

THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN BALANCHINE'S TECHNIQUE AND CHOREOGRAPHY

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ABSTRACT

The influence of George Balanchine's work as a choreographer in the 20th century is a continued presence in the ballet field. Through his establishment of the New York City Ballet and the School of American Ballet, George Balanchine developed his own aesthetic of ballet that departed from the traditions of the ballet field, particularly the Russian tradition that he trained, performed, and choreographed within early in his career. This research examines the establishment of a school in order for Balanchine to train dancers for performing within his aesthetic and looks at the way the School of American Ballet and the New York City Ballet shaped and influenced each other. The close relationship between these two institutions shaped the Balanchine technique's approach to ballet training. The research looks at the presence of Balanchine's choreographic values as distinguishing elements of the Balanchine technique. It concludes that an emphasis on linearity, shape driven movement, and precision shape both the Balanchine technique and his choreography.

Introduction

In the twentieth century, the landscape of American ballet was transformed by the contributions of Russian choreographer, George Balanchine. Balanchine established the School of American Ballet and the New York City Ballet, distinguished institutions within their fields, and developed his own aesthetic of ballet that departed from the traditions of the field. In the establishment of these two institutions, it was important to Balanchine that a school was the predecessor of a performing company (Dunning, viii). However, Balanchine's work as a choreographer informed what was taught and how it was taught at the School of American Ballet (58). This close relationship between the School of American Ballet and the New York City Ballet created a unique approach to ballet training.

Balanchine's process of choreographing was distinct in its values of precision and clarity that displayed Balanchine's forthright definition of dance as "movement of the human body, in a limited space, in relation to time" (Schorer, 20). Balanchine's choreography alongside the development of his technique demonstrates a particular regard for shapes a body and multiple bodies can create within space. The shapes of the body Balanchine created in choreography became guidelines for the specifics of the technique. As both the choreography and technique were developed alongside each other during the establishment of the School of American Ballet and the New York City Ballet, there was shift in focus to the presentation of the body and the space it occupied and created, diverging from a focus on narrative and character (Scholl, 127). The body was being positioned in relation to the audience, in both the context of a performance and in preparation for the stage.

Methodologies

This research is built upon the first-hand accounts of dancers trained by Balanchine and their lens into his choreographic works, process, and pedagogy. I used secondary analysis of Balanchine's works and processes to shape and broaden the lens through which I viewed the primary accounts, which included memoirs, autobiographies, and videos of choreography. My research lens is further informed by own personal experiences as a ballet dancer. Though I have not studied at the School of American Ballet or with dancers of the New York City Ballet, many of my teachers have been influenced by Balanchine's work. My early ballet training was shaped by Ingeborg Heuser, who brought professional ballet to El Paso with the guidance from Balanchine's teacher seminars and Ruth Page, a dancer who performed in several of Balanchine's works at the Ballets Russes. My ballet training was under Andrée Harper, who studied with Heuser and under many Balanchine ballerinas throughout her career.

As ballet is an oral tradition, the influences of each of my teachers are enmeshed in my training and understanding of ballet as an art and form of embodied scholarship. My personal experiences with Balanchine-influenced techniques and practices shapes my reading of dancers' accounts of working with Balanchine. My embodied knowledge of ballet gives me an understanding of what the physical practice of the Balanchine technique feels like. Secondary analysis of Balanchine's products and process at the New York City Ballet and the School of American Ballet shapes my understanding of Balanchine's motivation within the classroom and how it relates to what is presented on stage.

The Four Temperaments

George Balanchine's *The Four Temperaments* was premiered by Ballet Society, a predecessor of the New York City Ballet, in 1946. This ballet was set to music by Paul Hindemith, featured thirteen dancers, and is still performed by companies around the world. *The*

Four Temperaments contains elements that are viewed as distinguishing Balanchine's choreography from the typical ballets of this time. Particularly, this ballet contrasted what would have been typical for the Ballets Russes, the first company Balanchine choreographed for. The Ballet Russe exemplified the traditions of ballet as a culmination of movement, costumes, scenery, and music to serve a narrative. Balanchine's works functioned within this tradition by heightening the relationship of movement and music while minimizing other production elements.

After its premiere in 1946, *The Four Temperaments* continued to be refined as it shifted further from the traditions of ballet. This ballet premiered with elaborate, decorative, and asymmetrical costumes designed by Kurt Seligmann. Throughout the early life of this ballet, the costumes were changed to ballet class attire of black leotards and pink tights for female dancers and black tights and white shirts for male dancers (McCormik, 344). These costumes now paralleled the movement in contrasting the traditions of the "grand ballet" that displayed a "visual spectacle" of production elements in partnership with movement (Scholl, 4). Costumes modeled after class attire continue to be used in current performances of *The Four Temperaments*. Simple costuming is seen in many other Balanchine ballets and are referred to as their own genre of "leotard ballets" (McCormik, 344; Tomić-Vajagić, "Hidden Narratives," 173). Costumes such as these represent Balanchine's departure from ballets he performed in as a student at the Imperial Ballet, like *The Sleeping Beauty*, by prioritizing a display of the dancer's body (Dunning 29). *The Sleeping Beauty*'s costumes particularly prioritizes characterization over displaying the physical possibilities of ballet in comparison with *The Four Temperaments*. For example, female dancers in *The Sleeping Beauty* wear tutus to develop and display their characters as fairies and princesses. Leotards then function as a tool of limiting narrative while

also opening opportunities for interpretation with their “neutral” connotation within ballet. There is not a representation attached to a black leotard and pink tights the way there is to a ornately decorated tutu and tiara. Additionally, movement performed in a leotard is not physically weighted or impacted by the cumbersome nature of a tutu. Because a leotard is the everyday attire of a ballet dancer, the dancers are not acting or functioning as a representation but are able to express something broader than narrative (Tomić-Vajagić, “Hidden Narratives,” 178). In the case of *The Four Temperaments*, the structure of the ballet was heavily influenced by the structure of the music (Scholl, 118). Without ornate, representative costuming, the movement comes to stand independent of both Balanchine’s motivation within the choreography and a dancer’s intention in expression. While black leotards and pink tights is viewed as a neutral way of dressing within a ballet studio, it was used by Balanchine as a tool to heighten physicality on the stage by ensuring that the full extent of every movement would be visible to the audience.

The Four Temperaments exemplifies Balanchine’s departure from the ballet tradition through the absence of explicit narrative. Though plotless, this ballet was not without meaning. It is shaped by what Tamara Tomić-Vajagić terms “referential content,” which shapes this ballet as an exploration on a theme or idea, while a plot narrates characters and events. In *The Four Temperaments*, the “referential content” is the medieval belief in the four humors, or temperaments, that were thought to determine a person’s personality and behavior (Tomić-Vajagić “Hidden Narratives,” 173). These humors are sanguinic, choleric, phlegmatic, and melancholic, which are the names of each of *The Four Temperaments*’ sections. This reference material shaped the Balanchine’s choreographic choices, in turn guiding the artistry of the dancers performing the ballet. The exploration of temperaments throughout this ballet creates

the lens through which the audience views the ballet through, as well as creates parameters for the dancer's expression and artistry. George Balanchine's use of referential material shapes this ballet through the movement, the structure of sections, and the arrangements of people on stage.

The "Choleric" section of *The Four Temperaments* is a clear display of the thematic exploration that shaped Balanchine's choices in the creation of this ballet. The choleric humor is characterized by irritability, which is displayed through the opening solo of this section in quick, sharp movements that create angular shapes (*OED Online*). This female soloist is then joined on stage by a male dancer. She repeatedly leaps out of his reach until he exits the stage, further displaying the quick temper associated with cholera. The dancers she interacts with serve to further her choleric character through movement, as opposed to create a relationship between these individuals. The exploration of the theme uses movement and bodies as tools to display this humor.

Moments of conflict throughout *The Four Temperaments* are built through the arrangement of dancers on stage. One striking moment of movement creating tension is within the "Melancholic" section. At the conclusion of the male dancer's solo, he has collapsed on the floor and is then joined by two female dancers. The trio section that follows is characterized by quick, sharp movements that create a frantic, rushed sense. Four more dancers then enter in a confrontational manner, facing directly toward the trio of dancers. The quartet of women perform grand battements, or large kicks, that take their bodies to their limits and display an impressive feat of flexibility and strength. The male soloist dances in and out of this formation of woman as they remain uninterrupted by his presence. These female dancers are in perfect unison as the male dancer's movements convey a sense of recklessness. This moment communicates Balanchine's concern with using bodies and their arrangement in space to create

dynamics within his choreography. The contrast in movement between the quartet of women and the male soloist communicates their lack of connection without the use of pantomime or production elements that would be employed in a narrative driven ballet like *The Sleeping Beauty* to display different roles of dancers.

Abstraction in Balanchine's Choreography

In the process of creating his ballets, George Balanchine was interested in eliminating, reducing, limiting, and restraining to get to his desired product (Tomić-Vajagić, “The Balanchine Dilemma” 7). This principal was applied not only to the choreography, but also to the costumes and production elements. Tamara Tomić-Vajagić analyzes this process of eliminating, reducing, limiting, and restraining by drawing upon the definition of “to abstract” as a verb meaning the “action of taking something away; the action or process of withdrawing or removing something” (Tomić-Vajagić, 7). Though Balanchine himself did not approve of the term “abstract” as an adjective to describe his ballets, “abstract” as a verb has been documented in firsthand experiences within his choreographic process. As an adjective, Balanchine felt abstract had a connotation of “disembodiment” (Tomić-Vajagić, “The Balanchine Dilemma” 2). His process, however, was centered around guiding the audience’s focus to the embodiment of ballet through the shapes a dancer’s body could create in its movement and the arrangement of people. Though ballets like *Agon*, *The Four Temperaments*, and *Concerto Barocco* were non-narrative, “leotard ballets,” they were not without meaning, as Balanchine felt the term “abstract” suggested. Each of these ballets contain not only as expression of Balanchine’s artistry, but also the artistry of the dancers performing. Without the communication of costumes and scenery, Balanchine wanted the embodied elements of moving through time and space be the primary informant of the audience.

Balanchine's process of reduction and restraint was for the purpose of focusing on the physicality of ballet. For example, in the process of creating *Apollo*, a ballet which continues to be performed throughout the world today, Balanchine made many changes that limited the focus of the audience to emphasize the distinct shapes of the choreography ("The Balanchine Dilemma," Tomić-Vajagić; Taper). At its premiere in 1928, this ballet was titled *Apollon Musagète* and featured theatrical costumes that presented a Greek god and muses (Reynolds, 344). Over time, Balanchine changed the costumes, props, and title to their most minimal representations. The dancer portraying Apollo wears white tights with a small piece of fabric draped on the upper body to represent a toga. The muses wear simple white leotards and skirts. Where they once wore wigs, the muses each wear their hair in simple ballet buns. Each production element underwent a simplification to only what was necessary to convey the ballet's theme while keeping movement at the foreground. Abstracting production elements limits audience focus and contributes to the minimization of narrative in *Apollo*, as well as other ballets like *Jewels* and *The Four Temperament*. These ballets are formed around the exploration of themes and ideas without the creation of a narrative. This "referential content" also exercises a degree of limitation on what the dancer is expressing within a ballet in addition to limiting the interpretations of what the audience is viewing (Tomić-Vajagić "Hidden Narratives," 173). For example, dancer Aleksandar Antonijevic makes the distinction that he is portraying "the 'phlegmatic' mood of the dance" as opposed to "conveying a 'Phlegmatic man'" in *The Four Temperaments* ("Hidden Conceptualisations" Tomić-Vajagić, 192). Without the constraints of narrative, exploration of "referential content" allows a dancer to be a "co-producer" of what is expressed through the movement ("Hidden Conceptualisations" Tomić-Vajagić, 182). Through

this role as “co-producer,” some dancers felt that non-character roles opened them up to further exploration within the dance’s structure.

This specific type of representation and expression is visible throughout the ballet *Jewels*. This ballet is divided into three sections of “Emeralds,” “Rubies,” and “Diamonds.” Each section presents its own distinctive movement quality that shapes the relation between the dancers on stage. In the same sentiment expressed by Antonjevic, the dancers portray the “mood” of an emerald, ruby, or diamond through movement that pointedly distinguishes these three gems from one another (“Hidden Conceptualisations” Tomić-Vajagić, 192). This ballet is further built upon referencing rather than representing in Balanchine’s personal inspiration behind each section. “Emeralds,” “Rubies,” and “Diamonds” were inspired by Balanchine’s time in France, America, and Russia, respectively (Scholl, 128). Because this inspiration is not ingrained into the ballet through narrative, this motivation in choreography functions as a parameter for the dancer’s artistic expression within the structure of *Jewels*. Within each section, the dancer shapes each performance through their own interpretation and expression of the “mood” of an emerald, ruby, or diamond. Balanchine’s balance of non-narrativity and referentiality creates a narrow path of freedom and limitation for the artistic expression of the dancer performing in these roles. For example, a dancer performing in the “Rubies” section is not acting out Balanchine’s experiences in America, giving them artistic freedom on how they are approaching each step, interacting with other dancers, and projecting to the audience. However, because this section is a reference to Balanchine’s work while in America, the steps themselves are construed in a way that communicates precision and confidence and, therefore, there is a certain attitude inherent in feats of athleticism and crisp musicality. The way

Balanchine used referentiality to shape movement creates a limiting factor on the possibilities of artistic expression.

Shapes in George Balanchine's Choreography

Through his choreography, George Balanchine structured his choices around the “assertion of the dance element” (Taper, 257). Through simple costumes, the physicality of dance was displayed in a way that is not visible in tutus or long dresses. The movement, its shapes, and its relationship to the music were tools for creating the drama within Balanchine's ballets, as opposed to a plot of conflict and resolution. Without narrative, the shapes and positions were at the forefront of the audience's experience in viewing works like *Agon*, *Apollo*, and *The Four Temperaments*. In investigating what distinguishes the movement of these ballets from *The Sleeping Beauty*, *Swan Lake*, and other “grand ballets,” Balanchine's works display a different relationship to linearity and space (Scholl, 4). This particular regard for space is visible in both the movement of an individual dancer and spatial patterning on the stage and in relation to others. Tim Scholl makes the statement that “Balanchine focuses first on his material and second on that material's potential interaction within the larger structure” (Scholl, 115). The primary focus on the dancer as compositional material is where linearity of movement is most visible.

The use of minimal costumes was a tool of displaying the dancer's body as the material of the choreography. Balanchine took classical ballet's shapes and shifted them from rounded and placed to linear and expansive. Based in the Russian ballet tradition, Balanchine explored and expanded on the feats of ballet to create angularity within the body (Reynolds, 68). This regard for the lines of the body is a distinguishing feature of Balanchine's choreography and has become a defining trait of the neoclassical style. This exploitation of classical positions into

geometric shapes developed other elements of Balanchine's choreographic style, such as its precision and off-balance sense. In Balanchine's establishment of the School of American Ballet and the New York City Ballet, he was guided by his goal of creating a distinctive aesthetic of movement that widened the ballet tradition (Dunning, 45, 60; Gottschild, 340). Balanchine's distinguishing shapes were influenced by what Brenda Dixon Gottschild's refers to as the Africanist aesthetic, particularly his use of polycentricism and juxtaposition (332, 336). The sense of expansion on the ballet tradition comes from Balanchine's incorporation of Africanist movement principles into his European training.

This way of pushing the body to its limits as material for choreography shaped the dancers' relationship to space. In *The Four Temperaments*, this can be seen in instances where a dancer extends their limbs to the point that it pulls them into a new movement as well as in the way one dancer's body might serve as an obstacle to another dancer's path of motion. Scholl describes this spatial relationship as a "continual transformation" from "body as obstacle to body in motion" (Scholl 122). Without characters and narrative, the dancers had the ability to be in continual negotiation on the motivation of their movement. In some instances, a dancer is creating the reference of a temperament through the quality of their movement. In other instances, the reference is created by the way their body on the stage shifts the movement of another dancer. For example, within the "Phlegmatic" section of *The Four Temperaments* the four women embody the calm, apathetic qualities of this temperament through their individual movements. They also allow the male soloist to create this temperament by creating a formation of overlapped limbs that he must weave through. Later, in the "Choleric" section, the qualities demonstrated through the female soloist's movement are heightened by the male dancers who join her on stage and support and create her movements and positions. In viewing the body as

compositional material and not a representation of a character or object, Balanchine expanded the possibilities within a choreographic structure. What a dancer was embodying in each moment was in constant shift. This method of relation between dancers furthered the purpose of distinctive shapes within the body as a method of creating tension and resolution without narrative. Furthermore, this view of the human body as the material of choreography shaped Balanchine's understanding of and approach to ballet technique in order to develop dancers able to carry out Balanchine's vision as a choreographer.

Abstraction In the Balanchine Technique

In the development of the New York City Ballet, Balanchine felt it was necessary for the School of American Ballet to precede it (Dunning, viii). The School of American Ballet, founded in 1934, was where Balanchine further developed the movement aesthetic he had created in his choreography into a training method. During this time, Balanchine choreographed on students at the School of American Ballet in addition to the companies that preceded the New York City Ballet. Balanchine was shaping his choreographic ideas alongside creating his technique. As Balanchine reconfigured and refined ballet's traditions into his vision for the stage, he did the same with ballet training. Suki Schorer, a former principal dancer with the New York City Ballet and fifty-year faculty member at the School of American Ballet, described Balanchine's motivation as a teacher as "prepar[ing] [dancers] to dance his ballets better and more in keeping with his aesthetic" (Schorer, 21). As Balanchine's choreographic process limited decorative elements that did not further the specific exploration of a ballet, there was a similar regard for directness in training under Balanchine. Balanchine regarded *Apollo*, which premiered in 1928, as his realization that by "limiting" and "reducing" he could take "multiple possibilities to the one which is inevitable" (Reynolds, 69). This process, documented

throughout Balanchine's choreography, is embedded within his translation of the Russian ballet tradition into America for the style and aesthetic he was creating.

Balanchine's technique used legs and feet in very specific ways that trained these qualities of his choreography into each individual and allowed for full embodiment within performance of his choreography. As Schorer stated, "Mr. B taught because he choreographed" (25). His goals for the stage created his goals for the classroom. In this sense, Balanchine looked at his own training and assessed what of it was necessary to allow dancers to perform his choreography. Many dancers who trained under him recall intense repetition in his classes in the quest for excellence (*In Balanchine's Classroom*, Kirkland, Schorer). A distinguishing component of a Balanchine class are simple exercises that are challenging due to their speed or repetition. When directly comparing this style of training to the Imperial Ballet School, Balanchine's practices read more as exercises; class was clearly preparation for complexity that came later. At the Imperial Ballet School, class exercises were longer and look closely like steps that would be performed on stage. Balanchine's training took components of performance and perfected them through repetition of each element piece by piece. The culmination of these elements was in the choreography, as Balanchine's technique is a direct response to his choreography.

Shapes in the Technique

With the main goal of preparation for the stage, Balanchine's aesthetic and interest in linearity was displayed in the technique through the use of the legs and feet that exaggerated the presentational qualities of ballet. Balanchine created his technique by focusing in on what was integral and necessary within the Russian tradition to achieve Balanchine's ideals by emphasizing some qualities and minimizing others. As Balanchine prioritized the lines of the

body within choreography, the same prioritization was applied in daily classwork. Suki Schorer explains this through the use of turnout in Balanchine's technique. "Turnout" is the foundation of how a ballet dancer stands in the five classical positions. In first position, the legs are rotated outward so that, at its maximum, the heels are touching, and the toes are facing out to the side. All other classical leg positions involve this rotation with variations of one leg being in front of the other or legs being closer or further apart. While traditionally ballet strives for symmetry, Schorer states that turnout in the working leg, the leg creating the shape or position, was prioritized over the supporting leg, the leg the dancer is standing on, as a way of "enhanc[ing]...that the foot is being presented" (23). The presentational aspect of ballet was held as central by Balanchine to such a degree that he built it into his technique so it would be practiced daily and consistently. Balanchine's choreographic values informed the classwork. As in his choreographic process, there was a regard for limiting the focus of the movement. Through a prioritization of the working leg, the importance of taking each movement to its physical maximum became inherent in the dancers that learned from Balanchine.

The development of the linearity that is a defining characteristic of Balanchine's choreographic works was further developed in daily class through the practice of wearing pointe shoes for the entirety of ballet classes (Schorer, 35). Typically, a ballet student would have separate pointe classes that built this skill in addition to daily technique classes, while a professional ballet dancer often does the first portion of a ballet class in ballet slippers and wears pointe shoes for the second half of class in preparation for rehearsal and performance. Beyond the physical demands of pointe work, the pointe shoe adds a layer of presentation to the movement of the legs by extending the line of the leg to the tips of the toes. This increased training en pointe contributed to the display of linearity on stage in the potential for pointe work

to extend and elongate a dancer's body (Schorer, 225). While the pointe shoe was created for a ballerina to become ethereal in their characterization of airborne fairies and sylphs, Balanchine employed them for their ability to create new shapes. Additionally, by elongating the legs, pointe shoes allowed for a more expansive use of space (Schorer, 226). The length created by a pointe shoe furthered Balanchine's exploration of off-balance movement. Increased training in pointe opened possibilities in choreography as Balanchine developed his aesthetic.

As the display of the body became central to Balanchine's ballets, it became central within the technique. In partnership with the leotards worn on stage, even the hands were held in a way that showcased each finger and furthered the display of the body. Schorer recalls the importance of shaping the hand so that "all five fingers" were shaped into "petals of a flower" as a way of showcasing the importance of every part of the body (146). In the same way, Balanchine preferred a very specific use of the head. In addition to presenting the neck in a way that is distinctive from other ballet techniques, it also presents the face forward toward the audience. Balanchine built in an equal display of each part of the body into his technique. In such a specific display of the neck and hands, there is a built-in expression of vulnerability in the upper body as the neck is curved and open (Schorer, 172). This curve of the neck leaves the head behind the center of the body and further contributes to Balanchine's exploration of off-balance, asymmetrical movement. While the legs particularly carry out linearity, the hands and neck are carried in a rounded and open manner. Looking again to the choreography, Balanchine wanted movement to be the instigator of drama and not characters and plot. This contrast in what the hands and neck are asked to do in comparison to the rest of the body display this choreographic value within class work.

Conclusion

As George Balanchine rose as a choreographer in the 20th century, he was concerned with both developing a new style of ballet and shaping the training that led to its performance. Though it was important to Balanchine to establish a school before a company, his choreographic values remained central in the training methods of the Balanchine technique. Performing Balanchine choreography and training in the Balanchine technique are both characterized by distinct shapes of linearity and displaying the space within the body. Additionally, in the processes of choreography and developing the technique, Balanchine focused his choices around limiting for clarification (Reynolds, 69). This mind set of limiting is what keeps Balanchine's works within the ballet tradition. Though these works were a departure from ballet's expectations, Balanchine did not venture into invented movement vocabulary, but expanded on the tools his own training had given him. The choreography and technique shaped each other in the establishment of the New York City Ballet and School of American Ballet, both with an emphasis on linearity, shape driven movement, and precision that came together to define American ballet in the 20th century.

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