



Cross-cultural representation and influences in ballets by Darius Milhaud and Paul Hindemith¹

Daniël G Geldenhuys

Summary

In this article I will be dealing with the ballet output of two composers, the Frenchman, Darius Milhaud, and the German, Paul Hindemith, concentrating on one representative work of each, namely *La Création du Monde* and *Noblissima Visione*. Both ballets have external influences from other cultures, which will be highlighted, especially regarding their jazz roots deriving from the African continent via the New World in the work of Milhaud. Finally, some focus will be directed on radical stylistic changes which took place in the ballet production of both composers after their emigration to the United States of America.

‘*L*a Création du monde. C’est une des grandes lettres de noblesse du jazz dans la musique écrite des Blancs’ (Goléa 1965:n.p.).² Antoine Goléa’s statement is a reflection of comments by many reviewers of this ballet, such as those by Humphrey Searle, for example, who wrote almost a decade later of *La Création* that it was ‘a work which has remained a landmark in the history of modern ballet music’ (Searle 1973:128). Does Goléa’s comment have certain racist undertones, or does it simply mean that the jazz idiom had with the composition of *La Création du Monde* suddenly been normalised, allowing the structural characteristics of jazz to be strictly superimposed into a specific classical format, or that the different authentic and commercial performance practices of jazz, as well as its instrumentation, had now to a certain extent been fixed and standardised? Had Darius Milhaud’s 1922 ‘authentic jazz experience’ (Nichols 1996:51) in Harlem, New York, led to a stylistic symphonic jazz model whereby all opportunities for improvisation became redundant, or did he manage to develop a novel French method of blood transfusion to escape the swollen-headed and weary *bourgeoisie* musical presentations of the Twenties (Asriel 1985:413)? Does this have anything to do with jazz, or should one define the work as a smoothed-out orchestral

version of the Paul Whiteman style? Despite all inherent discrepancies, Milhaud has succeeded in achieving through this melting pot of styles an exceptional degree of compositional quality, resulting in a constant flow of positive press comments even from the inception of the work in 1923, when Boris de Schloezer wrote in the *Revue Pleyel* ‘Celle-ci possède son charme propre; elle porte pourtant la marque de la personnalité de son auteur’³ (Schloezer 1923:21).

Historical background

Towards the end of the nineteenth century the art of ballet became more and more superficial, allowing George Bernard Shaw in 1893 to concede that ‘the present ballet is so far removed from real life, that it has become completely immoral and therefore unable to convince’ (Seipp 1996:7). Even in France the great Romantic ballet, with roots deriving from the court of Louis XIV, had become stuck in the dancing and the dancers’ glittering façade as an end in itself.

The naturalistic approach to the dance movement of the American dancer, Isadora Duncan, brought about drastic changes in the traditional rules of classic ballet in Paris round about 1900, not only emphasising the enormous possibilities of expression by the human body, but also accentuating the close inspirational relationship between music and dance. Fokine was deeply moved by Isadora Duncan’s performance in St Petersburg in 1905 (Kindermann 1970:159) and on his part again influenced Diaghilev, who with his organisational capabilities could bring together artists, composers, writers and choreographers to achieve a conceptual artistic production of stylistic unity.

A turning point and transformation process took place in French dancing on the stage during the years 1909 to 1910, leading to a different perception of the role of ballet music. This came

about mainly through the 'invasion' of the Ballets Russes, who not only brought Russian dancers along with them to Paris, but also the choreographies of Fokine, music by Russian composers, and the décor and costumes by important Russian artists such as Benois, Bakst and Roerich (Seipp 1996:10). The impresario Sergeij Diaghilev and his company of dancers, with their ideas of converting the concept of theatre through the upgrading, artistic individualisation and fusion of all effective devices on the dance stage, did achieve the inception of modern ballet as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. By upgrading the ballet in its totality down to the last details, looking for new content and finding innovative aesthetic formats, greater demands were made on the quality of ballet composition. This inevitably led to the active participation of composers such as Milhaud and Hindemith in ballet composition.

Darius Milhaud and the Ballets Suédois

The Swedish ballet company, Ballets Suédois, was formed in 1920 under the patronage and financial support of the Swedish art collector Rolf de Maré. During its guest performances in the Paris *Théâtre des Champs-Élysées* from October 1920 to December 1925, the Ballets Suédois presented 24 different ballet works. As guiding principle and motto for the artistic production of the Ballets Suédois, complementing the concept of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* projected by the Ballets Russes, was the creation of a 'theatrical art' whereby in each new work old performance traditions are broken, implementing new provocative and shocking trends (Seipp 1996:18). The prevailing guidelines of provocation, innovation and revolution led to the following principles regarding the performances of the Ballets Suédois:

- An almost total abandonment of a traditional repertoire, with each production having a new artistic approach
- Contacting the leading avant-garde artists of the time, such as Picabia, Cocteau, Satie, René Clair and Léger, and incorporating their participation in ballet productions
- Guaranteeing to the participating artists that their ideas would be expressed unconditionally and in their original form.

The first and the last points above clearly show the differences in approach and method of the Ballets Russes (Seipp 1996:19).

This approach suited Darius Milhaud's philosophies very well, giving him the incentive to create three ballets in collaboration with the Ballets Suédois, namely, *L'homme et son Désir*, *Les*

Mariés de la Tour Eiffel and finally in 1923, *La Création du Monde*.

La Création du Monde and cross-cultural influences

From around 1906 the Parisian cultural environment found African sculpture, as well as American Negro jazz and dance forms, enormously attractive; in many ways they influenced the entertainment, fashion and designers' world of the time (Rosenstock 1984:487). The reception of jazz in the music world is double-sided: the European – American and African symbolic elements as an intrinsic cultural mixture. Two symbolic elements are inherent:

- the American big city as symbol of unlimited technical progress
- the Negroid as symbol signifying untouched originality by Western civilisation (Danuser 1984:159).

In her conversations with Roger Nichols, Madeleine Milhaud said about Darius's visit to America in 1922:

During his stay in New York he spent every evening in Harlem listening to the groups from New Orleans. It was there that he discovered the jazz music that expresses the sorrow of a people complaining of the injustice of which they were victims. When he came back to France Darius brought back dozens of jazz records, which he listened to night and day. More than ever he was determined to transpose the jazz idiom into a classical work. It was the director of the Ballets Suédois, Rolf de Maré, who provided the opportunity when he proposed a collaboration with Blaise Cendrars, who had just published a collection of African tales [*Cendrars, Anthologie Nègre*]. He used one of them [*Légendes Cosmogoniques*] as a basis for 'The Creation of the World', a subject that was taken up with enthusiasm by Darius and by [Fernand] Léger. (Nichols 1996:51)

To quote Fernau Hall in his *An Anatomy of Ballet* (London 1953:137): 'This ballet was like much of the expressionist drama in that the décor and costumes dominated the production.'

La Création du Monde: jazz reception and formal construction

The compositional process with Milhaud in this work is very closely related with an intensive reception of musical influences, which in the process of artistic creation are re-evaluated and reworked. Example 1 shows the orchestration consisting of 13 instrumental groups, partly scored for double or solo instrumentation. It is clear that this form and style of instrumentation had nothing

