

## MUSIC'S DEBT TO THE BALLET

SOME OF OUR MUSIC CRITICS look askance at the Russian ballet, and, apparently, only deign to notice it at all because the music employed is such as falls within their province to review. Having the task forced upon them, they relieve their feelings by deploring the forced association of, for example, Schumann and pattering feet. "The professional

tion, vitalized the art dance by the introduction of new dramatic and plastic ideals." Some of the things the *Ballet russe* has done to music are thus reviewed:

"Quite aside from the esthetic value of their own beautiful choreographic art, synchronizing color and sound, employing dramatic mimicry as well as the dance pure and simple to develop its themes, these Russians did educational work of decided importance in popularizing some of the best of older and modern music.

"Weber's 'Invitation to the Dance' is a hackneyed number of the pianist's repertory, yet many have obtained a new and more poetic concept of its charm by hearing it as the musical complement of 'Le Spectre de la Rose.' Schumann's 'Carnaval,' in which Fokine, with such artistic restraint and scenic beauty, has carried out in the dance the program suggestions of the music, has made it live for thousands who had never heard it before. And Chopin—there is not a *danceuse* of note to-day who does not interpret his music! The *Ballet russe* has given us the

exquisite 'Sylphides' (those of our readers who saw performances of last year's *Ballets russes* will recall Mlle. Lopokova in this ballet), Mlle. Pavlova and her company. 'Chopiniana.' Isadora Duncan includes a *mélange* of Chopin compositions in her repertory; Maud Allan is dancing a cycle of 'Eight Chopin Preludes' this season; and in her *Ballet classique* (1912) Mlle. Albertina Rasch gave us a charming interpretation, along traditional lines, of an ingenious and musically effective welding of compositions by Delibes and Chopin.

"But the *Ballet russe* went further in the musical exploitation of their art ideals. The free-form symphonic poem, with its often splendid dramatic program and glowing and colorful score, was material lying ready at hand. The symphonic poem 'Schéhérazade,' for example, that scintillant expression of Rimsky-Korsakoff's genius at its best, was reshaped for their own ends—and it did not lose in the process. Despite all that has been said about the 'sacrilege' of changing a

shipwreck in Eastern waters into a harem holiday, the fact remains that no one who did not know the composer's original program would suspect that that of the *Ballet russe* was a new one. And the music of 'Schéhérazade' has been introduced to multitudes who never have a chance to hear it in its purely symphonic version. In 'Thamar,' Balakireff's one and only symphonic poem, the composer's program has hardly been altered, and the same may be said of Nijinsky's new ballet creations of this season, Liszt's brilliant 'Mephisto Waltz' (a favorite repertory number of Leo Ornstein, by the way), and Richard Strauss's 'Till Eulenspiegel,' in which the tingling, genial score of Germany's foremost composer of the present day is realized with its maximum of possible scenic effect by the dancer of whom Jean Cocteau said, 'Apollo holds the string by which he is suspended.'"

Mention is also made of Nijinsky's 'L'Après-midi d'un Faune,' which has "made a nation-wide propaganda for Debussy's music among people who might otherwise never know it existed." Then we hear of one of the latest ballet-offerings set to music of Rimsky-Korsakoff, who, indeed, composed this music as a symphonic poem, "an inspired bit of programmatic composition that moves with a constantly increasing *stretto* to a climax of tremendous effect."



A SCENE ON THE OCEAN'S FLOOR: SADKO CASTING HIS LYRICAL SPELL.

*Sadko*, according to the Russian folk-tale, was the poet of Novgorod, and with his *gusly* [harp] sang its praises through the land. In Rimsky-Korsakoff's ballet he is shipwrecked and sinks to the bottom. But his music is potent here, and he charms the *Sea King* and all the fishes, and wins the *Sea King's* daughter.

musician," says Mr. Frederick H. Martens, meaning mainly the critics, "is all too apt to look upon the modern ballet as a species of artistic 'white slave,' who, breaking into the temple of music, seizes the priestesses of the shrine and drives them forth to do ignoble service for the greater glory of a frivolous and negligible art." Mr. Martens, indeed, shows that, however negligible a factor the music of the ballet may have been eighty years ago, when Taglioni and Fanny Elssler reigned, "the modern dance-drama, developed in its symphonic form by the Russians, in its lyric by Isadora Duncan and her followers, . . . is emphatically a serious dramatic-art development of this twentieth century, and none but those blinded by prejudice can deny its value as an imaginative and creative stimulant for its sister art of music." Mr. Martens, writing in *The Musical Observer* (New York), mentions such composers as Claude Debussy, Richard Strauss, Paul Dukas, Maurice Ravel, Roger-Ducasse, and Edward Burlingame Hill, as men directly inspired to compose for the ballet through its suggestive possibilities, names not to be neglected by serious students of music.

The Diaghileff *Ballet russe*, Mr. Martens points out, was the first organization which, "without breaking wholly with tradi-

*The Literary Digest*

*for*

*November 4, 1916*

*~the second of two pages~*

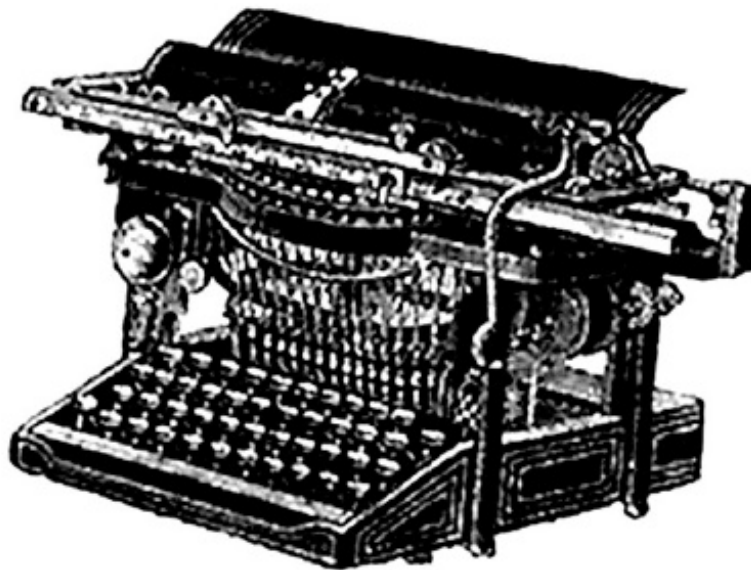
"'Sadko,' the symphonic poem, was given its first performance as a ballet in the United States in the Manhattan Opera-House on October 10 last, in a manner which emphasized and enhanced the effect of every note of its music. Adolf Bolm, like Fokine, is no less distinguished as a creative artist than as a dancer. He designed the wonderful plastic version of this tale of a Russian folk-hero (which rôle he interpreted), charming the inhabitants of the submarine kingdom with his playing on the *gusly*, and sweeping them by the magic of his music into a breathless dance, which his beloved, the daughter of the *Sea King* (Mlle. Doris), is only able to arrest by tearing the lyre from his hands.

"Does Rimsky-Korsakov's music lose by its atmospheric setting displaying waving festoons of clear and dark green seaweed, with deeper bluish depths and the faint rose glimmer of distant sunlight that sweeps down from fathoms above, the constant flux of moving currents, the pearl-hung princesses of the sea, and aureate and argent fishes that dance and float above the silver sands, the splendid figure of the adventurous

hero himself slowly sinking into the deeps, and the frenetic dance with its startlingly sudden end? Nothing has been put into the music that is not already there—tone is visualized in color, in movement, it is merged with plastic beauty."

Much modern music, as already hinted, has been purposely written for the ballet. Debussy wrote his "Jeux" for Nijinsky, Florent Schmitt's "La Tragédie de Salomé" was "directly conceived for the stage, as was Ronssel's 'Festin de l'Araignée,' and Reynaldo Hahn's 'Le Dieu Bleu,' the first two members on the symphonic programs of the leading orchestras." Also:

"The incomparable 'Petrouchka,' the glittering and glorious 'Oiseau de feu,' the primal 'Sacre du Printemps,' have they not, since the *Ballet russe* made them known, taken their place in the repertory of the symphony orchestra? The ballet may truly be said to have been the instrument of Stravinsky's fame, the medium which introduced his scores to the notice of the general as well as to that of the specifically music-loving public."



OldMagazineArticles.com