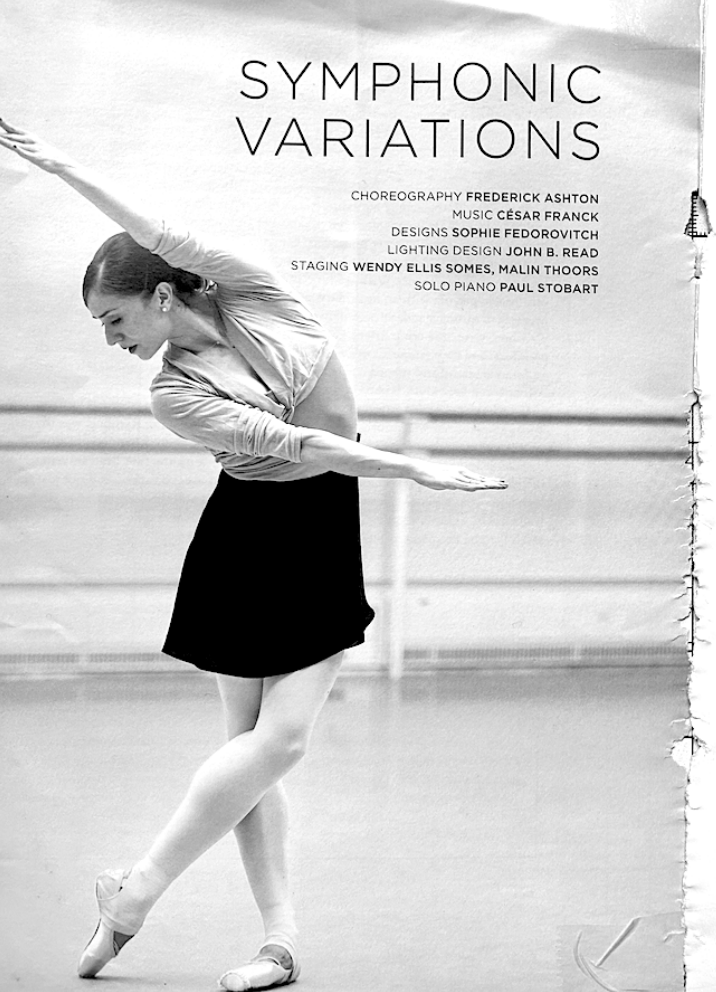

Marianela Nuñez

DANCE WITHOUT TIME

ISMENE BROWN

This was Frederick Ashton's idea for a new post-war ballet to César Franck's *Symphonic Variations*:

> 1. The lover excites the love of the spouse. 2. The wound of love. 3. Rapture caused by spark of love. 4. The call of the Bridegroom. 5. Before the spiritual nuptials. 6. The heart's joy in union.

So far, so pre-war Sadler's Wells.

As his thoughts evolved (while in the RAF he had been reading the mystical texts of the 17th-century St Teresa of Ávila) he even 'considered the notion of introducing a suggestion of a nun taking the veil', he told the critic Richard Buckle. But he also confessed that he found attempting to describe his thought processes a brake on his own imagination: the ballet might become too 'literary', 'the final nature of my inspiration might crystallize into something I did not really intend'.

It's instructive about the way a creative mind works that Ashton suddenly stripped down his conception of a conventional corps de ballet with leading principals, and emerged with the wondrous spareness of just six dancers in an abstract place of breathtakingly undefined serenity.

Julie Kavanagh's biography clarified the courage this took, and its possible psychological origin. Having spent four years away from dance in the RAF, surrounded by the dreariness and fears of war, Ashton was 'very sensitive' about re-emerging as a creator on a large, unfamiliar stage – Covent Garden, The Sadler's Wells Ballet's grand new base. The more so because his rival, the Australian Robert Helpmann, had come to dominate the company during the war with his own highly dramatic, theatrical style. 'I thought they were losing the dancing element and this worried me. And I began thinking in terms of pure dance', said Ashton.

He was working on two projects at once in early 1946, of equal importance but entirely dissimilar creative stresses. For the symbolically momentous new *Sleeping Beauty* that had been commissioned for The Sadler's Wells Ballet to reopen the Royal Opera House, he had been steeping himself in Petipa in order to create a new Garland Dance and a brilliant Florestan trio. But those were, as it were, stylistic exercises – tributes to the grand classical tradition which the Sadler's Wells dancers had so rapidly shown themselves master of in little more than a decade.

But an original, abstract creation would be both infinitely more exposing of his imagination and challenging in terms of choreography within the new space. And Franck's *Variations symphoniques* was 20 minutes long – through-composed in one long breath, rather than made in distinct numbers like Tchaikovsky's *Beauty*.

Frederick Ashton watches Rosemary Lindsay, Michael Somes, Anya Linden and Margot Fonteyn in rehearsal for *Symphonic Variations*, 1948 *Roger Wood Photographic Collection/©ROH Collections*

Still, Ashton (who had seen and loved Isadora Duncan) knew that pure dance was rich enough a language to have equal power to reach viewers largely familiar with theatrical entertainments or emotional narratives. As he wrote in 1959,

> Poetic evocation when sensitively handled can lead to masterpieces such as *Les Sylphides*, *Serenade* etc, and leave an audience suspended in a trance-like response (that a storyballet can never achieve) because of their very directness and delicacy of poetic potency that needle-like reaches the heart.

He mentions his great peer Balanchine there – *Serenade* – but to some watchers it might rather be Balanchine's *Apollo* whose choreographic imagery comes to mind at points in *Symphonic Variations*. Both works feature the combination of a man and three women, a motif of 20th-century ballet, not of the 19th century. A man with two women, or vice versa, hints at romance and works with conventional partnering; a man with three women takes us back to the female trinities of classical myth, the three Graces, the Muses, the Fates, in which the human soul enters allegorical conversations beyond earthly relationships, and the choreographer must invent resonant neoclassical combinations.

The ballet had its first performance at the Royal Opera House on 24 April 1946. Seeing it in this immediate post-war context, Franco Zeffirelli found it profoundly erotic and loving, as the performers took hands, lifted each other, and danced in a healing synchronization. And indeed that perhaps is where Ashton's first, raw ideas of holy expiation and renewal embedded themselves.

But however the ballet is explained, to this day *Symphonic Variations* asks both watcher and dancer to dare to be simple. If you think it may be about morning light through trees, about nature's blissful renewal, you will find it here; if it is about the gentle profundity of love between human beings, and their re-dedication to each other, here it is too; if it is a re-invention of classical ballet-dancing in utmost grace, this holds its head up alongside Petipa, Balanchine or Fokine. It is also, in theatrical terms, purest Apollonian lyricism, the muses of dance, music and poetry clearly taking Ashton by the hand and leading him to the heights of creativity.

Even if you spurn such quasi-narrative associations and you look on *Symphonic Variations* in aesthetic terms alone, you see something of complete structural wholeness, almost Cunninghamesque. The stage is a box of light; the dancers begin and end in the same positions, and never leave this glowing cube of spring green. The dance could be cyclical, and likewise the mysterious black lines across the walls summon up ribbons of sound, the musical stave, as well as the electricity lines across flat Norfolk horizons that were one of the designer Sophie Fedorovitch's graphic inspirations.

The costumes, suggestive of Attic divinities (they predate Balanchine's rather similar *Apollo* redesign for New York City Ballet), are thus removed from any realistic associations. Beth Genné has pointed out that the men's costumes echo the black lines on their surroundings, so that as they move they seem to emerge from the plane of the background to join the women in 3-D space, and then finally to merge into the back plane again.

Tristan Dyer and Yuhui Choe; opposite, Leticia Stock, Vadim Muntagirov, Melissa Hamilton and Emma Maguire

This sense of a sealed experience, a microcosm of music, dance and light, is mysteriously attractive – you could almost pick up this radiant box and turn it in your hand, gazing at a perfect, intricate timepiece. The rapid spins and eddies that are a refrain in the movement draw your eyes to their constantly innovative variation, but the gentle taking of hands in quiet waves of certainty speaks of natural laws of renewal between human beings. Set the box down, and let the movement start again. It is, like Matisse's *La danse*, a perfect, eternal cycle.

That this eternal dance is never ruptured is due to a last-minute masterstroke. An injury to Michael Somes delayed the premiere, and gave Ashton five crucial extra weeks, in which he rethought the ending. He had prescribed that the dancers would run off stage. It was Sophie Fedorovitch who felt this was wrong, that they should end where they started.

For the six chosen dancers, the challenge of performing so undefined a ballet on a new stage at this moment of historical resurrection was unnerving. Margot Fonteyn remembered how uneasy it made them. Dealing with both stillness and also an unprecedented test of stamina (Monica Mason said she would feel 'legless' at the end) presented an unknown: not to interpret the steps, but to watch as if through the audience's eyes what the choreographer was making, as they were dancing it.

Talking to Barbara Newman, Moira Shearer described the unique terrors of those early performances:

> *Symphonic Variations* is simply steps, pure dancing. There isn't anything else for the public to hang onto; but that, surely, is what you learn to do as a dancer. You are simply there in *Symphonic*, on a stage, and you have to try to create a series of geometric patterns, to music, that are genuinely beautiful to look at. And create some kind of illusion or mood of… I don't know what… of coolness or excitement.

For another early interpreter, Alexander Grant, leaving 'character' behind was frightening:

> When I was a character, I didn't have to be humble. When it was just me, I really had trouble. That's why that particular ballet was so terrifying… When the curtain went up, when I suddenly found myself… in all-over white tights, sort of naked to the world, and just having to be me, it was one of the most difficult things I've ever done.

For later performers, increasingly used to the plotless ballets of Balanchine, and Ashton's own subsequent canon, confidence grew. '*Symphonic* is heaven – it's what heaven must be like,' said Antoinette Sibley. 'It's fulfilment, peace, happiness, beauty. It's not abstract. It's not steps, is it? It's intoxication of everything that's beautiful.'

At the heart of the ballet are the qualities remembered in Fonteyn. Sibley recalled:

> One wasn't watching the dancing that was going on in the centre. One was just watching that beautiful, beautiful woman on the edge of the stage. Moving the heart, but not moving in action at all. Just standing there. Motionless.

Violette Verdy put her finger on what Fonteyn's performance revealed about the ballet itself: she noted that 'submission [was Fonteyn's] greatest power. She was waiting for her turn to move, but not looking at the other dancers, or interfering with them, or stealing their thunder, but waiting in the music.'

Waiting in the music.

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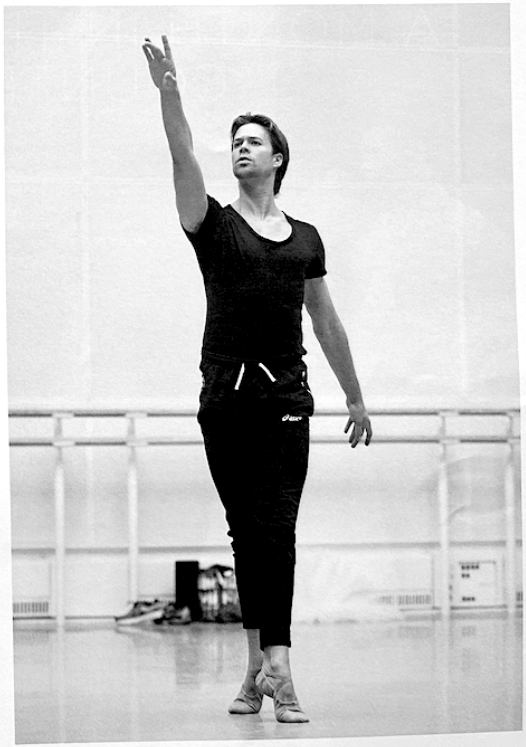
Symphonic Variations
by César Franck (1822–90)

Franck's virtuoso work for piano and orchestra received its premiere on 1 May 1866 in Paris, with Louis Diémer as the soloist and also the dedicatee of the work. The fluid single movement comprises three sections: an introduction, the theme and the variations on the theme.



Matthew Golding