

## Music ~Dance's indispensable partner

Yasuko Yeung

Dance needs music. Even though the connection between music and dance seems obvious, it is really fascinating to study the history of their relationship. The more you appreciate the link, the richer your time in the theatre may become as you appreciate both elements even more.

### Music in the 19th Century ~ Music made for Ballet

Singapore Dance Theatre's Artistic Director Janek explains that from the earliest days of professional productions, almost all forms of entertainment contained a dancing segment. Many Shakespeare plays had dances in them. Most operas contain a short ballet within their structure. Beethoven composed several pieces specifically with dance in mind. The operatic score by Gaetano Donizetti, the famous opera composer in Italy, influenced Adolph Adam in his composition of the music for Giselle. There are numerous example of this.

Music in the 19th century was composed "made to order" to demonstrate elements of the story and add structure to the dancing scenes. Even those of us not familiar with ballet may have heard the names of composers such as Minkus and Tchaikovsky, who are famous for their masterly ballet scores. Minkus created Don Quixote, La Bayadere, and Paquita, whereas Tchaikovsky created Swan Lake, Sleeping Beauty and Nutcracker.

Did you know ballet composers were often regarded as second-rate composers in those days? Hard to believe, as time has proven how wrong this idea was and we have grown to love their music even more this century. Not that their music has not been changed over the years. Music from the most famous ballets is often restructured, adapted and orchestrated in our modern ballets. For example, Swan Lake and Sleeping Beauty were both originally almost three full



Classic Seasons in March and December entertain audience with live music by Metropolitan Festival Orchestra. Swan Lake (SDT 2019)

hours long but are now commonly rearranged to a more manageable length of two hours dancing time.

### From 20th Century to Now ~ Evolution of the connection

In the 20th Century witnessed the emergence of great composers such as Maurice Ravel, Claude Debussy, Francis Poulenc, and Sergei Prokofiev. Artistic Director Janek regards Igor Stravinsky as one of the most highly esteemed of these composers, creating Firebird, Petroushka and The Rite of Spring.

The Rite of Spring was written for the 1913 Paris Season of Ballet Russes. When first performed in Paris the avant-garde nature of the music and choreography caused a sensation. Many have called the opening night reaction a "riot" or "near-riot". Although what actually happened on that night is not entirely clear, what is certain is that the audience was shocked. Sergei Diaghiliev, Director of the Ballets Russes, believed in the combination of the most famous and talented individual artists of the time in music, design and choreography in collaboration to create the highest quality in theatrical performances. Ballet has been inspired by that concept ever since.



Paquita (SDT 2019) Scheduled to show in July 2021



Unexpected B by Toru Shimazaki (SDT 2019)  
Unexpectedly, B stands for Beethoven :)



Blue Snow by Toru Shimazaki (SDT 2019).  
Theremin by Yano Yuki combined with Toru's choreography takes us to a nostalgic world.



The ballet Les Sylphides was also significant as it represented the shift from “made to order” music to interpretations of existing music in choreography. For example, several of Chopin’s compositions were strung together to become the ballet Les Sylphides in 1909 for the Ballet Russes in Paris. This was the beginning of non-narrative ballet in choreography. It was created to allow the audience to appreciate the beauty of movement and music combined.

Symphonic ballets became the fashion in the middle of the 20th century. Some of Shakespeare’s plays have had music composed for them and become well known such as with Prokofiev’s Romeo and Juliet, which is one of SDT’s popular productions. Before I saw the ballet, it was difficult for me to imagine Romeo and Juliet without words spoken on stage, as the play contains so many famous lines such as “O Romeo, Romeo, wherefore art thou Romeo? Deny thy father and refuse thy name”. However when I watched the ballet, I realized that words are not needed. The music was so eloquent and rich and each dancer’s movement expressed their feelings and explained the story so well. It was interesting to know that when Romeo and Juliet was created in 1935, the score was labeled “undanceable”! But now most experts acknowledge it as one of the most brilliant scores composed for ballet.

There have been well-regarded ballets made to choral music and traditional folk music from various regions. Many famous composers are well known for their dance compositions such as Leonard Bernstein for West Side Story. During the last century, prominent choreographers like George Balanchine and Frederic Ashton were inspired by classical music and gave new life to it. Some people say that when you watch a piece Balanchine choreographed to Tchaikovsky, he will make you hear the music differently.

In modern days, the sources of music used in ballet are many and range from film scores to electronic music, soundscape, loops to environmental sounds. This means that more contemporary choreographers can be more flexible in how they match their dance movements with the music, rather than making movement and structure precisely match the music so as to require counting.

**Music and Dance as partners**

According to SDT’s Janek, inspiration from dance is inextricably linked to the music it used as a source. Choreography and dance have the potential to show the magnificence of each other as one complements the other. I particularly recall Evening Voices (2018), created by Timothy Rushton for SDT as an example. The music



Evening Voice by Tim Rashton (SDT 2018)

was All Night Vigil by Sergey Rachmaninov. The combination of ballet and a Russian Orthodox cappella is beautiful and spiritual, reminding me of the fact that dance and music both also have roots in prayer. It is the piece I would love to watch again when my heart feels tired in this restricted COVID norm. There are many examples of music and dance forming great partnerships. Please do watch and listen carefully and see and hear why the relationship between watch dance and music is such a remarkable joy.

Information: Singapore Dance Theatre (One@the Ballet “Music and Movement”)  
 Photos: Metropolitan Festival Orchestra (Brandon Koh), Singapore Dance Theatre, Nanase Tanaka, Takeaki Miura



Passages (2019) is an excellent showcase for dance and movement

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Janek once said “If you like ballet, it is inevitable you’ll like classical music too”. Writing this column, I think he was right! I am glad that now small concerts and studio ballet performances are slowly coming back to rejuvenate and inspire us. One of the things this pandemic taught us is how precious art can be in our everyday life.



Romeo and Juliet by Choo San Goh (SDT 2020)