

***Lettres sur la danse et sur les balletes* – choreomusicology in theory and practice**

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Abstract

Noverre was a French choreographer who applied in his ballets the aesthetic ideas about the inter-disciplinary approach of a dance performance – as we would say today. He created a new genre – *ballet d'action* – the story ballet in which dances were arranged on a unified dramatic theme, and extended to a several acts performance. In such a performance, dance represented the technical part of virtuosity, music gave the character of the movements and pantomime had to be the expressive part of a ballet.

Keywords

Ballet d'action, synthesis of arts, reform the art of ballet, “Shakespeare of the dance”, choreomusicology

Introduction

The art of scenic dance was born in France, and its masters from *le Grand Siècle* established the name “ballet” for a performance that includes dance, music and pantomime, adjusted to a coherent plot, a performance included into a dramatic action on stage.

Back in the 17th and at the beginning of the 18th century, the structure of a ballet performance was established entirely by the choreographer. After all the integrated elements (dance, pantomime, costumes, scenery) were set up, the choreographer asked the composer to work with the ideas and plans of the choreography in order to adequate the style, rhythm and tempo of the music to the specific choreography.

Due to *Academie royale de musique et de la danse* (established in 1661 in Paris) dance technique was enriched and became a difficult profession requiring solid studies, devotion and perseverance. Charles Beauchamps invented a system of dance notation aiming at the accuracy of the steps and of the dance movements. Under his direction, the ballet technique and ballet composition began a formative process: the “classical ballet rules” were established – the *en dehors* rule, the specific positions of the feet and arms, turns and high jumps techniques as well as the simplicity and elegance of the performing style.

Ballet masters and dancers searched for the specific and appropriate form and features of dance movements in order to make the ballet performance an amazing theatrical experience. Along the 17th and 18th century, ballet continued to develop its formal features but, eventually the dancers were interested merely in their body technique and skills and ballet performances became a stereotype without any expressiveness.

The first book of choreomusicology

Jean Georges Noverre (1727-1810) was a French dancer, a master of ballet and a choreographer who brought a new perspective in ballet performance. Through his reform of ballets the art of modern choreography is born. In his lifetime he was a well-known choreographer working in Paris, Lyon, Vienna, Wurttemberg and London where he worked with the famous actor David Garrick.

Noverre applied in his ballets the aesthetic ideas about the interdisciplinary approach of a dance performance – as we would say today. He created a new genre – *ballet d'action* – story ballet in which dances were arranged on a unified dramatic theme, and extended to a several acts performance. In such a performance, dance represented the technical part of virtuosity, music gave the character of the movements and pantomime has to be the expressive part of a ballet.

Garrick called him “the Shakespeare of dance” (Agnes de Mille, 1963, p.97). He was extremely prolific creating over 150 ballets – exotic or heroic ballets, pastorals, or opera-ballets. For his outstanding art work, his birthday (April 29) was declared by UNESCO “the International Dance Day” in 1982.

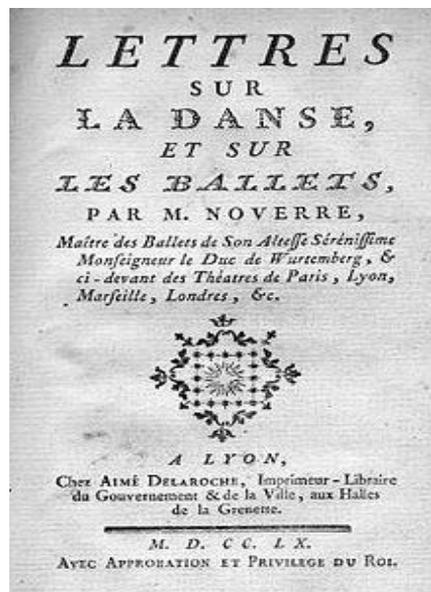


Figure 1: the cover page of Noverre’s book, published in 1760

In his book, written in the form of 15 letters addressed to an unidentified person, Noverre made up one of the most important reforms in the art of ballet (Urseanu, 1967).

Being under the influence of the philosophical ideas of the epoch he was living in – the Enlightenment century - Noverre made a sharp analysis of the ballet performance of his time. “In the time I had the honour to talk about – wrote Noverre – the dance from opera performances offered nothing but the monotonous pictures; ballets were cold, with poor scenery, and without any variety. The so called noble dance was in fact an insensible exhibition with no expressiveness. The languorous music of Lully, written to direct the dancers’ movements became, eventually, dull and uninteresting for the audience.” (Noverre, 1967)

His book is appreciated today as a valuable theoretical synthesis, a new aesthetics and methodology, as well as the first analysis in the field of dance musicology. The main principles about ballet, postulated by Noverre will be presented in the following lines.

- Art should be the imitation of nature (as in Aristotle’s *mimesis*), but sometimes nature should be embellished by the art of man – Noverre wanted to return to the natural and expressive character of the Greek and Latin dances.
- Giving up the mask and coming back to the old art of pantomime would set out the real talent of a dancer.
- Costume reform was necessary in order to let the head and the arms of dancers to be free to move expressively.
- He militated for giving up the excess of technique and virtuosity.
- A professional dancer should master his physical potential and should continue to develop his acting and musical abilities by studying anatomy, music and pantomime.
- Dance style should be expressive and impressive, and for that matter a dancer should be a cultivated person.
- The Opera House is an institution destined for theatrical performances and for that reason it should become the ideal place for ballet performances – scenery must become functional, it must complete the language of dance and pantomime, it must indulge the audience.
- Noverre was the first choreographer who had a fine and modern vision about the stage design – he considered costumes, scenery and lights technical stage tools.
- The art of making dances (dance composition, as we called today) was for him very much like the work of a painter: the ballet performance is a picture or a succession of pictures united by a theme – the stage is the canvas, the music, scenery and costumes are the colours and the choreographer is the painter of that picture. A ballet performance should become a mirror of its time.

Appealing to the eyes, a ballet should speak to the soul of the audience. (Noverre, 1967, p.40).

- His ideas about a ballet performance seen as a synthesis of arts, a picture of its time and a poem in the same time were taken over by modern and vanguard artists such Wagner, Artaud or Bejart.
- Noverre was considered the precursor of the ideas of romanticism, for him dance is the art which could touch the audience by gestures “a step, a gesture, a movement and attitude express and reveal more than words can do”. (Noverre, 1967, p.22)
- Although he settled upon the rules of a dance composition, i.e. *ballet d'action*, he admitted that the great talents could innovate, could break the rules if they reached to a better way to express the humanity.

Les Petits Riens (The Little Nothings)

In the 18th century the choreographer had the most important role in a ballet, and it was common practice to commission the music especially for it. Initially, Noverre composed *Les Petits Riens* as an intermezzo of the opera *Le finte gemelle* (m. N. Piccinni) in 1767 but it wasn't a real success.

In 1778 he reverted to his idea and, together with the young composer Mozart, made a new version of the ballet with a brand new music score. Mozart composed an overture and twenty dances and Noverre made the choreography of one act and the three ballet scenes.

Although the name of the composer wasn't mentioned on the original score, modern musicologists assigned to Mozart some of the dances because of the stylistic features and the recurrent themes of his composition.



Figure 2: Gavotte from *Les petits riens*(first page)

Structured as a dance suite, Mozart revealed a sober yet sophisticated technique and a touch of tender emotion. The dancers as well as the audience felt that music articulated dance movements. The simple dance structure interweaves with simple, symmetric music structure. Composition as a whole has a sprightly spirit.

The choreography and the musical score, in its original version, had been almost forgotten but, it was rediscovered in the archives of the Paris Opera, and during the 20th century was presented as a ballet in one act. The music score (K. 299b) of today ballet includes four parts:

I. Overture

II. Largo – Vivo – Andantino – Allegro – Larghetto – Gavotte

III. Adagio – (Gigue) – Gavotte Gracieuse – Pantomime – Passepied

IV. Gavotte – Andante.

Noverre was against dance suites which had no message but mere entertainment, he had pleaded for a ballet based on a dramatic action. His ballet *Les Petits Riens* was composed as a dance suite but he integrated pantomime in the inner structure of the dance. He considered – and illustrated with this ballet – that pantomime and dramatic action are equivalent in a dance performance: “in the field of dance, the action means to transmit emotion, feelings and passions to the soul of the spectator by the natural movements, gestures and mimic.” (Noverre, 1967).

In his ballets, dance is present only in the great moments of passion or in the decisive scene otherwise the action is completed by pantomime and acting. Noverre took over this formula from Gluck who reformed the opera with the alternation *recitative-aria*. His ballets had a libretto, several acts, a dramatic plot and a narrative character.

Modern choreomusicologists appreciate the plasticity and expressiveness of this ballet as well as its original dramatic character – *Les petits riens* was indeed a mirror of the 18th century society. In a sparkling atmosphere, the characters express their emotions by theatrical means and dance wasn't mere divertimento but an artistic technique. Giving up the mythological climate (which was a recurrent ballet theme in those days), Noverre proved realism by choosing a contemporary subject and thus the revolution of dance language had been possible.

Due to its classical characteristics - clarity of music and dance structure, balanced emotional touch, sparkling dramatic plot - *Les Petits Riens*, is Noverre's single ballet which is still in repertory of dance companies nowadays.



Figure 3: *Les Petits Riens*, danced by *la Compagnie de danse baroque l'Eventail*, 2009

Noverre had an integrative vision about the scenic concept of a ballet performance (music, dance, costume, scenery must follow a dramatic scenario) and he built it as the painter. The concept of the ballet as a *tableau vivant*, a picture of its time, is a vision which contributed to the development of the scenic art of dance.

Some of his principles of dance composition – collaboration between the choreographer and the composer, the narrative character of a dance performance, the dancers' natural acting and fine technique – are applicable to the dance performance today, and that's why Noverre is considered the first choreomusicologist.

If in the theoretical field of dance analysis his book is considered the first choreographers' handbook, his ballet *Les petits riens* is considered an example of a new genre – the story ballet – a source of inspiration for all choreographers till now.

Noverre made possible the liberation of the ballet from the opera and, little by little, dance performance became an independent art form with its own rules and specific techniques. In fact, he demonstrated (for the first time in dance history) the choreomusical relationship between music sound and dance movement.

In the late 20th century, the relationships between music and movement were as diverse as dance performances were. Many important artists such as Igor Stravinsky, Martha Graham, John Cage or Merce Cunningham exhibit in their works interesting choreomusical relationships.

Even if in some contemporary dance analyses the notion of inventiveness regarding dance movement is no longer related to the musical aspect, the choreographic performance had a fundamental sound and rhythmic component. A dance performance always had and will have a time and space structure. A dance performance is a theatrical form of art in which music and dance could be reviewed

separately but they are structurally connected, as Noverre had demonstrated in theory and practice.

The legacy Noverre left us is not only a theoretical book about choreography but through his 241 years old ballet *Les petits riens* he demonstrated the value of his choreomusicological principles:

- Dance must be adequate to the subject
- Dance structure must be adequate to the musical structure
- Dance technique must be adequate to the dramatic character.

In a ballet performance – beginning with Noverre – the dance movements are appreciated not only for their beautiful and graceful posture but also for their significance and meaning. Dance performance became a structure of movements in which art, as technique and interpretation, has the leading role.

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