

The Role of George Balanchine in Building and Strengthening Georgian - American Cultural Relations

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The article is dedicated to my ballerina daughter – Kate

"Ballet is important and significant – yes. But first of all, it is a pleasure".

George Balanchine

Abstract: *George Balanchine, also known as Giorgi Balanchivadze, played a significant role in bridging Georgian and American cultures through his contributions to ballet. Known as the 'Father of American Ballet,' Balanchine revolutionized dance, bringing it to prominence in America and beyond. This article explores Balanchine's early life, his contributions to American ballet, and his enduring connection to his Georgian heritage, highlighting his cultural impact and legacy.*

Keywords: George Balanchine, American Ballet, Georgian Culture, Cultural Relations, Ballet Legacy

1. Introduction

Purpose: This article investigates George Balanchine's contributions to American ballet and his role in strengthening cultural relations between Georgia and the United States.

Significance of the article: This study highlights Balanchine's role as a cultural ambassador, emphasizing how his Georgian roots influenced his revolutionary work in American ballet, fostering cross-cultural appreciation.

History highlights many Georgians who, through selfless work, talent, and courage, have made contributions of global importance, one of these is Giorgi Balanchivadze, a Georgian who started a dizzying choreographic career, did not forget his roots in distant America and in the 30s of the last century brought and established the art of ballet across the ocean.

Early Life and Career

Although George Balanchine is regarded as "The Father of American Ballet," his outstanding influence is felt not just in America but all across the world.

George Balanchine was the son of Meliton Balanchivadze and Maria Nikolayevna Vasilyeva. Meliton was a Georgian composer and public figure, founder of Georgian opera music. In 1889 - 1895 he studied at the St. Petersburg Conservatory for vocal instruction (with Prof. V. Samus), then moved to the composition class with the advice of the Conservatory Director Anton Rubinstein. He worked in Rimsky - Korsakov, Russia for 28 years, propagated the art of Georgian music, ran Georgian music evenings, performed as a singer (Kendall, 2013, p. 16).

Very little is known about Balanchine's mother, Maria Nikolayevna Vasilyeva. Some reports suggest she worked as

a maid in Meliton's household, while others claim she was the daughter of his housekeeper. From her photos taken in her youth, we see a beautiful woman dressed in beautiful clothes. There is information that Maria was an illegitimate child. Later, her son Andria said that Maria's father was a German Nicholas Von Almedingen, who started a business in Russia and started a family, but left the country soon after, so his daughter had to take her mother's surname, Vasilieva. If Maria's father was an Almedingen, the rarity of this surname makes it unquestionable that he must have been a descendant of the Almedingens of St. Petersburg (who immigrated to Russia from the Austro - Hungarian Empire at the end of the eighteenth century) (Kendall, 2013, p. 22).

George was born in 1904 in St. Petersburg. Encouraged by his mother and father, he began to pursue the arts. As young as five years old, he began to study piano, and at the age of ten, he joined the Imperial Theater School of Ballet. From this early training, Balanchine gained an instinctual musicality and practiced world-renowned, comprehensive ballet techniques (Kendall, 2013, p. 27).

At the age 17, in 1921 he graduated the Imperial Theater School, after which he started working in The Mariinsky Theater, then named The State Theater of Opera and Ballet. During this time, he also began choreographing. Before graduation, he set his first piece, a duet called La Nuit, performed by himself and a fellow female dancer. After graduation, he continued his musical studies, focusing on piano, counterpoint, harmony, and composition. While Balanchine was performing in Russia, he would also try experimental choreography that broke away from Russian conventions and was threatened for doing so (Williamson, 2022).

George Balanchine subsequently declined to go back to the newly formed Soviet Union when on tour in Europe in 1924. Accompanying him were Russian dancers Alexandra Danilova and Nicholas Efimov, as well as his first wife

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Tamara Geva. None other than the notorious Sergei Diaghilev would perform with these four dancers in London. Following that, they would all rise to prominence on a global scale in the dance industry (Williamson, 2022).



(Gabrichidze, 2019)

2. Balanchine's Prominence

It should be noted, that Balanchine's life from the early adulthood had been shaped by immigration and travel abroad. His journey that started with the departure from the Soviet Union and continued with the establishment of the New York City Ballet was very long and challenging.

Balanchine's prominence rose at the age of 21, as the principal choreographer of the most notorious ballet of the day - and, some would contend, among the most significant ballets ever created. He would be the *Ballets Russes** fifth and last choreographer, ending the history of the company (Williamson, 2022). *Apollo* and *Prodigal Son* were among the important pieces that Balanchine choreographed during his four years at the Ballets Russes. In addition, he would refine his signature Neoclassical look (Association, 2024). The romantic roots of the art form had been completely destroyed by earlier Ballet Russes choreographers in the service of modernist ideas and avant - garde goals. Romantic - era elements would resurface under Balanchine, even though many traditions would continue to be disregarded. Balanchine would revisit classical aesthetics and Greco - Roman themes while maintaining the abstraction and experimentation that came before him (Williamson, 2022).

We can emphasize, that Balanchine's first substantial professional phase began with the Ballets Russes, and it was a pivotal time in his life (Association, 2024). It would do three things: first, establish his Neoclassical style and two of his most well - known works; second, help him forge a lifelong friendship with composer Igor Stravinsky; and third, it would make his career prominent globally.

2.1 The Establishment of The New York City Ballet

In 1933, Balanchine founded his own company in Paris - Les Ballets. Leonard Kirstein, a key figure in the establishment of The New York City Ballet, saw Balanchine while she was choreographing for Les Ballets. Leonard Kerstein told Balanchine about his ambition of an American

Ballet after they were introduced by Romola Nijinsky, the renowned choreographer Vaslav Nijinsky's wife. Persuaded, Balanchine relocated to New York, and the two of them established The School of American Ballet, a renowned company to this day, in 1934. One of Balanchine's most infamous works, *Serenade*, was choreographed for students at the SAB that same year (Kendall, 2013).

In 1947, Balanchine and Kirstein formed the Ballet Society, as a subscription - based performance group catering to affluent audiences. Rich patron Morton Baum, who had seen a performance of *Orpheus*, extended an invitation to Balanchine to join the City Center - now called the Lincoln Centre. At last, the founding of the New York City Ballet marked the pinnacle of Balanchine's career.

2.2 New York City Ballet: American Ballet, Modernism, & the Cold War

By the time Balanchine was forty - three, the New York City Ballet had become a home for his choreography. In his capacity as the NYCB's artistic director, Balanchine choreographed a number of pieces that are being performed all over the world. Furthermore, Balanchine and the NYCB would represent American ballet both domestically and internationally. One could call Balanchine an American exemplar because of his light, quick pointework, experimental abstraction, and neoclassical motifs (Williamson, 2022).

During his tenure with the New York City Ballet, Balanchine created numerous pieces, including as the well - known pieces *Jewels*, *Stars and Stripes*, *Agon*, and *Vienna Waltzes*. He expanded his neoclassical approach further while he was at the NYCB, where he also revised famous ballet pieces including: *Sleeping Beauty*, *The Nutcracker*, and *The Firebird*.

Being an immigrant from Georgia who had strong ties to the United States, Balanchine occupied a unique role as a Cultural Ambassador. Under Balanchine's leadership, the "New York City Ballet" toured twice in Georgia (1962, 1972). Very interesting was the meeting of brothers - Andria and Giorgi Balanchivadze. After 1918, brothers did not see each other until 1962. This meeting is connected with the tour of George Balanchine to the Soviet Union, when he visited Tbilisi with concerts. Andria and Giorgi embraced each other so much that even a stranger could not hold back tears. At that time, Andria was the chairman of the Union of Composers of the Soviet Socialist Republic of Georgia and a respected person of the party nomenclature, while his brother, the founder of the American ballet, was called the main choreographer of the twentieth century - George Balanchine.

After the emotional meeting at the Tbilisi airport, brothers went directly to Kutaisi, where George knelt at the grave of his father, Meliton Balanchivadze and fell on the ground. Giorgi, excited by visiting Kutaisi and praying at the Gelati Cathedral, wrote in his impression book: "I am proud to be from Imereti". As George Balanchine's friends and relatives recalled, he had a New York apartment full of Georgian items and was always proud of his origin. He kept chokha

* The Ballets Russes was an itinerant ballet company begun in Paris that performed between 1909 and 1929 throughout Europe and on tours to North and South America.

and icons, and he celebrated the magnificent Easter holiday by coloring eggs and baking Paska with his own hands (STARVISION, 2022).

3. Conclusion

As George Balanchine noted: "We must understand that dance is an absolutely independent art and not a secondary thing associated with anything. I consider it to be one of the greatest arts, like the music of great composers, the perception of which can be understood without any verbal explanation". (Merkviladze, 2014, p. 4).

George Balanchine revolutionized ballet by introducing a unique 'Balanchine style' that redefined dance as a modern and expressive art form. While he preferred to be remembered as a craftsman rather than an innovator, his work remains a cornerstone of American ballet and a testament to his Georgian heritage.

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