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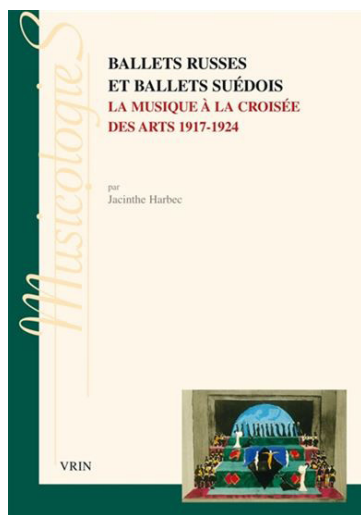
# *Ballets russes et Ballets suédois.* *La musique à la croisée des arts 1917-1924,* by **Jacinthe Harbec**

Paris, Vrin, 2021, 504 pages

Barbara Swanson

Keywords: Ballets Russes; Ballets Suédois; inter-arts collaboration; modernism; Paris.

Mots clés : Ballets russes ; Ballets suédois ; collaboration inter-artistique ; modernisme ; Paris.



Ballet productions from the early twentieth century invite, indeed require, a multi-disciplinary lens to fully appreciate the aesthetic and intellectual processes as well as the socio-cultural influences shaping their creation, reception, and legacy. Jacinthe Harbec's *Ballets russes et Ballets suédois* attempts just such a study of new ballets created by the Ballets Russes and Ballets Suédois between 1917 and 1924, focusing closely on seven ballets: *Parade* (1917), *Les Mariés de la tour Eiffel* (1921), *L'Homme et son désir* (1921), *Skating Rink* (1922), *La Création du monde* (1923), *Within the Quota* also known as *L'Immigration* (1923), and *Relâche* (1924). Noting that few studies of these ballets address the integral role of music in the collaborative creative process—including compositions by Erik Satie, Les Six, Darius Milhaud, Arthur Honegger, and Cole Porter—Harbec addresses that gap by providing an integrated approach to each ballet's musical dimension alongside literary, artistic, and choreographic design, as well as reception. Interested especially in the contribution of ballet to post-war modernism, Harbec focuses on multiple modernist movements, from cubism, futurism, and fauvism, to surrealism, dada, and symbolism. The selection of ballets reflects Harbec's interest in ballet as a testing ground for new ideas and

creative projects, choosing works in which one or more collaborators was new to ballet. Building on previous scholarship by scholars including Sabine Vergnaud, Manfred Kelkel, and Carole Boulbès, Harbec draws on new archival research and musico-analytical approaches to deliver detailed and systematic studies of interartistic collaboration, resulting in a fascinating compendium with an exciting depth and breadth of research.

The title of the book draws the reader's attention to the place of music in its intersection with other arts between 1917 and 1924. For the Ballets Russes, this period marked the approximate mid-point and maturity of the company, which was initially founded in 1909 by Serge Diaghilev as a forum for Russian-produced ballet in Paris, and which came to end in 1929 at Diaghilev's death. Known for staging provocative works such as *Le Sacre du printemps* in 1913 (music by Igor Stravinsky, choreography by Vaslav Nijinsky, and designs by Nicholas Roerich), the company struggled to maintain financial and artistic stability during the First World War. This led, in some cases, towards smaller-scale, experimental productions—such as *Feu d'artifice*, a “non-ballet” in which light danced across cubist forms (designs by Italian Futurist Giacomo Balla to a pre-existing score by Stravinsky)—alongside Russian-themed works (*Soleil de nuit*) and nods to eighteenth-century comedy (*La Boutique fantasque*). This new juxtaposition of experimentalism, Russianness, and the eighteenth-century *galant* continued into the 1920s alongside further influences as the company sought to navigate the changing dynamics of post-war France.

For the Ballets Suédois, 1917-1924 marked a period of gestation followed by intense activity. Founded in 1920 by Rolf de Maré as a company of Scandinavian dancers in Paris, the idea for the company emerged as early as 1913 when de Maré met Michel Fokine, former choreographer for the Ballets Russes. Fokine worked in Stockholm, Copenhagen, and St. Petersburg after his departure from the Ballets Russes, during which time he also met the soon-to-be choreographer for the Ballets Suédois, Jean Börlin. Together, de Maré, Fokine, and Börlin imagined a new kind of Swedish Ballet, free from the traditions of the Royal Swedish company.

As Sally Banes and Erik Näslund have noted, the Ballets Russes influence was visible in the opening season of the company, during which the Ballets Suédois positioned themselves somewhat conservatively *within* the Ballets Russes legacy, staging Diaghilev-like works (whether in style or theme), Swedish folkloric works, as well as edgy avant-garde productions. For example, the first Ballets Suédois season of 1920 paid homage to the older company by restaging *Jeux* (music by Claude Debussy as in the Ballets Russes original, but choreography by Börlin instead of Nijinsky with designs by Pierre Bonnard instead of Léon Bakst). Other Ballets Suédois works recalled themes from earlier Ballets Russes productions: *Skating Rink*, like *Jeux*, used sport to explore modern life and relationships; *Iberia* (music by Isaac Albéniz, designs by Théophile Steinlen) recalled the 1919 Spanish-themed *Le Tricorne* (music by Manuel de Falla, designs by Pablo Picasso), and the 1923 *Offerlunden* (one of the company's least successful works) echoed the theme of sacrifice for an ailing kingdom, comparable to *Le Sacre du printemps*.

While both ballet companies overturned the norms of traditional ballet, de Maré's Ballets Suédois was oriented even more strongly towards conceptual ballet, an

increasing abstraction of movement, and closer integration of visual artists within the collaborative project often evident in dances that resembled moving, human décor. This is essentially the starting point for Harbec's volume: she begins by examining the experimental work undertaken by the Ballets Russes with *Parade* in 1917, setting this up as a precursor to six key works by the Ballets Suédois undertaken between 1921 and 1924. Noting the influence of *Parade*, Harbec draws particular attention to the importance of the artists/décor designers in defining not only the visual palette for each ballet but also the choreography and music. This indeed seems to have been a defining approach of the Swedish company. As Näslund has noted, de Maré had an extensive collection of art that inspired not only his approach to ballet but specific productions; for example, his collection of works by El Greco inspired the 1920 ballet of the same name and his collection of modernist works included some by Fernand Léger, who became scenic designer for *Skating Rink* and *La Création du monde*. Seen thus, as Näslund states, new works by the Ballets Suédois complemented de Maré's art collection by becoming a living gallery.

Harbec's particular emphasis is on the importance of cubism (inflected by other various -isms) for her seven focal works, noting multiple key features: geometrical, visual, choreographic, and musical design (for example, through the juxtaposition of sound blocks); fragmentation and collage (including the use of everyday noises within scores); leveling of distinctions between elevated and popular elements (for example blues and jazz plus classical music); use of cyclic forms; and blurring of lines between reality and unreality (including through the use of gramophones on stage in *Les Mariés de la tour Eiffel* and cinematic references in *Within the Quota* and *Relâche*). She grounds this reading of the works by providing an overview, in the first chapter, of major artistic, literary, and musical movements of the era, while also introducing the two ballet companies and various collaborators. While it is the most broadly-focused chapter of the entire volume (and at times a rehashing of commonly-known features of major artistic movements), Harbec focuses this first chapter around figures and developments connected to her selected ballets, and returns to those themes, personages, and even artworks in later chapters.

The subsequent seven chapters are each focused on a single ballet, providing a systematic examination of the genesis, collaborative process, and different artistic facets of the work at hand. Thanks to Harbec's extensive archival research and analytical framework, these chapters are rich with material that illuminate the initial development of each ballet as well as the connections between the arts. For example, her investigation into the original commission from de Maré to Cocteau for *Les Mariés de la tour Eiffel* clarifies various aspects of its early development, from Georges Auric's initial involvement as sole composer to his withdrawal and the decision to divide the work amongst the composers of Les Six, minus Louis Durey (pp. 142–146). The resulting collage of works by multiple composers suited the collage-like, dada, and surreal aspects of the ballet overall, with different musical styles incongruously juxtaposed alongside one another, interrupted by announcements from the two gramophones placed on either side of the stage and various intruders upon the wedding scene (from cyclists; to the couple's future, murderous child; to a ravenous lion; to an art collector). Despite resembling the surrealist drawing game of "exquisite

corpse” (whereby artists, one by one, would continue a drawing without viewing what the preceding artist had done), Harbec confirms that the approach to the score was originally a practical solution to a pragmatic problem (p. 160); she thus problematizes how Daniel Albright describes the score in *Untwisting the Serpent. Modernism in Music, Literature, and Other Arts* (Chicago, 2000).

In addition to the documentary aspects of the volume, another great strength is Harbec’s musical analyses. Noting in her introduction that music has been relatively neglected in scholarship on the Ballets Suédois, Harbec corrects this by dedicating the most substantial section of each chapter to music. Her analyses address a wide range of features, including motivic and harmonic material, form, and modernist features such as fragmentation, juxtaposition, and high/low crossover. Rigorous in their own right, the analyses usually point the reader back to an inter-arts framework by demonstrating how the musical elements cohere within the overall design. For example, she demonstrates how Satie, for *Parade* (1917), creates a “cubist juxtaposition” between the “Prélude du Rideau rouge” and the “Entrée des Managers” that resonates in each case with Picasso’s visual designs. For Picasso’s more traditional red curtain image that depicts circus members backstage, Satie uses a more “backward-looking” fugal form. He then switches to a mechanistic ostinato of small melodic motives, which resonates with the urban, cubist streetscape of the subsequent scene, and the angular futuro-cubist manager’s costumes (pp. 68, 87–91). She later also demonstrates how the music follows a palindromic, pyramidal structure that mirrors the narrative form of the ballet: beginning and ending with the “Prélude du Rideau rouge,” then alternating in a mirrored way between managers and circus acts, with the American girl and the “Rag-time du paquebot” at the centre of the palindrome (pp. 108–112). Her sophisticated analysis connects this structure with the interior-exterior, real-unreal dynamics of the ballet: the audience is repeatedly entreated and enticed by managers and stage acts to believe that a real show is taking place inside a circus tent (which we, as audience, never get to enter).

In the case of the African creation myth, *La Création du monde*, Harbec uses her musical analyses to explore the collaborative approach taken by its creators and to contextualize early criticisms of the music in its combination of classical and jazz idioms (pp. 315–335). As Harbec notes, the idea for the ballet began with Blaise Cendrars, the Swiss-born writer whose interest in African culture seems to have developed during and after his experience and disillusionment with the First World War (he lost his right hand on the front lines, after which he wrote and published *J’ai tué* (1918) and began work on *La Main coupée*). His development of the libretto included research at the Bibliothèque nationale on *Fang* oral traditions of central Africa. The designer Fernand Léger similarly undertook research, relying on volumes on African art written by Carl Einstein and Marius de Zayas in 1915 and 1916 respectively, and hoping (in vain) to view collections held in the British Museum. Milhaud on the other hand approached the African subject matter through an African-American lens, that of jazz. As Harbec notes, Milhaud encountered jazz as early as 1918 in the café-bars of Paris. During his 1922 and 1923 travels, he immersed himself in the jazz culture of Harlem and began purchasing records released by the Black Swan label—an African-American owned and operated label based in Harlem.



Harbec's analyses of this work are convincing and carefully drawn, but her findings raise more questions for me than she answers in this, the shortest of all the chapters. For example, Léger clearly refracted African sculpture through his own cubist-modernist lens, but did Milhaud approach the musical idioms of jazz as an already modernized expression of African identity? Or did he perceive jazz, however problematically, as a present-day preservation of "primitive Africa"? The latter seems more likely, given Harbec's citation of Milhaud himself on how the "primitive African side remains profoundly anchored among the Blacks of the United States." That said, Milhaud in the same passage notes the oppression faced by Black Americans, aligning the music not specifically with an African homeland but with more recent experiences of slavery and other oppressions (p. 315).

*La Création du monde* was just one of many ballets in Harbec's study (whether Ballets Russes or Ballets Suédois) to engage with African or African-American related images, stories, sounds, and stereotypes—whether it be the initial inclusion of two Black Managers (instead of the eventual French and American ones) in *Parade*; or the inclusion of a "Gentleman of Colour" holding a flask of rum while dancing to ragtime and blues-inflected melodies in *Within the Quota*. To help situate these instances—not just within the narrative of specific ballets but within Parisian culture of the 1920s—I found myself frequently looking towards other scholarship. I read, for example, the first few chapters of Jody Blake's *Le Tumulte Noir. Modernist Art and Popular Culture in Jazz Age Paris, 1900-1930* (Pennsylvania University Press, 1999), which draws attention to the era's often limited association of Black culture with "life instincts rather than conscious expressions of aesthetic principles" (p. 25). I then looked slightly further afield to Priscilla Layne's book *White Rebels in Black. German Appropriation of Black Popular Culture* (University of Michigan Press, 2018) for thinking about the appropriation of Black identity and culture as counter-cultural gesture (seemingly the case in *La Création du monde*), which, ranging from empathetic to more self-serving interests, in turn "limit the possibilities of Black subjectivity" in a "fantasy about Blackness" (pp. 4, 8). Wondering how/if such works might be restaged today given current concerns about cultural appropriation, I turned to Nicole Haitzinger's article "Afro-Futurism or Lament" Staging Africa(s) in Dance Today and in the 1920s" (*Dance Research Journal*, 2017), and the chapter "Performing 'Africa'. Linyekula's Re-vision of *La Création du monde* as Critical Pastiche," by Klaus-Peter Köpping from the book *Moving (Across) Borders* (de Gruyter, 2017). In each, we read about attempts to reclaim the plurality of African identities and challenge the Eurocentrism of the original works. While Harbec's focus is an inter-arts framework rather than a cultural or racial history of the ballets, it feels important to acknowledge these cultural questions. My own additional reading as described above is certainly preliminary and limited itself, but suggests how Harbec's extensive archival documentation and analyses can inspire further studies that move in other directions.

A surprising aspect of Harbec's volume is how little the Ballets Russes actually feature within its pages despite appearing so prominently in the title. Aside from brief introductory material about the Ballets Russes in Chapter 1 and the treatment of *Parade* in Chapter 2 (itself detailed, fascinating, and lengthy), there are relatively few references to the Ballets Russes in subsequent chapters. Harbec certainly notes when

a Ballets Suédois work is influenced by or expands upon an earlier Ballets Russes one (such as *Parade*), or when certain collaborators “crossed over” to the Ballets Suédois (such as Cocteau for *Les Mariés de la tour Eiffel* or Satie for *Relâche*), or occasional intersections between the two companies (such as using the same manager for their American tours). Yet, given the length of Harbec’s volume as a whole (504 pages), it is hard to imagine asking Harbec to do more than she has already done. Reading between the lines of the later chapters, clearly the Ballets Suédois provided a new forum for artists, writers, and musicians who felt limited within the sphere of the Ballets Russes, despite its own experimental approaches. For example, Cocteau could finally include spoken text in *Les Mariés de la tour Eiffel* after having to drop this element from *Parade*. In the case of Milhaud, the Ballets Suédois provided a forum for his work when Diaghilev would not: after crossing paths in Brazil during the Ballets Russes tour of 1918-19, Diaghilev declined to work with Milhaud on a Brazilian-themed ballet. Milhaud would later realize the project with the Ballets Suédois as *L’Homme et son désir* in 1921. Indeed, it was only after working on multiple works for the Ballets Suédois (*Les Mariés de la tour Eiffel*, *L’Homme et son désir*, and *La Création du monde* in 1923) that Diaghilev invited Milhaud to compose for *Le Train Bleu*. It thus appears that within five years, the direction of influence had shifted: no longer from the Ballets Russes to the Ballets Suédois but the other way around, and in turn, towards a more cosmopolitan set of themes and greater French influence within Ballets Russes works themselves.

Although Harbec draws attention to the French orientation of Ballets Suédois works, she frequently identifies American influences as well. The most obvious case is the American-themed ballet *Within the Quota*, a cynical satire of American culture in which a Swedish immigrant encounters a series of Hollywood stereotypes before being swept away to realize his own “American dream.” Created by two Americans-in-Paris—Cole Porter and Gerald Murphy—the ballet portrays tensions within American culture, including between excess and puritanism and, musically-speaking, between the gaiety of ragtime and the sombre evocation of Handelian oratorio and tritone motifs (pp. 364–367). But Harbec also notes less conflicted American influences and evocations—the many myths of America co-existing within the French imagination, as described by Diana Hallman and César Leal in their edited volume *America in the French Imaginary, 1789-1914. Music, Revolution, and Race* (Boydell, 2022). For example, Harbec notes the recurring influence of Charlie Chaplin’s silent films on Ballets Suédois productions. In the case of *Within the Quota*, the program cover portrays an immigrant similar to Chaplin’s character in the 1917 film *The Immigrant*—both hold a cane and spotted rucksack in the right hand and wear a prominent tag featuring the numbers 1 and 7 (p. 346). The ballet *Skating Rink* seems also to have been influenced by a specific Chaplin film, *The Rink*: Ricciotto Canudo published the poem *Skating-Rink à Tabarin / Ballets-aux-patins / pour la musique* a year after Chaplin’s film appeared in France, later developing the poem into the ballet (p. 257). As described by Libby Murphy in her monograph *The Art of Survival. France and the Great War Picaresque* (Yale, 2016), the farcical element of Chaplin’s films was liberating for French audiences during the First World War. Blaise Cendrars personally identified with Chaplin’s down-and-out Tramp character and Cocteau viewed Chaplin’s films

as the triumph of levity over the heaviness of the war years. Harbec further notes how Cocteau considered playing a Chaplin film in the background of a pre-Ballets Suédois work, *Le Boeuf sur le toit* or *The Nothing-Happens Bar* (pp. 123–124). Chaplin seems indeed to have functioned as a national icon—one the Ballets Suédois would reference in their productions throughout the twenties.

Harbec's volume is so rich with documentary material—including these multiple references to Chaplin—that it bears reading and re-reading. It is simply difficult to catch all the connections and links the first time through. Her extensive list of archival sources includes multiple collections in the Paris Bibliothèque nationale de France as well as the Rolf de Maré Study Centre—Dansmuseet in Stockholm. Harbec's thoughtfulness and thoroughness as a scholar are evident in her documentation of easily accessible audiovisual resources (including YouTube links to the works in question) and an array of appendices to each chapter—usually the libretti and sometimes in multiple versions. Select images in both colour and black and white provide useful illustrations that help bring the ballets to life. Although one could sometimes imagine Harbec drawing even more connections between the ballets or with a broader cultural history, *Ballets russes et Ballets suédois. La musique à la croisée des arts 1917-1924* is a substantial, detailed, and invaluable resource on ballet modernism, the Ballets Suédois, inter-arts collaboration, and the seven ballets that Harbec investigates so closely, including their musical scores.