

Kirov brings an old-world grace to the best of Balanchine

Ismene Brown reviews *Homage to Balanchine* performed by the Kirov Ballet at Covent Garden

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GIVEN the high ticket prices this year, the question of which Kirov night to go to has pressed hard on many ballet-lovers. The thousands who risked the Balanchine triple bill rather than a full-length classic will be smiling like cats who got the cream. They saw the Kirov spread out its artists in three of the most magical ballets that exist.

All three are early Balanchine pieces, suffused with his Russian heritage rather than his American future, and the Kirov claim them with all their Russian instincts. Balanchine, for them, is a new world, but he is also one of their ancestors, and they dance him with a perfumed, old-world grace - grander, more courteously correct, and with more bewitching arms - than Americans do.

Serenade (1934) is a Tchaikovsky ballet, a Sylphides-like nocturne of girlish romantic melancholy, with dreams, angels, and first sexual urges magicked up in a heady potion of chiffon dancing.

In the lead the director's young favourite, Svetlana Zakharova, seems to me too conscious of her own lissome perfections to convey the breathy innocence of this ballet. But there were two of the Kirov's more deliciously communicative females alongside her - Maya Dumchenko and Veronica Part, one elusive, the other sumptuous - and the dark, courtly partnering of Daniil Korsuntsev to compensate.

This romanticism also made the classical masterpiece *Symphony in C* (1947) a thing of jewels and champagne. The corps de ballet danced with joy, and the four movements

were graced by the Kirov's finest stars - vivid Sofia Gumerova and arrestingly talented Igor Kolb in the first, followed by the luminescence of Uliana Lopatkina in the great adagio, then bubbling Diana Vishneva, and finally delicate, neat Janna Ayupova.

Apollo (1928) was the largest challenge. Despite its age, it feels distinctly radical, telling of the birth of the god of music and the sun and his achieving of divinity, in a style that's both comedy-drama and sheer dance abstraction.

Apollo is born swaddled in white sheets, and clueless. Three goddesses then instruct him in poetry, theatre, music. We usually see this performed with a certain professorial strictness, the intoxicatingly inventive steps speaking for themselves. The Kirov ignored the rule book. The choreography was graced with their unsurpassable dew-bright finesse and a dramatic characterisation that might upset some Americans.

Veronica Part was an irresistible Terpsichore, casting radiant, imploring smiles at Igor Zelensky's magnificent Apollo. Daria Pavlenko, a pearl of a dancer, and the sultry Irina Golub further plied their femininity on him, and no wonder Zelensky melted under their attack.

The one fault was the conductor, Boris Gruzin, taking the Stravinsky with a chewy sentimentality that would have pitched lesser artists into an unBalanchinean mire. Sharper and bolder, please, maestro. This is the new world.

- Season until July 7. Tickets: 020 7304 4000

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