***Apollon Musagète* (1928)**

Apollon Musagète, premiered by Serge Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes in 1928 and since the 1950s usually called *Apollo*, is the oldest work by George Balanchine still in active repertoire. For its age alone the ballet would be 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 which 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) 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 also wrote the book and conducted the opening-night performance.

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. He 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’.[[3]](#endnote-3)

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 with 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 in 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 focussed attention more directly on the choreography itself. But even he must have considered this approach too rigorous, since he soon restored the first variation, in which the young god tests his newfound manly strength and learns to play the lute. Some companies continue to present the ballet with the birth scene as well.

*Apollo* is performed by companies all over the world. For its forceful and unusual movement and its dominant position within the ballet, the title role is one of the most coveted in the male repertoire. Notable Apollos have been 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.

**References and Further Reading**

D’Amboise, J. (2011) *I Was a Dancer*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf. (Contains an analysis of the ballet, written by one of the title role’s foremost interpreters)

Joseph, C. (2002) *Stravinsky and Balanchine: A Journey of Invention*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press. (Contains two lengthy chapters on the evolution of the ballet and an analysis of its score, written by a professor of music)

Kirstein, L., with photographs by M. Swope and G. P. Lynes (1973) *The New York City Ballet*, New York: Alfred A. Knopf. (Contains four pages of photographs of many of the most memorable poses from the ballet, with text written by the General Director of the New York City Ballet)

Taper, B. (1996) *Balanchine: A Biography, With a New Epilogue*, Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press. (Originally published in 1984 and twice updated, this remains the standard biography. Contains information on and pictures of *Apollo*)

**Moving Image Material**

The Balanchine Foundation has tapes of *Apollo*, from which 60-second segments can be extracted.  However, permission **must** be requested from the Balanchine Trust ([esorrin@balanchine.com](https://mail.uvic.ca/owa/redir.aspx?C=mPZLgPxEzUykmC7TqIXkq72TsZozQs9I8GnC58pYFgyVho_rRGry4ozFLUhwjBMb-53u6BrErF8.&URL=mailto%3aesorrin%40balanchine.com)).  It is possible that the Balanchine Foundation also has to sign off on any requests.

*Balanchine* (two-part documentary) (2004) Kultur (pas de deux, coda).

*The Balanchine Library: The Balanchine Celebration*, Part One (1996) Nonesuch (complete 1979 [shortened] version, taped in 1993).

*Jacques d’Amboise: Portrait of a Great American Dancer* (2006) VAI (complete ballet, taped in 1960).

Jordan, Stephanie (2010) *Music Dances: Balanchine Choreographs Stravinsky*, The George Balanchine Foundation (Calliope’s variation).

**Photographs**

Jacques d’Amboise with lute

Poster for American Ballet tour with Lew Christensen as Apollo

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**Endnotes**

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 N. Reynolds, *Repertory in Review: 40 Years of the New York City Ballet* (New York: Dial, 1977), pp. 48, 49. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)