

The Sleeping Beauty

updated Dec 24

I am often asked “*What is the best ballet you can recommend?*” The answer will of course depend on whether the recommendation is for young children viewing their first ballet (*Peter and the Wolf*), older children (*The Nutcracker* or *Alice in Wonderland*) or for adults (*Coppélia* for fun or perhaps *Dracula* for a more contemporary neo-classical ballet experience). But for those wishing to view the finest achievement of classical ballet there is only one candidate – *The Sleeping Beauty*. Rudolf Nureyev often called it the “*ballet of ballets*”. So why is this ballet considered to be a masterpiece? Is it the drama and conflict inherent in the story and the strength of the characterization; is it the moral of the fairy tale that symbolically enshrines human experience and behavior; is it the length of the ballet; is it the sheer beauty of the spectacle and costumes; is it the choreography; or is it the music. Let us examine each of these possibilities in turn.

Drama: *The Sleeping Beauty* offers very little compared to the drama, conflict and characterization in *Swan Lake* that give the principal dancers scope for dramatic expression, acting and personal interpretation. As The Guardian newspaper reviewer put it “*there really is no story to speak of (princess is born, has a birthday party, falls asleep for 100 years, wakes up when kissed by prince and has another party)*”.

What does Prince Désiré¹ have to do to win the hand of the princess? As the briar thicket offers no resistance, all he is called on to do is to kiss her. The job requirements merely specified he be handsome and be a prince. If the awakening kiss is the climax of the ballet what happens next? In Charles Perrault’s tale “*they talked four hours together, and yet they said not half what they had to say*”. Well, that is not going to make a very interesting spectacle for an audience so in the ballet we jump straight to the marriage celebration – a series of *divertissements* without any story arc or drama.

For the ballerina as well, there is not much call for acting, drama or characterization – Princess Aurora is a passive figure subject to the actions of others. Instead, in the words of one critic: “*the ballerina, through her sheer beauty and force of dancing skills, must hold the audience across three acts calling for a charming young princess in the first act, a radiant vision in the second and a complete classical ballerina in full command of her skills in the third.*” So yes, the ballerina must portray three different personalities, which takes considerable skill, but she is not required to act, just dance. That said, Petipa’s full use of the Classical Era *pointe* work (in contrast to the preceding airiness of the Romantic Era) in for example the famous *Rose Adagio*² where Aurora must balance *en pointe* as she is passed from prince to prince is a demanding and scary test for any ballerina. She is even expected to smile through it all.

¹ When The Royal Ballet (at that time called Sadler's Wells Ballet) first performed the full ballet in 1939, calling it *Sleeping Princess*, the prince was named Prince Charming – the name was changed to Prince Florimund when the ballet was revived as *The Sleeping Beauty* in 1946. Robert Helpmann danced the role partnered by Margot Fonteyn.

² The use of props such as flowers, fans and scarves to adorn his choreography was part of Petipa’s oeuvre.

Moral: If it is not the drama of the tale that makes *The Sleeping Beauty* a classic ballet, is it the moral of the story? To answer this question, we first need to clarify what the morals are in the tale of Sleeping Beauty. Is it that party guest invitation lists should always be kept up to date; or is it that knitting is an activity best confined to the privacy of one's home and not conducted in public? We all know that knitting needles are banned from carriage on aeroplanes for a reason. If it is an allegorical tale, then the allegory is so obscure as to escape modern understanding.

Tchaikovsky interpreted the story as a struggle between good and evil, between the forces of light and darkness, represented by the benevolent Lilac Fairy and the wicked fairy Carabosse. Perrault, on whose story the ballet is based, suggested the moral was that a girl should wait for true love and that love "*grows better by delay*" but concluded that while it is wiser to wait "*Maids will be a sighing still ... Young blood must when young blood will.*" However, Perrault's tale³ is not the Sleeping Beauty with which we are familiar. It is a far darker tale, involving the rape of a sleeping girl by a king and a queen mother who is a cannibalistic ogress. Even in the sanitized ballet it is possible to see the various divertissements of Act III as examples of sinister desires or of male predators and female victims such as the White Cat and Puss-in-Boots or Little Red Riding Hood and the Wolf.

Choreographer Javier Torres when creating a new version of *The Sleeping Beauty* for the Finnish National Ballet in 2008 focused his retelling of the tale on "*the conflict between love and fear as opposed to good versus evil*" as he believed that by focusing on two distinct human emotions rather than moral values would give the ballet much more universal appeal.

Russian composer and critic Boris Asafiev believed that the three adagios (the Rose Adagio, the Vision Scene appearance, and the *Grand pas de Deux*) "*tell the story of a whole life – the growth and development of a playful and carefree child into a young woman who learns, through tribulations to know great love*". Matthew Bourne in his 2012 gothic romance reinterpretation agrees, seeing the prick of the finger and letting of blood symbolic of a young girl's journey into womanhood. He may well be right that this is a "*rites of passage*" story but regardless it is clear that whatever you decide the moral of the fairy tale to be it is not the moral that makes this ballet a masterpiece.

Length: Perhaps it is simply the length of the ballet. Comprising three acts, a prologue and an apotheosis, Tchaikovsky's complete score of 30 individual numbers runs for nearly three hours making it one of the longer surviving classical ballets. But Petipa cut this back by removing some numbers or reducing their length, so the final ballet was probably no more than 2.5 hours long at most (not including intervals). Most current productions also do not run for much longer than two hours, not including intervals. Depending on what is cut and whether the performance has one or two intervals the total running time is typically between 2.5 and 3 hours⁴.

³ Perrault's tale is a retelling of the Italian fairy tale *Sole, Luna e Talia* published in 1634 by Giambattista Basile in his collection *Il Pentamerone*, which in turn was derived from a 14th century Arthurian romance.

⁴ For comparison Julius Reisinger's *Swan Lake* at its world premiere in 1877 clocked in at 140 minutes.

Petipa's first grand spectacle ballet in Russia, *The Pharoah's Daughter (La Fille du Pharaon)*, and the last in which he danced a role, premiered in St. Petersburg in 1862. Comprising three acts and nine scenes, with prologue and epilogue it lasted nearly four hours. It was too much for Arthur Saint-Léon who writing to Charles Nutter referred to it as "*this interminable ballet (it began yesterday at 7.15 and we finished at 11.38)!!*"⁵. Petipa's *The Vestal* of February 1888 comprising three acts and four scenes seemed to one viewer to be even longer but is unlikely to have been so in reality. Thus, it is evident that while *The Sleeping Beauty* is considered a longish ballet today its length is not in any way out of the ordinary.

Costumes: This is one area where *The Sleeping Beauty* clearly stands out. It is a Wardrobe Department's dream ballet (or nightmare depending on circumstances). Set in two royal courts and in two timeframes separated by 100 years, the variety and opulence of the costumes required is unique. Add to that dream sequences, a hunt scene and fairy tale creatures and there can be no dispute that the variety of stunning costumes displayed are a highlight of this ballet. Ballet critic Konstantin Skalkovsky even went as far as stating that the magnificence was so excessive that the ballet should be retitled "*The Sleeping Beauty; or the Triumph of the Art of Sewing*".

But no matter how opulent the costumes, how extravagant the sets, how large the cast, these things alone do not a ballet make. Nadine Meisner in her biography of Marius Petipa quotes critic 'N' (Dmitrii Koroviakov): "*If in fact ballet is only a spectacle, a multicoloured kaldeiscope of costumes and décor, then no splendour of staging will compensate for its emptiness, lack of substance, and that boredom which towards the end inevitably takes hold of every 'grown-up', not to mention a spectator with sophisticated tastes.*"

Music & Choreography: Thus, in answer to the question as to why *The Sleeping Beauty* is considered the epitome of ballet, we are only left with the music and choreography, which must be considered together. Yes, it is Tchaikovsky's music that lifts *The Sleeping Beauty* above the ordinary by expressing the themes and defining the characters. The ballet scored for a large orchestra is arguably Tchaikovsky's finest musical attainment, but only because Petipa constrained him with his precise choreographic blueprint. The composer and choreographer worked closely together such that the music and choreography are inextricably linked. Petipa told Tchaikovsky exactly how many measures he wanted for each episode and specified the tempo, the style, even the scoring.

Petipa had planned the choreography in detail at home devising poses and groupings by moving little *papier mâché* figures about on a tabletop and then provided Tchaikovsky with an outline of the action and basic instructions on the music he wanted. The two met frequently at Petipa's home and Petipa was not above making changes to Tchaikovsky's

⁵ In 2000, Pierre Lacotte recreated *The Pharoah's Daughter* in a more friendly 100 minutes version keeping "*not the letter but the spirit of the age*".

score. Several numbers in the second and third acts were cut⁶ or shortened⁷ after Petipa realized the ballet was too long. Petipa also rejected Tchaikovsky's music for Aurora's variation in the *Vision Pas d'action* because it did not showcase the talents and abilities of Italian dancer Carlotta Brianza. Brianza was not keen on the music either preferring the music that Tchaikovsky had composed for the Gold Fairy's variation in the third act. Petipa agreed, so Tchaikovsky's original variation was cut, and the *Variation of the Gold Fairy* was transferred to the second act as the *Variation of Aurora*.

Tchaikovsky not only accepted such severe restrictions he seemed to thrive on them. Because he saw the story as one of battle between good and evil, he used major keys to indicate goodness and minor keys to indicate evil and sadness. He also used inventive combinations of instruments and distinguished characters through melodies. For instance, the harp, associated with magic and used in Acts I and II, is not used in back-to-reality Act III, replaced by the piano, a family instrument found in most households. In keeping with the ballet's French court setting, the apotheosis is based on a popular French song, *Marche Henri IV*, which was used as the national anthem of the Kingdom of France during the 17th and 18th centuries⁸.

In May 1888, the Director of the Imperial Theatre Ivan Vsevolozhsky had written to Tchaikovsky that he was "*planning to write a libretto on 'La belle au bois dormant' after Perrault's fairy tale*⁹. *I would like a mise en scene in the style of Louis XIV, which would be a musical fantasia written in the spirit of Lully, Bach, Rameau, etc. If this idea appeals to you, then why not undertake to write the music? In the last act there would have to be quadrilles for all Perrault's fairytale characters.*"¹⁰ It was not until August and while in Kiev that Tchaikovsky finally got to read the libretto and immediately wrote back to say: "*I very much wanted to tell you forthwith that I am delighted and enchanted beyond all description. It suits me perfectly and I ask nothing more than to make the music for it.*" Occupied with completion of other works, Tchaikovsky did not start work on the ballet immediately as he thought it necessary first "*to enter into discussions with the balletmaster*".

The initial meeting between Vsevolozhsky, Petipa and Tchaikovsky took place in November 1888, although Tchaikovsky's notes indicate that he had already started developing sketches for the fairies' variations during October. By June 1889 he had finished the composition of the ballet and by August 1889 the instrumentation upon which he "*lavished particular care*"

⁶ Music numbers cut included the *Danse des baronesses*, the *Danse des comtesses*, the *Danse des marquises*, *Variation of Aurora*, the *Entr'acte symphonique for solo violin* and *Variation of the Sapphire Fairy*. Some modern versions have restored these dances.

⁷ In the third act, the lengths of the *Bluebird Pas de deux*, the *Wedding Pas de deux* and the *Coda generale* were shortened as was the *Apotheosis*. Once again, the Bluebird variations have been restored in some modern versions such as in Rudolf Nureyev's 1989 revival for Paris Opera Ballet.

⁸ The period in which the ballet takes place.

⁹ Vsevolozhsky also used the Brothers Grimm 1812 version under the title *Little Briar Rose* where the King and Queen survive the 100-year sleep and live to see their daughter's wedding to the prince. In addition, the Brothers Grimm updated the story to include the kiss that awakens the princess.

¹⁰ Some of the characters incorporated from other Perrault stories included Puss-in-Boots, Little Red Riding Hood and Cinderella while characters incorporated from other French fairytales included Beauty and the Beast, the White Cat and Princess Florine and the Bluebird.

and “*devised several completely new orchestral combinations*”. In a letter to Nadezhda von Meck in August 1889 he wrote: “*the music from this ballet will be amongst my best works. The subject is so poetical, it is so suited for music, that in composing it I was utterly absorbed, and wrote with a fervour and passion which always result in work of merit*”.

The ballet premiered at the Imperial Mariinsky Theatre, St. Petersburg in January 1890 with Carlotta Brianza as Princess Aurora, Pavel Gerdt as Prince Désiré, Marie Petipa as The Lilac Fairy/Cinderella, Enrico Cecchetti as Carabosse/The Bluebird and Varvara Nikitina as Princess Florine. The ballet was an enormous success with some numbers especially well received. Petipa was called out to take a bow after the performance of the Act I *Waltz* and the dance of *Puss-in-Boots and the White Cat* was encored. The few criticisms voiced related to the French setting, the too luxurious costumes¹¹, the juvenile plot and the symphonic score which was not thought to be proper ballet music. Tchaikovsky was left very disappointed when Tsar Alexander III (who saw the ballet for the first time in a general rehearsal) summoned him to the Imperial box and only remarked that the new ballet was “*very nice*”.

The ballet was notated in the Stepanov notation method in ca. 1903¹² but by then a few changes had been made from the 1890 performance. For example, Pavel Gerdt was 45 years old when he danced the role of Prince Désiré in 1890 and performed only a short simple variation for the *pas de deux*. When Nikolai Legat succeeded Gerdt in the role of Prince Désiré in 1894 he rechoreographed the variation to be more technically demanding and to showcase male virtuosity. It is Legat’s variation that has survived. Even as early as 1891, the third act *Sarabande* (which is shown as a dance for groups and couples representing the Roman, Persian, Indian, American and Turkish nationalities in the 1890 libretto) had been cut. Indeed, by 1904, Petipa was complaining about distortions to his ballet recording in his diary that *The Sleeping Beauty* had become “*awful*” and “*a downright decadence of our art*”. Changes for the ballet’s 1914 revival at Mariinsky included pushing the last act from the early part of Louis XIV’s reign (1643-1715) into the latter half of the 18th Century.

But compared to most other classical ballets, because the ballet has been passed down by generations of dancers, it has come to us virtually intact. Yes – over the years there have been constant alterations to the original score to shorten the ballet for modern audiences. But these changes mainly involve dropping numbers such as character dances not necessary for the story, removing repeats or music that is partly there because the theatre, without the benefit of modern technology, needed time to change the scenes, or swapping musical pieces around and assigning them to different characters, but Tchaikovsky’s score remains at the heart of the ballet. It is well recognized that the quality of the music is the main reason *The Sleeping Beauty* became the most performed ballet in the early Soviet repertory.

¹¹ Perhaps a fair criticism as the ballet consumed a quarter of the annual production budget of the theatre.

¹² *The Sleeping Beauty* ballet celebrated its 100th performance in April 1903. Petipa (then aged 85) did not attend as according to his diary entry “*that nasty swine*” prima ballerina Matilda Kshesinskaya, who he thoroughly despised, was dancing.

Outside Russia, *The Sleeping Beauty* was first staged at the Teatro alla Scala in Milan in 1896 with Carlotta Brianza reprising her role as Aurora. The *Peterburgskaia gazeta* reported that La Scala's ballet master Giorgio Saracco had first visited St. Petersburg to meet and receive directions from Petipa. It was not until January 1899 that *The Sleeping Beauty* was staged at the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow by ballet master Alexander Gorksy.

Key References:

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Sleeping Beauty at WAB

In September 2010 to celebrate the 40th anniversary of the company, WAB, under then Artistic Director Ivan Cavallari, performed the Australian premiere of Marcia Haydée's production of *The Sleeping Beauty* at Perth's Crown Theatre, the only stage large enough in Perth to accommodate the magnificent set which had been provided by Ballet de Santiago¹³. The production required a cast of 64 dancers, including local children and students from WAAPA and other ballet schools, led by Yu Takayama and Sergey Pevnev with Jennifer Provins as the Lilac Fairy and Alain Honorez as Carabosse (stepping in for an injured Ben Marrett).

Haydée's production of this classic ballet had premiered for Stuttgart Ballet in 1987 and was much acclaimed. Cavallari, who had danced the roles of Prince Désiré and Carabosse whilst at Stuttgart Ballet, later commented about this time "*Getting a ticket after the opening night became hard work: ballet fans were camped outside of the theatre each night hoping to secure seats as soon as the box office opened.*"

Although closely based on Petipa's original choreography, Haydée's focus was on the male dancers. She had cast Richard Cragun, her partner at Stuttgart, to take the role of Carabosse¹⁴ and made it a full-on dance role. The focus was as much on Carabosse as Aurora. Carabosse hovers malevolently throughout the ballet and even after being defeated by the Lilac Fairy, unbeknown to the Royal Court, remains omnipresent watching over Aurora's wedding thus ensuring the battle that rages between good and evil lives on forever. One odd feature of Haydée's production was the interposing of Ali Baba into the Act III fairy tale divertissements.

¹³ Haydée had assumed the position of Artistic Director of Ballet de Santiago in 2004.

¹⁴ Although Carabosse is usually played by women, the role was originated by Enrico Cecchetti.

Following Ivan Cavallari's departure from WAB, the new Artistic Director Aurélien Scannella appointed in January 2013 acquired a new version of *The Sleeping Beauty* that had been created by Javier Torres for the Finnish National Ballet in 2008. Wanting to make this classical ballet more accessible to a modern audience Torres had shortened sections that *"were not particularly exciting or failed to contribute much to the plot"*, allowing him *"to better shape the material around the core sections"*. The number of fairies invited to attend the christening was reduced from six to three but the remaining fairies *"were given greater emphasis to lend them depth"*. Torres also deleted the Cinderella and Prince Fortuné fairy tale character dance from Act III but strangely did add the character of Babette, Aurora's high-spirited cousin, presumably for comic relief - as she has no solo variations she does not add to the ballet's length.

Act II traditionally begins with the Hunt Scene, the costumes reflecting the passing of 100 years. Versions vary but typically this is more a picnic in the Royal Gardens than a hunt, the participants playing a game of Blind Man's Buff. Prince Désiré remains aloof from proceedings and when a quarry is sighted and the party leaves for the actual hunt, he remains behind, to be met by the Lilac Fairy who gives him a vision of Princess Aurora. However, Torres treats the hunt scene as just that - there is no picnic, no games. All the men and woman that attend the hunt are equipped with crossbows, actively hunting a Golden Deer, only to be continually thwarted in their chase by a large herd of deer with over-sized heads. The high energy of Torres' hunt is a more interesting and exciting start to Act II, thus a good contrast to the slower paced dreamy vision scene to come.

As mentioned earlier, *"The main feature of (Torres') retelling is the focus on the conflict between love and fear as opposed to good versus evil."* To achieve this the role of Carabosse, traditionally more a mimed role, was enhanced and was cast as a dual role for both a male and female dancer giving a supernatural impression and with the accompaniment of bats sporting huge black wings a truly menacing performance. In Haydée's production Carabosse disguised as an elderly woman presents Princess Aurora at her 16th birthday party with a bouquet of red roses which contains a hidden knitting needle. In Torres' production Princess Aurora is presented with a single red rose that has been poisoned by Carabosse.

The sets and costumes for Torre's production arrived in Perth by boat in 2019 and required substantial refurbishment and repairs to get the production ready for the 2020 season. Unfortunately, Covid intervened, and the Australian premiere of the ballet in Perth was postponed until November 2021. In WAB's version the number of supernumeraries such as pages, heralds, maids and guards etc. were also reduced to make the ballet more suited to the small stage of Perth's His Majesty's Theatre. Never-the-less, Torres had choreographed for a company of 90 dancers, so WAB, with only 40 dancers in its company, kept backstage very busy with rapid costume changes. On opening night, the cast included Chihiro Nomura as Princess Aurora, Oscar Valdes as Prince Désiré, Kiki Sato and Juan Carlos Osma in the dual role of Carabosse and Alexa Tuzil as the Lilac Fairy. The ballet was reprised in November 2024 for a three-week season comprising 21 performances at His Majesty's Theatre. Following the final sell-out performance Alexa Tuzil, Juan Carlos Osma and Julio Blanes were promoted to the rank of Principal Artist.