# Serenade

updated Jun 26

Marius Petipa, regarded as the "*father of classical ballet*", pioneered the use of the *corps de ballet* to deliver elaborate choreographed spectacles and invented the climatic *grand pas de deux* which allowed the principal dancers to showcase their technique. Choreographing in Russia in the latter half of the 19th century Petipa's ballets were traditional romantic or fairytale classical story ballets. His 20th century heir apparent in America, George Balanchine, created over 200 ballets and if one counts his choreography for Broadway (17 shows), vaudeville, opera, film, television and even the circus[1] he created a total of 425 works. In contrast to Petipa's story ballets, Balanchine choreographed neoclassical ballets that were plotless, focused solely on movement and the relationship of movement to music and therefore typically performed in simple practice clothes against a plain backdrop.

Balanchine (born Georgi Melitonovich Balanchivadze in St. Petersburg in 1904) was the son of a composer. He enrolled in the Imperial Theatre Ballet School at age nine and later studied piano for three years in addition to his dance studies. It was his 1915 debut on stage playing a cupid in Marius Petipa's *The Sleeping Beauty* that he later credited as inspiring him to pursue a career in ballet. As a student he created his first choreography in 1920 (*La Nuit*) for a student concert and by 1922 he was choreographing for the school's graduation performances.

In 1923 shortly after graduating he organized a small company, the Young Ballet troupe, in order to showcase his experimental choreography, but his choreography was controversial and drew disapproval from Russian authorities, so the following year whilst in Germany touring Europe as part of the Principal Dancers of the Soviet State Ballet he and three others defected to the West. He successfully auditioned as a dancer for Serge Diaghilev's Ballet Russes in Paris in 1924 and it was Diaghilev who asked him to change his name from Balanchivadze to Balanchine as he thought it would be easier for Europeans to pronounce. Following a knee injury, he served as Diaghilev's choreographer and ballet master for the next five years. During his time with Diaghilev, Balanchine choreographed ten ballets and dozens of operas but only two ballets have survived – *Apollo* (known as *Apollon Musagète* until 1957) and *The Prodigal Son*[2].

After Diaghilev died in 1929 and Diaghilev's Ballet Russes company was disbanded, Balanchine spent the next three years choreographing for companies in Paris, London, Copenhagen and Monte Carlo, and it was here he was hired as Ballet Master for a new company. For his first season in 1932 he recruited three young girls[3] who English dance critic Arnold Haskell famously labelled as the "baby ballerinas". Unfortunately, he clashed with the company managers who preferred the old ballet standards and was fired. He then returned

---

[1] In 1942 he choregraphed a dance for Ringling Brothers and Barnum & Bailey Circus to music by Igor Stravinsky. The dance (a polka) included 50 elephants and 50 human dancers, the elephants being fitted with pink ballet tutus

[2] Premiering in May 1929, *The Prodigal Son* was Balanchine's last ballet for the Ballet Russes which disbanded three months later. Balanchine restaged it for New York City Ballet in 1950

[3] The girls, recruited by Balanchine in 1931, were Irina Baranova (aged 12), Tamara Toumanova (aged 12) and Tatiana Riabouchinska (aged 14) at time of recruitment

to Paris where he opened his own company – Les Ballets 1933. He created six new ballets for this company, but reviews were indifferent, so his company moved to London where they gave about 20 performances.

It was in London at a cocktail party that Balanchine met Lincoln Kirstein who invited him to the United States to establish an American ballet company. Balanchine agreed to Kirstein's proposal but realized he first needed a ballet school as almost no one in the USA danced classical ballet. Kirstein later wrote that in America "*young girls were not sylphides; they were basketball champions and queens of the tennis court, whose proper domain was athletics. They were long-legged, long-necked, slim-hipped and capable of endless acrobatic virtuosity. The drum majorette, the cheerleader of the high-school football team of the thirties filled his eye*". Consequently, Balanchine did not want to impose classical purity on them but replaced this with "*a raciness, an alert celerity which claimed as its own the gaiety of sport and the skill of the champion athlete*".

Balanchine arrived in America in October 1933, opened his new School of American Ballet in a 4th floor studio in New York in January 1934 and in March began work on his first American ballet – *Serenade*, a ballet designed to teach the senior class the difference between classwork and the stage technique required for actual performance. Because of their technical limitations he built complex patterns out of simple movements, focused on the ensemble rather than on individuals. This gives the ballet an idiosyncratic character and distinctly American style.

The ballet was to premiere on Saturday 9 June 1934 at the estate of Felix M. Warburg, White Plains, New York, danced to Pyotr Tchaikovsky's Serenade in C for String Orchestra, Op. 48, using the first three of Tchaikovsky's four movements[4] - the Sonatina, Waltz and Elegy. Music for the evening was provided by two pianists and the costumes, simple white tunics for the women designed by William B. Okie Jr; red pants and brownish polo shirts for the men. The reason for this location was because Kirstein had convinced his Harvard friend and financial supporter Eddie Warburg to ask his wealthy parents to host an evening of ballet at their estate as his 26th birthday present.

The premiere's advance preparations were not smooth as this was an amateur company of students aided by a few helpers. The women's dark blue practice costumes arrived at the rehearsal studio on April 24. Kirstein reports "*They didn't fit very well because Bal. as usual had wanted them cut low over the breasts and they were cut too low and consequently they had to be worn backwards*". Never-the-less, a rehearsal of *Mozartiana* and *Serenade* was carried out before about 50 people including The New York Times dance critic John Martin who according to Kirstein was "*ungracious & said only the work was commendable & he disliked Tchaikovsky's music*".[5]

---

[4] The same music Mikhail Fokine used in 1916 for *Eros*, a ballet that Balanchine must have seen in its 1922 Petrograd revival

[5] Critics were often not kind. As late as 1944 Edwin Denby writing for the New York Herald Tribune said, "*There is no story, though there seems to be a girl who meets a boy; he comes on with another girl and for a while all three are together; then, at the end, the first girl is left alone and given a sort of tragic little apotheosis*".

On the 5th and 6th of June, just days before the premiere, the hunt for costumes for the boys took place Kirstein recording, "*Hours spent more or less fruitlessly with Bal. at Bloomingdales …. while he tried to make up his mind abt. costumes for the Boys in Serenade. He has a spoiled boy's vanity which makes him at once refuse any given suggestion*". It was only the day before the performance that suitable shirts for the men were found "*at last at Abercrombies*". That same day at 3pm the troupe set out for the Warburg estate.

"*The Warburg mansion, when we arrived*", Kirstein wrote, "*had the air of a castle deserted before the onslaught of invaders. No one was around …. Frances Mann, one of the important 2nd line dancers, hurt her foot, Caccialanza tripped and fell. Another girl wept and was suspected to have female ills … The students looked peaked and were cold and hungry and I feared a revolution ….".*

The next day the pianos were covered and uncovered with tarps repeatedly and the stage dismantled and reassembled three times under the threat of a downpour. "*Balanchine wholly indifferent went off in his car into White Plains to get some decent food. Fair weather came & Dimitriew*[6] *searched in vain for him to rehearse*". By evening, tempers were flaring, recalcitrant dancers and difficult costumes adding to the tension.

Danced on an open-air stage on the lawn, the evening's program, in front of 250 guests, began with the ballet *Mozartiana*[7]*, "which looked lovely: went off well. Ridiculously stupid audience. Little enthusiasm….*" and was to be followed by *Serenade* and then *Dreams.* However, as soon as the dancers lifted their hands to the sky in the opening tableaux of *Serenade*, as if in answer to their raised arms, heavy rain began to fall, and the audience ran for cover. The performance was promptly cancelled and rescheduled for the following night (Sunday June 10th), when it went ahead to an even bigger audience that included Nelson Rockefeller and Alfred Barr, the young director of the newly founded Museum of Modern Art (MOMA). As *Mozartiana* had been performed the night before, the program order was reversed in case of further rain interruptions, the order now being *Dreams*: *Serenade*: *Mozartiana*. Once again, a light rain started just as the dancers were going up for *Serenade* but "*it was pushed through – with little enough confusion - although the piano keys were so wet that*" the pianists "*could hardly play …. Serenade looked very lovely …*".

*Serenade* was initially scheduled to premiere as a stage work in December 1934 at the Avery Memorial Theatre, Hartford, Connecticut. Dress rehearsals took place, but as Kirstein records they *"decided not to give 'Serenade' at all : Stage wasn't big enough : the costumes were impossible. No use in trying to fool ourselves. It wd. ruin an otherwise gd. ballet by getting it set off on the wrong foot*".

---

[6] Vladimirov Dimitriev, Balanchine's volatile Russian manager

[7] Balanchine had choreographed *Mozartiana* to Tchaikovsky's Suite No.4 , Op. 61 for his company Ballet Russes 1933, and it had premiered in June 1933 at the Théâtre de Champs-Élysées in Paris. The version that exists today is a revised version he choreographed for New York City Ballet in 1981. *Dreams* was a revised version of his 1933 *Les Songes*, which had been set to music by French composer Darius Milhaud. Balanchine could not get permission to use Milhaud's music so instead, new music was provided by American avant-garde composer George Antheil. The costumes were by André Dérain, the original costume designer.

Thus, the official premiere of *Serenade* as a stage work took place on March 1, 1935, at the Adelphi Theatre in New York. According to Kirstein's hand-written diary "*The Adelphi Theatre was full, a brilliant audience which came in late, both at first & from the intermissions…. It was danced well enough : but the lights & the costumes were a terrible strain : No atmosphere of mystery …. Bal back stage not dressed, unshaved & unslept praised the dancers, cursed Harmati the conductor for taking Serenade so slow …".*

Critics liked the ballet overall, and the March 1935 Dancing Times review of *Serenade* was positive reporting it, "*Contains some of Balanchine's most unusual groupings, breathtaking in the sheer beauty of their arrangement. The Elegy is a little masterpiece of choreographic design".*

This production used costumes designed by Jean Lurçat, a French artist best known for his tapestries. His male and female costume designs can be viewed in the following link. Note the female dancer's hat!

https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O50971/costume-design-lurcat-jean/

However, films from the years 1935-47 (when Lurçat's designs were used in most productions) suggest that several different costume versions were tried, the initial russet colours being replaced by blues in the 1940s. The women's dresses ended at about knee-level and there is some evidence that there was a differentiation of the leading roles by costume. Fragments of a 1944 silent film of *Serenade* show the corps wearing short white or pale dresses with little cloaks; a corps dancer from the period 1946-48 recalling the costumes in her time were blue but the cloaks white. In 1947 when Balanchine staged it for Paris Opéra Ballet the corps wore short skirts and hats resembling Russian diadems with veils trailing down at the back, the designs by André Delfau. When Frederick Ashton was visiting New York with Sadler's Wells Ballet in 1950, Kirstein asked him to give advice to himself and Balanchine on New York City Ballet's impending 1950 Covent Garden season of *Serenade*. Ashton suggested they change the clothes to "*flowing robes*", advice that was adopted. Up to then, the women's costumes comprised short skirts ending at the knee or higher.

In 1952 the costumes were redesigned by Barbara Karinska[8]. Karinska's costumes have become standard comprising a tight blue bodice with matching long blue tulle skirt for the woman, deeper blue tights and tunics for the men, leading to them being nicknamed '*blueberries*'. The men's costumes, which at first were adorned with embossed gold chains, predate Karinska's redesign of the women's costumes but it is commonly thought that they were also designed by her. The longer skirts give a romantic quality and enhance points of resemblance to *Giselle*. In about 1964 the women's costumes were subtly revised, the asymmetrical waistline remaining but the hemline became straighter and two vertical panels of soft yellow/cream or beige were added at the front of the skirt. In September 2016, NYCB

[8] Karinska (born Varvara Andriivna Jmudska in Kharkiv), began designing costumes for Balanchine in 1949, collaborating with him on 75 ballets. The two had met in Paris during de Basil's Ballet Russes time. Together they developed the American (or powder puff) tutu ballet costume which became an international costume standard

commissioned new versions of the women's dresses making them stiffer and longer and replacing the panels with brighter lemon-yellow ones. The changes drew so many complaints that as Alastair Macauley wrote, "*Over the ensuing months, the excessive length is modified, the fabric softened, and the yellow tempered*".

*Serenade* was the ballet Balanchine most frequently revisited and revised as his ideas for this ballet changed. As the opportunity arose for him to work with better dancers, he added more difficult steps and solos to show off his principal dancers. Originally the soloist movements were shared by nine dancers, later consolidated into one principal female role. However, when NYCB was to make its first appearance at Covent Garden in London in 1950 Balanchine thought it more appropriate to introduce the company by introducing its principal dancers and the leading role was again divided and danced by the leading soloists. There is no hierarchy, the three soloists (Waltz Girl, Russian Girl and Dark Angel) dressed the same as the corps and often emerging from the group before retreating.

John Clifford, who joined the company in 1966, was asked by Balanchine to revise one section of his Stravinsky ballet as an exercise to see if he could "*re-think it*". When Clifford asked why Balanchine said, "*Look at me. I've been changing Serenade for over 30 years!*" adding on further query, "*I need to get it right. I will keep fixing it until I do. Someday I see Tchaikovsky and I want to be sure I did it right*".

The 1934 *Serenade* was likely not the continuous dance that we see today but the three movements conceived as three separate scenes with no continuity. In 1941 he added a fourth movement, the Russian Dance [Tema Russo], but placed it third, before the Elegy, so that the ballet still ends on a note of sadness.

When Balanchine added the Tema Russo, there were two musical cuts, and it was not until 1966 that he opened the previously cut music. In the 1970s Balanchine remarked on this, "*A few years ago I finally succeeded in expanding the ballet so that it now uses all of the score of the Tchaikovsky Serenade for Strings, something I had wanted to do for a long time*". According to Anne Polajenko in a March 2019 Facebook post, Balanchine did not choreograph the extra section on NYCB but for Geneva's Ballet du Grand Théâtre, noting that at the time he was artistic advisor to the company and spent a great deal of his time tinkering with his ballets. Arriving late and making all these additions just a few days before the opening, she recalled how frantic it was and how the dancers were appalled by it all.

The first opening is short, featuring the moment the five opening women twine into one another and then face upstage, with arms raised and crossed above their heads. The longer second opening includes a musical passage featuring the music's reference to the opening of the Sonatina and which prompted Balanchine to return the dancers to the opening formation but, as the music changes, with marked variations. The heroine is now center front, is on pointe, supported by the man.

*Serenade* does not have a story, and Balanchine consistently refused to define any narrative thread when interviewed[9], but because Tchaikovsky's four movements evoke differing emotions, audiences cannot help but add their own narrative interpretations. What *Serenade* does have, however, is a backstory for Balanchine choreographed each section for as many dancers as showed up that evening and he also wove in random studio events.

On the first night of class[10], he had 17 girls and no boys, so he placed them in diagonal lines. "*I placed them - almost looked like an orange grove in California[11]. If I had only 16 dancers, an even amount, it would have been two lines*". The result was, as one of the first cast dancers remembered, that these were "*lines where everyone could be seen*". Only nine girls attended the second class and six the third. Balanchine simply adjusted his choreography to suit[12]. When male students began attending classes, just one at first, arriving in time to be the hero in the Elegy, and then four the next night, he added them in as partnering was now possible.

At the first rehearsal, according to Kirstein's hand-written diary, "*He said his head was a blank & asked me to pray for him. He lined every one up according to their heights & commenced slowly to compose a hymn to ward off the sun[13]*". Ruthanna Boris, a 15-year-old dancer, several decades later recalled Balanchine announcing, "*we will make some steps*" and then taking forever to place the girls into the opening formation, leading them into position one by one. To the confusion and boredom of the girls, who were ignorant of European affairs, he followed the placement of them by speaking of his life in Russia, his move to Europe and the awful man in Germany "*who looks like me but he has a mustache. The people know him, they love him. When they see him all the people do like that for him. [Balanchine put his arm up in the Heil, Hitler salute]…. I am not such an awful man, and I don't have a mustache. So maybe for me you put together this. Your hand is high …. Now put together feet, side by side – now, turn face, eyes look at hand. Now maybe hand is tired, hand falls down*". He showed them all the hand, cheek, head, and arm positions as he spoke them.

Francis Mason in *Balanchine's Complete Stories of the Great Ballets* quotes Balanchine as saying, "*That was how Serenade began …. Later, when we staged Serenade, everything was revised. The girls who couldn't dance well were kept out of the more difficult parts; I*

---

[9] Balanchine always said, "*If you have a man and a woman on stage together, that's a story*" and in a filmed PBS interview, he elaborated: "*A duet is a long story, almost. So, how much story do you want?*" Dance critic and friend of Balanchine, Francis Mason writing in 1954 quotes Balanchine as saying, "*I have gone into a little detail about Serenade because many people think there is a connected story in the ballet. There is not. There are, simply, dancers in motion to a beautiful piece of music. The only story is the music's story, a serenade, a dance, if you like, in the light of the moon*"

[10] Ruthanna Boris, one of the first students, remembers the opening rehearsal as taking place in the morning. Balanchine himself refers to the "first night" of class

[11] This orange grove image is likely another after the event story as Balanchine had not yet been to California

[12] Alastair Macauley has noted that the Sonatina movement "*has an early incident in which two separate groups of nine and six girls are placed antiphonally against each other*"

[13] Kirstein's 1973 typescript diary changes the word "sun" to "sin". Macauley observes "*If correct, it is the first of several suggestions of religious imagery in Serenade*". Was Kirstein's word change in describing the meaning of this hand raise to warding off "sin" a retrospective post WWII reference to Hitler's crimes?

*elaborated on the small accidental bits I had included in class and made the whole more dramatic, more theatrical, synchronizing it to the music with additional movement, but always using the little things that might ordinarily be overlooked*".

Kathyrn Morgan, a former soloist with New York City Ballet, has deconstructed the ballet's four movements so I have linked her YouTube videos at the end of my comment on each movement.

## Sonatina:

The opening ritual of *Serenade* transforms the 17 young women from female dancers into turned-out classical dancers in nine stages, which approximately reflect the music's descending scales. Balanchine later said, "*I placed them on diagonal lines and decided that the hands should move first to give the girls practice*".

**Stage 1**: In the opening gesture the ordinary women stand feet together toes pointing forward and with the right arm raised palm outward, the left arm natural to the side. There is a long tradition of interpreting this opening gesture as a way of screening the eyes from the light of the sun or sometimes the light of the moon[14]. Balanchine, after his monologue on Hitler, had originally choreographed the opening lines of woman to be holding up one arm stiffly outstretched, which alarmed Eddie Warburg[15] as he thought this too closely resembled Heil Hitler salutes, so Balanchine asked the girls to "*soften*" the arm, by slightly bending the elbow, moving the arm a little to the right, palm outward, fingers apart. This more curvilinear position of the arms is still the opening pose today.

**Stage 2:** A bend or slight lift of the wrist, the elbow bending at the same time as the hand drops. In a 2015 *Serenade* seminar Victoria Simon described this action as "*a breath*" that brings the ballet into life.

**Stage 3:** A slow *port de bras* that ends by placing the wrist on the forehead, palm flipped away from the head and the head turned away and slightly down from this hand[16].

**Stage 4:** This stage brings the arm down to cross the chest, the hand now resting at the base of the neck.

---

[14] Reference to the moon may date from when Balanchine called the ballet, "….. *a dance, if you like, in the light of the moon*" - see footnote 9. Kirstein also wrote in his diary "*Hands are curved to shield their eyes, as if facing some intolerable lunar light*" but shielding the eyes from the sun appears to have been the original image. Toni Bentley writes that years later Balanchine told a dancer that it was "*the light of god, too bright for human eyes*". Another of Balanchine's many retrospective comments

[15] Kirstein's financial backer who had paid for Balanchine's passage to America from Europe. The son of a Jewish financier, while not knowing much about ballet, he knew something about world politics

[16] According to Bentley known to the dancers as the Aspirin dance, as in "*I have a headache and need some Bayer*"

**Stage 5:** A *bras bas* that is the foundational ballet arm position where both arms are held low and rounded in front of the thighs, forming an oval shape. It serves as the starting and ending point for most exercises

**Stage 6:** A turnout of the feet into first position.

**Stage 7:** A *tendu battement* side (with arms opening from first to second).

**Stage 8:** A closing of the legs and feet in fifth position (with arms lowering to fifth *en bas*).

**Stage 9:** A *port de bras* opening through first to second position, with the palms turning and the head lifting (a backward bend of the neck and topmost spine) so that the face, arms and hands address the sky – an image that for some suggests a religious quality.

The now classical ballet dancers do not remain standing motionless in the opening tableau for long, they are soon running and speedily flowing in and out of patterns, running around one another, constantly in motion. The difficulty for the dancers is the speed of transition – there is no time for preparation before the next turn or jump. As the formation moves upstage left, one girl exits to leave 16 dancers; according to Annabelle Lyon this was because "*When he originally did Serenade in 1934, the first movement concluded with the entire corps de ballet doing a sequence of fouettés. (Later he changed it to piqué turns). I couldn't do fouettés, so he had me run offstage just before that".* As Lyon's comment regarding *piqué turns* refers to the end of the Sonatina movement it appears Balanchine has placed this incident earlier in the ballet.

The Waltz Girl is the first soloist to appear, looping across the stage before exiting, her only appearance in this first movement. The Russian Girl (at NYCB normally a shorter girl) and the Dark Angel (normally a taller girl) perform all the solo moments, although often just entering and looping around the stage before exiting. Since the late 1950s it is the Russian Girl who center stage, suddenly turns and falls (or quickly lowers herself) to the floor, imitating a real fall in the studio that Balanchine elected to keep in the final production. "*One day, when all the girls rushed off the floor area we were using as a stage, one of the girls fell and began to cry. I told the pianist to keep on playing and kept this bit in the dance*".

Colleen Neary recalled Balanchine telling her that when the Russian Girl falls over in the Sonatina, "*It is as if she has fainted, after turning so fast, she reaches up and then faints, and then, after 1 x 8 on the floor, she slowly recovers and slowly crosses her foot over and gets up and rises on point in full strength*".

The first movement ends with a repeat of the opening tableau, the 15 corps dancers on stage moving into the opening tableau holding up one hand to the sky while the 16$^{th}$ girl slips almost unnoticed into the back row. Balanchine now incorporates another random studio event, "*the girl who was late for class*". The 17th dancer, (once again Annabelle Lyon) had arrived only in time for the second hour of rehearsal. Balanchine reviewed the ending and brought her in from the left rear stage, wandering through the lines looking for her place at the front of the tableau. This is now the role of the Waltz Girl. In 1971, Balanchine rearranged the Waltz Girl's pose so that she leaned back on the man. This stopped applause and prepared the audience for the Waltz.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ivj3-EIjJ9Y&t=0s

## Waltz:

As the corps turn, one hand extended behind them, and slowly step by step depart the stage into the wings the late arrival (Waltz Girl) remains in place but lowers her arms into first position; that is, she repeats the opening ritual as far as the *bras bas*. No formal turned-out first position recurs.

A male enters from the back of the stage walking diagonally towards her and taps her on the shoulder as if to ask, "Do you want to dance?" And of course, she does and we now see her waltzing on pointe in what is the first of only two *pas de deux* in the ballet. It is worth noting that in 1934 there was no man in the Waltz, the Waltz beginning with five women, so it was very different from the one we know today. It is believed the male dancer for the Waltz was added in 1936.

When the male exits, the corps returns to frame the stage back and sides, the Waltz Girl hopping on pointe and interacting with two of the corps before leaving and being replaced by the Russian Girl who dances with the 17$^{th}$ corps girl. It is then the Dark Angel's turn to take centre stage before the waltz couple return. On their departure the corps begin forming patterns and long diagonals, the Russian Girl joining them spinning forwards while the two lines of dancers cross behind her. The Waltz ends with only the Russian Girl and four corps dancers remaining (known as demi-Russians and according to Kathyrn Morgan, because of their almost continuous presence on stage, one of the hardest roles).

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3-9nfPNJ5zw

## Russian Dance (Tema Russo):

The five remaining women sink to the floor and turn towards each other to join hands forming a chain. Rising they perform intricate rotations. When they exit the corps returns, quickly followed by the return of the four demi-Russians to form a 4x4 pattern. The Waltz Girl and a previously unseen male rush in as the corps depart and dance their second *pas de deux*. The Dark Angel does not appear in this movement.

Finally, the corps return to repeat the opening tableau but with the Waltz Girl and her male partner positioned center front, the girl on pointe supported by the man. After a series of forward hopping movements suggestive of the wilis of *Giselle*, everyone exits leaving only the Waltz Girl who takes out her hair, something that was not in the original ballet. Undoing her hair onstage is a very tricky move as the hairdo can come out too early or not at all. The advice of seasoned dancers is to know where every hair pin is. She then falls to the floor, just as Giselle loosened her hair during her mad scene and fell to the floor.

It needs to be pointed out that the girl who falls to ground at the end of the Tema Russo movement is not "*the girl that fell and began to cry*" studio incident reported by Balanchine, as according to Kirstein this fall occurs at the end of the Sonatina. The fall at the end of the Tema Russo, while perhaps more spectacular, is an echo of this moment.

https://youtu.be/x-jcEreVhZo?t=1

## Elegy:

The ballet's gripping conclusion is a dreamlike scene in which strong emotions appear to underlie the dancers' relationships but there is such psychological ambiguity that it is open to each audience member to provide their own interpretation. Douglas Rollins writing for EBSCO Research in 2023 wrote: *"….. a man walks slowly across the stage followed by a darkly dressed woman, who covers his eyes with one hand and holds her other hand over his heart. The man's eyes open, and he beholds a woman at his feet. The three begin to dance, but they are interrupted by streams of dancers who throw themselves into the man's arms. He attempts to express his love for the woman, but when places his hand over his heart to pledge his devotion, the dark shadow behind him again covers his eyes and places her chill hand over his heart. He walks away, and the distraught woman is borne offstage by a solemn procession of dancers".* Rollins then notes that Balanchine had confessed to a friend that the final scene was "*like fate ….. Each Man going through the world with his destiny on his back. He meets a woman – he cares for her – but his destiny has other plans*".

Alastair Macauley wrote in his *Serenade* essay of October 2024, "*The Elegy seems always to have had the same overall structure: the heroine on the floor; the man who arrives with the Dark Angel; her promenade arabesque turned by her thigh: their trio; the other women who rush by and the one dancer who joins them for a quartet; the episode where four men partner eight woman: the return to the trio: the Canova/Eros arms movement: the departure of the man and Dark Angel, leaving the 'heroine' alone on the floor: the arrival of other women: the suggestion of her awakening; her rush to the anonymous 'mother' figure, the three men who help carry her away".* The *'mother'* figure that the Waltz Girl embraces is reminiscent of Giselle's mother and as the Waltz Girl is lifted and carried upstage, lifting her arms and leaning back as if ascending to heaven, the '*mother'* trails behind and mimics her.

Macauley further noted that the episode of four men partnering eight woman is a diversion from the Elegy's main dramatic theme of one man and two women and proceeds more like a formal exercise in partnering, where girls outnumber boys. The five men that appear in this movement have not appeared before in the ballet.

Balanchine revised the Elegy in about 1976, making the three women principals perform it with loosened hair. Colleen Neary (Russian Girl) recalled: "*We had a rehearsal in the main hall for the Elegy section. In rehearsal, when Karin* [von Aroldingen – Waltz Girl] *fell to the floor at the end of the Waltz when all the girls do the famous 'Serenade' jump forward and back and run off, and the Waltz girl chaînés to the floor, Karin's hair fell down from her bun, and was totally down. Balanchine stopped and said: Oh wait … that is beautiful! Maria*

[Calegari – Dark Angel] *and Colleen take your hair down also. So, we did, and it was Karin, blondish, myself, dark at the time, and Maria redhead, and he said GREAT!!! It looks like a Clairol commercial".*

I have previously noted that in initially using only the first three movements of Tchaikovsky's four-movement *Serenade*, Balanchine was using the same music Mikhail Fokine used for his 1916 *Eros* ballet. Another parallel to Fokine is that both *Eros* and *Serenade* form poses that mirror the arrangement of figures struck by Antonio Canova for his *Cupid and Psyche* sculpture. Macauley writes, "*Cupid (or Eros), with wide wings, leans down toward Psyche, whose arms stretch up to circle his head while his descend to frame and embrace her upper torso; their faces come close for a kiss*".

https://www.thoughtco.com/the-myth-of-cupid-and-psyche-117892

It is possible that the image of a winged angel behind the man comes from Tchaikovsky's tomb at Aleksandra Nevskogo Monastery Cemetery.

https://www.worldhistory.org/image/17536/grave-of-tchaikovsky-st-petersburg/

Colleen Neary, who danced both Russian and Dark Angel roles in the 1970s recalls that Balanchine said about the Elegy that the girl on the floor was the wife, the Dark Angel was the mistress, and the Russian girl, passing through was the lover. He then jokingly added "*the story of my life*"[17]. However, Alexandra Danilova, who danced the lead role in *Serenade* in the 1940s recalled Balanchine saying that the woman on the man's back (i.e. the Dark Angel) was the wife. "*She is his wife and together, he said, they pass down the road of life. I, the girl on the floor, was pitied by the man, but I was a frivolous girl who had one affair after another. Then I was left alone*". Patricia Neary, a dancer from the 1960s agrees with Danilova saying in a 2023 Royal Ballet Insight talk that Balanchine told her the Dark Angel is the man's wife and the girl who fell on the floor is his mistress.

Dr. Natalie Rouland, The Fellow for the Study of Russia and Ballet at New York University writing for the Jordan Center in 2018 also commented: "*The Waltz Girl is marked from the beginning: she arrives late, attains elated heights in the Waltz pas de deux, falls to the floor in the Elegy, and achieves an ambiguous apotheosis at the ballet's conclusion. Danilova believed this girl was modeled on her in her love triangle with Balanchine and his first wife Tamara Geva*".

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rjTVzAwvGT0

[17] Balanchine married four times, all to ballerinas on whom he choreographed, and was known to have several mistresses. His first marriage to Tamara Geva (he was 18, she was 15) took place in Russia in 1921. They divorced in 1926 and he did not marry again until 1938. Thus, at the time of choreographing the Elegy he was not married but he did have an intimate relationship with Alexandra Danilova after his divorce. Patricia Neary stressed he never said the man was himself

# Serenade at WAB

In 1958, New York City Ballet toured Australia with 46 dancers for an eight-week season, the first American classical ballet to ever visit the country. The repertoire comprised 26 works, 17 of which were by Balanchine and five by Jerome Robbins. The curtain raiser for opening night at Sydney's Empire Theatre was Balanchine's *Serenade*. According to Edward Pask in his history of ballet in Australia (The Second Act, 1940-1980) the "*opening was something of a disappointment, with its simple backgrounds, bare stages and plotless works. The hauntingly beautiful Serenade was dismissed by the critic of the Sydney Morning Herald as 'a series of rather simplified evolutions on the part of the corps de ballet'*." The problem was that until that point Australians had been brought up on the story ballets brought to Australia by three of Colonel Wassily de Basil's companies and Ballet Rambert. Plotless ballets were too new for their taste[18]. It was not until March 1970 that The Australian Ballet performed *Serenade*.

The first time *Serenade* was performed in Western Australia was in November 2011, presented by Western Australia Academy of Performing Arts (WAAPA) dance students as their graduation performance. Staged by Balanchine repetiteur Eve Lawson, Ausdance reviewer Julie Dyson wrote "*The work was beautifully performed*". Dance Australia reviewer Susan Whitford was also generally impressed but noted "*On the first night, there was an occasional ragged line, some feet that needed more articulation, and a minor lack of crispness – but the dynamic speed was there, as were the seductive shapes"*.

Three months later in February 2012, West Australian Ballet (WAB) also performed *Serenade* as part of their summer season, this time at the outdoor Quarry Amphitheatre in City Beach as part of the 2012 Perth International Arts Festival. The performance was well-received, featuring as part of a mixed program under then-Artistic Director Ivan Cavallari. The WAB cast was augmented by dancers from WAAPA and once again staged by Balanchine repetiteur Eve Lawson. The outdoor setting with the rising moon forming the backdrop captured the mood and exquisite lines of Balanchine's seminal work.

*Serenade* is Balanchine's most widely performed ballet and a dancer favourite. WAB's new Artistic Director, Leanne Stojmenov, appointed in January 2026, danced *Serenade* while at The Australian Ballet, so I am hoping that *Serenade* will again appear in WAB's seasonal programme sometime in the future.

**Key References**

Serenade: A Balanchine Story by Toni Bentley Pantheon Books 2022

https://www.alastairmacaulay.com/all-essays/y1ra81n7bcpa4hp1y15cilgi85qx5a

[18] This was not a problem unique to Australia, as *Serenade* was initially dismissed by dance critic John Martin in the USA as a "*serviceable rather than inspired piece of work*".