

MARK FRANKO

The Balanchine Enigma: Repertory, Variation, and the Plotless Ballet



Photo: Megan Fairchild and Anthony Huxley in George Balanchine's *Raymonda Variations*. Photographer: Erin Baiano. Courtesy of the New York City Ballet.

SLOWLY SURFACING from the social and emotional depths of the COVID nightmare to perceive a tenuous normalcy around me, I experience New York City Ballet performances as a welcome after-life—in which a repertory continuously redefines itself in relation to its own potentials and boundaries. Immediately after the pandemic, the bursts of individual energy of dancers drew attention to themselves, whereas now they are once again working through repertory

rather than focusing attention on their individual exhilaration.¹

The repertory itself takes center stage as a constantly varying puzzle. For example, *Divertimento no. 15* (1956), *Vienna Waltzes* (1977), and *Mozartiana* (1981)—all seen this season or last—suggest there is a festive, Central European plotless ballet in the Balanchine repertory, with evocations of the rococo. It must be said: New York City Ballet is that rarest of things, a repertory company. Although limited to the work of George Balanchine and Jerome Robbins (not in itself necessarily a problem, although the conundrum of what to add to it remains), the repertory is even on these terms sizable and contains distinct historical and artistic interest and complexity. As a viewing experience, it works over time and implies the possibility of encompassing a totality, although it is dependent upon programming from season to season for the insights it affords.

It is therefore not surprising that, in 1954, Lincoln Kirstein expressed the meaning of repertory when he theorized: “A repertory theatre is a living library of past masterpieces and present innovation, established on a permanent economic and artistic basis which consequently presents as a criterion of performance the most significant lay-rituals of human experience.”² From this it seems Kirstein values the masterpiece and innovation equally, while “permanent” economic stability is thought to sustain the interrelated staying power of both. The masterpiece slowly emerges from among the new ballets to take its place in the repertory for the long term. But Kirstein implies that further innovation is required to sustain the masterpiece, which is why he also insisted on the importance of virtuosity to repertory. “The virtuoso may have no genius but only the talent of energy directed by the supporting tradition,” he wrote, “but his uses are the basis of the repertory company.”³ Innovation lies with the continued and continuous articulation of the work to which virtuosity contributes. Innovation, therefore, lies more with technique and interpretation than it does with choreography. Anthony Huxley’s series, in *Raymonda Variations*, of *tours en l’air* with quarter turns each ending in an arabesque *plié* may have been grafted onto the solo, given that early film does not show this sequence. Is virtuosity being interpolated into choreography? Be that as it may, we can reflect on the development of the performers in the present through what they bring to the repertory while simultaneously thinking through the repertory itself as something historical that benefits from the innovations performers can bring.

Kirstein wrote these lines in the wake of the company's first taste of financial success. On March 12, 1950, in a letter to Robert Harris Chapman he noted: "I have recently had a very great success with the ballet company. We have had a month of sell-outs at the City Centre, and after 15 years of work a really formidable Broadway-type success is as gratifying as it is disconcerting."⁴ While for Kirstein, the idea of repertory combined tradition with innovation on these terms, now, almost seventy years later, the evolution of the repertory is less and less likely; it is complete, since its makers are no longer with us. And despite new choreographic commissions, the reality is that, so far, they seem unlikely to graft themselves onto this repertory. What continues to grow and evolve is the ability of dancers to articulate and hence interpret the repertory in continuously renewed senses. As it stands, the repertory allows for continuously new facets of itself to reveal themselves in performance, thus giving added value to the choreography—while also making evident that the practice of performing the choreography night after night is essential to the continuous cultivation of the dancer as the instrument of the repertory.

Given the repertory's substantial size, ballets can disappear for some time and then reemerge for new consideration by both the dancers and the public. From that repertorial storehouse, this fall New York City Ballet brought back George Balanchine's seldom seen *Raymonda Variations* (1961). Although rarely touted as foundational to the Balanchine repertory, this ballet quietly supports the claim of Balanchine's status as heir to Marius Petipa, choreographer of the original *Raymonda* in 1898.⁵ As Nancy Meisner writes in her recent biography of Petipa: "[I]n all the variations and ensembles [Petipa] composed, he increasingly promoted the route of plotless dance that would lead to Balanchine."⁶

At the premiere of *Raymonda Variations* critics did not look too closely at what the title meant, instead referring to Balanchine's offering as a concoction or a confection. *New York Times* dance critic John Martin remarked:

It is an adorable confection, concocted of marzipan, diamonds, youth and nostalgia. If it is not dedicated to the Kirov Ballet, it should be, for it brings back to us (though enriched and illuminated by Balanchine's artistry and affection) the traditional school of the Kirov company, its sweetness and its brilliance. There are steps and combinations that have probably never been seen anywhere,

except in the Kirov Theatre, since the days of Petipa himself. And there is a kind of perfume of an enchanted era hanging over it.⁷

In his review, Martin noted the link between the Russian school and American ballet by characterizing *Raymonda Variations* as nostalgic and impressionistic, not unlike Fokine's earlier *Chopiniana* (1909) (later *Les Sylphides*) understood as a tribute to nineteenth-century Romantic Ballet, especially to Bournonville's *La Sylphide* of 1832. Yet at the same time Martin perceived something distinctly historical within *Raymonda Variations*: the steps and combinations of steps that had not been seen outside the Kirov since the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Martin combined a nostalgic and a historical apprehension of *Raymonda Variations* without further comment.

Literary and dance scholar Seeta Chaganti has since discussed *Raymonda* as the depiction of the Middle Ages in a nineteenth-century ballet. As such, she sees *Raymonda* as a combination of historical textuality and cultural nostalgia, which represent two distinct ways that dance can treat the historical past.⁸ For example, historical accuracy in the reconstruction of an earlier performance technique betokens a documentary, "textual" impulse whereas a more impressionistic evocation of style can lend itself to cultural nostalgia. According to Chaganti, classical ballet is adept at deploying both these qualities simultaneously while foregrounding their interaction. Using this distinction to better understand Martin's reception of *Raymonda Variations* in 1961, we can note that he perceived in it both history and nostalgia. I argue, however, that the innovative quality of Balanchine's choreography is mostly to be found in its transformation of the historical givens of choreographic convention.

The last appearance of Petipa's *Raymonda* in New York City was during the Bolshoi Ballet 2012 tour, when the ballet was assailed as a caricature of the Middle East.⁹ Although today any opportunity to see the original *Raymonda* in New York City is unlikely, in 1961 Walter Terry did just that: "While watching 'Raymonda Variations,'" he wrote, "it came to mind that at the same moment at the Metropolitan Opera House the Leningrad Kirov Ballet was presenting its version of the full-length 'Raymonda.' The Kirov production, as I reported, is a watered-down treatment of this old-fashioned ballet."¹⁰ Terry then proceeded to call *Raymonda Variations* a welcome distillation of the original. The idea of distillation evokes nostalgia alongside aloofness from the historical implications of the original, which refer at once

to an earlier style of performance as well as to narrative content. It would be hard to imagine anyone taking Balanchine to task for an inequitable depiction of the conflict between Christians and Saracens.

It is true that a set of variations making no reference to characters or narrative could be considered a concoction rather than an abstraction, especially when the outcome is frothy and costumed in pink by Karinska. But what is unusual about this plotless ballet is that its technique touches on period style: it is itself historical. This is the enigma: modernist neoclassicism can be nostalgic. And some of the repertory falls short of modernist innovation and is also nostalgic. The strategy of many of Balanchine's plotless ballets is ultimately to revive nostalgia for classicism while appearing to eschew it. Is it possible that Balanchine's rigorous formal operations on the choreographic materials of ballet has the reverse effect: unleashing and setting into motion a memory of what has been excised? On stage, this memory might take the form of nostalgia. Balanchine's enigma lies precisely in this interplay, between modernist innovation and nostalgia.

Raymonda Variations might be thought of as another of Balanchine's plotless ballets, but in this case, in its evocation of an earlier era, the modernist gesture of abstraction also partakes of anachronism. Anthony Huxley, partnering Megan Fairchild in *Raymonda Variations*, came into his own as a heroic figure on stage and thus offset the impression that the ballet was uniquely about a box of candies. Huxley has discovered in himself a grand style that puts the finishing touch on his pristine technique and movement imagination. Yet his newly found heroic quality was present in a context deprived of narrative motivation. What he adds to this ballet is a nostalgia for that which has been eliminated and an understanding that it is still present. Fairchild continues to be superlative in her unique unveiling of what is most original and evocative in the choreography. With these two dancers, the memory of narrative continues to haunt abstraction.

Raymonda Variations pays tribute to the style of the Kirov Ballet in the nineteenth century, a style still evident in the early twentieth century, when Akim Volynsky experienced the dancing as separate from the narrative, which was for him entirely superficial. Thus, when this seminal thinker selected ballet neoclassicism from what was before him and imagined it prior to any actual choreographic practice, it predated its actual emergence. In a sense, Balanchine's *Raymonda Variations* proposes to us Volynsky's vision of *Raymonda*, when he viewed it in

the 1920s and saw only dancing. This oddly antiquated view of what later became known as neoclassicism in Paris and as new classicism in New York shows how, in Volynsky's mind, narrative theatricality seems to have fallen away from the Kirov early in the twentieth century. Once he recognized it was no longer in need of narrative to communicate, left in its wake was a choreographic and performative style that only then needed to be discovered in practice, as dancing in relation to music. In ballet, what is so often called abstraction is simply ballet with the absence of plot. The repertory reveals this as an oversimplification. Was Volynsky already thinking of abstraction in opposition to the theatrical? "Ballet's true content," he wrote, "is contained in the music and the dancing."¹¹ This is a statement worthy of Balanchine, but it precedes him and came from Russia, not America. Volynsky elaborated upon this assertion: "The figures of dance, like words, phrases, and sighs of the heart, must each be interpreted individually. Taken together, these figures are the real text of the ballet's action."¹²

Balanchine's brand of abstraction involving the rejection of plot and a focus on music as a motivating factor was in evidence in his own reflection on *Raymonda Variations*: "To try to talk about these dances outside the music is not possible: they do not have any literary content at all and of course have nothing to do with the story of the original *Raymonda*. The music itself, its grand and generous manner, its joy and playfulness, was for me more than enough to carry the plot of the dances."¹³ Balanchine's statement accomplishes several seminal and programmatic gestures: it states why plot gets in the way of dance and it aligns music with his choreographic formalism, which substitutes for plot (it is "enough to carry the plot"). If there is still a plot here, it is the formal plot of the variation itself.

At first glance, the title *Raymonda Variations* suggests the new ballet is a variation on the earlier full-length one. Yet this is not the case: Petipa's *Raymonda* was a nineteenth-century story ballet with a highly convoluted and Orientalist plot. Balanchine used a composite of Glazunov's music from *Raymonda*, but he significantly avoided *Raymonda*'s famous "Hungarian solo," which has remained the touchstone for work in traditional ballet repertory. The idea of variation is pertinent to dance vocabulary itself, which, as French dance scholar Isabelle Launay points out, has a different meaning than the same term does in music. While in music a variation refers to theme and variation, in ballet "the 'variation' is a technical term designating still today a set of

simple or composed steps created for a soloist which can be detached from the rest of a ballet.”¹⁴ Launay specifies that this practice of solo dancing derives from the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century choreographic notations of solo dance. However, by around 1860, she adds, the term came to be applied to the structure of the *pas de deux* that comprises a duet followed by alternating solos for both male and female dancers, and the coda. Launay’s account of the meaning of variation in ballet touches upon several aspects of *Raymonda Variations*, notably that it is composed of a *pas de deux* whose structure is interrupted by several solos by others. Balanchine has montaged the baroque and the romantic senses of the ballet variation.

After a brief opening for the corps de ballet of seven dancers alongside soloists, to swell the ranks, the *pas de deux* takes place in order to introduce the principal dancers. There follow five solos for ballerinas (Sara Adams, Baily Jones, Emily Kikta, Mary Elisabeth Sell, and Ashley Hod) alternating with solos for the principles Megan Fairchild and Anthony Huxley. The structure of the *pas de deux* is interrupted by other solos so that its structural integrity is compromised by a heterogeneous meaning of the variation as solo. The entire work is dominated by the structure of the solo variation, although three levels of cast—principles, soloists, and a small corps de ballet—are interspersed throughout. In other terms, the solos by the principals have been moved until after the variations by the female soloists. This unique vision of what variation means is the characteristic element of *Raymonda Variations*.

Balanchine’s play with the placement of these variations and his combination of their diverse historical meanings is the boldest gesture of this piece. More than the plotless ballet as such, *Raymonda Variations* reveals that the complex formal maneuvers made possible by the historical concept of the variation are the true source of creative innovation in this apparently nostalgic work. It seems to me that Balanchine is more the heir of Volynsky than he is of Petipa, and that the moniker of the plotless ballet is no guarantee of abstraction, understood as the relinquishing of subject matter. The subject matter is the formal aspect of ballet itself, which is precisely historical. In other terms the play with form—meaning here the organizing principles and historical conventions—comprises both the traditional and the innovative content. These thoughts are entirely indebted to the ongoing exhibition of the repertory itself, serving to foreground the variation as material

for balletic construction.

[New York City Ballet in *Raymonda Variations* \(1965\).](#)

MARK FRANKO is the Laura H. Carnell Professor of Dance at Temple University. A revised edition of Franko's *Dancing Modernism/Performing Politics* will be published by Indiana University Press in 2023.

Notes

¹See my recent review, in which the dancers have taken the fore in defining the terms of the return to live performance: "[Post-Pandemic Dance Fervor and the Dramatic Turn](#)," in *The Massachusetts Review* (April 11, 2022):

²This quote comes from Kirstein's "Notes Toward a Spencer Lecture for April 1954" that Kirstein sent to Chapman, who was then teaching theater at Harvard. The lecture was to address the idea of Harvard University initiating a theater program (Lincoln Kirstein Papers, 1950-1999, (S) *MGZMD 253, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center).

³*Ibidem*.

⁴Lincoln Kirstein Papers, 1950-1999, (S) *MGZMD 253, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center.

⁵There is even a biographical basis to this idea, because as a young dancer Balanchine performed in this ballet. Clive Barnes noted in 1989 that "Balanchine danced in Petipa's version when he was studying at the Imperial Ballet School." Barnes also pointed out that Balanchine did a *Raymonda* for Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo in 1946. Also, there are three other ballets with material from *Raymonda*: "Pas de dix" (1955), *Raymonda Variations* (1961) and *Cortège Hongrois* (1973). Clive Barnes, "Balanchine's bright flame," in *New York Post* (January 20, 1989). *MGZR *Raymonda Variations* clippings file, Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center.

⁶Nadine Meisner, *Marius Petipa. The Emperor's Ballet Master* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019), 146. The strongest case for this argument is made in Tim Scholl's book *From Petipa to Balanchine. Classical Revival and the Modernization of Ballet* (London: Routledge, 1994).

⁷John Martin, "Ballet: A Confection by Balanchine" *The New York Times* (December 8, 1961). *MGZR *Raymonda Variations* clippings file, Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center.

⁸Seeta Chaganti, "Under the Angle: Memory, History and Dance in Nineteenth-Century Medievalism," in *Australian Literary Studies* 26, no. 3-4 (October-November 2011), 147.

⁹Alaistair Macaulay, "Stereotypes in Toe Shoes," in *The New York Times* (September 6, 2012), C1 & C5.

¹⁰Walter Terry, "Ballet 'Soup', All Puree," n.p., n.d. *MGZR *Raymonda Variations* clippings file, Dance Division, New York Public Library for the Performing

Arts at Lincoln Center.

¹¹Akim Volynsky, *Ballet's Magic Kingdom. Selected Writings on Dance in Russia, 1911-1925* translated and edited by Stanley J. Rabinowitz (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 245.

¹²Ibidem.

¹³Balanchine quoted in "Repertory Notes" in the *Playbill* (September 22, 2022).

¹⁴Isabelle Launay, *Poétique et Politique des Répertoires. Les danse d'après, I* (Paris: Centre National de la Danse, 2017), 81 (my translation).