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Library News

From the Dance Notation Bureau

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THE SYMPHONY IN C SAGA

by Ann Hutchinson Guest

For a long time the USA copyright law did not include dance. Dance was considered as a form of ballroom dance, which the copyright powers considered to be below the dignity of being given copyright protection. If considered at all, it came under the heading of a Dramatico-musical composition. It had to have a story. Then the copyright law changed; dance was considered as a serious art, but Pure Dance choreography, abstract composition without a story, was still debatable.

Copyright registration of Balanchine's ballet *Symphony in C* became quite a saga. But let us go back to the beginning.

NOTATING FOR BALANCHINE 1948 -1961

John Coleman took my hand. "Come," he said, "You've got to meet Balanchine!" It was the Fall of 1946, I was at the San Francisco Opera House seeing a performance of the Ballets Russes. John Coleman, musician, composer, teacher, and expert on Dalcroze, was a crazy, endearing man who knew everyone. He had worked with Balanchine and also with Kurt Jooss and so knew me from Dartington Hall days. It was he who had introduced me to Hanya Holm, out of which introduction came the Dance Notation Bureau. Now he was dragging a rather bewildered me backstage to meet the famous Balanchine, and another chapter in my life was about to open.

John explained about dance notation, how important it was. Balanchine listened, attentively. He was not at all what I expected. Where was all that Russian flamboyance? That dominating ego? Here was a rather small, quiet man. As I learned much later the ego was there, very much there, but comfortably (for other people) submerged and rarely evident. "Come to the School of American Ballet when you are back in New York" Balanchine said, and, of course, I did. The School was then on Madison Avenue. John was teaching at SAB, as we all called it, and he saw to it that Balanchine did not forget. In 1948 on a visit to the school, Balanchine arranged to have me attend a rehearsal and see how much I could get notated. It was in the small studio and I had the task of notating a *pas de deux* from *The Four Temperaments* (as I later learned) featuring the ballerina performing long, horizontal swimming *grands jetés* as her partner carried her in a circle around the room. Mary Ellen Moylan was the dancer who was swimming that day. My pencil flew across the sheets of paper: I caught as much as I could. When the rehearsal ended, Balanchine asked me to explain what I had written. The notes were, as usual, very messy, but I pointed out the particular features I had captured and explained that all this would be copied out neatly after the rehearsal and the details filled in. He seemed satisfied. Soon after he arranged to come to my apartment at 33 West 8th Street in Greenwich Village to study Labanotation, bringing with him William Dollar, who had by then retired from dancing. Mr. B., as every one called him, quickly latched onto the system, understanding the basic structure and movement analysis. This could not, alas, be said of Dollar who, despite his enthusiastic willingness, hadn't a clue. I doubt if he had ever needed to analyze the movements he had performed so impressively. By the third lesson,

Mr. B. brought with him his notation of the opening steps of the man's solo in *Theme and Variations*. It was mostly right, but he was 'leaping' before he could run. When I pointed out what he still needed to know to capture the sequence, he completely understood.

Notating Bizet

Notation classes for Balanchine were interrupted, as he had decided to get *Symphony in C* (usually called *Bizet*) notated. This ballet, with the title *Le Palais de Cristale*, had been composed the year before for the Paris Opera with elaborate costumes and set. Lacking the needed financial backing for his company, then called Ballet Society and soon to become New York City Ballet, Balanchine used the simplest of costumes on a bare stage. I was to go along to the Ballet Society office and negotiate the contract with Frances Hawkins. My God - how much was I to charge? I had no idea. Payment by the page of the finished score seemed the fairest as I had no idea how many hours the work would take. I settled on \$3 a page, fearing to kill the golden goose.

The notating situation was not ideal; most of the rehearsing had already taken place. How to start? Only a certain amount of information could be captured during regular group rehearsals. The floor plans, the stage formations, and the various paths of the dancers could be jotted down. We learned how practical it was to have an assistant on hand, usually a notator-trainee, who would follow the music, marking in key moments, and also sketch in the floor plans. But for the individual steps, we had to interview the dancers. I say 'we' because I realized I could not do all this alone. To expedite the work on *Bizet*, I called in two extra people. While I embarked on notating the first movement, I assigned our most promising student, Els Grelinger, to tackle the third movement which she did successfully. The fourth movement was assigned to Lena Belloc, a student of my Dartington colleague Bodil Genkel. Unfortunately, as a notator she proved to be too inexperienced. This impressed on me the need for adequate notator training. I also tackled the second movement, and almost forgot to notate, so entranced was I by the way that Tanaquil LeClerc phrased the movements, her light and shade. To me her performance has always been the definitive version. But catching her with some time to spare was difficult. The fourth movement was assigned to another student with mixed results, but at least it was a start. Eventually I completed each section.

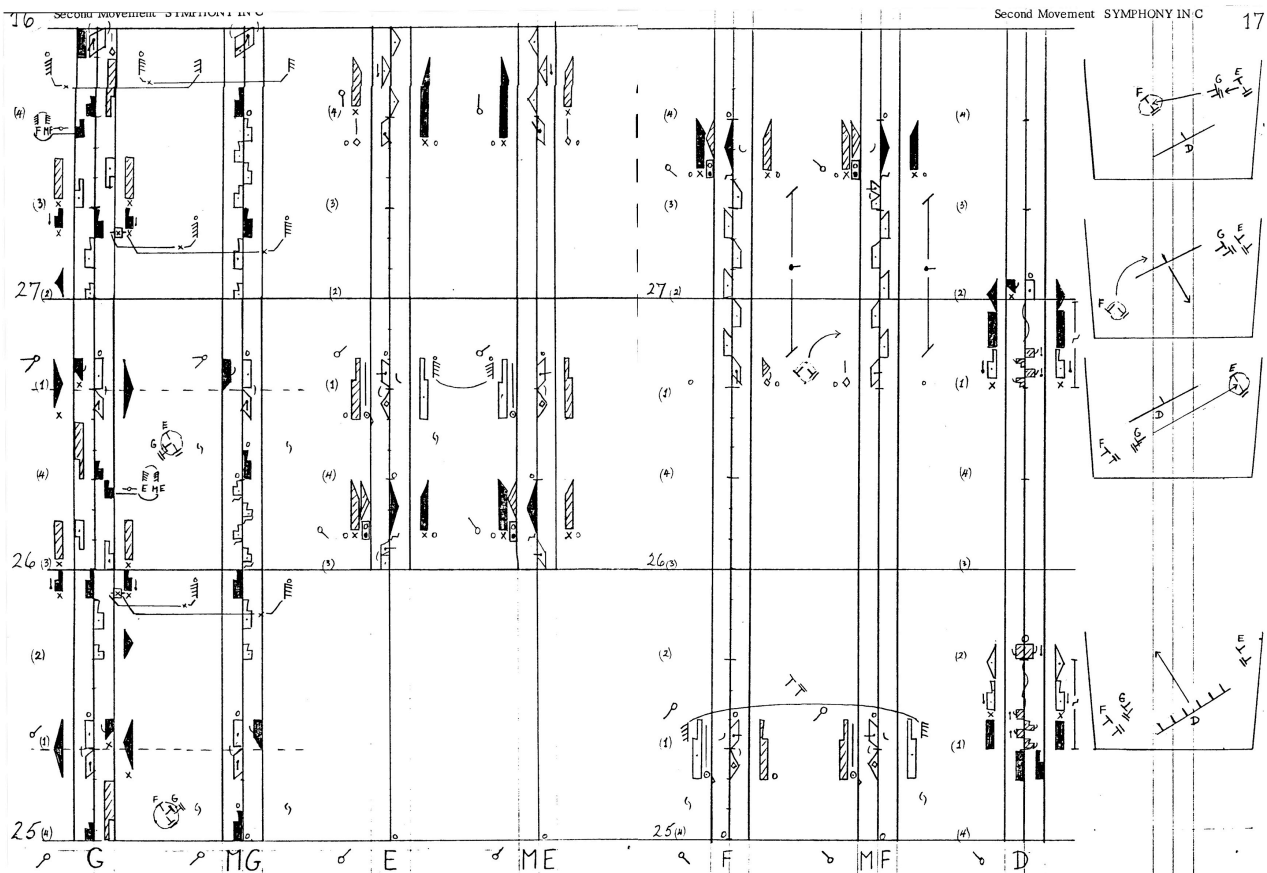


Mr. B (R2) and Ann Hutchinson (R1) at a rehearsal. Photo by Martha Swope, circa 1950s. Photo from the Dance Notation Bureau Collection, Jerome Lawrence and Robert E. Lee Theatre Research Institute, Ohio State University Libraries. BALANCHINE is a Trademark of The George Balanchine Trust.

PHOTO BY MARTHA SWOPE

Interviewing the dancers to record the movement sequences meant making appointments between or after rehearsals. Expectedly, some dancers were gracious and cooperative, some not. This process turned out to be something of a jig-saw puzzle. Some knew what they were doing, knew what the counts were, some did not. We found one dancer would count 4/4 at half time, 1, -, 2, -. Another would count each beat: 1, 2, 3, 4. How did these parts relate and fit with the music? With each measure of the music carefully numbered, we had to get our dance score synchronized. Coordination would have been simple if everyone had counted musically. Apart from that, not every dancer was fully aware of what she was doing. How many times did you repeat that step? "Oh, until Maria [Tallchief] enters." Splendid! But when does Maria enter? That could not be determined until the next rehearsal or until Maria could be found and asked. And Maria? Tallchief was known for her musicality. I remember asking "When do you take that arabesque?" to which she answered "On the high A." Clear as a bell, but it meant locating that 'A' in the music score before I could pin it down in our dance score. We learned then of her perfect pitch and that she danced musically, aware of just where in the music each movement fell, rather than counting. Gradually the many pieces were pulled together and the full score emerged.

Maria danced the First Movement of *Bizet* with tremendous sparkle. She ran in swiftly on a curve from upstage right, taking over centre stage as her rightful place of abode; her assurance and command were delightful. While the Second Movement had not been choreographed for Tanaquil LeClerc, she was exquisite in it. Her long legs, torso and arms suited the adagio sections, the flow of the movement extending out into space. What was amazing was the speed with which she moved those long legs for the fugue section. Rarely can long legs get themselves around quick, intricate steps. Tanny kept her energy contained within a smaller space, a spatial compression without bound flow being involved. In tackling the Third Movement, Els Grelinger found Beatrice Tompkins and Herbert Bliss, the leads, helpfully cooperative. At that time all four movements were performed by different dancers, Mr. B made use of as many students as possible; there was none of the doubling up that came in later. At the end of each movement the corps dancers, all in white, remained in line at the edge of the stage. Gradually, as the Second and then the Third Movements terminated, the white-clad edging on the stage had been augmented, so that by the time the Fourth Movement ladies were in place there was a miniature army on hand to perform the series of *battements tendus en croisée, écarté, effacé*, etc.



Only Tanny was unsympathetic to our need to obtain information from the dancers. She would agree to give me half an hour and then leave early or not show up. She was ungracious and uncaring. I had to hound her to get the work done. At that time in her career she was totally self-centred, all her time and energies being focused on her career. Only much later, when she was building a new life for herself after the disaster of being stricken by polio, did she gradually discover the pleasure derived from being concerned about others, an admission which she made to her physiotherapist, my friend Irmgard Bartenieff, who later related it to me.

Symphony in C has a special meaning to me; it is hard for me to evaluate it objectively as a choreographic work. The process of notating every step, every movement, gives an intimacy of a special kind. One has a certain sense of ownership. When I see contemporary performances where the whole point of the movement is missed, I itch to put it right, 'right' being how it was performed in the 1948 vintage. Did Mr. B. make such changes? Changes that water down the impact, the design, the whole sense of a particular phrase? I cannot believe that.

For the *Bizet* score I discussed the layout with Mr. B. Special notation paper was printed, 11" by 17", to accommodate the principals, soloists and corps on one spread. The next page, the verso, was written on the back and, with the following recto page spreading out from the central binding we had a total spread of 34 inches, fine to put on a library table to be able to study the score with less page turning, but, we learned, hopelessly awkward in the studio when we came to use these scores in rehearsal. Far more practical was use of 8.5" x 11" sheets in a ring binder from which individual pages can be taken out and held in hand as steps are demonstrated. Each ballet we notated was put into colour-coded binders, *Bizet's* being bright yellow.

When the score was finished I discussed with Balanchine sending it in for copyright registration. I wanted it to be the first such score to be sent to the Copyright Office in Washington, D.C. to receive copyright protection under the new law. The reply I received from Washington was that it was not eligible as it had no story. I reported back to Balanchine, "What do we do?" I asked, "Can you provide something?" He replied, "You do it, make something up". I then put my imagination to work.

During this time, without my knowing, Hanya Holm had sent to the Copyright Bureau in Washington the Labanotation score (which I had notated) of the dances she had choreographed for the Broadway musical *Kiss Me Kate*. They were immediately accepted because, of course, *Kiss Me Kate* told a story. The dances themselves did not contain any narrative, but that was not investigated, and so Hanya 'pipped us to the post' in getting her dances registered first. Having created a 'story' for *Symphony in C*, I sent it with the score to the Copyright Office. Amazingly, it was accepted! The following is what I wrote:

This ballet is in four movements. Through the medium of the classic dance, each movement presents a different mood and spatial theme.

First Movement

The energy, intensity, and vigor of mid-day, of full sunlight, are depicted here. A theme is established by the working in unison or in counterpoint. The central figure, a girl, enters and circles around the stage, giving the image of the focus of the sun. The mood is changed somewhat by the entrance of the men, when the tempo of activity drops, and there is more a feeling of play between the partners. The center of the activity is then taken over by the men who show off their abilities, until the central figure breaks in and sets a contrasting style. To conclude, all join in unison in the same spirit in which the piece opened.

Second Movement

This sets a mood of tenderness and extreme lightness. It is the coming of dusk, when the fragrance of the day hangs in the air, and all must walk and move as though suspended. The weaving patterns employed by the dancers simulate the gentle breezes of the evening.

Third Movement

In this movement the theme is that of exuberance of exploring the space of the universe. With agility and lift, the dancers make use of diagonals, of circles, and of straight lines. It is the transition from one spatial pattern to the next, plus the lift – the use of aerial patterns – that gives the quality to this movement.

Fourth Movement

In a burst of unbridled energy, the group enters to perform spinning and turning figures as though portraying the idea of stars and planets whirling through space. In contrast to this, there is a lyric, swinging theme which reappears throughout the piece. As the movement progresses, more and more stars and planets appear and in turn dance variations of the themes of spinning and the lyrical swinging motions. In the finale, all the dancers are on the stage and join in unison in the themes mentioned above.

These are the basic ideas; there is no exact literal interpretation, rather through the movement quality and patterns the above thoughts and ideas are suggested.

As you can see, there was no story line as such, but everyone was delighted that it had been accepted.

The *Bizet* score did not rest idly on a shelf. Balanchine agreed to the First Movement being taught to the advanced students at the High School of Performing Arts in New York City, he also attended a rehearsal and gave the dancers pointers on performance understanding, information that I immediately added to the score. The next year the Third Movement was part of the end of year recital. Subsequently the opening section of *Serenade* was performed by the then senior group.

Then the exciting experience arrived for members of the Junior Dansnotators, a group of youngsters who were learning to read Labanotation. At our monthly meetings I realized we had just the right number, including three boys, to learn the First Movement of *Bizet*. Parts were assigned and sections to be learned before the next meeting were determined. After good progress we were all able to see New York City Ballet perform it on stage. The result was electric. "Maria Tallchief was performing my part!" exclaimed one Junior Dansnotator. How rewarding to have enriched the experiences of those students, and how wonderful if dancers could learn their parts from the score and save precious rehearsal time.



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