

Dancing Notes
Tschaikovsky Pas de Deux: See the Music
Transcript

00:00:17:21 - 00:00:26:05

George Balanchine has said, “Dancing is always pointing to music, showing it, making it visually interesting.”

00:00:26:20 - 00:01:00:23

Balanchine's legendary musicality is much talked about, but seldom explained. Because Balanchine was a trained musician who studied the musical scores he used, those scores can offer important insights into his ballets and how he made them. In this video, I analyze the musical score and the steps of the ballerina variation of *Tschaikovsky Pas de Deux* to show specific examples in which Balanchine's choreography invites the viewer to “see the music.”

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The ballerina variation is Variation Two, the third of four sections of *Tschaikovsky Pas de Deux*. The music was composed around 1877 by Tchaikovsky as a supplement to his full-length ballet *Swan Lake*. Balanchine choreographed his ballet to the score of the supplemental *pas de deux* in 1960.

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Before we get into the details of this famous solo variation, let's watch it once in its entirety.

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[Variation 2, performed by Patricia McBride]

00:02:11:06 - 00:02:39:08

To examine the music, we will look through the same lenses Balanchine used, which are the Western European music traditions, including the notation. But to analyze the dance, I created choreomusical notation, which is a music-based notation for dance that is designed expressly for analysis with music. Choreomusical notation is explained in another video and in chapter two of my dissertation.

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Using choreomusical notation, I will highlight several moments in which patterns in the dance clearly follow patterns that exist already in the music. These patterns occur at the same time, in stretched or condensed time, and even across time.

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Right at the outset, there are many correspondences between music and dance occurring at the same time. Balanchine seems to be establishing a close relationship where dance partners music visually as the variation begins.

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For example, in the two-measure prefix to the variation, the bass establishes a quarter-note beat that the dancer follows in her opening steps.

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These steps begin with the first musical phrase, which we will call, the antecedent phrase.

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There are other elements present in the music, of course, like the higher pitched, chirping, running melody and the syncopated accompaniment chords.

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Other choreographers might create small, quick movements to align with the patterns of the melody, or other movements to align with the “oompah, oompah” of the combined accompaniment. But Balanchine seems to align the dancer’s movements with the bass line’s slower quarter-note rhythm along with its pitch contour.

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The up-down up-down melodic contour of the bass line exactly matches the contour of the dancer's movements in space.

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Let's watch those opening measures again at a slower pace, listening for the quarter-note rhythm and the up-down pitch contour of the bass line, which has been boosted in the audio.

00:04:26:18 - 00:04:51:11

In addition to pitch and rhythmic patterns, music and dance are aligned in their repetition schemes. The music begins with a one-measure accompaniment pattern that is repeated immediately. As that pattern continues, the dancer performs two *sissonnes* in succession, both landing *en pointe* on the right foot, followed by two *assemblés* in succession.

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Please note that right and left in choreomusical notation mirror the reader’s right and left, so that you can quickly try to feel those rhythmic changes of weight in your own body.

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At the moment when the *assemblés* begin, the music's bass line inverts from the descending major-third interval, D to B-flat,

00:05:14:09 - 00:05:18:11

to the ascending major-third interval, D to F-sharp.

00:05:21:03 - 00:05:28:11

This creates a peculiar musical structure: a mirror inversion above and below the keynote D.

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While third relations like this one came into fashion in the late 19th century when Tchaikovsky was composing, in earlier tonal music, it was more common for a simple accompaniment pattern to sound like this:

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tonic and dominant alternating in the bass. Or you might hear this:

00:06:01:15 - 00:06:05:01

tonic and subdominant harmonies alternating.

00:06:05:01 - 00:06:09:24

Less commonly, a subdominant chord may be borrowed from the minor mode.

00:06:13:26 - 00:06:21:17

But what Tchaikovsky does is to take the borrowed minor-mode note, the B-flat, and feature it in the bass line.

00:06:25:09 - 00:06:33:14

Those of us who have heard this music many times may miss the peculiarity of this sound, but Balanchine seems to have taken note.

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For when the major-third interval

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is inverted in the bass line, Balanchine inverts the dancer's directions from facing stage left then stage right in the *sissonnes*,

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to facing stage right then stage left in the *assemblés*.

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And he inverts the dancer's step from a *sissonne*, a jump from two feet to one, to an *assemblé*, a jump from one foot to two.

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When Violette Verdy coached this variation, she insisted on a precise *assemblé* step here.

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In the next short passage, measures 7 to 10, Balanchine aligns choreographic patterns to even more technical music theoretical ideas. Here, the music's harmonic pattern changes from alternations in the previous passage to a straight-line path along the descending-fifth root progression, F-sharp to B to E to A.

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But these sharp signs that you see in the score create strong harmonic tendencies that pair F-sharp with B and E with A.

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In other words, the sharp signs make the F-sharp chord sound like it leads strongly to the B,

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and make the E chord leads strongly to the A.

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So we have two pairs of chords moving along a straight path. The directed harmonies are chromatic and point to their chords of resolution, which are diatonic and not strongly directed. At the same time, the dance reflects these harmonic patterns. The dancer's alternations -- left-right, right-left -- of the previous passage give way to movements along a straight line toward stage right. And, two measures are paired together in the repeating unit

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sissonne - close fifth, *sous-sus* - close fifth.

00:08:30:07 - 00:08:54:21

What is more, in the first measure of each pair, when the music has directed harmonies, the dancer travels on her *sissonne* jump toward stage right, facing and even pointing in that direction. In the second measure of each pair, when we hear non-directed harmonies, the dancer stays in place, performing *sous-sus en face*, facing the audience.

00:08:54:21 - 00:09:03:16

Let's watch the opening ten measures again at a slower pace. The video is annotated to help you see the analysis.

00:09:17:09 - 00:09:38:16

So far, I have shown five ways that the dance reflects elements of the music in the opening passage. These were all choreographic patterns that occur at the same time as the musical patterns that they relate to. In the next section, I discuss patterns that occur in non-simultaneous ways.

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Near the middle of the variation, the ballerina performs a series of quick *relevés passés*. If we trace the up-and-down contour of her steps, we can see that each repeating unit has the same shape as the new melody in the music at measure 19.

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However, the musical rhythm is faster, taking up only one measure for the pattern, using four sixteenth notes and two eighth notes, while the dance rhythm takes double the time with four eighth notes and two quarter notes.

00:10:12:22 - 00:10:28:13

Each repeating dance unit takes up two full measures that are overlapped right in the middle by the music's pattern. Watch this passage again and see if you can kind of hear the music's melody in the up-down movements of the dancer.

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Now at a slower pace and without the music, try to "hear the dance."

00:10:46:26 - 00:10:59:02

In my final example, I trace a pattern in the dance that occurs long before the musical pattern that it reflects. To explain, I need to draw you a diagram of the musical form.

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The music of the variation is in three parts: A, B, A-prime.

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Each section is roughly the same length, and the whole thing is preceded by a two-measure prefix.

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The music of A-Prime is a reprise of the opening music. But, not exactly, because only the second half of the first A section, the consequent phrase, returns in A-prime. Just when the consequent phrase is expected to end the second time, Tchaikovsky surprises us by using that final chord to begin the coda. This is called a phrase overlap.

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The end of the first phase becomes the beginning of the next phase.

00:11:44:12 - 00:12:06:19

So, while most of the music is fairly predictable, Tchaikovsky gives listeners one special surprise at the moment of expected ending at measure 42. Why am I explaining all of this? Because the special musical moment has a corresponding moment earlier, at measure 18. And at that point,

00:12:06:19 - 00:12:14:22

there was no musical phrase overlap. The phrase ends at measure 18, and the next phase begins at measure 19.

00:12:14:22 - 00:12:26:29

But it is precisely here, in measure 18, that Balanchine creates a choreographic phrase overlap that foreshadows the musical phrase overlap in measure 42.

00:12:27:04 - 00:12:54:26

At measure 18, if the dance phrases were aligned with the musical phrases, the landing from a jump into fifth position would be held for a full measure, and then the *relevés passés* would begin in the next measure. Instead, the *relevés* begin a half measure early. The *demi-plié* of the previous phrase ending becomes the *demi-plié* of the beginning of the next dance phrase, creating a choreographic phrase overlap.

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In her performances of this moment, Violette Verdy holds the landing from her *gargouillade* jump for just a moment, enhancing the expectation of ending and the surprise of the somewhat early beginning.

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After Verdy's performances, this momentary hold seems to have been lost.

00:13:33:12 - 00:13:53:15

As I noted earlier, Balanchine said, "Dancing is always pointing to music, showing it, making it visually interesting." In the past, the meaning of such a statement was largely left to the imagination. In this video, I showed specific ways that dance points to elements in the musical score.

00:13:53:15 - 00:14:16:24

Using the ballerina variation of *Tschaikovsky Pas de Deux*, I traced relationships between patterns in the dance and patterns in the music that occur at the same time, in stretched or condensed time, and across time. These patterns reflected ideas such as melodic interval inversion, harmonic motion and tendency, and phrase overlap.

00:14:16:24 - 00:14:52:00

Balanchine's high level of formal musical training is evident in his ballets. By his own account, he analyzed musical scores, and this enabled him to engage with musical ideas, not only audible sounds. This brief but finely crafted variation from *Tschaikovsky Pas de Deux* shows a musician steeped in Western European musical traditions. When we put on the same lenses to analyze the music and study the choreography in relation to it, we can appreciate Balanchine's musical expression more deeply.

00:14:52:03 - 00:14:57:13

Thus, we are better prepared to "see the music" in his ballets.