exactly, but an atmospheric affinity, a sensation of Martha Graham's all-women rituals of the early 1930s, particularly her *Primitive Mysteries* of 1931. (Balanchine was interested in Graham's work. According to Lincoln Kirstein's biographer Martin Duberman, he'd been taken by Kirstein to see her perform in 1934. Balanchine thought Graham talented, Duberman writes, "but felt she'd seen too much Mary Wigman and not enough ballet.")

There is a vein of barefoot mortality running through *Serenade*, a quotidian element that doesn't fit easily to the Kirov technique. If you look at the old photo of Balanchine's girls in rehearsal in 1934, you see a bunch of chubby students attempting classicism. Certainly there are intonations of immortal creatures in the blue air of *Serenade*—sylphs and Wilis and even an angel—but Balanchine's students, a makeshift corps at best, did not have the coherent company style necessary to put across an enchanted world. They hardly had a technique. They were a bunch of girls trying to learn fast.

To this day, you can't dance *Serenade* as if it's *Chopiniana*, and the Kirov performance didn't get this. *Serenade* trades rounded interiority for a leaping linear reach and rush. The Kirov women are persuasive in quiet moments when *port de bras* prevails (and their arabesques are real ones, uniformly gorgeous, such a treat), but they don't ride this music in the right way. Dancing Balanchine can be like shooting a white-water rapid: the vessel must be swifter than the river, if only infinitesimally, or the oars get stuck. The Kirov women were so much inside Tchaikovsky's curves and phrases they lost maneuverability and therefore immediacy, that blue chill in the air. In fact, the stage was not nearly blue enough. It was lit a pale blue-gray, a White Night when it should be, must be, midnight.

What didn't work in *Serenade* at the beginning of the Balanchine program, triumphed in *Ballet Imperial* at the end. I don't love this ballet. Its score, so glitteringly turbulent and booming repetitive, is not first-tier Tchaikovsky. Balanchine choreographed it in 1941 for the little company Ballet Caravan, renamed American Ballet Caravan for a South American tour it took that same year. The ballet, Nancy Reynolds tells us in *Repertory in Review*, "was created to show South America that the classical tradition was alive and well in the North." But whose classical tradition? As Lincoln Kirstein wrote, "*Ballet Imperial* is not an American ballet. It is a Russian ballet danced by an American company."

Maybe this is why it looks better on Russian dancers. When ABT performed *Ballet Imperial* three seasons ago at the Met, it was the company's two Russian ballerinas, Diana Vishneva and Veronika Part, who made sense of the ballet, both treating it as more than a big bag of tricks. *Ballet Review*'s Don Daniels sees in *Ballet Imperial* the social orders of Catherine the Great's court. He even detects in its formations the rising and receding waters of St. Petersburg locks. It is a compelling reading, and with this in mind one begins to see the grand isolation of the ballerina, the chattering castes around her, and, in a twice repeated entrance—the ballerina carried in from upstage left, crossing to center and then down—the Neva River in the background. Russians seem to recognize these patterns as if they're imprinted in the womb. They find the story in a ballet, if only for themselves.

Balanchine did not put *Ballet Imperial* on the City Center stage when his next company—Ballet Society, in two years renamed New York City Ballet—danced there from 1946 to 1964. *Concerto Barocco*, however, which premiered in South America on the same night as *Ballet Imperial*, became

a company signature during these years. In other words, it *was* “an American ballet.” Balanchine revived *Ballet Imperial* in 1964 at Lincoln Center, probably hoping it would work on the larger State Theater stage. In 1973, he took away the czarist backdrop, switched the costumes from stiff tutus to flowing chiffon, tinkered with the Andante, and renamed the ballet for its music, *Tchaikovsky Piano Concerto No. 2*—which melted the imperial ice a bit, and made a better, freer fit for NYCB dancing. It’s not the only Tchaikovsky ballet he refitted: three years earlier in 1970, by adding in three movements of wafty romance, he turned *Theme and Variations*, a classical showstopper he’d made for Ballet Theatre in 1947, into *Tchaikovsky Suite No. 3*. Of the two makeovers, *Ballet Imperial*’s is the more successful, and still, despite winning performances like Teresa Reichlen’s Amazonian debut last winter, I find it long-winded at City Ballet.

It was not long-winded at City Center. The Kirov wore NYCB’s flowing chiffon, but danced with a snapping classicism that quickened the stage. In the same way the dancers have understood Balanchine’s “Diamonds,” a later evocation of imperial Tchaikovsky, they clicked here, with swooping *temps liés*, sailing *arabesques*, a Standart ship-shape ebullience, and yet the slow time needed for chiaroscuro, that beaming pride in placement. Early on, when eight young men in a row stepped forward in *croisé* fourth, one marveled at the sight, how their legs aligned to catch the same light and throw the same shadows, and how moving it was.

Uliana Lopatkina performed the lead in the performance I saw. She’s an older ballerina now, and has lost elevation in *petite batterie* and also give in *plié*, which means she doesn’t have much vertical dynamic—she’s like frost hugging the ground. Lopatkina began the ballet weakly, and all I could see were her faults, the dead foot in *arabesque* (an injury I’m told), the not really beautiful legs (though long and slim). But as the ballet went on, the power of her persona took over, and the performance found its note, held and lifted it. Lopatkina has imperious freedom in the upper body. With her shoulders, head, even her forehead, she creates a very long line. Her take on *Ballet Imperial* was at times tormented, her isolation expressed in that bracing field of space in the *port de bras*. She looked every bit the top cat in the Kirov hierarchy—or harem, for the dancing here connected with her performance a week earlier in the title role of *Scheherazade*, that spinner of stories who in Lopatkina’s person was expensively spun from alabaster and bronze. Indeed, pulling *Scheherazade* into *Ballet Imperial*, not with face or gesture but sheer spine, Lopatkina made a point about imagination and ballet and Balanchine, about the false bottoms and trapdoors in that opaque word “abstraction.”

Lopatkina has star power. But when you put aside technical and stylistic specifics, star power is pretty much the same property in every country and on every stage: it comes down to will. What impressed me more than Lopatkina’s compensatory gifts, her strength personified, was the quiet light coming from two corps women, Svetlana Ivanova and Yana Selina. Both had danced in *Serenade*, where each was noticeable for something extra. Ivanova, a blond of sparrowy delicacy, has a line like the finest rapidograph pen, and a grave face that seems to see through mist. And Selina is just so calm, correct, a steadiness pulsing through the corps. In the second movement of *Ballet Imperial* these two formed a *pas de trois* with the male lead, Igor Zelensky, shadowing him like guardian spirits, benevolent versions of Moyna and Zulma, Myrta’s lieutenant Wilis. Their presence had its own power, a sounding bass note that brought a deeper breathing to the ballet. One of the glories of classical dancing is the number of beating hearts in the dark garden of the corps. We talk endlessly about which hearts will emerge from that darkness, but the greater mystery is which hearts draw us in.

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

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