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| Neoclassicism |
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| Neo-classicism in dance is part of the historicist modernist movement of the first third of the twentieth century; it indicates an approach that redefines movement in relation to music and makes it independent of the narrative plot by placing form over content. The term was first applied to characterise George Balanchine’s (1904–1983) *Apollo* (1928) to Igor Stravinsky’s (1882–1971) music, but was soon extended to the choreographer’s works to music by Peter Tchaikovsky (1840–1893) such as *Serenade* (1934). |
| Neo-classicism only appeared in dance historical studies in the twentieth century and as a concept was most likely borrowed from musicology, which in turn borrowed it from art history. The term ‘neo-classicism’ was originally introduced into the history of architecture and sculpture where it denoted a return to an earlier, idealised concept of art, mainly the ancient Greek or Roman formal organisation and approach to material. In the eighteenth century the German art historian Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–1768) redefined the history of art and created a periodisation, in which the neo-classical appeared as a stylistic classification and a period distinct from the earlier, classical epoch. The period during which Winckelmann initiated this neo-classical conceptual analysis coincided with the first Viennese School of music of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This music, however, was not defined as neo-classical but as classical. Eighteenth-century dance theorists such as John Weaver (1673–1760) used ‘ancient’ rather than ‘classical’ or ‘neo-classical’ to trace the historical evolution of dance genres and styles or discuss Greek and Roman movement traditions.  In music, neo-classicism refers to early twentieth-century compositions which explore and copy seventeenth- and eighteenth-century forms and styles which rejected excessive romantic harmonisation, orchestration and loss of formal cohesion. The approaches in art as well as music history are generalisations; neo-classicism suggests a re-appropriation of earlier, ancient Greek and Roman (or those of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries) classical forms or genres and their re-definition in later times. It is therefore a relative, generic and rather imprecise term which establishes specific reference frames of a past which is then cast as ‘classical’ in order to justify the renewed interest in or re-framing of that past to set it apart from a specific contemporary perspective.  In dance, a truly classical period never existed after the fall of the Roman Empire. Ancient Greek or Roman dance practices were completely lost and therefore needed to be invented by artists who wished to use the notion of the ‘classical’ as an imagined ideal. John Weaver, Jean-Georges Noverre (1727–1810) and Isadora Duncan (1877–1927) cultivated such an approach. Noverre considered himself a choreographer who remade the ancient ‘classical’ canon. Duncan could be called a neo-classical dancer in the sense that Winckelmann once defined: she took her inspiration from ancient Greek vases or derived much of her own movement aesthetics from Friedrich Nietzsche’s (1844–1900) 1871 study *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music*, an analysis of the downfall of Greek tragedy and the role of the chorus.  The problem of defining neo-classicism in dance is amplified by periodisation debates and by the blurred use of the terms ‘romantic’ and ‘classical’ in the twentieth century. The confusion arises from the collapse of romanticism into classical ballet, i.e. the identification of an aesthetic ideology with its technical principles that evolved throughout the nineteenth century. The choreographer Michel Fokine (1880–1942) distinguished between the ‘old’ and ‘new’ ballet in his Letter to the London *Times* of 6 July 1914, whereas the critic and dance theorist André Levinson (1887–1933), who left Russia after the Bolshevik revolution of 1917, was one of the first to use the term ‘classical’ consciously as a historical reference and to circumscribe a dance movement or period of the past. He did so systematically from 1917 onwards in his dance monographs and collections of reviews, for instance in *Ballet Old and New* (1917), *The Designs of Leon Bakst for the Sleeping Beauty* (1923) or *Argentina* (1928). Levinson discerned a specific aesthetic of classical ballet in Marius Petipa’s (1818–1910) *La Bayadère* (1877) and *The Sleeping Beauty* (1890). For Levinson, this classicism established a canonical standard for dance (and particularly ballet) against which later movement creations had to be measured.  Other post-1917 Russian refugees, such as Joseph Levitan (1894–1976) in Berlin, also used the term ‘classical’ dance. From 1925 on Levitan published his translations of Akim Volynskii’s (1865–1926) *Kniga Likovanii: Azbuka klassichesgo tantsa* [*Book of Exaltation*] into German as *Buch des Jubels*. In opposition to this ‘classical’ style the neo-classical mode of choreographers engaged by Serge Diaghilev (1872–1929) for the Ballets Russes, such as George Balanchine or Bronislava Nijinska (1891–1972) could then be discussed. Even before a theoretical and language re-orientation took place around ballet, musical neo-classicism was being established. ‘Neo-classical’ referred to the way in which composers appropriated and integrated historical melodic or harmonic material and formal rules of music from the sixteenth, seventeenth or eighteenth centuries, into their own works but also to the ‘historicising’ of contemporary twentieth-century material and the imitation and parody of historical styles.  The term ‘neo-classical’ was deliberately applied to Igor Stravinsky’s (1882–1971) music from 1923 onwards although many of his works that deserve the characterisation of ‘neo-classical’ predate the year. Particularly his work *Pulcinella* (1919–1920) was considered a prototype of neo-classical music; it was first performed as a ballet in 1920 with choreography by Léonide Massine (1896-1979). Other examples of neo-classical compositions as the basis of ballets are Sergei Prokofiev’s (1891–1953) *Symphony no. 1* (*the Classical*; 1916–1917) – the Gavotte was integrated into his ballet *Romeo and Juliet* (1935); Ottorino Resphigi’s ballet music (1879–1936) for *La Boutique Fantasque* (*The Magic Toy Shop*, 1918) – choreographed by Léonide Massine in 1919; *Sèvres de la vieille France* (1920), a transcription of seventeenth and eighteenth century French music – performed by Ileana Leonidoff’s (1893–c.1965) company in 1920; and *Ancient Airs and Dances Suite No. 1 and 2* (1917, 1923), choreographed by Margarete Wallmann (ca. 1904–1992) in 1937; Francis Poulenc’s (1899–1963) score for *Les Biches* – choreographed by Bronislava Nijinska in 1924.  *Pulcinella*, *La Boutique Fantasque* and *Les Biches* were commissioned by Serge Diaghilev for the Ballets Russes. There are many more examples, some of which appear in Constant Lambert’s (1905–1951) caustic rejection of neo-classicism in his book *Music, Ho! A Study of Music in Decline* (1934). This was a bitter, critical attack by Lambert on ‘chilly’ (23) neo-classicism resulting from ‘time travel’ in music (and ballet) and which he considered a muddle in form and sensual experience, a nasty pastiche that misinterpreted the original material and demonstrated a travesty of real invention: it led ‘with its apparent concentration on formalism and minute details of texture to the detriment of any emotional quality’ (21) and to dire poverty in every aspect of artistic innovation. Stravinsky’s own verdict of his style as ‘a rare form of kleptomania’ (Hyde 2003, 98) was cynical and unapologetic. Musicologist Martha Hyde counteracts Lambert’s rejection and provides a more positive understanding of Stravinsky’s, and by extension his ballet collaborators’, appropriation of past canons in music and dance: ‘a genuine artistic engagement, seeking to create modern works by reconstructing or accommodating past styles in a way that maintained his own integrity and identity in the history of music’ (2003, 98).  It took several decades before the term ‘classical’ rather than ‘old’, ‘Russian’, ‘Imperial’, ‘operatic’, ‘traditional’ or ‘theatrical’ entered general usage in Western European countries in reference to the ballet of the later nineteenth century, above all the works created by Marius Petipa. Only in the years after the Second World War years did the vocabulary of classical and neo-classical become generally accepted. Today, neo-classicism usually refers to a novel approach to ballet movement, particularly in relation to musical composition. The term neo-classical was first used to understand George Balanchine’s early style, which he developed to Stravinsky’s music in the 1920s and 1930s. Bronislava Nijinska took up the challenge and also articulated a neo-classical aesthetic by redefining the movement traditions of the nineteenth century. In the 1930s, Serge Lifar (1905–1986) was credited with the invention of a neo-classical training method at the Paris Opera, a system that he introduced in reference to the eighteenth-century ballet reforms and techniques of Jean-Georges Noverre. His reinterpretation of the Russian Imperial tradition followed from his encounter with Balanchine and borrowed heavily from Agrippina Vaganova’s (1879–1951) method of classical ballet.  From the mid-1920s onwards, Russian theorists wrote about ‘classical’ ballet and in consequence a ‘neo-classicism’ could be constructed as a new and contemporary aesthetic and in relation to the works that were being created and performed in the dialogue between composers and choreographers.  All the formal elements attributed to a neo-classical style had emerged during the late nineteenth century. Marius Petipa’s repertoire became the foundation on and against which neo-classicists could initially develop their own aesthetic either by fracturing the integrity of his ballet spectacles and re-assembling known elements in a counter-intuitive manner (and also introducing new, vernacular elements from sports and acrobatics) or by isolating individual elements which belonged to a whole but now were taken out of their context. Instead of complicated plots with huge casts, narrative was simplified or even abandoned. Abstract ballet-divertissements already existed in the mid-nineteenth century. Works by Jules Perrot (1810–1892) such as *Pas de Quatre* (1845), *Les Elements* (1847) and *Les Quatre Saisons* (1848) are examples.  Neo-classical works of the 1920s and subsequent decades also rediscovered historical forms of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, including the divertissement. But these forms had to be examined through the lens of the late nineteenth century and its elaborate performance culture. With its emphasis on minimalism, neo-classicism also led to a new asceticism, together with a preference for archaic themes and structures. Bronislava Nijinska’s *Les Noces* (1923) provides such an example. An archaic dimension was introduced by examining contemporary marriage through ancient communal rites that restrict and destroy the individuals – the bride’s and bride groom’s – personal choices; the presentation of marriage as oppressive and as an archetypal institution that forces past conventions onto the young who are unable to escape and suffocate could be considered a neo-classical fracture of subject matter through form, and vice versa. The anachronisms between content and form were amplified by Stravinsky’s music that once more broke-up the internal consistency.  Another neo-classical formal approach emerged from the new relationship to music. Already at the turn of the century, Isadora Duncan had resorted to symphonic music, operas and popular songs (the *Marseillaise*, for instance) to accompany her dance interpretations and had resolutely refused to submit to ballet music. Her escape from the musical conventions of ballet – a deliberate breaking of the ‘classical’ mould and a deliberate rejection of the integrity of a ‘classical’ style – enabled a new outlook on the interaction between movement and music. Not least, it allowed a stronger counteractive and contradictory interaction between both elements. In 1914 Fokine had reinforced this perspective when he proclaimed that ballet no longer needed to submit itself to explicit ballet music but could use any musical composition. Symphonies, off-limits to choreographers in the nineteenth century, now served as dance scores.  Experiments around symphonic ballet as an expression of the revolutionary spirit flourished in the very early years of Soviet Russia, with works such as *Dance Symphony: The Magnificence of the Universe* (1923) by Fedor Lopukhov (1886–1973) and Kasian Goleizovsky’s (1892–1970) choreographies to Alexander Scriabin’s (1872–1915) music as an answer to Petipa’s outdated academic ballets. Goleizovsky’s experiments re-examined the classical step material, the ballet canon of the nineteenth century, but also its stale morality and stagnant formality and introduced a fierce modernism. These experiments ended during the Stalinist years, but were continued outside of Soviet Russia in Western Europe. In *Les Présages* (1933), Léonide Massine (1895–1979) invented a new symphonic ballet form, which followed the structure of the music and interwove a loose storyline with formal movement that drove rather than illustrated it. In George Balanchine’s *Serenade* (1934) or *Concerto Barocco* (1941) set to music by Tchaikovsky and Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750), respectively, the movement was inspired and driven by internal musical development rather than external plot. In continental Europe, ballet-symphonies by choreographers such as Aurel von Milloss (1906–1988) soon formed an important part of the repertoire of ballet and dance companies. In England, the genre was explored by Frederick Ashton (1904–1988).  The most influential theoretical framework of twentieth-century neo-classicism evolved out of Théophile Gautier’s (1811–1872) aesthetic of *l’art pour l’art* – art for art’s sake – articulated in 1836 in the preface to his novel *Mademoiselle Maupin*. It fostered self-reflexivity and self-referentiality and in the early twentieth century defined most modernist art forms by encouraging a focus on abstraction. This means that both modernist theory as well as modernist artistic practice grew out of and cultivated a historicist methodology. Music and dance were independent of everything but themselves. No external factors, whether programmatic proclamation, narrative content or politics, should intrude on the internal logic of an art work. This approach was and is formally open and could be turned into several, even seemingly contradictory, musical or choreographic structures. It could also return to the classical formal and movement vocabulary and make the ‘*danse d’école*’ the theme of historical exploration, which means that historical accuracy or ‘authenticity’ were secondary to the notion that historical material could be lifted from and developed outside of its own context and placed in any other connotation in which it then would change its internal logic and meaning.  With the emergence of the Cold War at the end of the Second World War, neo-classicist theory became a weapon in the arsenal of tools to attack the dogma of socialist realism articulated in the 1930s. The antagonistic opposition between the Eastern and Western political powers, the Soviet Union and the United States of America, was lived out in the arts. The cultural confrontation between realism on the one hand and ‘abstraction’ and the a-historicity of neo-classicism on the other led to the discrediting of any realist approach in the arts – in the fine arts, music, literature, poetry, and performance. Art critic Clement Greenberg’s (1909–1994) verdict that realism was a kind of ‘kitsch’ proved hugely influential (see his essay ‘Avantgarde and Kitsch’ of 1939). Though abstract art and neo-classical art deemed themselves apolitical, both contributed to the successful politicisation of aesthetics. Whereas a style rooted in realism and narrative content was mandated by the Soviet authorities, the West espoused formal experimentation and abstraction, and pronounced it as fundamentally separated from politics. Collective devotion was pitched against individual freedom. In the Eastern sphere new elaborate narrative ballets together with the canonisation of the historical heritage formed the bases for contemporary works; in the Western sphere the hegemony of abstract music and abstract ballet guided artistic creation not only within ballet but also modern dance. Clement Greenberg became the voice of abstraction and condemned any other artistic approach, particularly in the visual arts. But the political duality, though articulated and put into action through pure theories, was subverted in the East as well as the West: full-length narrative ballets (albeit complicated by psychological depth and formal freedom), were created by choreographers such as Frederic Ashton in Great-Britain, John Cranko (1927–1973) in the Federal Republic of Germany and Roland Petit (1924–2011) in France, whereas Soviet choreographers such as Leonid Yacobson (1904–1975) in the 1960s tried to revive the revolutionary experiments of the early 1920s.  A late twentieth-century definition and post-modern appropriation of the concept but not necessarily the term could be detected in works that favour a multiplicity of approaches, historical eclecticism, the philosophical justification of shifting centres of identity and broken narratives. Any pastiche or any choreography that incorporates conscious references to past repertoires could thus claim to be neo-classical as it plays with the reinterpretation of an established, even canonical set of formal rules. Constant Lambert’s 1934 characterisation of time-travel, pastiche, historical quotation as the compositional methods of neo-classicism still hold in relation to post-modernism: neo-classicism could then be understood as the progenitor of post-modernism (albeit without the negative insinuations and implications at which Lambert arrived). Post-modernism would then be the heir of neo-classicism in its unfixed formal attitude rather than the continuation of specific characteristics. The past thus becomes a gigantic catalogue of often random and interchangeable ideas, motives, topics, tropes, and forms – the past no longer offers or demands the unity of form and content that is bound to a specific period. A past logic is therefore not untouchable but an invitation to rearrange it according to the momentary desires of a composer and choreographer who are re-discovering it. |
| Further reading:  (Balanchine)  (Fokine)  (Genné)  (Greenberg)  (Hyde)  (Jordan, Moving Music: Dialogues with Music in Twentieth-Century Ballet)  (Jordan, Stravinsky Dances: Re-Visions across the Century)  (Jordan and Grau, Europe Dancing: Perspectives on Theatre Dance and Cultural Identity)  (Lambert)  (Lifar)  (Neo-classical)  (Nijinska)  (Reynolds and McCormick)  (Veroli)  (Whittall) |