**Petrouchka Premiers at the Theatre de Chatelet**

By Meg Stirling

On Tuesday, June 13th, Michel Fokine’s latest ballet, *Petrouchka*, premiered at the Theatre de Chatelet in Paris. With the score composed by Igor Stravinsky, and the libretto, costumes and set designed by Alexandre Benois, the ballet is truly a masterpiece “created under the aegis of the Diaghilev collaborators because of the particularly harmonious balance of its components of libretto, choreography, music, and décor” (Lee 243).

The story of *Petrouchka* is set in St. Petersburg during the pre-Lenten Butter Week. The primary characters in this ballet are puppets who “act out a poignant love triangle in their rooms behind the stage of their little theater” (Lee 243). During the first act, the Magician (Enrico Cecchetti) sets up his booth, and displays three life-size puppets – the Moor (Alexander Orlov), the Ballerina (Tamara Karsavina), and Petrouchka, the ugly clown (Vaslav Nijinsky). Although Petrouchka is clearly in love with the Ballerina, the Ballerina prefers the Moor. During the fourth and final act, the jealous Moor kills Petrouchka. The audience questions whether or not Petrouchka is merely a puppet until his ghost appears on the roof of the Magician’s booth. So long as the imagination can rise to the challenge, the insinuation of humanity in the three puppets is successful.

Unlike recent ballets, this ballet is clever, modern, and baroque (MacDonald 76). In this sense, it is

All of the music in the first act of *Petrouchka* has fabulous “integrity, energy, and inexhaustible humor” (Taruskin 67). The music, “with which Stravinsky clothes the outer acts” of *Petrouchka* contains many folk and popular tunes (Taruskin 69) and it “evokes the atmosphere, and the sights, and the sounds of the Fair” in a brilliant manner (Horwitz 1120). The music that accompanies Petrouchka in his cell, however, is more brittle, sharp, and almost grotesque.

Since this ballet is so unique, it is best to critique it based upon Fokine’s five choreographic principles. According to Fokine, “each ballet should have a style of movement created especially for it according to the demands of the subject matter and the musical scores. The classical steps should be modified… according to the dictates of the thematic material” (Lee 238). In *Petrouchka*, Fokine demonstrates the ideas contained in his first principle. The Moor, for example, dances “all en dehors (turned out)” and Petrouchka dances “all en dedans (turned in)” (Scholl 46). These subtle changes in body positioning show “the self-satisfied Moor, an extrovert” compared to “the pathetic, frightened Petrouchka, an introvert [who] withdraws into himself” (Scholl 46).

In addition, Fokine claims that the dance movement “should convey (continued on page 2)
the unfolding of the dramatic action, thus eliminating the inclusion of mime.” Similarly, he believes that “the formalized pantomimic gesture of the previous ages should be replaced by an expressiveness created from total body movement” (Lee 238). In Petrouchka, the movement style of Orlov, Karsavina, and Nijinsky disregards some elements typically contained in classical ballet technique, as each of the dancers fully embody the movement qualities of the characters which they portray. It is because the movement comes from “the inwardness of the characters” that mime is an unnecessary element in Petrouchka (Nelson 9).

According to Fokine’s fourth principle, “all dancers in a work, including the corps de ballet, should be an intricate part of the whole” (Lee 238). Fokine achieves this through his exquisite use of crowd scenes. In choreographing Petrouchka, Fokine gave “each dancer an individual characterization that adds vitality and flavor to the festive setting” (Lee 224). Instead of creating divertissements for the corps de ballet, Fokine combined “over 100 choreographic themes” into the crowd scenes (Horwitz 1120). The first scene opens on “a square filled with diverse people—peasants, aristocrats, soldiers, gypsies, nursemaids, street performers, and vendors.” Although each character performs “varied and multiple activities,” the chaos that is created by the dancing crowd makes the fantasy ballet more realistic (Horwitz 1119).

Finally, Fokine believes that all aspects of the ballet “should be on an equal footing.” The dancing, music, sets, and costumes, for instance, “should reflect the collaborative effort toward a cohesive creative product” (Lee 238). In the first act of Petrouchka, Benois’ set captures the look of the Butter Week Fair, “Fokine’s choreography makes it come alive with a number of typical characters,” and Stravinsky’s score contains thematic material that accompanies both the mood and the action (Au 80). After observing the ballet, it is clear that Benois, the librettist, enhanced Stravinsky’s music in an appropriate fashion. In addition, “Benois’ stylization and emphasis on the angular character of the décor [is] an ideal visual parallel to the discordant syncopations of Stravinsky’s music and to the rigid, abrupt patterns of Fokine’s choreography” (Bowlt 35).

**Petrouchka, Continued from page 1**

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**Ballerina costume design by Alexandre Benois (Horwitz 1120)**

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**Michel Fokine (Nelson 5)**

*Petrouchka* is truly unlike any ballet previously performed at the Theatre de Chatelet. The ballet *Petrouchka* is a slice of St. Petersburg folk life, mixed with a mystical tale of puppets. Most remarkably, Fokine’s choreography of this ballet blends solo elements, crowd scenes, and ensembles “in such a way that each element emerges and returns seamlessly to the whole” (Horwitz 1120). *Petrouchka* is a fresh, and captivating performance that exemplifies the ways in which Fokine is able “to exploit the combination of realism and fantasy characteristic of folktales to create psychologically sophisticated roles for characters one would never expect to encounter” on or off the stage (Nelson 9).
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Works Cited


