

MUSIC AND THE DANCE THEATRE

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IT is a curious fact that in the comparatively brief period of one hundred and fifty years, two of the oldest arts, music and the dance, have undergone a complete cycle of change, each commencing and finishing with a classicism. As an art form the dance has followed a development closely resembling in outline that of music though not always chronologically coincident. For many years the classic ballet with its *pirouettes*, *pas seuls*, *pas d'action* and definitely stylized groupings bore unmistakable kinship to the *florituri*, *toccatas*, fugues and dance suites of musical classicism and, although lasting far into the age of romanticism, it nevertheless remained imbued with the impulse of its inception, art for art's sake. As a sort of step-child to the classic ballet came the *ballet d'action* (later to be metamorphosed by Diaghilev) a transitional step towards the programmatic and interpretive dance that followed. One cannot quite conceive the dance of romanticism without the influence of that singularly magnetic personality, Isadora Duncan. Born in an era of impressionism and dancing in classic Greek costume with gesture evocative of Attic friezes, she had a style, however, inseparably wed to that of the great musical romantics. To place her in either the preceding or the succeeding period would be to overlook entirely the life and spirit of her art. With Diaghilev came realism, at times merging with impressionism but principally realism, living, glittering, savage, suave and subtle. The *ballet d'action* was wrested away from the nymphs and dryads, the legendary heroes disporting with goddesses, to re-emerge in the tragi-comic posturing of a soul-riven puppet, the roguish impieties of a medieval Tyl or in the gaunt and mystic rites of pagan Russia. This was the Diaghilev who first burst upon the world. In his last years he appears the sponsor of an art far outside the conception of

his earlier days, a form which is still the infant of young and fertile minds—the stylized ballet, the acrobatic dance. Today there lingers a survival of the impressionist and the imagist dance in the work of Angna Enters and occasionally of others, such as Senia Gluck in his William Blake studies. But more truly related to our time is the abstract dance, more perfectly in key with the music of Hindemith, Prokofiev, the later Stravinsky, Honegger, Milhaud, Antheil, more clearly reflective of the stylizations of Picasso, Chirico, Gontcharova, or the psycho-mathematical formulas of a Stein, a Cummings or a Sitwell.

Though the abstract dance of today has stylization, and is based on the initial thesis of dance for the dance, yet in certain ways it has developed away from its predecessor of antiquity, the classic ballet. While the latter tended toward complexity and elaboration, the abstract dance is a study in economy. While the former was a gesture of elegance, the latter is a means of expression, though devoid of the robust emotional outlet of romanticism. The abstract dance is far more responsive to the music than was the classic ballet.

Of this newest phase of the classic dance we have had in America a recent and interesting development in the Dance Repertory Theatre of Martha Graham, Tamiris, Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman. It would of course be inexact to describe as abstract the whole range of performances given in the January debut of the organization. As in so many modern American movements we are confronted here with the national leaning toward eclecticism. But the dominant idea was quite emphatically contemporary. That this group may grow to the proportions of a Ballet Russe is a most hazardous guess—predictions at so early a stage are somewhat premature. But it demonstrated a modernism healthy enough to augur well for its success. Its dances represented the individuality of the different performers rather than a conscious attempt to astound, and although it perhaps lacked a singleness of profile it showed at all times a vital and positive reaction to the art of the day. The music was by Honegger, Hindemith, Antheil, Copland, Kodaly, Prokofiev, to mention but a few—an unusual list for audiences hardly accustomed to greater complexity than that of *Claire de Lune* or the *Pavane*

for a Dead Infanta. The costumes were almost always quite on the modern canvas in their simplicity, clarity of color and originality of design. The lighting made use of the plastic and psychological idioms in vogue in the contemporary theatre, but alas so little employed by most of the greatest opera houses.

The choreography showed a surprising variety in the startling and beautiful wood-cuts of Martha Graham, the electrical energy of Tamiris and the experiments in group movement of Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman. Certain obvious limitations in the productions cannot be denied. There was that tendency, common to so much of the stylized dance, toward static posture, the unfortunate prevalence of "sitting dances" which verge so dangerously close to mere pantomime that one longs for the sudden turns, the abrupt and dynamic rhythms of an Argentina. Disappointing in another way was the ballet to the opening movement of the Grieg *Piano Concerto* by Doris Humphrey and her group. Though interesting as an effort at correspondence with the sonata form, it proved to be a throw-back to the "interpretive" dance of ten years ago. The esthetic advisability of such ventures has always been dubious. One cannot help feeling that despite the subtle magic of Nijinsky, Debussy has expressed himself better in the score of *L'Après-Midi d'un Faune* than any interpretation on the stage, and that even the great Isadora, dancing the *Eroica*, invited comparison with Gounod in his lack of restraint in superimposing a banal and sentimental melody on a prelude by Bach. Nevertheless the experiment of the Dance Repertory Theatre as a whole showed fertility of idea and a sensitive response to the music, and may be said to have spoken definitely in the language of the day.

Such an organization, firmly established and somewhat enlarged can prove of infinite benefit to the contemporary composer. Merely as a means to get modern music before an unprotesting public it could have no equal, for where the eye is diverted the ear does not resist. Probably one of the principal reasons for the comparatively quick acceptance of Stravinsky's genius lies in the fact that most of his outstanding works have been for the theatre, more particularly for the dance. Aided by the spectacle, the mental ear involuntarily becomes attuned to the new consonances

of modern music. Furthermore such an organization supplies a theatrical experience invaluable to the composer of opera or ballet; to write well for the theatre one must have lived in it.

An extension of stimulating new possibilities has been indicated by the Dance Repertory Theatre in the employment of unusual instruments or instrumental combinations as musical accompaniment. Examples of this were the interesting flute soli of Louis Horst, danced by Martha Graham, and Tamiris' *Triangle Dance*. More daring still were the exciting psychological experiences of dances without music, or those set to the accompaniment of pure rhythm or sound effects, as in the beautiful choreographic poem, *Prologue to a Divine Comedy*, by Martha Graham and her group, or, in different vein, *The City*, by Tamiris, to the discordant shrieks of two sirens. (A few years ago Jacques Cartier made an experiment of this kind with a hypnotic *Congo Dance* inspired and accompanied by drum-beats alone.) With music reduced once more to its primary elements of rhythm, of sound, of melody, we may discover the means to form a substance of new and untried potentialities.

Through the stage knowledge and experience gained in connection with the Dance Repertory Theatre and other such groups, the composer may develop a new form intended to follow a choreographic rather than a musical or literary program. Where the stage-conscious composer works side by side with the musically responsive choreographer a new dance form is evolved. But most especially such mediums are of benefit to the composer in supplying him with a definite market. For the American it provides a particularly happy opportunity; it will allow him to develop unwatched, as was so enviably the case with our own best contribution to music—jazz. In its shirtsleeves as the rightful offspring of Tin Pan Alley, jazz brought us the effervescent scores of Gershwin, Rodgers, Youmans, the earlier classics of Berlin, the vibrant, insidious rhythms of a thousand dance halls; mounting the concert platform with white tie and tails it became a mediocre echo of the original inspiration, punctuated with many a deferential gesture towards Europe. For, like the coral insect, the composer should only build and "give no thought of the morrow."