

Effects of russia on ballet and opera essay sample



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Abstract

Russian ballet and opera as well as Russian literature in the nineteenth century contributed to the development of other countries' culture. The end of the nineteenth century was very fruitful for the Russian culture. Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoevsky made Russian novel famous all around the world. Tchaikovsky, Borodin, Diaghilev, Petipa, Isadora Duncan and many other artists of opera and ballet presented the Western world with Russian ballet and opera and changed the old European school in these arts forever.

It happened so that more and more Russian artists and theatrical groups went to Western Europe and America at the beginning of the twentieth century. So-called Russian cultural import was the result of Soviet revolution in 1917. Many prominent ballet and opera singers and dancers fled from Russia forever. They brought Russian ballet and opera to the Western world and contributed to its cultural development. This work will investigate what were the effects of Russia on ballet and opera.

Effects of Russia on Ballet and Opera

The written record of Russian ballet and opera stretches back over many centuries. Yet reminiscences, memoirs, and picture books far outnumber objective, researched accounts of ballet and opera's history. One writer's observations on the general state of ballet and opera books has special relevance for works on this most celebrated period in the history of Russian ballet and opera: " Shake them out and you would accumulate one small mound of method, one alpine peak of gossip, and, running between, a meandering stream of metaphysics" (Pierpont 1990, 82).

Historians of Russian ballet and opera usually divide that record into individual nineteenth-/twentieth-century and Russian/Western segments.

There is some reason for this: Russian ballet and opera last great works for the royal theaters were formed in 1900; the famous ballets and operas of the twentieth century's new ballet and opera school were revealed first and foremost in Western Europe.

This work views the contemporary history of the Russian ballet and opera as an incessant (though dislocated) practice. Russian ballet and opera works showed the way to a large amount of the modernization for the future, and symbolize the most significant imaginative reply to the nineteenth century ballet and opera school - and the most important twentieth century progress of Russian ballet and opera trends.

This work was not meant as an all-inclusive history of the period. To a certain extent, it examines a number of milestone works that form the course of contemporary ballet and opera history. Although the first Russian ballet and opera works were staged in France and then many prominent Russian ballet and opera artists worked primarily in the United States, these ballet and opera masters were mainly in charge of the development of the central ballet and opera schools of their centuries, and both these schools are rightly called " Russian."

The ballets and operas discussed here trace the progress of the Russian ballet and opera classical restoration. These works disclose a steady move from a retrospectivism that esteems the traditions of the French court ballet and opera to a reconsideration of the inherent classicism of the accepted

ballet and opera schools. In the ballet and opera, as in other Russian art forms, this classical inheritance increasingly included Russia's own (eighteenth-and nineteenth-century) contributions to the art form and included this latest inheritance into its twentieth-century meaning of dance and singing classicism.

Russian ballet and opera were at the vanguard of Russian artistic culture in the first decades of this century and an essential point of contact among the Russian arts in the modernist period (1890-1930). Diaghilev's method of ballet production showed an endeavor to blend dance, music, and the visual arts into a nonverbal art, the idealized combination of the arts Wagner anticipated. Later, other Russian artists would refuse the imposition of visual art and narrative in the ballet and opera. Preoccupation with music and space marked a return to a more basic definition of dance and singing: movement in space and time. This reappraisal of the art form's inherent properties reflected typically modernist concerns, as the modern ballet and opera dominant aesthetic evolved from minimalist purity.

Some of the works discussed in this work have disappeared completely, others have been reconstructed. Some have survived in the ballet and opera repertory much as originally produced; others have had their choreography altered over the years by performers and ballet and opera masters. Some have been notated in systems legible to specialists; others were preserved in notation systems now forgotten and virtually indecipherable.

A fortunate few of the ballets and operas were filmed under the choreographer's supervision and can be viewed today in these "authentic"

versions. This work attempted to use the most standard titles of the Russian ballets and operas, and accurate transliterations of Russian personal names. It uses the original French titles for ballets and that premiered in the Russian court theater and for the works given by the Russian theatrical companies in Europe.

In “ Our Ballet”, the earliest account of ballet and opera in Russia, Aleksandr Pleshcheev (1896) sketches the origins of Russian ballet to 1673, when, next to performance of some German verses, a ballet on the topic of Orpheus was offered to tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich: “ the pas de trois of Orpheus and two pyramids was performed, and then Orpheus and the other participants – brilliantly dressed – executed several foreign national dances.

The ballet performance greatly pleased Aleksei Mikhailovich” (Pleshcheev 1896, 29). The Orpheus ballet and the play “ Artokserksovo deistvo” (a biblical drama based on the book of Esther presented in Aleksei Mikhailovich’s court one year earlier) mark the beginning of imperial patronage of Russian theater and dance, a constant that enabled the ballet and opera to survive in Russia long after its viability as an art form in Western Europe had ceased.

Like popular theater, dance existed in Russia long before the tsars began to support the arts, but these were folk traditions; the importation and adaptation of Western theatrical forms represented something very different. As visiting European troupes acquainted Russian audiences with the principal Western theatrical genres in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Russian nobles began to train and maintain their own companies of

entertainers. The orchestra assembled for the performance of “Artakserksovo deistvo” was composed of foreigners and the household serfs of the tsar’s favorite noble (Pleshcheev 1896, 28).

The divergence from local amateur theatrical traditions was palpable: although the theatrical presentations of the skomorokhi (entertainers who acted, sang, and danced) held a place in the calendar of the Orthodox church already in the eleventh century, stagings of Western school dramas in the middle of the seventeenth century aroused the ire of Archpriest Avvakum, who denounced them as “Romanisms” (Hoover 1985, 470).

As in the West, where ballet and opera evolved slowly from social dancing and singing in Renaissance courts, social dancing paved the way for the acceptance of stage dancing and singing in Russia. Balls and assemblies assumed a primary socializing function in the court of Peter I. A 1718 decree required nobles to give and attend assemblies and outlined the rights and responsibilities of hosts and guests. Peter not only attended these assemblies, he also danced in them: “the sovereign himself took part in the dances and taught others to dance” (Pleshcheev 1896, 30). An eyewitness attested to his skill as a dancer: “the tsar performed cabrioles that would have made the best European ballet master of the day proud” (Pleshcheev 1896, 30.).

Catherine II’s interest in the theater and the steps she took to create a state theater monopoly virtually guaranteed the future of ballet and opera in Russia. She established the imperial theater system in 1756, created the directorate of the imperial theaters ten years later, saw to the construction

of St Petersburg's Bolshoi Theater in 1773, and founded the imperial theater school (which trained actors, singers, and dancers) in 1779.

By the end of the century, the ballet and opera and their school were part of a well-organized imperial theater bureaucracy, and the list of European ballet and opera masters associated with the Russian imperial ballet and opera in their formative years includes several of the most important choreographers and opera singers of the pre-romantic era.

Charles-Louis Didelot (1767-1837) worked in Russia from 1801 to 1811 and settled there permanently in 1816. Under Didelot, the imperial school and its syllabus began to assume its modern form and the Russian ballet and opera enjoyed its first period of celebrity (his dances and his dancers were immortalized in Pushkin's Eugene Onegin).

The titles of the works he staged in Russia (Apollo and Daphnis, Flore and Zephyre, Medea and Jason, Amour and Psyche, Acis and Galatea, to name but a few) reveal an eighteenth-century propensity for anacreontic plots drawn from Greek mythology, yet Didelot's stagings of these works (which frequently used machinery to "fly" his ballerinas across the stage) anticipated the elaborate "grand" ballet and opera production that Marius Petipa staged in the last half of the 19th century. Regrettably, our facts of Didelot's work are restricted to secondary sources; like the larger part of ballets and operas created before the era of film documentation, Didelot's work is lost (Lifar 1954).

In 1909, the Russian ballet was organized in Paris. This date shows precisely the establishment of new design for the ballet and opera in the Western

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world. At that era Paris presented the creative atmosphere, the latent ability and the willing spectators for the increase of so innovative an undertaking as a new ballet and opera. For ever since its commencement the Russian ballet and opera symbolized art in progress, more and more so when it turned from imported Russian designers to the leading easel painters of the School of Paris.

In time the name of Russian ballet and opera became both trendy and explicit, until it was recognized with characteristic theatrical dancing and singing par excellence. Russian ballet and opera set distinct principles for ballet and opera in Western Europe and from now on dominated the ballet and opera stage with total influence. In those two decades Russian ballet and opera standards had become firmly and definitely established as a genuine type of the arts, and as it involved a lot of artists of stature, it acquired a permanent importance.

If detached from precise indications of method and taste, which date the visual indication as a creation of our century's first quarter, Russian ballet and opera's basic idea appears as the classic method of choreographic, musical and plastic combination. During several centuries this exact standard had been an esthetic demand of the leading ballet and opera theorists and reformers. This is an eternal model. Russian ballet and opera summarized and perfected the sound standard and turned away from the anemic practice of mediocrity as conserved and experienced in the modern ballet and opera stage.

For this, exactly, was the state of affairs of the international ballet and opera theatre at the time Russian ballet and opera started to perform. The conventional Russian ballet and opera contributed a highly perfected dance and singing practice which was, however, unfamiliar outside Moscow and St. Petersburg. The traditional ballet and opera music had barely more explicit meaning or artistic significance than the accompaniment of the silent movies. Settings and costumes were missing completely creativity and diversity; definitely, no instance illustrates the shift between “ before and after” more decisively than a contrast between Russian ballet and opera designers and their direct predecessors.

At the moment of Russian ballet and opera advent, ballet and opera had degenerated from the prodigal performances of court and noble monarchs into a bourgeois institution which subsisted just on the force of thoughtless acceptance. There was neither need nor space for the inspired images of authentic artists; not even in Paris, the capital of the arts. The Paris Opera, owing to its distinguished record of two-and-one-half centuries of prominence in the lyric theatre and the dance, was still the European center of what was left of opera and ballet in 1909. As the official company of the famous “ Académie de Musique et de Danse” it was sadly representative, indeed, of the generally poor state of the ballet and opera.

The popularity of Russian ballet and opera throughout several centuries of their brilliant history derives essentially from the same set of sensual, emotional, social and esthetic responses to which, in a more inclusive definition, the theatre owes its permanent validity. The history of Russian ballet and opera demonstrates a constant shift of emphasis and interest. The <https://assignbuster.com/effects-of-russia-on-ballet-and-opera-essay-sample/>

start in the late 16th century with the imperial Russian ballets and operas in France, it passed all the way through all imaginable forms of staging: through mostly decorative stages, through operatic phases, through periods of theater and pantomime, through stages of acrobatic skill. But at all periods it marked a palpable inclination toward the impressive, toward challenging and inspiring visual elaboration. Even the conservative and inept stage show of the typical twentieth-century opera ballet discloses traces of some nameless painter's fruitless labors to live up to the reminiscence of a famous past. That's why the determination of Italian Renaissance and French Baroque can be seen in the following motifs: vanishing-point perspective, symmetrical vistas, rows of Ionic columns, convulsive architecture, heavy folded draperies, cumbersome, anachronistic costumes; and hence the complete disregard of modern stage techniques and lighting facilities.

This situation had lasted too long to be defined as a crisis which would call for radical decisions. The arrival of the Russian ballet and opera and the birth of modern ballet and opera occurred at a random moment, without warning or preparation. Although Russian ballet and opera made history, they had not come with the intention of reforming the Western ballet and opera, in fact Russian ballet and opera were quite unconcerned with their state. European ballet and opera became Russian ballet and opera. (Lifar 1954).

The artistic evolution of the Russian ballet and opera demonstrates two distinctly different phases roughly Russian and Gallic – clearly separated by the First World War. Until the war it had been almost exclusively Russian, with dancers from the Imperial Ballet, with composers like Borodin, Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakov and Stravinsky. It formed so compact an

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ethnic and cultural organism that it was practically self-sufficient. The Russian ballet and opera were both compelled and determined to live on their own artistic resources, and there was ample talent within the producing group to supply the entire ambitious repertoire.

The rather abrupt change of policy was not solely due to deliberate purpose and resolution. In those years of steady artistic development the Russian ballet and opera had been performing with rapidly growing success. With their spreading sphere of influence they had become at the same time the promoter and the exponent of signal changes in the world of art. Each new ballet and opera performance carried the weight of an authoritative statement in the name of progress. The Russian ballet and opera were modern in the double sense of being fashionable as well as progressive. There was an unmistakable tendency toward modishness, exclusiveness and sophistication, which became sometimes an end in itself and therefore did not survive the passing moment of contemporaneity.

The total accomplishment, however, transcended the limited duration of fashion, sensation and mere novelty. If not always for lasting intrinsic value, many of the some seventy Russian ballets and operas of the repertoire remain valid as significant statements of a period of artistic transition and gradual consolidation. The ambiguities and contradictions regarding the style of the later performances imply indeed the very same esthetic confusion and complexity which characterizes the formative process of contemporary art in general. In our present esthetic estimation the notoriety of the ballet and opera's experimental period overshadows the theatrical import of the prewar, Russian phase.

Throughout all the years of activity the rich source, from which Russian ballet and opera drew the substance, was the Russian Academy; they had in no way revolutionized the Western ballet and opera, but rather amplified or specified its use as a medium of modern art expression. Thus Russian ballet and opera in the early twentieth century signified the artificial glory of a formal tradition; a fine potential instrument of little artistic use; perfect, yet inert. The signal for a departure in new directions was given by a dancer of the New World: Isadora Duncan. She performed and lectured in Russia, attacking the rigidity of the ballet and opera code and the physical restrictions of the traditional costume, and promoting instead a “ natural” dance and singing, i. e., a free interpretation of antique Greece in plastic poses, floating movements, loose costumes and bare feet.

It is impossible to evaluate in this limited space the power and fascination of this priestess of beauty who swept the world with a message of sublime freedom. A declared enemy of the ballet, she denied its every tradition. Emotional rather than methodical in her criticism, she could not and would not conceive of a possible synthesis. The typical reproach of the “ artificiality” is based on a romantic idealization of “ nature” as the paradigm of perfection, and not on a realization of artistic principles. Duncan expressed in her violent and intolerant language an opinion which was, and still is, widely shared by balletomanes and balletophobes alike, namely that ballet and opera are virtually the abstraction of an art which can materialize at will in many different ways and forms of dancing.

That is not so. The ballerina’s rise on the toes is a symbol, not a stunt. Ballet and opera cannot be understood, appreciated, and considered apart from

the specific technique called “ classic” with reference to a traditional code of posture and movement.

This approved kinetic system, based on five absolute positions of the feet, assures functional and mechanical perfection of a compelling logic. Matured during many centuries, it contains the cumulative efforts, experiences and accomplishments of prominent dancers, dancing masters, choreographers and theorists, and has gradually reached a degree of purity which comes close to being absolute. It is, therefore, a fundamental mistake to reform the ballet and opera by an attempt either to improve upon or to abolish their technique.

The influence of the Russian ballet and opera made the Western ballet and opera to realize, as acutely as Duncan, the inadequacy of the academic style and system, as practiced at the Marinsky Theatre. Isadora may have been a symbol, a promise and a force, but definitely not an example to be followed. Ballet and opera without the basis of the danse d'école would simply cease to exist. The Russian ballet and opera never attacked the formal technique as such, but its conventional manner.

Thoroughly and methodically they developed both principles and practice for the staging of interpretative ballets and operas. Each ballet or opera presented a definite story which determined the style of the interpretation and in turn demanded a specific expression in body movement and gesture. It was style rather than creative originality which elevated the best works of Russian ballet and opera to the rank of art, and which explains why they

survived the dullness of antiquated subject matter and the dilution of countless revivals.

For the sake of style Russian ballet and opera advocated unity of conception and harmonious blending of the three elements: music, painting and dancing. This proved to be an immensely fruitful conception, giving access to the ballet or opera to composers and painters who had hitherto no solid ground for creative contributions. Modern ballet and opera had become a reality, and for one brief moment Russian ballet and opera grandiose success had passed over the ballet stage. The outstanding characteristic of the first Russian ballet and opera was the forceful concentration of all the divergent creative talents and tendencies in one steady point of focus. According to Asafiev (1953), the Russian ballet and opera had held a unique and privileged position because they had been unequalled, unrivalled and uncontested for the whole period of their existence.

Thus in superficial appearance the foremost Russian ballet and opera professionals showed every sign of confidence, optimism and initiative. Their productions were competent, beautiful, stimulating and effective enough to cover temporarily the shortage of first-rate soloists and well-trained companies of opera and ballet. In reality all this enterprising activity was lacking in leadership and sustained, consistent policy. However, the amazing productivity of those few modern choreographers filled the immediate needs of the repertoire, and hid the ominous fact that they perpetuated an empty formula. The Russian ballet and opera had absorbed and used everything that a cosmopolitan art in the Western world had to offer it.

The finest composers and the greatest painters had carried the Russian ballet and opera's final formula of musical and decorative sophistication to the extreme. For theatrical dancing and singing it was a time of latent crisis; for ballet or opera design it was decidedly a most profitable development. The artists, for the most part distinguished easel painters, created with an unrestrained disregard of stage mechanics and dance requirements never before permitted them in the modern theatre. They established the supremacy of the scenic image as an uncontested principle before anybody became aware of its basic fallacy. (Asafiev 1953).

At this critical moment European ballet and opera owed to Russia, for the second time in the same century, the restoration of its waning vital forces. Several great ballerinas and opera singers from the former Imperial Marinsky Theatre, refugees from the revolution, had opened modest ballet schools in Europe and had begun to train the children of the conservative Russian colony in the conservative manner, the exacting technique and rigid discipline of the traditional school. Three Russian prodigious dancers in their early teens, Toumanova, Baronova and Riabujinska, emerged as genuine ballerinas, demonstrating to a whole generation of awakening children the unrealized dance potentialities of their physiques and their artistic aspirations.

The changes since the early thirties were profound and significant; they revealed a negative as well as a positive aspect. There existed, for instance, a confusing abundance of " Russian Ballets" with equally legitimate claims for recognition, making equally justified efforts to secure the services of the few specialized choreographers who were able to revive from memory the "

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Russian" repertoire. The physical data are still available: the original scores remain, settings and costumes are in warehouses or may be copied easily, and the choreography can be reconstructed with just so much style as to appear genuine to an unsuspecting audience.

However, despite the careful preservation of time-tested appearances, it becomes glaringly obvious that the classic tradition is not automatically contained in a retrospective repertoire. The Soviet-Russian ballet was also "Russian" and "traditional" and "genuine" beyond any possible doubt. But it had never felt the impact of the real Russian ballet and opera's subtle assault on our taste which we take for granted, and from which it seems so hard to recover. (Asafiev 1953).

Many symptoms foreshadow the end of the stereotyped, pseudo-Russian predominance, and the definitive affirmation of a mature, self-confident native ballet and opera in every country. For Russia's most important contribution to the Western ballet and opera has been a host of outstanding teachers, i. e., the only means for an independent growth. In France, in England and America they directed academies and companies in which they trained not only new performers, but also new pedagogues and perfect technicians of the ballet and opera school. The vogue of ballet and opera, which is now surging over the world, receives its strongest incentive from the youthful enthusiasm and the splendid technique of new generations of dancers and opera singers.

There are now excellent academies in England and America, in Italy and France, and the continuity of classic theatrical dancing and opera singing is

assured – as it should be – in the daily accomplishments of countless young ballet and opera performers. England’s “ National Ballet” gives highest promise. Catherine Littlefield in Philadelphia, Ruth Page in Chicago, William Christensen in San Francisco have worked consistently for many years toward a truly American ballet. Lincoln Kirstein “ Ballet Caravan” and “ American Ballet” built an exemplary repertoire relying primarily on American subjects, authors, composers, designers, singers and dancers.

Mexico has a native ballet company composed exclusively of Mexican artists and performers. In France, a newly founded company presents an ensemble of French dancers and opera singers, although in the customary setup. With the inexhaustible resources of sound national stock, supplying fine native-born and trained ballet dancers, opera singers, composers, choreographers and designers, the ideal of a representative national ballet is well on its way to realization.

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