

Ballets: Serenade and Concerto Barocco

Choreography: Balanchine

Composer: Peter Ilyich Tchaikovsky and Johann Sebastian Bach

## Who Was Balanchine?

George Balanchine was the most influential choreographer of classical ballet in 20th-century America and a towering personality on the ballet scene! He is known for pioneering new ideas that shaped the way ballet was presented in the West. His story begins in Russia.

Born January 22, 1904, in St. Petersburg, Russia, George Balanchine (whose original name is Georgy Melitonovich Balanchivadze) joined the Imperial School of Ballet of the Mariinsky Theatre in 1914. He was part of a generation of dancers who kept ballet alive during World War I. This wasn't easy! In 1917, the school closed down because of the war, and Balanchine had to support himself for a year doing odd jobs and playing piano at cinemas- he was only 13 years old.

The school reopened in 1918 and Balanchine was able to graduate in 1921. Being the son of a composer, he had an excellent grasp of music and also studied music at the Petrograd Conservatory from 1921 - 1924.

Balanchine loved choreography and had already begun creating dances as a student. He choreographed pieces for himself and fellow students as part of experimental ballets performed at the Imperial School. Even though the school's directors discouraged this activity, Balanchine didn't give up his ideas.

In 1925, he was one of the first dancers to leave the Soviet Union during a European tour with other dancers. While on tour in Paris, he met a man named Serge Diaghilev and joined his Ballet Russes company in France. Diaghilev encouraged him to shorten his long, Georgian name to Balanchine. It was Diaghilev who first saw great things in Balanchine as a choreographer, and the two worked together until Diaghilev's death in 1929. Balanchine's career continued to expand as he went on to work with the Royal Danish Ballet and Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, building a reputation with his works. In 1933 he was one of the founders of avant-garde company Les Ballets 1933, whose works caught the attention of American dance enthusiast Lincoln Kirstein.

Kirstein invited Balanchine to come to America, to organize and co-found the School of American Ballet and the American Ballet Company. Balanchine accepted and began the second half of his career in the United States, where he ultimately shaped the way ballet was taught and performed in the West.

After World War II, Kirstein founded the Ballet Society, which developed into the New York City Ballet. Balanchine created most of New York City's Ballet's extensive repertoire, including full-length

versions of *Nutcracker* and *Don Quixote*. His influence spread across the country and across multiple platforms, even creating pieces for Hollywood movies and Broadway musicals.

He continued as artistic director and ballet master of the New York City Ballet until his death in 1983. Though based in New York City, Balanchine was an international choreographer. Now, almost every ballet company in the world performs his dances. He created over 465 works, typified by a cool, neoclassical style. He created plotless ballets, focusing more on the movement and music than on glitz and glam. He never featured a star in his ballets, believing that the performance should outshine the individual.

Two of Balanchine's creations that helped further his reputation were *Serenade* and *Concerto Barocco*. These neoclassical ballets are frequently performed around the world today.

### Serenade

In 1934, Balanchine choreographed his first full-length ballet in America to Tchaikovsky's *Serenade in C major for String Orchestra*. *Serenade* tells a musical story, without any specific narrative. It opens with strong, spacious chords, followed by melodious, deeply felt music with repeating themes. A group of girls stand motionless in crisscrossing lines for the first chords, then respond to the music with simple gestures at first, flowing into patterns and groups that grow increasingly more complex. Each dancer wears flowing, blue tulle skirts. The lighting is kept soft and shadowed, adding a romantic feel to the ballet. As the ballet progresses, various dancers enter and exit, and a loose story seems to unfold as the music explores four different qualities, suggestive of different human emotions and situations. Balanchine even included some real-life mistakes his dancers made—such as arriving late and falling on stage—into the piece, adding humanity and realism.

### Concerto Barocco

In 1940, Balanchine choreographed this piece to Bach's *Concerto in D minor for Two Violins*. *Concerto Barocco* has no plot or subject, instead, Balanchine drew focus to the music with exact movements executed without embellishment. Balanchine created *Concerto Barocco* with strong jazz elements, adding syncopation (making parts or all of a dance off beat to the tune; interrupting the regular flow or rhythm of the music with accented movements) and turned-in hips. He often told his dancers during rehearsals to "Make it jazzy. Lead with the hip." As a result, *Concerto Barocco* is marked by its precision, quick changes, and syncopation. The dancers wear simple white leotards with short skirts, complementing the precise nature of the dancing. At the beginning of the ballet, the dancers perform variously as one group, two groups, and in duets. In the second part, the music changes to a touching melody while a soloist and her partner are featured during a slower *pas de deux*, accented by the corps de ballet's responsive movements. The final part of the ballet is marked by quick, syncopated rhythms and jumps that appear spontaneous and joyous.