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| ***Apollon Musagète*** |
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| *Apollon Musagète*, premiered by Serge Diaghilev’s *Ballets Russes* in 1928 and usually known since the 1950s as *Apollo*, is the oldest work by choreographer George Balanchine still in active repertoire. For its age alone the ballet is significant, but it also marked a new phase in the development of Balanchine’s artistic philosophy. In 1945 he wrote, ‘*Apollo* I look back on as a turning point. In its discipline and restraint . . . the score was a revelation. It seemed to tell me that I could dare not to use everything, that I too could eliminate. I began to see how I could clarify [...] by reducing what seemed to be multiple possibilities to the one which is inevitable’.[[1]](#endnote-1) Such was Balanchine’s influence that what was a turning point for him was also a turning point for ballet in the twentieth century. The score that so influenced Balanchine was composed, by Igor Stravinsky, for a small string orchestra. Diaghilev described it as ‘an amazing work, extraordinarily calm, and with greater clarity than anything he has so far done, [with] filigree counterpoint [a]round transparent, clear-cut themes, all in the major key; [it is] somehow music not of this world, but from somewhere above’.[[2]](#endnote-2) |
| *Apollon Musagète*, premiered by Serge Diaghilev’s *Ballets Russes* in 1928 and usually known since the 1950s as *Apollo*, is the oldest work by choreographer George Balanchine still in active repertoire. For its age alone the ballet is significant, but it also marked a new phase in the development of Balanchine’s artistic philosophy. In 1945 he wrote, ‘*Apollo* I look back on as a turning point. In its discipline and restraint . . . the score was a revelation. It seemed to tell me that I could dare not to use everything, that I too could eliminate. I began to see how I could clarify [...] by reducing what seemed to be multiple possibilities to the one which is inevitable’.[[3]](#endnote-3) Such was Balanchine’s influence that what was a turning point for him was also a turning point for ballet in the twentieth century. The score that so influenced Balanchine was composed, by Igor Stravinsky, for a small string orchestra. Diaghilev described it as ‘an amazing work, extraordinarily calm, and with greater clarity than anything he has so far done, [with] filigree counterpoint [a]round transparent, clear-cut themes, all in the major key; [it is] somehow music not of this world, but from somewhere above’.[[4]](#endnote-4) The collaboration of Balanchine and Stravinsky on the creation of *Apollo* marked the beginning of an artistic partnership that would extend over the next fifty years. Stravinsky conducted the opening-night performance and later compiled a book of conversations with fellow composer Robert Craft, *Dialogues and a Diary*, which includes discussions of the ballet.    The ballet has a hint of a story: Apollo is born, grows to manhood, and commands three muses to dance for him — Calliope, muse of poetry, Polyhymnia, muse of mime, and Terpsichore, muse of the dance, whom he favours above the others. He chooses her to join him in a *pas de deux*. After an energetic coda, in the final tableau the four principals are seen ascending to Parnassus.  Balanchine based the choreography on the classical ballet technique he had learned as a student at the Imperial Theatre School in St. Petersburg, Russia. This he significantly redefined, inverting and distorting the academic vocabulary with manneristic movements of deliberate awkwardness. Turned-out positions of the feet became turned in, rounded arms became angular, erect torsos twisted and collapsed, hips protruded, hands clenched into fists, little running steps which had been performed on the toes were now shuffled on the heels, and the body’s centre of balance was displaced. Terpsichore balanced on Apollo’s back, ‘swimming’ without touching the floor. This approach has come to be called neoclassicism, or classicism seen through a prism of modernism.  As unusual as his vocabulary was Balanchine’s concept of the title character: his Apollo was not the majestic Sun God. Balanchine saw him, rather, as ‘the *small* Apollo, a wild half-human youth who acquires nobility through art’. He said to one of the early interpreters, ‘You are a woodcutter, a swimmer, a football player’.[[5]](#endnote-5)  In the original cast were Serge Lifar, a Diaghilev favourite, as Apollo; Alice Nikitina alternating with Alexandra Danilova as Terpsichore; Lubov Tchernicheva as Calliope and Felia Doubrovska as Polyhymnia. The costumes and scenery were credited to the primitive-naif painter André Bauchant, but within a year the women’s costumes were replaced by designs by Coco Chanel. Currently the ballet is most often danced in simple tunics and tights.  As the years went by, Balanchine made several changes to the ballet, the most notable of which were the elimination of the birth scene, including Apollo’s first variation, and the replacement of the ascent to Parnassus with a ‘sunburst’ pose formed by the dancers. By paring down the narrative, Balanchine focused attention more directly on the choreography itself. Even he, however, must have considered this approach too rigorous, as he soon restored the first variation in which the young god tests his newfound manly strength and learns to play the lute. Some companies do continue to present the ballet with the birth scene as well.  *Apollo* is performed by ballet companies all over the world: For its forceful and unusual movement and its dominant position within ballet, the title role is one of the most coveted in the male repertoire. Notable Apollos have included Lew Christensen (the first American Apollo, 1937), Igor Youskevitch, Jacques d’Amboise, Peter Martins and Mikhail Baryshnikov. The ballet remains one of the few from the Diaghilev era to have stood the test of time; it remains completely contemporary in our day.  Image: Jacques d’Amboise with lute. No copyright necessary.  Image: Poster for American Ballet tour with Lew Christensen as Apollo |
| Further reading:  (D’Amboise)  (Joseph)  (Kirstein)  (Taper)  (The George Balanchine Foundation)  (The George Balanchine Foundation)  (The Balanchine Library)  (Jacques d’Amboise: Portrait of a Great American Dancer) |

1. . Quoted in M. Lederman, (ed.), *Stravinsky in the Theatre* (New York: Pellegrini & Cudahy, 1949 [paperback, New York: Da Capo, 1975, p. 81]). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. . Quoted in E. W. White, *Stravinsky: The Composer and His Works* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966 [2d. ed., 1979, p. 342]). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. . Quoted in M. Lederman, (ed.), *Stravinsky in the Theatre* (New York: Pellegrini & Cudahy, 1949 [paperback, New York: Da Capo, 1975, p. 81]). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. . Quoted in E. W. White, *Stravinsky: The Composer and His Works* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1966 [2d. ed., 1979, p. 342]). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. . Quoted in N. Reynolds, *Repertory in Review: 40 Years of the New York City Ballet* (New York: Dial, 1977), pp. 48, 49. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)