

Stephanie Jordan

Re-Visioning Nineteenth-Century Music Through Ballet.

The Work of Sir Frederick Ashton

Sir Frederick Ashton, founder choreographer of The Royal Ballet, was a noted exponent of nineteenth-century music, especially ballet music. Consider his *Les Rendezvous* (1933, Daniel-François-Esprit Auber), *Les Patineurs* (1937, Giacomo Meyerbeer), and *Birthday Offering* (1956, Alexander Glazunov); then his two/three act ballets *La Fille mal gardée* (1960, mainly Ferdinand Hérold), *Sylvia* (1952, Léo Delibes), and *The Two Pigeons* (1961, André Messager); and finally the two dances to music from *La Source* (Delibes and Léon Minkus), training pieces for the Royal Academy of Dancing (RAD) Solo Seal examinations (circa 1956). Nearly all these ballets are to French ballet music for ballet-divertissements within, as well as independent from, opera. Yet we could add Ashton's settings of passages from Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky's *The Sleeping Beauty* and *Swan Lake*, his series of ballets to scores by Franz Liszt, *The Dream* (1964) to incidental music for Shakespeare's *Midsummer Night's Dream* by Felix Mendelssohn that sounds as if composed for dance, and *A Month in the Country* (1976) to Frédéric Chopin (based on the play by Turgenev) which, as we shall see later, has a number of links with nineteenth-century Paris. *Month* is set to three early Chopin scores for piano and orchestra that are full of dances and dance rhythms. (Ashton maintained a penchant for more recent French music too: he set Darius Milhaud, Paul Dukas, Erik Satie, Francis Poulenc, Claude Debussy and, on a number of occasions, Maurice Ravel.)¹

Most of these ballets are well-known Ashton, amongst his finest work, and never lost from the repertory. British choreographer Richard Alston has suggested that such music, with its light and crisp rhythms, admirably suits the "lightweight and feathery texture of the batterie and intricate footwork"² in Ashton's style. This movement style is much closer to the French and Danish romantic ballet of the mid-nineteenth century, as manifest in *La Sylphide* and *Giselle*, than to the Russian school that followed, with its Tchaikovsky classics. The critic Alastair Macaulay proposes that Ashton also used this music to look back to a world where "romantic flirtation might combine with social formality more comfortably than in a twentieth-century setting".³

1 An expanded account of some of the ballets discussed in this chapter appears in Chapter 4 of Stephanie Jordan: *Moving Music. Dialogues with Music in Twentieth-Century Ballet*, London 2000, pp. 187–266.

2 Richard Alston: *Appropriate Steps*, in: *Dance Theatre Journal* 2/3 (Autumn 1984), pp. 8–9, here p. 8.

3 Alastair Macaulay: *Ashton's Classicism and Les Rendezvous*, in: *Studies in Dance History* 3/2 (Fall 1992), pp. 9–14, here p. 10.

A second point about French nineteenth-century ballet music is that it contained strong references to the theatrical narrative traditions of the time, especially to opera, both dance and music being gestural, whether through song or the genre then termed *ballet-pantomime*. The music was much more than a background of familiar dance rhythms from social dance, waltzes, mazurkas, polkas, or marches. Aligning himself with nineteenth-century practices also helped Ashton tell stories through dance: he adopted the nineteenth-century piecemeal tradition of ballet reproduction that sometimes used the same score (edited, arranged or added to) and often modified the original story. A regular collaborator was John Lanchbery (following Constant Lambert as Ashton's musical advisor and conductor), who arranged scores and sometimes added material of his own: for *La Fille mal gardée* (which, alongside Hérold, contained interpolations from the original anonymous Fille score used by Jean Dauberval in 1789 and a tune from the 1864 Berlin Fille composed by Peter Ludwig Hertel), and later, *Two Pigeons*, *The Dream*, and *Month*. He also edited parts of *The Sleeping Beauty* and *Swan Lake*.

An especially subtle example of the proximity between ballet and opera in Ashton's mind is *Month*, telling the story of a young tutor, Beliaev, who disrupts the emotional stability of a Russian family, particularly Natalia, the lady of the household. But first let us consider the links with Paris. Ashton enjoyed the evidence that Turgenev lived in Paris and probably met not only Chopin there, but also George Sand, whom Beliaev mentions admiringly in the play. The setting of the dance is 1850, when the play was written and only shortly after composer and writer were likely to have met. The Russian upper classes also looked west for cultural inspiration, commonly speaking French amongst themselves. But Ashton might have known that there was too a strong community of Polish exiles in Paris around this time and that Polish national dances featured prominently both at public balls and in the theatre.⁴ The three early Chopin scores used in *Month* are as follows: the Variations in B-flat major on a theme from Mozart's *Don Giovanni* "Là ci darem la mano" for piano and orchestra (Op. 2), the Grand Fantasy in A major on Polish Airs for piano and orchestra (Op. 13), and the Andante Spianato in G major for piano solo together with the Grand Polonaise in E-flat major for piano and orchestra (Op. 22).

Ashton has suggested that the Mozart theme "Là ci darem" encouraged him to devise an operatic structure based on recitative and aria alternation, but there are also moments of quasi recitative in Chopin's music, all used for silent action. In the Polonaise (bars 77–84), for example, the piano style is declamatory, as Natalia's admirer Rakitin points to

4 Lisa C. Arkin/Marian Smith: National Dance in the Romantic Ballet, in: *Rethinking the Sylph*, ed. by Lynn Garafola, Hanover, NH, 1997, pp. 11–68.

the rose that Natalia has given Beliaev and gestures him to leave. Moreover, the first part of Variation V is made up of a series of brief, contrasting musical phrases, to which Ashton fits Beliaev's first entrance, the acknowledgements all round, a mimed gesture to each music gesture and a new character for each change of orchestration. The episode when Natalia chances upon Beliaev and Vera (Natalia's ward) embracing, listens appalled to Vera's explanation, and eventually strikes her, is set to music that contains firm gestures; to histrionic effect, she opens and closes the double doors to the room on the piano arpeggios; chord accents mark the motions when first Natalia and then Vera pushes the other away aggressively. The musical exaggeration of the confrontation adds a touch of humour.⁵

In *La Fille mal gardée*, we find the characteristic use of speaking tunes from the French romantic ballet, fragments of melodies from folk songs or opera arias, their original connotations brought to bear within, and help explain, the new situation of a ballet narrative. In Hérold's *Fille* (1828), for instance, the heroine Lise's entrance on tiptoe so that she does not wake her mother is aptly illustrated by the opening chorus from Gioachino Rossini's *The Barber of Seville* (1816), "Piano, pianissimo". The opening number likewise borrows from Jean-Paul-Égide Martini's *Le Droit du seigneur* (1783), which the *Fille* plot lightly alludes to, and the storm scene comes from the storm in Rossini's *La Cenerentola* (1817). One of the *Pas de deux* for Lise and her lover Colas uses airs from Donizetti's *L'Elisir d'amore* (1832); the music was interpolated for the ballerina Fanny Elssler in 1837.

My focus at this point, however, is on the detailed rhythmic relations between Ashton's choreography and the nineteenth-century music he loved so much. These are central to what today are called "choreomusical" relationships, reflecting the establishment of a new cross-modal entity made up of the two media in interaction within a composite, choreomusical form. In this regard, we will discover that music using the relatively simple rhythms of social dance belies Ashton's own rhythmic intricacies. Owing to lack of sufficient research, we cannot be as certain as we might wish, but there is good reason from what we do know to believe that these complications extend beyond nineteenth-century dance practice.

There is film proof that Ashton had begun to establish his particular rhythmic approach by the 1930s. The ballet-divertissement *Les Rendezvous* is a plotless series of dances, as if at a party, to the ballet music from Auber's five-act Grand opéra *L'Enfant*

5 A Month in the Country, performed by the Royal Ballet, filmed in 1978, on Youtube in 5 parts, starting with: www.youtube.com/watch?v=DqWSu5jiBw, the scene described to be seen in part 3: <https://youtu.be/yLYdYV6reeg?t=1m13s> (last consulted 26 October 2016).



EXAMPLE 1 Daniel-François-Esprit Auber: *Les Rendezvous*,
opening music (for the grand jeté sequences)

prodigue arranged by Lambert. It is interesting from the outset. The timings of the three opening grand jeté sequences are all different, in comprising two, three or four changes of weight across 2-bar musical units. The accent is sometimes up, at the top of the leap, coinciding with the musical downbeat, sometimes down with the musical downbeat. The effect varies: quick, light and soaring, or slow and boldly deliberate, each entry followed by a fleet departure (example 1).

Syncopations across the music testify to Ashton's freedom and confidence in handling rhythm. Elsewhere in *Les Rendezvous*, two men and one woman process with a series of petits jetés devants, but against the square eight-quaver count musical structure (two bars of 2/4), they alternate arms up and down on the weak counts as follows:

- Phrase 1: First 8 counts: On counts 1 (R arm up), 3 (L arm up) and 6 (R arm up); then 8 counts of plain jetés (arms still)
- Phrase 2: First 8 counts: On counts 3 (L arm up) and 6 (R arm up); then 8 counts of plain jetés (arms still)
- Phrases 3 and 4: Repeat as phrase 2

Looking now at the ballerina solo to a waltz (created for Alicia Markova), we find a dance with immense variety in step rhythm and content, facing and dynamics. One moment is of particular interest. The music moves into duple time – at least the melody, the most prominent part, is in duple time – creating 3×2 , then 2×3 , patterns equivalent to four bars of triple time in total. Meanwhile, the ballerina's turning steps up on pointe highlight the change to more rapid figuration in the music. But she maintains the triple metre, which is now hidden in the bass (using the hemiola musical device of counterpointing 2s with 3s).

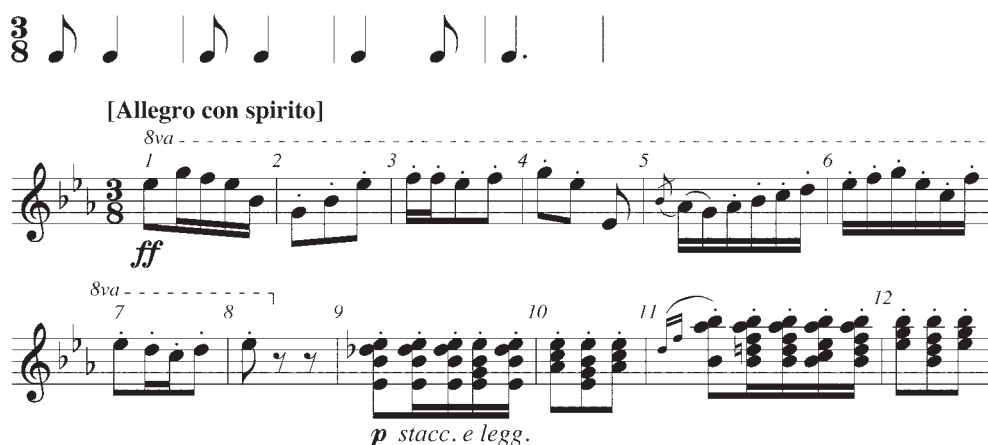
We might suggest that Ashton took the easy way out here and simply carried on with the established triple time, but it is a common stylistic device of his lightly to cross what you most readily hear. Here he highlights the crossing metre or hemiola more than it would seem from the music alone: as a slightly unsettling push and pull between visual and aural. We do not know how this music was choreographed originally in 1850, but it is likely that, for dancers then, as now, it would be easier to carry on dancing within their own established metre than to diverge from this for a few bars.

With sparkling wit, Ashton introduces a similar procedure at the beginning of the Scherzo in *The Dream*.⁶ Four fairies cross in a rectangular pathway round Puck and, as he bounds and turns to the basic 3/4 time, they travel in 2/4 with little springy beaten steps, small and fleet because of their quicker rhythm and with, no less, but a different kind of, buoyancy. The landing at the end of a *pas de chat* is the delicious beginning of the next phrase. But Ashton knows a good deal about the fun that already exists in Mendelssohn's music, the melodic riffs in 2-beat units crossing the established 3/4 framework, and the syncopations weighting the second beat of the bar. When they next dance together, it is these syncopations that the fairies choose to enjoy, matching them with sharp *relevés*.

Another particularly lively example of crossing metre occurs in the second scene of *La Fille mal gardée*, in one of the joyous dances for the villagers out in the country, with a flute player in their midst. The music is highly repetitive, far more so than Ashton's choreography, and for one central occurrence of the musical refrain, he has the dancers in couples move in 3s against the 4s in the music, in the sequence of a *pas de chat* followed by two steps. But there is an extra touch of complication, even added tension, here as the dancers move in canon with their partners, the menfolk jumping first and their partners two beats later – up and down, tugging at each other, in a kind of playful argument. Soon, they are back in unison, all tension resolved.

Ashton also thwarts rhythmic expectations by shifting the musical accent from coinciding with movement up on *pointe* or in the air to down in *plié*, or vice versa. This happens in one of the most striking dances in the ballet-divertissement *Les Patineurs* (arr. Lambert), which uses skating imagery and is set to ballet music, two arias and a Prelude from Meyerbeer's five-act *Grand opéra Le Prophète* (1849) and three-act *opéra comique L'Étoile du nord* (1854). During his first variation, the virtuoso figure of the Blue Boy travels upstage in a turning, jumping sequence performed three times. The sequence hints at a symmetry within itself, showing two landings in second arabesque on the first beat of bars 2 and 4 respectively. But their effect is slightly different. The first time, the shape is quickly diverted into *relevé* with the arabesque leg brought out *devant*, a syncopation weighting the second beat of the 3/8 bar. The second time the arabesque is given greater weight, the effect of two whole beats (1 and 2) before the transition turn into the repeating sequence. The sequence creates the rhythm in example 2, which is not suggested by the music. The sequence is also interesting in demonstrating different qualities of emphasis,

6 The *Dream*, performed by the Royal Ballet, filmed in 1978: <https://youtu.be/6qKxtoCTUIg?t=33m22s> (last consulted 26 October 2016).



EXAMPLE 2 Giacomo Meyerbeer: *Les Patineurs*, Blue Boy Variation, music for the repeating dance sequence (NB: bars numbered from the beginning of the dance sequence)

upwards in relevé (in bar 2) and downwards in plié (in bar 4), the point made more firmly by the inbuilt symmetry.⁷

Such shifting of the musical accent also happens in the feisty heroine Lise's Fanny Elssler solo in *La Fille mal gardée*. She pulls from plié to relevé in fifth on the musical accent, the downbeat, in a short-long rhythm (dancer Lesley Collier does this four times, Nadia Nerina three times). Next, she jumps down into plié on the musical accent to pull up to fifth immediately afterwards, in a short-long rhythm. Nerina emphasises the distinction of the plié, adding pressure and slightly lengthening it. Again, because there is a clear relationship between the dance ideas, the rhythmic change, the change in quality of the dance accent, is emphasized.⁸

Ashton's pair of RAD Solo Seal Variations (circa 1956), one demi-caractère, one classical, reveal similar devices and many more, but, not being part of the theatre repertory, they are barely known. Former Royal Ballet dancer Pamela May brought them to light during the 1994 conference *Following Sir Fred's Steps* at the University of Roehampton, pointing out that they were both choreographed on Lynn Seymour, who was in her final-year graduate class at the time.⁹ Their music comes from *La Source* (1866), by Delibes

- 7 Les Patineurs, performed by the Joffrey Ballet, filmed in 1977, part 1: <https://youtu.be/I3muoVkvVyM?t=5m37s> (last consulted 26 October 2016).
- 8 The Royal Ballet: *La Fille mal gardée*, produced by John Vernon, BBC, 4 May 1981 (Lesley Collier as Lise); The Royal Ballet: *La Fille mal gardée*, produced/directed by Margaret Dale, BBC, 27 December 1962 (Nadia Nerina as Lise).
- 9 Pamela May's Ashton conference presentation is documented in: *Following Sir Fred's Steps. Ashton's Legacy*, ed. by Stephanie Jordan and Andrée Grau, London 1996, pp. 158–160; the Roehampton University library houses a 1994 film of the complete conference.

and Minkus – Ashton had turned to this score a few years before, needing some additional numbers when he staged his *Sylvia*.

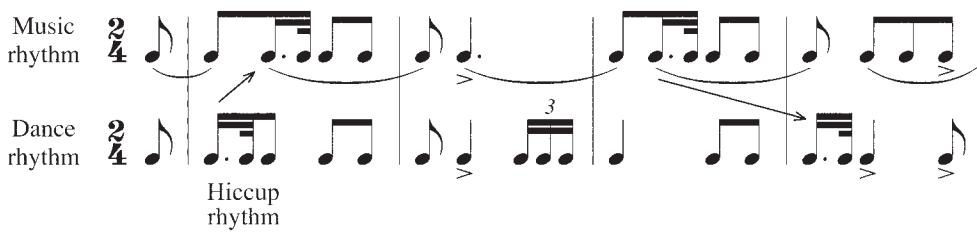
In her lecture-demonstration, May emphasized that Ashton's repeats to musical repeats are hardly ever exactly the same. Discussing the first, *demi-caractère* solo – the Scherzo-Polka *Pas de Naïla* to music by Delibes – in 2/4 time, she drew attention to a phrase finishing in attitude on pointe, directed to the left then the right, then, on repeat, again to left and right, but now finishing in attitude in *plié*. So much repetition only emphasizes any change that occurs, and especially because here, harmonic change also highlights the *pliés*. Another moment in the same variation shows how an arabesque on pointe marking the closure of a unit of material appears transformed when it contacts another beat of the musical bar. The arabesque is initially preceded by a single *pas de chat*, and the effect of the whole 4/4 one-bar unit is *moderato* and sustained, articulating beats 1 and 3. We get to know the arabesque: we see it three times. Finally, the fourth time, introduced more vivaciously by three *pas de chat* and happening later, on the final weak beat 4 of the bar, it seems barely there. The dancer scampers through the sequence in order to fit in all the movement. When we see the arabesque in this guise, we are surprised, and there is no hanging around in the position before the next dance material begins. In this variation too, there are a couple of occasions where Ashton leaves the musical rhythm completely, in series of rapid, simple steps “through” the music: “dizzy” feet is how May described one such passage.

With their swift rate of event (steps on every fast quaver beat), their sudden, unexpected changes of speed and shifts in dynamics and direction – a sharp turn of the head or change of facing creates Ashton's favourite “surprise” – these two solos are wonderfully testing, both musically and technically. These are all features of the mature Ashton, feeding his work for the theatre. In the next ballet that we examine, Seymour takes the major role, now as a professional dancer.

A Month in the Country is full of Ashtonian devices of independent dance rhythms and accents creating lively conversation with the music. The opening phrase in Natalia's “*Là ci darem*” variation (example 3) wends its way deftly around the music, holding to its pulse but meeting and parting with its accent structure, and her little “hiccup” rhythm cheekily anticipates and then echoes the same rhythm in Mozart's tune.¹⁰

The performance of Lynn Seymour, who created the role of Natalia (filmed for television in 1978), is remarkable for its variety and gradation of accent, from the barely-present articulation of *bourrées*, toe taps and *petits battements*, to the dynamic swoop of body and arms. Or an off the beat *piqué* into a new direction, drawn out with a light breath, contrasts with the triumphant printing of an on the beat *piqué* accent with arms and head

10 *A Month in the Country*, <https://youtu.be/DqWSusj1rBw?t=2m36s> (last consulted 26 October 2016).



EXAMPLE 3 A Month in the Country, Variation 1 (Natalia),
rhythmic analysis of the opening dance phrase

gesturing affirmatively. Again, sometimes, Natalia steps down, sometimes up, on the musical downbeat. The solo is already restless with its thicket of steps and zig-zag changes of direction. Musical and rhythmic means contribute further to this impression of excitement.

Anthony Dowell, celebrated amongst male dancers for his performance in adage, created the role of Beliaev, and the variation that signals that character's arrival, is telling.¹¹ Although his style is mainly lyrical and legato, at one point he shows us a series of strange little changes, jumps with the feet alternating front and back, and then one more with his legs out to the side (the accent up),¹² with his head twisting impatiently left and right. It is as if his body suddenly has a mind of its own, until finally his feet melt into the floor and meet musical event precisely. Then he keeps the energy going after the music slows down, with another set of changes. In interview, Dowell has referred to these jumps as sudden, "mad" changes.¹³ So what is going on? Has he had a sudden brainwave? Is he excited or nervous about something? Is the effect perhaps a little comical too? The jumps break up the potential sentimentality of non-stop lyricism. From time to time in the ballet, we see too Beliaev's motif of sharp (but lightly established) arabesques directed to one side of the stage and then the other, again not musically-driven. Crossing any pulse, such gestures look a little wild against Chopin's continuing legato.

Dowell confirms that Ashton always wanted to avoid "levelness". He would work like a demon to heighten the contrast between slow and fast, languorous and sharp. "Hold back until you have to rush in", he told Cynthia Harvey, rehearsing her in *The Sleeping Beauty*.¹⁴ Let us consider the near stillness at the musical climax of the final Pas de deux in *Two Pigeons*, odd and plain yet at the same time ultra-vivid, where the couple's arms rise and fall while their heads bow and arch, just that, up/down, down/up, in perfect

¹¹ A Month in the Country, <https://youtu.be/DqWSusjiBw?t=9m11s> (last consulted 26 October 2016).

¹² The up accent here can also be seen in the jumps of the Jester in Ashton's *Cinderella* (Prokofiev, 1948) and of Puck in the Scherzo of *The Dream*.

¹³ Author's interview with Anthony Dowell, 8 June 1993.

¹⁴ Author's interview with Cynthia Harvey, 27 September 1996.

communion. She suddenly escapes, only to race back across the stage into his arms, which in turn ignites a series of huge, swooping, circular lifts down the diagonal. That is a totally different way of treating climax, by opposition, and nothing in the music is equivalent to such a shift in tempo and manner. Devices of contrast, such as this, reveal unbridled passion and dangerously strong feeling.

It is clear from all the fore-going examples that they reveal the particular interaction that occurs between two media, which is not a simple matter of a choreographer duplicating, or merging into, musical information, rather of him making something new from the meeting of the media. At the same time, Ashton brought his own twentieth-century understanding to the nineteenth-century past. Like many other choreographers, he was stimulated by firm, relatively simple, existing musical constructions, but more than most, he re-visioned the music even as the shadow of its original identity lingers. He also brings to the music the higher density of information characteristic of his own times. Thus, he gets more edge out of the music, and it is quite possible to read his irregular impulses and jump-cut dynamics as anxious and thrilling, even shocking, as he reaches into our visceral regions, certainly not as “romantic” in the weaker, more sentimental, sense of the term. We may well hear Ashton’s nineteenth-century music in a new way, with new highlights (and perhaps some erasures).

In the examples discussed, Ashton shows us that there are many different ways in which to use music in dance, and his choices betray an individual choreomusical style, different from the styles of other choreographers. Yet dancing this Ashton choreomusical style to full effect is one of today’s biggest challenges. It is not merely about physical training, but also musical training, the capacity to listen intently to, and converse with, a score.

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