**Vainonen, Vasily Ivanovich (b. 8 [21] February 1901, St. Petersburg, Russia; d. 23 March 1964, Moscow, USSR)**

**Summary**

Dancer and choreographer, Vasily Vainonen created several signature choreographic works of the Soviet ballet repertoire of the 1930s, including composer Boris Afasiev’s *The Flames of Paris* (1932) and *Partisan Days* (1937). Vainonen made his debut as a choreographer at the cusp of a shift from the experimental works he danced in the 1920s to the ‘drambalet’ (dramatized ballet) of the 1930s. His best-known works were pivotal in this transition, foreshadowing the emphasis on psychological realism and folk-dance material to highlight the participation of politicized masses. Vainonen’s most celebrated works featured bravura dances, especially for men, and folklore adaptations, which highlighted the corps de ballet as a dancing collective.

**Training and Early Career**

Vainonen graduated from the Petrograd Dance Academy (now the Vaganova Academy of Russian Ballet) in 1919 and remained with the former Maryinsky Ballet (later, the Kirov Ballet) until 1938, working increasingly as a choreographer in the 1930s. As a dancer, Vainonen distinguished himself in character roles, including the Moor in Leonid Leontiev’s version of *Petrushka* (1920), the cat in Marius Petipa’s *The Sleeping Beauty* (1890) and folk-dance divertissements in a number of nineteenth-century ballets.

**Contributions to the Field and to Modernism**

Vainonen created his first major choreographic work, *The Golden Age* (1930), to music of Dmitry Shostakovich, together with Leonid Jakobson and B. P. Chesnakovsky. The ballet was meant to answer a directive from the State Theatres for works on contemporary themes. It portrayed a Soviet soccer team’s encounter with Western youth, and featured a number of popular ‘bourgeois’ dances (foxtrots, can-cans, tangos), along with scenes of sporting events. Although the ballet’s eclecticism was roundly criticised, the inclusion of a variety of dance forms, mostly new to the ballet stage, would figure prominently in Vainonen’s next ballet, *The Flames of Paris* (1932). In that work, a vastly more successful attempt to stage a ballet on the theme of revolution (although French, not Russian), the choreographer mined regional dances of eighteenth-century France to create a dynamic canvas of revolutionary mass movement. *Partisan Days* (1937) largely repeated Vainonen’s now successful formula: the ballet, set in the time of Russia’s post-Revolutionary Civil War, roused the masses in the theatre with heroic (and allegedly, ethnographically authentic) Russian and Caucasian folk dances.

The effectiveness of the Georgian dances owed no small debt to the star power of Vakhtang Chabukiani, the Kirov’s fiery male star of the 1930s. The roles Vainonen created for him in both *Flames of Paris* and *Partisan Days* did much to launch the Georgian virtuoso dancer’s career. More importantly, these ballets’ emphasis on dramatic realism and their inclusion of non-classical movement showed the way to the *drambalet* formula of the later 1930s and 1940s. Chabukiani’s most successful choreographic works (*Heart of the Hills* [1938], *Laurencia* [1939] and *Othello* [1957]) demonstrate the importance of Vainonen’s choreographic legacy for the development of Soviet ballet in subsequent decades.

In addition to the multi-act works he created, Vainonen also choreographed dances for operas and occasional pieces. His *Moszkovskii Waltz* (1940) reveals the priorities of Soviet ballet of Vainonen’s time: the epic space of the soundstage in the 1940 film magnifies the effect of the hair-raising throws and catches, all performed in costumes more redolent of a casual stroll than ballet at its most virtuosic.

Vainonen became balletmaster of Moscow’s Bolshoi Theatre from 1946-50, headed the Novosibirsk Ballet from 1951-3 and returned to Moscow to lead the Bolshoi Ballet once more from 1954-8. In 1939, Vainonen was named an Honoured Artist of the Soviet Union and received the Badge of Honor (*znak pochyota*). He was awarded Stalin Prizes in 1947 and 1949.

**Legacy**

Although considered an influential choreographer in his lifetime, the greater share of Vainonen’s choreography has not survived in original versions. Two facts of Soviet ballet production in the 1930s have contributed to these erasures. First, Vainonen began his career at a time when the ‘brigade method’ was a preferred compositional method: ballets were created by teams of choreographers, often rendering the contributions of an individual choreographer unrecognisable, and the distinctive choreographic ‘stamp’ of an individual’s style was undesirable. Second, in an era when the Soviet ballet produced relatively few works which could be considered both artistic and ideological successes, the works which survived their first seasons were often reproduced in theatres around the Soviet Union, further obscuring the authorship of an individual, original choreographer. Even though *Flames of Paris* enjoyed nine productions in the Russian Republic during the Soviet era, Vainonen’s best-known surviving work remains his restaging of the Petipa/Tchaikovsky *Nutcracker.* The canonical Soviet-era version of the ballet, Vainonen’s version remains in the repertoire of the Kirov/Maryinsky Ballet and continues to be revived across Russia.

Vainonen’s most important work occurred at an important transitional point in the history of Soviet ballet. His career commenced at a time when the demand for ballets on contemporary and revolutionary themes was intense. His early works proved more successful than the dances of other contemporary choreographers in this regard, but his works’ ideological content dated them quickly. By the 1950s, Soviet choreographers, including Vainonen’s protégés, moved away from the dramatic realism and folklore Vainonen had pioneered in favour of ballets whose choreography aligned movement more closely to music. Nonetheless, a number of signature works of the Soviet repertoire owe debts to Vainonen, including those of Chabukiani, mentioned above, and the emphasis on mass scenes and protracted psychological dramas of the ballets of Yuri Grigorovich, especially *Spartacus* (1968).

**Selected List of Works**

*The Golden Age* (with B. P. Chesnakovsky and Leonid Jakobson) (1930)

*The Flames of Paris* (1932)

*The Nutcracker* (1934)

*Partisan Days* (1937)

*Militsa* (1947)

*Mirandolina* (1949)

*The Shore of Happiness* (1952)

**Revivals**

*Raymonda* (1938)

*Harlequinade* (1945)

*The Sleeping Beauty* (1952)

*Gayané* (1957)

**References and Further Reading**

Armashevskaia, K. (1971) *Baletmeister Vainonen* (*The Balletmaster Vainonen*), Moscow: Iskusstvo. (A standard Soviet-era biography of the choreographer with useful information on his original works and revivals of his and other choreographers’ works)

Krasovskaia, V. (ed.) (1976) *Sovetskii baletnyi teatr, 1917-67* (*The Soviet Ballet Theatre, 1917-67*), Moscow: Iskusstvo. (A standard source on the history of Soviet ballet which contextualizes Vainonen’s contributions to that development)

Kulakov, V. A. (1998) ‘Vainonen, Vasily’, *International Encyclopedia of Dance*, New York: Oxford University Press. (A reliable, post-Soviet appraisal of Vainonen’s career)

Roslavleva, N. (1966) *Era of the Russian Ballet*, London: Gollancz. (Roslavleva’s history relies heavily on Krasovskaia’s, making much of that information available in English.)

Swift, M. G. (1968) *The Art of the Dance in the U.S.S.R.*, Notre Dame, IND: Notre Dame University Press. (A reliable source on Soviet ballet in the early Soviet period that provides useful information on Vainonen’s early works)

**Moving Image Material**

*The Glory of the Bolshoi* (2005) Warner Music Vision/NVC Arts Production, West Long Branch, NJ: Kultur. (Includes the classic 1940 film of *Mozskovskii Waltz* and the Sugar Plum Fairy solo from Vainonen’s *Nutcracker*)

*The Nutcracker* (1982/1977) MGM/UA Entertainment Co. MGM/UA Home Video. (The Baryshnikov version of the ballet featuring Vainonen’s ‘Snow’ scene)

*Stars of Russian Ballet* (2003) Corinth Films/Lenfilm Studios/Sovexportfilm, Pleasantville, NY: Video Artists International. (Includes footage from *The Flames of Paris*)

Youtube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7AC_PN4HSSs> (Male variation from *Flames of Paris.*)

Youtube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H5-go4lsZtw>(Female variation from *Flames of Paris.*)

Youtube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Y3fnAFcW5Ws> (Pas de deux from *Flames of Paris.*)

Youtube: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YeIV78-HOFs> (Pas de deux from *The Nutcracker.*)

**Photographs**

Routledge might consider trying to secure copyright for frames from *Flames of Paris* and/or *Moskovskii Waltz*.

Tim Scholl