

Twentieth-Century Ballet Music Assignment 1

Assess Diaghilev's achievement in the early years of the Ballets Russes, up to (and including) 1914. You should consider the extent of his importance bearing in mind that he was neither a musician nor a choreographer.

Considering the fact that Serge Diaghilev was neither a musician nor a choreographer, it is ironic that the success of the Ballet Russes was a consequence of a man who simply created a collaboration of outstanding artists. The idea that Diaghilev was not talented in these areas perhaps suggests why the company was so triumphant, as he was able to criticise every aspect of the performances. The Ballet Company was founded by Diaghilev in 1909, which “burst upon Paris...with the force of a revelation”.¹ Throughout the duration of the Ballet Russes, numerous successful performances were exhibited, particularly in the “early years” up to and including 1914. During this period, “Cléopâtre” (1909) and “Daphnis et Chloé” (1912) are just two of the company's accomplishments, portraying just how victorious the company were. It has been suggested that the success was largely due to the personality of Diaghilev and his ability to bring together artists, namely Tamara Karsavina, who danced with “great beauty and intelligence”,² Nijinsky, Stravinsky and Fokine, to name a few. In more cases than one, it was more of a sexual nature as opposed to a friendly relationship. Diaghilev's homosexuality could play a part of his success, possibly contributing to his feeling for creativity, and in addition, his ability to work well with other artists. It is fair to say that Diaghilev played an extremely imperative function in the achievement of the troupe, and in fact had an enormous influence on modern music in general.

Serge Diaghilev has been described as having a “majestic personality”³ by Lydia Sokolova, a former dancer for Diaghilev, who was said to have been “scared stiff” at the meeting of him for the first time. Yet throughout the time they spent together, Sokolova tells of how she “seldom heard him raise his voice”⁴. This

¹ S. Au: *Ballet and Modern Dance* P. 76

² S. Au: *Ballet and Modern Dance* P. 76

³ L. Sokolova: *Memoirs of Lydia Sokolova* P. 37

⁴ L. Sokolova: *Memoirs of Lydia Sokolova* P. 40

somewhat depicts how his authority was portrayed to others, and how others significantly felt inferior, as he was indeed a powerful man. According to Sokolova, Serge would “look for creases in the scenery, make sure the lighting was correct, mumble a few words to Nijinsky or Karsavina, ignoring the rest of us, give Grigoriev the word to begin, and go through the pass door into the front of the house”.⁵ Again we are painted a picture of a simple man, yet knows exactly how he wanted things to appear, almost like a perfectionist. He knew artistically what he wanted to create, and he used this vision, in addition to his personal relationships with artists in order to create this vision. Diaghilev grew up in an aristocratic family, surrounded by music, art and enthusiastic, progressive people. These characteristics are reflected through Diaghilev’s passion for the Ballet Russes, as he was obsessed with modernising ballet and bringing fresh ideas to the performances. As a result of his passion to bring new ideas to the ballet, he was dismissed from the Imperial Ballet, which inspired him to create the company The Ballet Russes, of which he brought a small group of artists. Throughout his childhood he was subjected to the arts through all different directions; he composed romances for piano, his step aunt taught him to sing, his father was an amateur singer and his uncle even a conductor and cellist. He moved to St Petersburg to study for six years at the university, and on graduating in 1895, “it was not as the composer or singer he had hoped to be. In a letter to his stepmother, he wrote: “I am someone afflicted, it seems, with complete absence of talent. I think I’ve found my true vocation: to be a patron of the arts. For that I have everything I need, except the money.””⁶ Although (so and so) suggests that Diaghilev had hoped to be a composer, these musical skills contributed to his artistic directing skills. It is important, also, to realise that it was not just the choreography, music and design that Diaghilev had to organise, however the categories of administration, finance, publicity and the planning were all his responsibilities as well. Diaghilev did not have a knowledgeable audience, nor reliable funding and therefore it is an achievement alone to realise just how immense the Ballet Russes were, all things considering. The Ballet Russes is said to have comprised of forty different composers within the short space of twenty years. It is evident, therefore, that the Ballet Russes put on a diverse amount of performances and produced numerous ballets, keeping all the collaborators extremely busy, resulting in a triumphant company. The idea that Diaghilev directed

⁵ L. Sokolova: *Memoirs of Lydia Sokolova* P. 40

⁶ http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1083/is_n9_v70/ai_18640442 consulted on 12/03/07

the whole company, despite not being a choreographer or a musician shows how his achievements are extremely impressive.

For Diaghilev, his vision and dream was for the Western World to discover the Russian arts. He did so by editing a magazine, *World of Art*, and putting on many exhibitions, however exceeded expectations by taking it further with the Ballet Russes. Western Europe, North and South America were instantly impressed with Diaghilev's work, and were influenced a great deal, however Russia, surprisingly as most of the collaborators and Diaghilev himself was Russian, did not warm to the new ballet company. "He was recognised as one of the wonders of the theatrical world"⁷ and certainly brought new ideas to both theatre design and costumes, as well as "revolutionising the world of dance.... And producing some of the greatest music of the time"⁸. In particular, Diaghilev's "early years" were radical and elaborate, moving away from the typical 19th century clichés. The fact that Diaghilev's ballets were so out of the ordinary again highlights his achievements.

One of his greatest achievements was the ballet "The Firebird", first performed in June 1910, and conducted by Gabriel Pierné. Stravinsky composes the music for the ballet, despite him not being Diaghilev's first choice. It was the first ever ballet to have music composed for them especially, and was Stravinsky's first major piece in the collaboration of Diaghilev and Stravinsky. The Firebird is constructed from a Russian folk tale, and is choreographed by Fokine. He creates a liberated style of dance, with energetic and dynamic moves, which is accompanied by a lively and vigorous score. The Firebird is a typical example of how ballet music became equally important as the choreography itself in the twentieth century, as opposed to the nineteenth century, where the choreography was the dominant part of the ballet. Diaghilev was the main influence on this idea, and "from the first representation in the summer of 1910, the Firebird has been an incredible success. Stravinsky won instant fame, celebrated as one of the greatest composers for the ballet."⁹ Instant success with the Firebird was due to its outstanding collaboration with Diaghilev, Fokine and Stravinsky. If it weren't for Diaghilev's charming personality, the ballet would have been in jeopardy. Furthermore, the fact that it was a ballet of renovation, full of fresh ideas, intrigued the public and added to its success.

⁷ L. Sokolova: *Memoirs of Lydia Sokolova* P. 45

⁸ J. Drummond: *Speaking of Diaghilev* P. 59

⁹ <http://www.danceit.org/firebird.html> consulted on 12/03/07

The achievements of the Ballet Russes “must have depended on Diaghilev’s personality, on his knowledge and the authority he gained over so many outstanding creative artists of different disciplines.”¹⁰ In agreement with John Drummond, it would appear most likely that the company was so distinguished due to Diaghilev’s personal relations with other artists. Most notably, the relationship between Diaghilev and Nijinsky was an extremely close and personal one, which extended beyond work. Nijinsky joined the Ballet Russes as the choreographer when Fokine left. Fokine and Diaghilev had a poor relationship, however this never affected the ballets themselves. “Diaghilev’s genius was to have understood how remarkable and original Fokine was as a choreographer, even though he had never much liked him as a man”.¹¹ Fokine and Diaghilev’s collaboration saw the works of “Petrushka”, “The Firebird” and “Carnaval” to name a few, and later, after Nijinsky left the Ballet Russes, and Fokine was reappointed, the works of “La legende de Joseph” and “Le Coq d’or” were produced. Despite Fokine and Diaghilev having their differences, after Nijinsky left, Diaghilev was able to persuade Fokine to come back to the company to choreograph more ballets. This portrays how Diaghilev was a powerful and genuine man, as he was more concerned about the overall result than his personal relationships. It also highlights the flexibility that every artistic director should have.

“Diaghilev loves Nijinsky; and he was incapable of loving anyone without trying to educate him and bring out all his talent possibilities.”¹² Nijinsky and Diaghilev had become extremely close, and when Nijinsky married Ramola, it became apparent when reading his contract that each artist had fulfilled favours for each other without being paid, which draws attention to their close relationship. It was due to Ramola, one would say, that Nijinsky’s career ended at the Ballet Russes, and Fokine was brought back.

Throughout the twenty years at the Ballet Russes, numerous different artists collaborated with each other, including Debussy, Stravinsky, Fokine, Ravel, and it is interesting to see how the language barriers made a huge impact on the success of the Ballet Russes. In particular, Lydia Sokolova, from Essex, England talks in her memoirs of Grigoriar, the stage manager, and how communication was limited; “Not understanding much of what he said, I had the feeling that he was usually

¹⁰ J. Drummond: *Speaking of Diaghilev* P. 67

¹¹ J. Drummond: *Speaking of Diaghilev* P. 67

¹² L. Sokolova: *Memoirs of Lydia Sokolova* P. 37

complaining, but no doubt Diaghilev was always complaining to him, and it was his job to pass on the comments and reprimands of his employer.”¹³ Despite the various language barriers, however, the understanding between everyone involved in the Ballet Russes was composed, which was largely due to the way Diaghilev dealt with things. As the artistic director, he tended not to get too involved, except just pass on his comments and thoughts to the appropriate artist, which generally proved appropriate. The fact that throughout its duration, the Ballet Russes saw many different artists and even ones that had left were easily persuaded to return depicts just how efficient and competent Diaghilev’s running of the company had been, including the numerous successful ballets that had been created.

The successes of the “Early years” of the Ballet Russes were overall due to its dynamic impact on the general public. Not only were they a representation of the Russian Arts to Western Europe, however they were revolutionised with modern ideas, which resulted in a huge influence on modern music. In comparison to 19th century, Diaghilev had had a big impact by collaborating with some worldwide famous artists. The impact Diaghilev had on the company is established more at his death. Diaghilev’s death in 1929 saw the collapse of the company, despite the company continuing for a few years after, the vision and direction in the company was no longer present, and the company fell apart. It is evident; therefore that Diaghilev’s biggest achievement was the construction of the Ballet Russes, in addition to many of the performances created, despite being neither a choreographer nor a musician. Diaghilev did have some music ability and an eye for creativity, which drove him towards his passion for artistic direction. In addition to this, his personality was one of royalty and charm, which ultimately helped when collaborating with some of the finest artists, to produce some of the finest music. “His career suggests that, without being primarily creative it is all the same possible to influence even great artists and the path that they take in their creative life.”¹⁴

¹³ L. Sokolova: *Memoirs of Lydia Sokolova* P. 36

¹⁴ J. Drummond: *Speaking of Diaghilev* P. 99

Bibliography

S. Au: *Ballet and Modern Dance* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 1988/2002)

J. Drummond: *Speaking of Diaghilev* (London: Faber and Faber Ltd, 1997)

S. Jordan: *Moving Music* (London: Dance Books Ltd, 2000)

L. Sokolova: *Dancing for Diaghilev: Memoirs of Lydia Sokolova* (USA: Mercury House, 1960. Edited: R. Buckle)

<http://www.danceit.org/firebird.html> consulted on 12/03/07

http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1083/is_n9_v70/ai_18640442 consulted on 12/03/07