



Courtesy of the Galerie Jeanne Bucher

Design for APOLLON MUSAGETE, Scene 1

For the Diaghilev production of Stravinsky's most recent work, given in Paris last June, the artist A. Bauchant made two highly imaginative paintings. The huge vase in this opening scene was designed to fall apart and become a grotto for the succeeding action of the ballet.

BALLETS RUSSES, 1928

RICHARD HAMMOND

TO compare the Ballets Russes of today with the Diaghilev productions in their heyday is to arrive at a conclusion at once unfavorable and unfair; unfavorable in that the present performances lack the glamour, magic and superlative technique of the first tours, and unfair for a number of reasons. The first, and most obvious is a lack of funds; in Europe today there is but little money for the luxury of a great ballet, a troupe, such as first astounded the world, the product of years of patient labor and vast expenditure. Then, too, in an age of post war depression few works possess the flaming enthusiasm that gave us a *Sacre*, a *Petrouchka* or a *Fire Bird*. But most of all, where could there again be found a group of such unique and totally original geniuses as Stravinsky, Nijinsky and Bakst? The Ballet of today suffers greatly by comparison. However, in the light of present conditions, it is not without stimulus and even, to use a much abused word, highly provocative.

The creations of this season were two—*Ode*, a ballet by Nicolas Nabokoff on a text of Lomonossoff, for chorus, solo voices and orchestra, and Stravinsky's *Apollon Musagète*. The first, resoundingly subtitled *An Evening Meditation on the Majesty of God on the Occasion of the Great Aurora Borealis*, unblushingly revealed the wonders of nature—sea, planets, fruits, flowers, the human body. A little less than encyclopedic in its scope, it was but little more than pompous banality in its achievement. With the exception of some rather effective passages in the fête scene and a tellingly simple ending, with a wailing horn betokening the final futility of man's struggles as he becomes once more enchained at the feet of nature, the rest of the score proved a pot-pourri of triteness and bombast. Choreographically however the ballet had much of interest and in its angular movement one

could see the germ of quite a new technique. The décors and mise en scène of Paul Tchelitcheff likewise bore evidence of creative imagination but were too often rendered ineffective by bad lighting and a lack of back stage direction worthy of a parish-house benefit.

In Stravinsky's *Apollon Musagète*, the score makes a deferential gesture towards the eighteenth century as does the choreography with its pas de deux, variations, divertissements and statuesque groupings. The music, so different from the glittering pages of the earlier Stravinsky, confines itself to the sober garments of a string ensemble. It comes somewhat disturbingly after the *Sacre, Noces*, even the *Octuor* with its biting clarity, the acid *Symphonies pour Instruments à Vent*, or the majestic spaces of *Oedipus*, and to feel at ease in it, one has to forget many of one's best loved memories.

The production itself proved colorful, the stylized décors in keeping, and Serge Lifar created an Apollon, to say the least, grateful to the eye.

Of revivals from recent years, *La Chatte* of Henri Sauguet and Rietti's *Barabau* proved diverting on the lighter side. *La Chatte* again offered an opportunity for interesting, stylistic choreography and an effectively modernist setting of geometrical curves in isinglass. *Barabau*, based on a nursery rhyme, was replete with good humour, lyrical gaiety and amusing character acting.

But by far the most outstanding revivals, overshadowing even the novelties of the year, were *Les Noces* of Stravinsky and Prokofieff's *Le Pas d'Acier*. *Les Noces*, that amazing ballet-cantata for chorus, bells, pianos and percussion, which portrays with burning vividness the genre canvas of a Russian peasant wedding, is the epic of Russia of the peasantry—the Russia of a few years ago. But *Le Pas d'Acier*, relentless, steely, brutally rhythmic, tantalizingly repetitious—that is Russia today—industrial Russia. It seems to have epitomized the machine in music and has left the realist nothing further to say. Both the choreography and the settings of these two ballets are worthy of the greater days of the Ballets Russes.

That flawless technique was lacking, alas, too often proved noticeable in the first performances, but towards the close of the



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Design for APOLLON MUSAGETE, Scene 2

This is Bauchant's conception of the Apollonic ascent which is the climax and conclusion of Stravinsky's ballet. The world premiere of the work was given at Washington last April in the Library of Congress; a few months later it was introduced to Europe by Diaghilev's Russian troupe.

Paris season the troupe seemed to be thoroughly broken in, the dances to come off with precision and always with imagination and verve. But the ballets themselves so often disappointed. The plots in many were scarcely more than infantile, and an evening of theatrical bon-bons soon becomes fatiguing to the intelligence. There is an increasing use of choruses and solo voices in the newer ballets—a tendency toward ballet-opera. But perhaps the most salient feature was the striking contrast between *Apollon* and *Le Pas d'Acier*. These most recent works by two of the outstanding composers of today leave one guessing as to the course of modern music. Are we to continue the music of the machine shop or are we to revert to the politer manners of lost centuries?

It seems a pity that the ballet hangs upon so slender a thread. Why should there be but one creative and imaginative troupe capable of producing the greater stage works? In a day when millions are devoted to the construction and maintenance of opera houses—those gilded sepulchres of music—it is surprising that there is no adequate institution for the production of a type of art appealing both to the public and the modern composer. This terser, more vivid and concentrated art form would soon supplant the waste spaces and artificiality of opera. Certainly this particular form of music-theatrical work seems better suited to the American temperament and offers opportunity for freer, greater output from that most nomadic of animals, the American composer. We wait with interest the day that an American Diaghilev shall open the doors to a theatre of modern ballet.