

THE CRITICS AND
THE RUSSIAN BALLET

BY FRANK MOORE COLBY

CRUDELY and inarticulately pleased by some of the Russian ballets, I have taken counsel with the connoisseurs in the hope of authenticating my emotions. It is of no use. If, as one of them declared, the ballet is a "psychological laboratory" in which the observer is expected to "measure mental processes," I must have gone hopelessly astray. Ever since Emerson said it was poetry and Margaret Fuller said it was religion, the intellectual American when observing a ballet seems always to feel as he ought to feel if he were doing something else, and nowadays perhaps any really serious person ought to rejoice at it as in a psychological laboratory. People on my low level, if they are transported at a ballet, are never transported that far.

NOR could the untutored mind (to whose point of view, be it understood at the outset, these remarks are necessarily restricted) share adequately in that amazement of the connoisseurs over the "revolution" in the ballet. Changes there certainly were, but the really surprising thing about them was that they had not come before. The ballet as we knew it down to a few years ago seems not to have been in a merely normal state of conservatism. Measured by the movement of almost any other form of art, it seemed distinctly sub-normal. One did not feel simply bored at the old ballet as by a classic; one felt debilitated as by a Chautauqua address. People of reasonably active imaginations did not in those days go to new performances; by the aid of memory and a billboard they conjured them up. The ballet itself had long since shrunk into a background of traditional insipidity for the display of more or less irrelevant physical activities. Had the ballet advanced as an art, it could never have been so dominated by the legs of the première danseuse, but in the absence of any sort of artistic diversion, those legs, however praiseworthy in themselves, assumed a degree of importance considerably beyond their aesthetic deserts. Audiences stayed for them alone, and people with short memories came back to them.

PROBABLY text-books have been written on how to breathe when listening to music, and perhaps people ought to read them. This is not a plea for a lawless or incorrect manner of enjoyment. But the accounts of the Russian ballet did seem unnecessarily formidable. Perhaps the critics exaggerated the degree of antecedent culture requisite for its appreciation and gave too elaborate a report of the effects it had on them. Art critics are apt to exaggerate the eventfulness of their inner life. Music critics in many cases probably do not hear the music at all; they are deaf-

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ened by the noise of their own expository intentions. I find a savage consolation for my inability to see any relation between that ballet music and its criticism in an entry in Stendhal's journal, dated 1822—"I noted at Naples last year," he writes, during the Greek war of independence, "that perfect music, like perfect pantomime, makes me think of that which forms at the time the subject of my reveries and brings me some excellent ideas; at Naples it is the means of arming the Greeks." Fancy a critic for the *Morning Postscript* letting it go at that. If it brought him some "excellent ideas," which is highly improbable, those ideas would be carefully set down and all attributed to the composer; and conscientious folk would afterwards attend a course of lectures by him to avoid making any mistakes in future as to what the composer was about. Or if, in our present preoccupations, for example, it stimulated his desire to arm the Allies or fight with Germany, he would probably remark the submarine leitmotiv and the andante movement of the Wilson notes, and in the play of timbres and harmonies, of modulation and juxtaposition, of broken rhythms and broken chords, he would probably see the great movement of Preparedness down to and perhaps including the latest dinner of the Defense Society. The things discovered by connoisseurs in several of the Russian ballets were no whit less specific than this.

I HAVE no doubt that the general run of American artistic and literary critics are honest men and report as faithfully as they can of their own emotions, but I do believe that, in the absence of any sort of self-knowledge, they are bad guessers as to what is going on inside them. A cultivated Harvard teacher of English, for example, fidgeting through the Russian ballet lest he might not be cultivated enough to see all there was in it, would be likely to distort the truth in regard to himself, and needlessly frighten the rest of us. The broad margins of our parasitic and explanatory literature are full of much worried professors of terrapin who secretly cherish quite simple boiled ham tastes.

