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## 10 Ballet

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The economics of ballet is impossible to understand without understanding its history, its heritage and its working. *Dancing* can be traced back for almost as long as mankind's history. From early on in civilized societies, it was considered an art of the theatre. In ancient Greek mythology, to give an example, Terpsichore, a daughter of Zeus and Mnemosyne, herself being the goddess of fine arts, music and literature, was believed to be the Muse not only of dance, but of choral poetry, or choral dance, as well, thus giving a clear indication of the high esteem in which dance was held.

The part of theatre art which today is referred to as *ballet* – the noun is merely derived from the Italian word for dance, or dancing – originates in the fifteenth-century Renaissance. Its history can be divided into two parts, the first of which is easily told and of limited economic interest. Ballet had begun as court entertainment in northern Italy and became more widely known when King Charles VIII of France, in his quest for the throne of Naples, invaded Italy. Just like Italian cuisine, ballet and its Italian school immediately conquered France, which so far had only indulged in spectacles called masquerades, these being closer to wrestling than to dance. The victory was short-lived, though. Ballet began to stagnate, then to degenerate into mere acrobatics. It had lost the naturalness of dancing, inspired by a Greek muse, the ability to express human feeling such as love, sorrow or even the Seven Sins without using any words or sounds other than music, and to communicate to an audience whatever its language, or nationality. In the late seventeenth century, in what seemed to be a last resort, elements of ballet were integrated into opera. As *divertissements*, they certainly helped to popularize the latter, but they detracted from what ballet should have been all about.

However, the vocabulary, that is the language as well as the steps, continued to survive in a few places, if only just, passed on through a sometimes very thin line of ballet masters, such as Jean Georges Noverre in the eighteenth century, and with it an original spirit, and a continuous generic line going back to Italian Renaissance ballet schools.

Still, ballet as a theatre art would have vanished had it not been for the Romantic movement at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Jean Jacques Rousseau's picture of the *noble savage*, the explicit and implicit integration of the supernatural, as in Heinrich Heine's poems and Caspar

David Friedrich's paintings, and the gradual amalgamation of Romanticism and the early democracy movements across Europe found in ballet a perfect complement. Romantic ballet, though, did not confine itself to supernatural elements. Local colour, regardless of whether this was reasonably realistic, as with most Spanish themes, or completely fantastic, as with the Indian temple dancers in *La Bayadère*, was just as enthusiastically welcomed as were Scottish *Sylphides* or German *Wilis*. The bell-shaped tutu was first used in *Giselle*, and Danish ladies began to wear their hair à *La Sylphide*. *Pointe* work, while already having been in use in the eighteenth century, only now fully developed into one coherent system of elements, though not for merely aesthetic value but as a means of expression for the supernatural, to be identified as elevated steps, *ballonnée*, in contrast to the more earth-bound steps of this world.

Ballerinas gained pop star-like status. A pair of Marie Taglioni's ballet shoes were once cooked and served to St Petersburg balletomanes with a special sauce, and when Fanny Ellsler became the first ballerina to dance in North America, the United States Congress had to be adjourned for the first time in its history owing to a lack of quorum because most of its members were at the Washington theatre to watch her. Two old schools, Italian ballet and French ballet, and a new one, Danish ballet, whose founder August Bournonville had been a student of Noverre, became the driving force, to be joined in the twentieth century, first by the British school and then by the American school. In contrast, Russia never had a proper national school of its own. Even though a ballet school had been opened in St Petersburg in 1738, and ballet, by soon becoming one of the favourite pastimes of the Imperial court, began to blossom in Russia, this was by no means Russian ballet. It rather continued to 'buy' Italian or French ballet masters like Carlo Blasis and Enrico Cecchetti, or Marius Petipa, respectively, and Italian dancers like Virginia Zucchi. Russian ballet only came to the fore with Alexander Gorsky's 1900 revival of Petipa's *Don Quixote*, paving the way for Mikhail Fokine, and Serge Diaghilev and his *Ballets Russes*, the adjective now very rightly used. Paradoxically, though, Russian ballet very soon could only be viewed outside Russia.

Setbacks occurred. Whether or not the tragic death of a young French ballerina, Emma Livry, played a part (in 1862, during a rehearsal, her costume caught fire from one of the stage lights and she died of her horrific injuries months later; Théophile Gautier, the creator of *Giselle*, later wrote of white butterflies accompanying the dancer's coffin on its way to her final resting place), French ballet declined. Russia soon became infected. Again, the theatre part of ballet became neglected, with the number of *fouettées* a dancer could manage becoming more important than anything else, including choreography. Dancers were not supposed to

mime, and neither were hands or the upper body supposed to support any acting. It was only a short interruption. If one point in time is needed to mark the return of ballet's principles, a worthy candidate would be Fokine's 1914 letter to *The Times*, setting out his famous five theses. Ballet had become synonymous with Romantic ballet, and every important work of the twentieth century, whether narrative or not, can be traced back to these roots.

The exile forced upon the *Ballets Russes* by the Russian revolution made Diaghilev turn to the new art forms of Western Europe. The ensuing collaboration reached a new height with Léon Massine's 1917 *Parade*, from Jean Cocteau's libretto and Erik Satie's music, with stage design and costumes provided by Pablo Picasso. Unlike opera in the eighteenth century, ballet now was the catalyst, the leading art.

Ballet today is a living art, just as it has been throughout its (Romantic) history. This is clearly reflected in the programming schedules of leading ballet companies all over the world. New works are being created, both full-evening narrative ballets for large companies, such as Kenneth Macmillan's *Manon* (1974), for the Royal Ballet, or for smaller companies like Christopher Gable's adaptation of Dickens' famous *A Christmas Carol* (1992) for Northern Theatre Ballet, and shorter works like David Bintley's *Still Life at the Penguin Café* (1988), again for the Royal Ballet, the first ecologically themed ballet. All of these are still in the respective companies' repertoires and are regularly, and successfully, performed all over the world alongside well-known classics such as *Swan Lake*. In this, today's ballet programmes are fundamentally very different from those of opera houses. Not only does the creation of the last opera which is still a success in all big opera houses – Giacomo Puccini's *Turandot* – date back three-quarters of a century, but many houses even rarely show operas created this side of the 1860s. On the other hand, while neither is commercially viable, opera in general sells far better than ballet and commands a far lesser degree of subsidization.

Like most performing arts, any ballet production, as well as the company itself, can be seen as a natural monopoly. Fixed costs are considerable. These range from the orchestra and dancers – in contrast to opera, even most of the principal artists, with the rare exception of freelance guest dancers, are employed on fixed contracts rather than on a per performance basis – to the stage set and technicians. Production is labour-intensive, with negligible substitution opportunities for artistic personnel. By assigning to every single member of the cast an individual part, as Gorsky did in *Don Quixote*, and thus making a crowd look like a real crowd again, Romantic ballet had returned to its roots: only by replacing symmetric lines with contrapuntal movements could classical ballet look natural again.

Reducing a *corps de ballet* for cost-cutting purposes would in most cases seriously compromise not only the original work but ballet as a whole. (One should note the difference from *modern dance*, or *dance theatre*, though. Its works generally are rather short-lived, rarely surviving more than a decade. Other than from training – many dancers come from classical ballet – it neither draws inspiration from nor builds up new heritage. As a consequence, there is no minimum fixed cost regarding the number of dancers either.)

Costs for an additional performance are negligible. This may change, though, if opportunity costs have to be taken into account. Especially in Europe, major ballet companies and opera companies often belong to the same commercial organization, such as the Royal Opera House. While costs are reduced by using the same stage and sharing administrative and artistic resources, both have to compete for a finite number of nights and matinees. Owing to the higher commercial viability of opera, every ballet performance then results in opportunity costs of forgone higher earnings that would have resulted if an opera had been shown instead.

Both scheduling and pricing policies may be based on a number of rationales. As a general rule of thumb, unless there is time to educate the audience, new works and mixed bills, while being important as a greater artistic challenge both to the artistic director and to the dancers, generate less revenue than famous classics. This is the case in Europe, though less so in the United States. Differences may be caused by a different tax treatment of and a fundamentally different attitude towards private donations and sponsorship, enabling American companies to pursue more long-term policies than, for example, British ones which, being at the mercy of politics most of the time, are rarely able to plan more than a year ahead. Still, classics are money spinners everywhere.

With respect to pricing, a company's objectives range from revenue maximization, coming close to profit maximization due to low marginal costs and enabling the company to spend more on commercially more risky productions favoured because of artistic considerations, to attendance maximization, making it easier to counter accusations of elitism and, in turn, secure future subsidization because of ballet's increased popularity. Demand depends not only on the particular work(s) to be shown, but on time of day, weekday and even season – during autumn and winter, demand is usually higher. On the other hand, there are, again in contrast to opera, few cross-price effects between seat categories as substitution effects are negligible. Booking patterns show that each category has its own patronage irrespective of changes in relative prices, implying that the visual angle offered by a particular category is merely different; that is, of special importance to the ballet connoisseur, rather than better or worse than another

one. In terms of Lancastrian preferences, then, the visual angle may be considered a dominant characteristic.

Most ballet companies entertain friendship schemes. While members are encouraged to make contributions either to the company in general or to some special appeal supporting a particular production – both are public goods – private goods are available to members only. Favourite among these are all kinds of look-behind-the-scenes events, especially visiting dress rehearsals or classes with opportunities to meet the dancers in person afterwards.

Owing to the lack of sufficient recording possibilities (while ballet notation helps during the creation of a new choreography, especially when doing this in a studio in direct cooperation with the dancers, it is unable to describe it the way an orchestra score works) individual ballets have to be performed in order to survive. Given the nature of its heritage, especially its vocabulary, ballet as a whole has to be performed. Otherwise it would die. Again, this makes it different from classical music – occasionally ‘new’ works from long-gone composers hidden in old manuscripts are discovered and, with little difficulty, performed probably in a way very similar to that which the composer had originally intended; it could never work with ballet – or the conservation of old paintings. Reviving a production would require the presence of people that are familiar with any of the previous productions. Regarding ballet schools, no proper teaching would be possible without at least some of the teachers being able to communicate the principles of Romantic ballet from personal experience.

Two welfare economic implications follow. First, every ballet production not only generates economic welfare in terms of a direct use value but has both an option value and an existence value as well. Second, as a production forms part of a specific school’s heritage, its conservation can be interpreted as contributing to a private good. Looking at ballet as a whole, though, it has never been one school or nation’s art alone. Without mutual stimulation, ballet would never have been able to achieve the artistic excellence and diversity which has been necessary to survive for over half of a millennium. Any support given to an individual production or company thus brings about positive external effects, too.

A final note of reflection might be appropriate. Ballet forms a significant part of Europe’s cultural heritage, just as old paintings or architecture do. Neither of the latter is seriously required to argue an economic case for conservation, but ballet is. As a further matter, ballet is standing alone in its conditions for preservation: in order for its heritage to be able to survive, ballet has to live on as a performing art. Demanding a cost–benefit analysis might sound both narrow-minded and unfair.

**See also:**

Chapter 11: Baumol's cost disease; Chapter 44: Opera.

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