**Balanchine, George (b. Georgii Melitonovich Balanchivadze, 22 January 1904, St. Petersburg, Russia; d. 30 April 1983, New York City)**

**Summary**

George Balanchine, arguably the greatest ballet choreographer of the twentieth century, was at once both modernist and traditionalist. Unlike many radical innovators, in charting new ground he did not reject the past. Virtually all of his major works make reference, even if obliquely, to the classical ballet technique in which he was trained. Although born in Russia and active in Europe in the early part of his career, it was in America that he made his greatest impact, directing the New York City Ballet, which he co-founded with Lincoln Kirstein, from its inception in 1948 until his death in 1983. During this time, the company grew from modest beginnings to become one of the most important ballet troupes in the world. Balanchine is credited with creating a particularly American style of classical dance, one that is characterised by speed, precision, energy, daring, and a rough grace more associated with athletes than with sylphs. His more than 400 dance works include *Apollo* (1928), *Serenade* (1934), *Concerto Barocco* (1941), *Le Palais de Cristal* (later renamed *Symphony in C*) (1948), *Orpheus* (1948), *The Nutcracker* (1954), *Agon* (1957), *Symphony in Three Movements* (1972), *Stravinsky Violin Concerto* (1972), *Vienna Waltzes* (1977), *Ballo della Regina* (1978) and *Mozartiana* (1981).

**Training and Early Influences**

Balanchine was accepted into the dance section of the famed Imperial Theatre School in St. Petersburg in 1913 at the age of nine. The state-supported school was known for its exacting classical ballet training; the syllabus included not only lessons in ballet technique but also classes in acting, mime, declamation, and music, in addition to academic subjects. In his second year Balanchine appeared as Cupid in *The Sleeping Beauty* at the Maryinsky Theatre, an event which caused him to fall in love with ballet as a career. His main teacher was Samuil Andrianov, and he also acknowledged the influence of the avant-garde choreographers Fedor Lopukhov and Kasian Goleizovsky. Although his training was interrupted for a year by the Russian Revolution, Balanchine graduated in 1921 and joined the former Imperial Ballet (now renamed the troupe of the State Academic Theatre of Opera and Ballet). While still a student, he had begun to choreograph and also started serious music study at the Petrograd Conservatory. Later he organised a small group (Young Ballet) to perform experimental pieces (his own and others’), but when the authorities disapproved, he sought a way to leave the country. In 1924, with a small group of colleagues, he went on a tour to Germany and did not return.

**Major Contributions to the Field and to Modernism**

Soon after leaving Russia, Balanchine joined Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes, where in less than five years he choreographed nearly a dozen ballets, including two that are still performed—*Apollon Musagète* (1928; later called *Apollo*) and *Le Fils prodigue* (1929; later usually known as *[The] Prodigal Son*). In both of these early works, with their angular, ‘ugly’ gestures, unconventional partnering and asymmetrical groupings, Balanchine had already begun to depart significantly fromhis heritage, as epitomised by such lavish full-evening ballets as *Swan Lake* and *The Sleeping Beauty* on the stage of the Maryinsky Theatre. In 1933, with the assistance of the American arts patron Lincoln Kirstein and others, Balanchine settled permanently in New York. After some years of trial and error, in 1948 the two founded the New York City Ballet, where Balanchine created his most important work.

In a long career, Balanchine proved himself one of the most inventive, progressive, musically acute and extraordinarily prolific dance makers ever, a thorough master of his craft. But his astonishing abilityin creating movement notwithstanding, his most radical contribution, revolutionary at the time but now widely accepted and copied, was to insist that pure dance, set to distinguished music but unembellished by costumes, sets, plot, or star dancers, made a statement on its own. As he expressed it, ‘Ballet will speak by itself, for itself.’ He demonstrated his beliefs in his first ballet in America, the rhapsodic *Serenade* (1934). Set to Tchaikovsky’s *Serenade for Strings*, it had no story, minimal costumes, and no scenery; further, it fully integrated the corps de ballet into the dance design. In its original version (since modified), it had no star dancers; as ever for Balanchine, choreography was the star.

In another exploration of dance as expressive in its own right, Balanchine created the sublime *Concerto Barocco* (1941) to Bach’s *Double Violin Concerto*, in which the score itself may be considered the ‘subject’ of the ballet. As a critic wrote, ‘it makes polyphony visible’.[[1]](#endnote-1) Balanchine did not follow the music literally; his dancers play with and around the beat, creating an intriguing syncopation that gives the movements a jazzy intonation. In the central adagio, the ballerina is lifted repeatedly as the music swells, is then lowered into a swivel; finally, with the simplest of walking steps, she threads her way through the corps de ballet, creating Balanchine’s signature chains and bridges. At moments dancers move withparallel knees, turned-in toe positions, and a forward lurch through the hip—‘distortions’ of the classical school already foreshadowed in *Apollo*. This style came to be known as neoclassicism.

As settings for some of his later, more radical experiments, Balanchine chose twentieth-century scores, often of the more austere variety. Over the years he set ballets to Igor Stravinsky (his favourite and most frequent collaborator), Paul Hindemith, Arnold Schoenberg, Anton Webern, Charles Ives, Iannis Xenakis and Toshiro Mayuzumi, as well as to electronic music.

*The Four Temperaments* (1946), to Hindemith’s score of the same name, proved to be the first of the reductive works created over a thirty-year period that established Balanchine as the pioneer and master of a pared-down, unadorned neoclassical style. Its movement is at times violent, at times pensive. Although individual steps are fragmented and distorted, thus appearing foreign to the eye, the vocabulary of the ballet when considered in its entirety—from an initial pointed foot, a bent knee, an arabesque, a lunge, a leap—can be seen as a complete reconstitution of the classical school; that is its ‘story’. As with *Concerto Barocco*, the ballet was originally presented in elaborate costumes, which Balanchine soon discarded and replaced with leotards.

*Agon* (1957), to Stravinsky’s score of the same name (commissioned by the New York City Ballet) was costumed from the start in leotards, which became the unquestioned ‘uniform’ for all Balanchine’s subsequent experimental ballets. Of *Agon*’s partially twelve-tone score, Balanchine observed, ‘It is a new piece of diabolical craftsmanship; sounds like this have never been heard before; it may take rather developed ears to hear them’.[[2]](#endnote-2) With his extensive musical training, Balanchine was up to the task. He matched the ‘lean and muscular’ musical surface with choreography of equivalent terseness. The steps, derived from the classical canon, some of them unexpectedly laced with whimsy and some with daring, acquired a razor-edge excitement by split-second timing. The frankly sexual pas de deux, with its suggestive splits and bodily intertwinings, proved to be a sensation with the public, especially as Balanchine, fully aware of the implications, choreographed it on a black man and a white woman just as the Civil Rights movement in America was gathering steam. With *Agon*, an audience favourite, Balanchine may be said to have broken through popular resistance to his avant-garde experiments.

He continued along minimalist lines with *Episodes* (1959), to the ‘ruthlessly economical’ music of Anton Webern, some of whose pieces are just a few minutes long, ‘scraps’ of sound followed by silence. Balanchine mostly dispensed with steps as such; his spurts of movement were described by John Martin, critic of *The New York Times*, as ‘the briefest of broken graspings …. Balanchine shows us the body … as an assemblage of bones, muscles, and nerves.’[[3]](#endnote-3)

He achieved his most absolute statement of the reductive principle with *Movements for Piano and Orchestra* (1963). To one of Stravinsky’s most ‘hermetic’, dissonant, ‘shattered’ scores, he set dense movement phrases which sometimes corresponded to sounds, sometimes to silence. His vocabulary was spare (and unballetic)—crouches, stretches, splits on the ground and in the air upside down—but each fragment was so closely interlocked with the movements of the other dancers onstage and the movements which preceded and followed it that the choreography was perceived as supercharged kinetically. Stravinsky felt that the choreography enlarged his score; Balanchine believed he had never penetrated music more profoundly than with this ballet.

A later work may be cited as a further illustration of Balanchine’s modernist approach. *Violin Concerto* (1972, later called *Stravinsky Violin Concerto*) is one of the most bracing and intellectually satisfying of his mature ballets. In the closing movement, working with a greater number of dancers than in most of his earlier reductive works,he probes and reveals the complex score in an uncanny way. His choreography both complements and confronts the music’s rhythmic layering with blocks of dancers, in small repetitive motions, delineating several count systems occurring simultaneously. In this regard, it is Balanchine’s most densely textured work. But unlike some of the others in this vein, the ballet also has emotional implications; critics have referred to the two central movements, the spellbinding pas de deux—one rough, one tender—as love duets.

There is another side of Balanchine’s modernism that has been little explored, probably because he dared to compose some works largely without identifiable dance steps. The essential ‘subject’ of these works is not dance, but atmosphere. They include *Ivesiana* (1954, Charles Ives), with its mysterious female, held aloft, manipulated by four men without ever touching the ground, and a final movement consisting solely of dancers walking across the stage on their knees in semi-darkness; *Gaspard de la Nuit* (*Gaspard of the Night*, 1975; Ravel), featuring shadowy figures with murky lighting and mirrors; *Variations pour une Porte et un Soupir* [*Variations for a Door and a Sigh*, 1974; ‘sonority’: Pierre Henry], in which a female ‘door’ devours a male ‘sigh’, to the bafflement of the audience; and *Opus 34* (1954, Schoenberg), a score played twice, with its simulation of an operating room with bloody bandages and bright lights focussed directly into the audience, momentarily blinding them.

Although Balanchine will be best remembered for his radical works set to challenging twentieth-century scores, it is essential to note that these made up just a fraction of his output. He was highly productive throughout his long life, and his range was astounding. He produced strictly classical work, technical display pieces, ballets that were romantic and emotional, dances to popular music, full-length classical story ballets with elaborate costumes and sets, dance miniatures and dramas. He also choreographed Broadway shows. What characterised them all, to a greater or lesser extent, was the aptness of their music and the integrity of their choreography.

**Legacy**

Balanchine significantly altered the look of classical ballet by insisting on the primacy of choreography.He extended the 400-year-old language of academic dance by heightening, streamlining and even inverting its fundamental elements. This, together with tours by the New York City Ballet in the United States and abroad and national telecasts of his work beginning in the 1970s, had a major impact on the growth of dance in America. At first, his style seemed specifically suited to the energy and speed of the dancers he trained, but his ballets are now performed by all the major classical ballet companies throughout the world.

**References and Further Reading**

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**Moving Image Material**

The Balanchine Foundation has tapes of *Concerto Barocco* and *Agon*, 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 also sign off on any requests.

*Arthur Mitchell coaching the pas de deux from Agon* (2007, taped 2001) The George Balanchine Foundation Interpreters Archive. (The originator of the male role coaching today’s dancers in the studio.)

*Balanchine* (2004) Kultur. (Two-part documentary with excerpts from more than thirty Balanchine ballets.)

*Balanchine Celebration Part One* (1996) Nonesuch Records. Excerpts from *Apollo*, *Scherzo à la Russe* (complete), *Square Dance*, *Theme and Variations*, *Union Jack,* *Vienna Waltzes*, and *Walpurgisnacht Ballet*. Choreography by George Balanchine.

*Balanchine Celebration Part Two* (1996) Nonesuch Records. Excerpts from *Agon*, *Stars and Stripes*, *Western* *Symphony*, and *Who Cares?* Choreography by George Balanchine.

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*Choreography by Balanchine Part One* (2004) Nonesuch/Dance in America. (*Tzigane*, *Divertimento No. 15*, excerpts; *The* *Four Temperaments*. *Jewels*, excerpts and *Stravinsky Violin Concerto*.)

*Choreography by Balanchine Part Two* (2004) Nonesuch/Dance in America. (*Chaconne*, excerpts; *Prodigal Son*; *Ballo della* *Regina*; *The Steadfast Tin Soldier*; *Elégie*, from *Suite No. 3*; *Tschaikovsky Pas de Deux*.

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*George Balanchine’s The Nutcracker* (1993) Warner Bros. Family Entertainment.

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*Man Who Dances: Edward Villella* (1968) Direct Cinema Limited. (Excerpts from *Tarantella*, *Divertimento Brillante* from *Glinkiana*, *Rubies* from *Jewels*).

*Maria Tallchief coaching principal roles in the Sanguinic variation from The Four Temperaments* (2008, taped 1996) The George Balanchine Foundation Interpreters Archive. (An early interpreter coaches the principal female role.)

*Marie-Jeanne, John Taras, and Suki Schorer coaching Concerto Barocco* (complete) (2008, taped 1996) The George Balanchine Foundation Interpreters Archive. (Coaching of the leading female role by its originator, Marie-Jeanne, and others.)

*Peter Martins: A Dancer* (1979) Kultur. (Excerpts from *Chaconne*, *Agon*, *Tschaikovsky Pas de Deux* by Balanchine; *Calcium Light Night* by Peter Martins; *Afternoon of a Faun* by Robbins [rehearsal]).

*Robert Schumann’s Davidsbündlertänze* (1995) Nonesuch Records. (Choreography by George Balanchine.)

*Suzanne Farrell: Elusive Muse* (2001) Seahorse Films. (Excerpts from *Apollo*, *Meditation*, *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *Don Quixote*).

*Suzanne Farrell coaching principal roles in Movements and Monumentum pro Gesualdo* (2007, taped 2001) The George Balanchine Foundation Interpreters Archive. (Farrell originated the lead female role in *Movements* and danced the female lead in *Monumentum*.)

*Todd Bolender coaching the principal role in the Phlegmatic variation from The Four Temperaments* (2007, taped 1997) The George Balanchine Foundation Interpreters Archive. (The role’s originator coaching a contemporary dancer in the studio.)

*Yvonne Mounsey coaching principal roles in Prodigal Son* (2010, taped 2008) The George Balanchine Foundation Interpreters Archive. (Mounsey learned the role of the Siren from its originator, Felia Doubrovska.)

**Photographs**

*Movements*

*Violin Concerto*

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**Endnotes**

1. . T. Willis, *Chicago Tribune*, August 16, 1967. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. . New York City Ballet programme note, reprinted in N. Reynolds, *Repertory in Review: 40 Years of the New York City Ballet*, New York: Dial Press, 1977: 182-83. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. . J. Martin, *New York Times*, June 7, 1959. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)