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Marius Petipa and Russian Ballet

Marius Petipa (Victor Marius Alphonse Petipa) was the inventor of modern classical ballet. Petipa elevated Russian ballet to international acclaim and recognition. The Frenchman who came to be known as «the father of Russian ballet», left a legacy that continues to this day. He greatly expanded the role of male dancers and we have him to thank for the leaping, twirling, breathtaking men's choreography we now see in ballets. His work lives not only in the pages of dance history but in the ballet repertoire of most current Companies.

Petipa rose to fame in St. Petersburg, where he produced more than 60 major ballets and numerous shorter ones over his almost 60-year career. In total, he also reworked over 20 old pieces and arranged the dancing in over 35 operas. His fantasy was absolutely amazing, fueling such all time European classics as «Don Quixote», «The Pharaoh's Daughter», «The Corsair», «The Bayadere», and «Giselle». Still, Petipa owed his biggest triumphs to his majestic staging of Russian ballets set to music by Tchaikovsky.

Nitpicking and demanding, the ever-tasteful perfectionist Petipa seemed to some an absolutely unbearable person; but it was under his watch that the Mariinsky Ballet (Russia's Imperial Theater) made a quantum leap forward to become one of the very best in Europe and the world. Over the course of his career in St. Petersburg as chief ballet master of Russia's Imperial Theater he raised technical standards for dancing and set new ones for choreographing evening-length ballets [3].

M. Petipa danced at the Comédie Française then at the Paris Opera where Lucien was a premier danseur. Marius grew tired of living in Lucien's shadow at the Paris Opera and struck out on his own. He went to Bordeaux for a year in 1842 then to Madrid for four years. It was in Madrid that Petipa learned about Spanish dance which would come through in the Spanish dances he choreographed for ballets in Russia [2].

On May 24, 1847 he went to St. Petersburg at the suggestion of ballet master Titus. He was offered a contract for one year as a principal dancer. The first ballet he choreographed in Russia was «The Swiss Milkmaid» (1849) [1]. By 1871 he had risen to the position of principal ballet master and he remained at the Mariinsky Theater until 1907, before retiring at the age of 89.

M. Petipa excelled at stylized dances for operas. In fact many of Petipa's ballets had a choreographic counterpart in the dances he created for operas. For example the ballet «Camargo» has a similar subject to the dances Petipa choreographed in the opera «Manon». Petipa especially favoured Spanish dances – something that came from his time spent in Spain, and he rarely choreographed Russian dances; he would

usually assign these to native Russian choreographers working under him. M.Petipa brought the French and Italian traditions to Russia and gave increased importance to dance over pantomime. He was talented at pleasing audiences and dealing with the bureaucracy of the Imperial Theatres while still maintaining artistic integrity in his works [2].

In 1895 Petipa restaged «Swan Lake» (music by P.Tchaikovsky) including major choreographic additions. One of these was as the thirty two fouetté turns in the coda of the pas de deux from the ballroom scene. In 1898 Petipa choreographed his last ballet with any staying power. «Raymonda» is a three-act ballet with music by Alexander Glazunov. Similar in style to the three Tchaikovsky ballets Raymonda is very difficult to follow because it showcases an impressive variety of dancing more than it portrays its plot line.

As the new century began, people started to get tired of Petipa's ideas and principles of ballet and looked for fresh ideas. By now the Russian ballet had surpassed the French ballet and many Russian dancers had become international stars. Probably the most notable ballerina of this time was Anna Pavlova, (1881–1931), who is known for dancing *The Dying Swan*.

With M.Petipa as the chief ballet master, many more Russian born and trained ballerinas danced on the imperial stages at this time than did at the beginning of Russian ballet. Now the Russians are known the world over as ballet dancers of extreme quality [4].

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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