

SERGE DE DIAGHILEFF

And His Activities in Four Phases of Russian Art

BY R. L. COTTENET

IT is a remarkable fact that the American writers and critics who have considered the life and work of Serge de Diaghileff have fixed upon only one of his four notable artistic activities. Mention the name of Diaghileff in America and someone is sure to murmur "Russian Ballet." True, he does personify the Russian Ballet in this country, but in times to come he will be remembered because of his daring and successful promotion of Russian painting, Russian orchestral music, and Russian opera, as well as for the part he has played in the evolution of choreographic art,—that is, the art of choral dancing. His fifth title to fame is his introduction to western Europe of Nijinsky, Karsavina, and other almost as notable dancers.

It was ten years ago—in the Spring of 1906—that he first took to Paris a large collection of ancient and modern Russian paintings. They were exhibited in the Grand Palais, on the Champs Elysées, and became first the fashion, and then the rage. Dealers in antiquities began to fill their shops with ikons and with embroideries of Russian design. People of fashion and the celebrities of the day hastened to have their portraits painted by Bakst, and the other Russian artists represented in the exhibition.

THIS was the first real effort made to introduce Russian painting to the world at large, and it was the beginning of that invigorating influence which it has since exercised in modern art, from painting and sculpture to stage decoration and women's clothes.

The ancient Russian school of painting is sometimes erroneously confounded with the Byzantine school. Russian art is, perhaps, somewhat influenced by the Byzantine feeling, but it is more positive in outline, and more daring in color. It has a much stronger and more individual note, and is more direct in its appeal to the eye.

Encouraged by the success of his exhibition of pictures, M. de Diaghileff decided to make another artistic venture, and this time in a branch of art really nearer his heart, namely, music. Therefore, in the Spring of 1907, he organized and gave in Paris at the Grand Opera House a series of historical concerts, introducing for the first time in France the compositions of the more celebrated Russian composers, ancient and modern. Mussorgsky, Borodin and Rimsky-Korsakoff were heard at that time, besides many others who have since become famous.

It was then—on hearing this Russian music for the first time—that Europe learned the source from which Debussy and other modern French composers had received so much of their inspiration. These notable concerts were the means of introducing to the French public Mr. Josef Hofmann, the greatest pianist of our day, and the idol of the Russian public. Mr. Hofmann—at these concerts—played the concertos of Scriabine and Loadov.

THE success of the concerts, with the Parisian public and press, was so great that the following year—1908—M. de Diaghileff decided on producing in Paris certain Russian operas sung in the Russian language. It was

a daring artistic undertaking, and a hazardous financial venture. Conductors, chorus, artists and scenery all had to be brought from Petrograd. "Boris Godounoff," by Mussorgsky, was the first opera that he produced. The French public was enchanted with it. The press exhausted itself in praise of the music, and of the marvellous singing of both the chorus and the principals. Chaliapine, the famous basso, triumphed in the rôle of *Boris*, and Leon Bakst caused a sensation with



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The man who introduced the genius of Russia to the western world and combined its various phases into a new art

his novel and artistic scenery and costumes. The success of the enterprise was complete.

FROM Paris the operatic organization went to London, where their reception was equally enthusiastic. The following Spring, 1909, the same troupe returned to Paris and London and produced "Ivan le Terrible," an opera by Rimsky-Korsakoff, which had quite a remarkable success in both cities. But this time de Diaghileff also brought with him the entire Imperial Ballet from Petrograd—corps de ballet, principals, scenery, everything. To present this unique, and, until then, novel assemblage of artists in an ultra modern work to a foreign public had for a long time been de Diaghileff's ardent desire. Accordingly, during that season, among the other ballets given, he produced the ballet "Cleopatre" for the first time. The excitement and success attending this production is now a matter of familiar and ancient history. It was during this season, 1909, that Waslav

Nijinsky made his first public appearance outside the boundaries of Russia. The perfection of his dancing combined with his marvellous histrionic gifts—both in comedy and in tragedy—immediately placed him in the front rank of modern choreographic artists. Indeed, he has no superior, and hardly an equal on any stage.

BORN in Russian Poland, Nijinsky is a Russian subject. His mother is a Hungarian and his father a Pole, for which latter reason he was interned in Austria at the beginning of the War. It was this which prevented his coming here in February with the Russian Ballet.

Both of Nijinsky's parents were dancers, and when he was but six years old they sent him to the Imperial Russian ballet school at Petrograd. After passing the severe physical examination which all applicants must pass before being taken into that institution, he was admitted. He remained there until he was seventeen, making his début in Petrograd. His extraordinary gifts were immediately appreciated, and he instantly became the principal male dancer of the troupe. After a very short season in Russia, Diaghileff took him as his foremost dancer to Paris and London and he soon became the most talked of artist in Europe. No dancer of our day, male or female, has created quite the furore that Nijinsky has, and this is owing not only to his dancing and acting, but to his having been the originator and composer of many of M. de Diaghileff's most successful productions: "L'Après Midi d'un Faune," "Narcisse," and "Le Jeu."

Nijinsky is a deep and constant student of ancient Greek art. He has a profound knowledge of it, and it is from the Greek bas-reliefs and from the designs of ancient Greek vases that he derives much of his inspiration for the composition of his ballets. About three years ago Nijinsky married a young dancer who was a member of their troupe when they visited Buenos Aires. They have two children. It was as *Cleopatre* that the slender and celebrated Mme. Ida Rubinstein—appearing with Nijinsky—so suddenly and mysteriously rose to fame, only, alas, to vanish as mysteriously and suddenly.

RETURNING to Paris and London in the Spring and Summer of 1910, 1911, 1912, 1913 and 1914, M. de Diaghileff successfully produced "L'Oiseau de Feu," "Petrouchka," "Narcisse," "Spectre de la Rose," "Daphnis," "L'Après Midi d'un Faun," "Sacré du Printemps," "Le Jeu," and "Legende de Josef."

During the Winter seasons M. de Diaghileff as a rule takes his organization on tour, and has most successfully presented their repertoire in Berlin, Vienna and other of the larger European cities. He has made for himself a unique and important position in the world of modern art. Of large independent means, and a member of an ancient and noble Russian family, he has devoted most of his life and fortune to the development of Russian art, particularly of the ballet. The Russian Ballet, as it is now known to us, does not merely aim at perfect technique in dancing, or in dancing rhythmically to (Continued on page 142)

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the present development of thought.

Analysts of mental phenomena tell us that we achieve appreciation of a great musical composition only after we have heard it again and again. The first hearing "plows a furrow" in the grain and each successive one serves to deepen the furrow until our capacity for discovering new beauties in it becomes so great that—paradoxically—the older it grows the newer it becomes. Similar furrows must exist in the race consciousness to account for our ready response to what is elemental in any art. Such was the effect of the Russian Ballet.

Historically considered, as an imperial institution, it dates back to the seventeenth century and began with technique and artists borrowed from the French and Italians. The Imperial Ballet Academy practised an all-embracing paternalism. By a rigorous process of selection and exclusion only the most fit specimens were admitted to its nine years of superb training which included not only dancing and its allied arts, but a liberal education in the broad sense. Generations of such training resulted in bringing together a group of artists ideally ready for the transforming influence of an Isadora Duncan and the informing genius of a Bakst.

Isadora Duncan's radical break from the stiffness and rigidity of classicism and her return to the Greek and Pagan is well known to her fellow Americans. Her appearance in Russia had the effect of a vision so startling that it must, perforce, work startling changes. She had brought to the members of the Russian Academy what, for the want of a better word, we must term a "message." With the fact that this "message," if accepted, presaged revolt and with the progress of that revolt we are not concerned. It is enough that as a result the Russian Ballet as we know it was born.

With Fokine at their head, the Russians grafted the Pagan on to their own school. Fired with enthusiasm, musical and choreographic composers joined forces with them and the gifted Bakst

brought to the designing of stage decorations and costumes his marvelous powers of line and color and his faculty for conveying the mystical element.

The dance-drama they evolved was closely related in form to the mimetic drama of the early Greek stage. It is probably far-fetched to assume—however flattering it might be to patrons of screen art—that of the two forms of dramatic art developed under the exigencies of the great spaces of the Greek outdoor theatre, the pantomime appealed to the highest intelligences of the time, yet it is true that the Athenians had developed to a high pitch the art of conveying the essentials of their plots by means of noble gesture and pose.

Bakst was master of the art of creating what we are wont to term suspense, an atmosphere of expectancy calculated to intensify the succeeding impressions. Every member of the ballet, no matter how humble his place—and no place is humble in an ensemble so dependent on its units—was, of necessity, an actor and, temperamentally at least, a musician. What we call the "star system" was unknown to them. Each participant was an entity who danced not to please his spectators but to carry on the story he and his fellow dancers were telling, and each invested his part with his own forceful personality.

The functions of the motion picture director and of the master of the ballet have much in common. Each, to tell his story, must enlist the sympathetic co-operation of human beings quickly sensitive to the emotions to be aroused and more keenly interested in being a sentient part of a perfect whole than in personal aggrandizement. Each must make his appeal to his public through their sense of beauty, of grace, of line, of rhythm and tempo, and each must know when harmony must be struck across with discord. Finally, each must produce a picture. A sympathetic student of the screen has said: "The more it becomes like a mural painting, the more it realizes its genius," and an equally keen lover of the Russian Ballet says, "The ballet is mural decoration."