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A Century of Artistic Evolution: Examining the Transformation from Classical to Modern Ballet through Two Versions of "Swan Lake"

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Abstract

Classical Ballet and Modern Ballet are two significant periods in the history of ballet, each having a profound impact on the development of the art form. Both periods have produced numerous classic works and cultivated a wealth of outstanding ballet choreographers and performers. Classical ballet is characterized by its strict conventions in creation, performance, and training methods. In contrast, modern ballet is more diverse in its dance vocabulary, creative approaches, and stage design. "Swan Lake," a hallmark of ballet art, has enjoyed worldwide acclaim and continues to be performed regularly. A hundred years after its debut, a modern version of "Swan Lake" was created in England, featuring powerful male swans that captivated audiences. By examining these two epoch-making classics, we can discern the distinct charms of classical and modern ballet and the innovative aspects of modern ballet. This also highlights that contemporary ballet is gaining and will continue to gain more attention in the present and future.

Keywords: ballet; classical ballet; modern ballet; "Swan Lake"

I. The Creative Backgrounds of Classical and Modern "Swan Lake"

The music for the ballet "Swan Lake" was composed by Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky in 1876, marking his first venture into ballet composition. The classical ballet "Swan Lake" that we are

familiar with today was premiered by the Mariinsky Theatre in Saint Petersburg on January 15, 1895. This version was staged to commemorate the first anniversary of Tchaikovsky's death. The production was directed by Marius Petipa and his disciple Lev Ivanov, with Petipa choreographing Acts I and III and Ivanov choreographing Acts II and IV. The content of the ballet was based on a German folk tale, with the Italian dancer Pierina Legnani performing the role of Odette. Although the script and music were the same, the order of the musical pieces was significantly altered. The choreographers' deep understanding of Tchaikovsky's music allowed them to align the "leitmotif" of the white swan with classical ballet poses such as the *suivi*, *arabesque*, and *attitudes*, thus creating a lifelike and expressive swan figure. This approach greatly enhanced the dancers' expressive capabilities compared to the rigid arm movements used in the first version, where performers held small, stiff wings. The harmonious blend of exquisite ballet music, sophisticated choreography, high-caliber performance, and a poignant love story rendered "Swan Lake" a quintessential work of classical ballet, widely recognized and cherished.

Exactly a century after the 1895 premiere of the classical "Swan Lake," British choreographer Matthew Bourne introduced a revolutionary all-male version of "Swan Lake" to audiences. Retaining Tchaikovsky's original music, this 1995 production by the Adventure in Motion Pictures (AMP) in London presented a completely novel narrative and performance style, challenging traditional perceptions. Lead roles were performed by Simon Williams and Liam Monaghan. The ballet featured male swans, highlighting a powerful and dynamic representation of love through the prince and male swan characters. This bold reinterpretation garnered significant attention and acclaim within the art community, winning over 30 awards. The Los Angeles Times hailed it as "a new Swan for a new millennium, a daring display," while The Hollywood Reporter described it as "an astonishing feat."

II. Different Interpretations of Classical and Modern "Swan Lake"

(A) Dance Language and Ballet Themes

Classical ballet "Swan Lake" utilizes the dance language of classical ballet, adhering to the four aesthetic principles of classical ballet: turnout, pointe, straight lines, and upright posture. It also incorporates character dances and historical dances to enrich the narrative and visual appeal. Choreographer Petipa, with a profound understanding of Tchaikovsky's music, masterfully used ballet movements, postures, and steps to vividly portray the swan-maiden figure. The elongated arms, light jumps, graceful movements, and specific mimicry of swan behaviors vividly bring the swan-maiden to life. For instance, the prevalent use of attitude and arabesque postures in the ballet seem tailor-made for the "white swan" character. The dancers' extended arms resemble the elegant neck of a swan, and the space between the thumb and middle finger mimics the swan's

eye, while the extended limbs evoke the image of a swan in flight. The light *suivi* steps, combined with the upward and downward arm movements, vividly depict the swan gliding across the lake. The precise and delicate movements of the dancers fully express their inner emotions, with each *pointe relevé* and arm movement conveying the essence of their stories. The ballet primarily features female leads, with female dancers embodying the delicate beauty of the swan. The overall theme revolves around the idea that "sincere love is eternal," using the dance imagery to express "truth, goodness, and beauty."



Figure 1: The Arabesque Pose of the White **Figure 2: The Attitude Pose of the White**

In contrast, Matthew Bourne's all-male "Swan Lake" employs a bold, avant-garde, and diverse dance language. Bourne incorporates elements from ballroom dance, Latin dance, tap dance, and jazz into modern ballet, enriching the dance vocabulary and making the scenes more dynamic and varied, thus attracting a broader audience. The choreography uses angular hand movements to depict the aggression of male swans, with powerful *passé* and arabesque jumps representing



Figure 3: The Angular Hand Movements of the Male Swan



Figure 4: The Wild and Muscular Form of the Male Swan, with Exposed Upper Body, Emphasizing its Ferocity

freedom and strength, shaping a wild, masculine swan character. This modern interpretation offers audiences a fresh perspective on swans, revealing their fierce and combative nature in the wild. The male swans dominate the narrative, uncovering the hidden emotions, societal complexities, and inner conflicts of modern life.

(B) Expression Modes and Choreographic Techniques

The classical ballet "Swan Lake" was a collaborative effort by choreographers Petipa (Acts I and III) and Ivanov (Acts II and IV). Despite being Petipa's disciple, Ivanov's choreographic techniques significantly differed, creating a striking contrast. The ballet showcased the emergence of symphonic and psychological ballet, moving beyond earlier mime-centric and romantic ballet forms. The pas de deux in the ballet strictly followed the classical A-B-A performance model: a slow duet, followed by male and female solos, culminating in a lively, technically demanding coda. The third act included Spanish, Italian, Hungarian, and Polish character dances, enriching the narrative and adding vibrant scenes. In Act II, Ivanov grounded the dance on the music, blending it seamlessly to express the prince and white swan's emotions. His choreography vividly embodied the white swan, translating the music into poetic, mesmerizing dance, making Act II a model of symphonic ballet frequently performed independently at major events. Act IV used psychological ballet techniques, with extended group dances depicting Odette's inner world and her journey from rejection to love through psychological cues. The ballet also featured stylized hand gestures, such as circling hands overhead to signify "Let's dance together" and pointing to the ring finger to mean "Marry me," reflecting long-standing ballet traditions.

Bourne's modern "Swan Lake" breaks from classical conventions, integrating modern artistic concepts with elements of romantic, classical, theatrical, and symphonic ballet. His choreography uses distinctive, sometimes exaggerated methods to convey modern ideas through ballet. The production incorporates contemporary life movements, allowing dancers to perform more freely and naturally, enhancing emotional expression and bridging the gap with the audience. Bourne also employed extensive psychological dance creation, analyzing the prince's inner world through the lens of Freudian psychoanalysis. The ballet portrays the prince's emotional journey, from seeking his mother's comfort in a nightmare to confronting her over a rejected lover and finding solace in the male swan by the lake. This narrative reveals the prince's psychological struggles due to unreciprocated maternal love and betrayal, highlighting the importance of addressing psychological health during development. The ballet begins and ends with the prince's nightmare, symbolizing the cyclical nature of his emotional turmoil. Bourne's modern reinterpretation aligns with Freud's idea that dreams reveal inner desires, using the swan as a symbol of the prince's longing for freedom, strength, and love.

(C) Costume, Props, and Stage Design

In classical "Swan Lake," the white swan wears the iconic white tutu, flesh-colored tights, and

pointe shoes, with a crown for the princess, contrasting with the black swan's attire. The courtly costumes and character dance attire in Acts I and III enhance the regal and exotic atmosphere. The set design features a grand palace to depict royal opulence and a deep blue lake and forest to create the swan lake setting.

In Bourne's modern "Swan Lake," the male swans are shirtless, wearing white feathered shorts with a black triangle on their foreheads, emphasizing their muscular, powerful, and wild nature. The black costumes of servants and guards heighten the oppressive palace atmosphere, while the prince's girlfriend's bright clothes starkly contrast with the surrounding darkness, highlighting social class differences. The stage design includes contemporary urban elements like bars, cameras, telephones, and cars, recreating scenes from the 1950s. Bourne also creatively used stage lighting to project the prince and queen's shadows onto a white backdrop, accentuating the mother's dominance and the prince's vulnerability.



Figure 5: Stage Lighting Highlighting the Mother's Dominance and the Prince's Vulnerability

(D) Iconic Dance Sequences and Music Interpretation

Classical "Swan Lake" features renowned dance sequences like the white swan and prince's duet, the four little swans, the black swan's 36 fouettés, and the third act's character dances, often performed independently at dance events. Act II employs symphonic choreography to depict the white swan's emotional journey, with the solo dance and violin and cello melodies creating a harmonious and touching visual and auditory experience. The white swan's developpé and sissonne jumps symbolize breaking the curse and emotional struggle, while the ensemble's formations reflect the white swan's evolving feelings, from instability to relaxation. The four little swans' synchronized movements and lively music capture their playful nature, contrasting with the grand swans' 3/4 rhythm. The extensive use of waltz rhythm enhances the romantic parts, with music and dance interweaving to convey the ballet's theme, making "Swan Lake" a milestone in ballet music history.



Figure 6: The Classic "Four Little Swans" Dance Segment, Featuring Synchronized Movements and Formations



Figure 7: The Highly Stylized "Spanish" Character Dance Segment, Rich in Spanish Costume and Movements

In the male version of "Swan Lake," the duet is between the prince and the lead swan. The prince imitates the movements of the lead swan, similar to how primitive people mimic during rituals, hoping to attain the freedom and strength of the lead swan through this imitation—qualities he has always longed for but could not achieve. In the modern version, the dance evolves from the prince's imitation of the male swan to a duet and eventually to numerous instances of mutual lifts and supports, symbolizing the transformation and fusion of their emotions. The prince's repeated forward-reaching gesture suggests his desire to follow the male swan, yearning for a life filled with freedom.

The group of swans in this version follows a zigzag pattern similar to the classical version, but their movements are wilder, eventually forming a triangular formation that visually impacts the audience, emphasizing the aggression of the male swans. The "four little swans" in this version are clumsy and playful, with quick foot changes that more accurately depict the swans' awkward early steps and playful antics, making the scene choreography more dynamic.

In terms of music, the choreographer offers a new perspective, blending modern elements to reinterpret Tchaikovsky's music. Exploring Tchaikovsky's life reveals that many of his outstanding works are closely tied to his emotional experiences. He once professed love to a male student, who did not reciprocate, leading him to marry a female student, Antonina, who had passionately pursued him, even threatening suicide. The marriage soon ended in divorce. "Swan Lake" was composed during this period, and the music might reflect Tchaikovsky's personal emotional turmoil. Matthew Bourne, the choreographer, uses his approach to reimagine the emotional tones of this ballet's music.

Through this, we see that modern works have broader meanings, allowing audiences of different

backgrounds and experiences to derive their interpretations and insights. Just as "there are a thousand Hamlets in a thousand people's eyes," this perhaps is the unique charm of modern ballet works.



Figure 8: The Wild, Aggressive Formations and Movements of the Male Swans Against the Modern Park Backdrop



Figure 9: The Lifting Pose Between the Prince and the Male Swan

III. Exploring the Differences and Similarities Between Classical and Modern "Swan Lake"

(A) Dance Vocabulary

In 1661, under the order of King Louis XIV of France, the Royal Academy of Dance was established, with Beauchamps as the director and 13 experienced dance teachers as members. They categorized and named the movements, poses, and formations according to classical court aesthetics, which became the ballet terminology we use today. Beauchamps also established the five basic foot positions, which remain fundamental in ballet training. Among the six major ballet schools today, different names are used for hand positions, with the Russian school, which is commonly used in China, defining seven positions. All classical ballet poses and movements are based on these five foot positions and seven hand positions, including classic poses like the four types of arabesque, attitudes, croisé, effacé, and écarté. The Russian school also created six port de bras combinations from the seven hand positions to train dancers' body coordination. Classical ballet often includes stylized mime gestures. Female dancers typically wear pointe shoes to highlight their light and airy movements, focusing on pointe techniques such as the black swan's 32 fouettés and various pique turns. Male dancers emphasize jumps and turns in their performances.

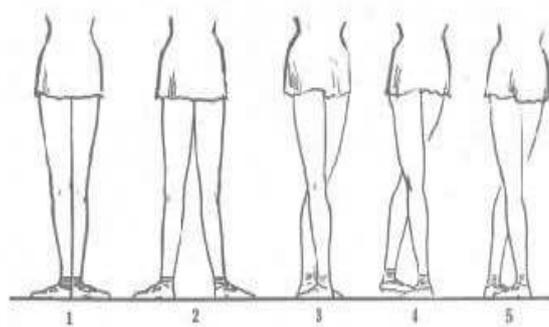


Figure 10: The Five Basic Foot Positions in Ballet

Modern ballet emerged to break free from the constraints of classical ballet and challenge classical aesthetics. It allows dancers to experiment and express more freely, unbound by the five basic foot positions and seven hand positions, resulting in more abstract movements. Some choreographers use non-traditional poses, like inward-facing feet and angular arm positions, as seen in Fokine's "The Night of Egypt," which mimics ancient Egyptian reliefs with palms up and bent elbows and wrists. Modern ballet incorporates everyday movements, such as speaking or drinking water on stage, to enhance realism. The thematic movements and steps in modern ballet are re-choreographed to align with the ballet's themes, as seen in Nijinsky's "Afternoon of a Faun" and William Forsythe's "In the Middle, Somewhat Elevated," which diverge from classical aesthetics by emphasizing downward movements and weight. Modern ballet also seamlessly integrates other dance elements, such as ballroom dance, as in the Tianjin Ballet's 2017 production "Haihe Red Sail," showcasing innovative and contemporary spirit.

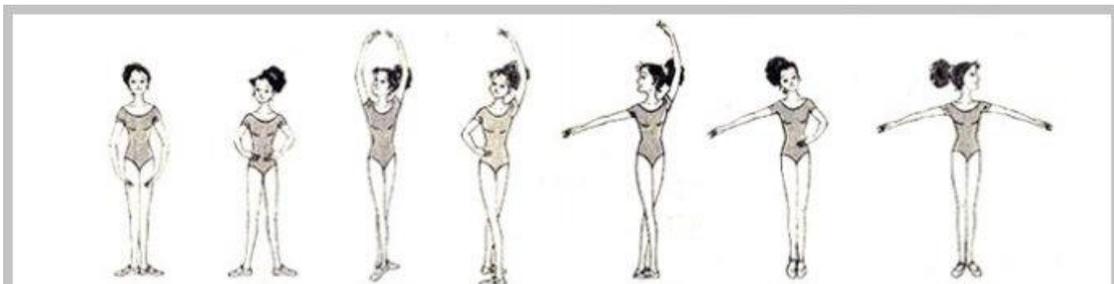


Figure 11: The Seven Basic Hand Positions in the Russian Ballet School

(B) Performance Styles

Classical ballet often draws on romantic fairy tales, typically presented in three to four acts, using "dream plays" as a dramatic device, with theatrical and symphonic ballet as the main forms of expression. The creation process follows strict formal rules. Ballet master Petipa established performance models for pas de deux and character dances. The A-B-A structure of pas de deux begins with a slow duet, followed by male and female variations, and concludes with a lively, technically challenging coda. Character dances, tailored to the narrative, enrich the scenes and

enhance the atmosphere. Historical dances are used to recreate court scenes. Classical ballets usually end happily, reflecting contemporary aspirations for a better life, emphasizing formalism and focusing on realism, lyrical expression, representation, and imitation.

Modern ballet works are often shorter and more varied in content and creation methods, encouraging choreographers to break away from traditional models and explore new forms of expression. Modern ballet pieces may lack a specific narrative, focusing instead on physical interpretation and deeper meanings conveyed through movement. Susan Langer's "Feeling and Form" suggests that art expresses human emotions symbolically, a concept well represented in modern ballet, which emphasizes emotional expression. "The Dying Swan," an early modern ballet, uses expressive arm movements and *suivi* steps to portray a swan's struggle and defiance, reflecting the despair of Russian intellectuals after the failed 1905 revolution.

(C) Costume and Scenery

The Romantic ballet "La Sylphide" introduced the era of the white tutu, which classical ballet retained with its airy, bell-shaped long skirts. Later, dancers like Marie Camargo shortened the skirts to showcase technical skills, culminating in the thigh-length tutus of "Swan Lake," emphasizing the dancers' long limbs. Costumes in classical ballets often symbolize purity, love, and aspirations for a better life, earning the Romantic ballet the nickname "white tutu ballet." Lavish stage designs recreate historical court scenes, as seen in "The Sleeping Beauty," with its opulent sets and dazzling costumes creating a "fairy tale" stage effect. Classical ballet scenery aims to create atmospheric and scenic effects.



Figure 12: The Shortening Process of the Ballet Tutu

Modern ballet costumes, like its dance vocabulary, are diverse and colorful, changing to suit characters and plots. Costumes may include traditional tutus or be influenced by ethnic and contemporary styles, as seen in "The Rite of Spring" with its rustic Russian attire or the bold, near-nude designs showcasing natural human beauty. Modern ballet sets are simpler, more modern, and multifunctional, using props to indicate scenes or convey deeper meanings. In Bourne's male "Swan Lake," the oversized bed signifies the setting and symbolizes the prince's status and the cold, inhumane palace rules.



Figure 13: The Recurrent Large Bed in the Modern "Swan Lake," Reflecting Both the Setting and the Inhumane Rules of the Palace

(D) Music Interpretation

Classical ballet music, composed during the 19th-century Romantic era, emphasizes subjective emotion, nature, and fantasy. It features passionate, free-spirited styles with nationalistic elements and follows fixed compositional patterns. Tchaikovsky's ballet music harmonizes with the choreography, using different instruments to convey emotions and themes, with lyrical adagios building to climaxes. Classical ballet performances often feature live symphony orchestras, enhancing the experience and showcasing the ballet company's grandeur and precision.

Post-World War I, music demands shifted, influenced by neoclassicism, which emphasized "art for art's sake" and composers' detachment from subjectivity. Neoclassical music, typified by Stravinsky's works like "The Rite of Spring" and "Firebird," combines Russian folk elements with modernism, characterized by unpredictable rhythms and non-periodic structures, making the music bold, avant-garde, and dynamic.

(E) Philosophical Content

The aesthetic characteristics of classical ballet, such as "turnout, pointe, straight lines, and upright posture," reflect European court influences and Christian spiritual pursuits. Aristocrats wore high heels to signify status, later evolving into pointe shoes for female dancers. Ballet movements, emphasizing upward and elongated postures, symbolize the search for divinity, with arabesque

poses creating cruciform shapes to convey spiritual aspirations. Classical ballet narratives often depict the struggle between good and evil, with clear character delineations and rich imagination, embodying classical themes.

Modern ballet, influenced by Western modern dance, emphasizes the spiritual world. Isadora Duncan's principles of "freedom of body and spirit, unity of life and dance, and harmony of body and soul" profoundly impacted choreographers like Fokine and Nijinsky. Fokine advocated reforming rather than abandoning ballet, establishing five principles of modern ballet that guided future creativity. Modern ballet reflects contemporary social concerns and artists' introspection, integrating diverse artistic influences to create pieces with distinct contemporary characteristics and unique artistic styles.

(F) Training Value

Classical ballet training, rooted in centuries of development, is a scientifically based and standardized dance training system. It follows the body's skeletal, muscular, and physiological development principles, progressing gradually. Classical ballet not only influences ballet choreography but also has rigorous classroom training requirements. Professional ballet dancers undergo at least seven years of training, applicable to other dance forms and related arts like rhythmic gymnastics and acrobatics. Training includes barre work, center practice, jumps, turns, and pointe work, enhancing dancers' muscle strength and overall dance quality. Supplementary courses like character dance, pas de deux, and performance classes develop dancers' versatility, preparing them for diverse roles.

Modern ballet training builds on classical foundations, offering more freedom and scope for expression. It emphasizes internal body awareness and development, exploring various physical dynamics and integrating diverse dance elements. Modern ballet training liberates and innovates dancers' bodies, enhancing coordination and expressiveness, fostering self-discovery and body consciousness.

IV. Conclusion

Ballet's enduring vitality over centuries lies in its adaptability and innovation, progressing with the times. Classical ballet, the "jewel" of European classical dance, created timeless masterpieces and left a rich legacy, forming the foundation for contemporary ballet training and creation. Modern ballet, vibrant and dynamic, continuously integrates various dance arts, creating rich dance vocabularies and attracting art enthusiasts with its expressive and diverse techniques.

From classical "Swan Lake" to Bourne's male "Swan Lake," we witness the evolution from classical to modern ballet, demonstrating dance's powerful vitality. Dance transcends mere aesthetic entertainment, using diverse languages and creative methods to convey different ideas,

touching hearts, inspiring emotions, and bringing strength and hope.

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