the 1930s came initially through negotiations with Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes, then after Diaghilev’s death in 1929 mainly with Leonide Massine of the then newly formed Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo, as later on with George Balanchine of the American Ballet as well.

Although negotiations for a ballet had been going on for some time, the idea of Noblissima Visione was realised through a coming together of circumstances whereby Hindemith and Massine happened purely by chance to be together in Florence for the Maggio Fiorentino in 1937. Massine wrote about this in his book, *My Life in Ballet*:

[Hindemith] had just come from the great church of Santa Croce, which contains the frescoes by Giotto depicting the life of St Francis of Assisi. He had been deeply impressed by them, and taking me by the arm...
he hurried me back to the church to see them. I too
was struck by their spiritual beauty and could well
understand why they had so profoundly moved
Hindemith. But when he suggested that we should
do a ballet together on the life of St Francis, I
hesitated
After much research on the subject by Massine,
and having discussed the matter with François
Mauriac in Paris, he later decided that ‘the idea had
now fired my imagination, and I felt that I could
make something of it. I therefore wrote to
Hindemith, inviting him and his wife to visit me on
Galli’ (Massine 1968:s.p.). Thus it came about that
between 15 and 24 September 1937 Hindemith
and Massine worked on the ballet Noblissima
Visione on this island in the Gulf of Salerno. Not
only did the cross-cultural presentation in this
work come from Italy, but also from the French
side, as Hindemith had decided to incorporate old
French music using, for example, the troubadour
melody, Ce funt en mai (Briner 1996:245).

Ballet after World War II

One of the parallelisms in the lives of Milhaud and
Hindemith was that both composers were forced
by the circumstances of World War II to emigrate
to the United States of America in 1940. For both
of them this meant the traumatic experience of
being drastically – and for some time at least
irrevocably – separated from their home countries.
In terms of their compositional output, this move
also signified a turning point, which can very
clearly be seen in the stylistic changes which took
place in their ballet production.
The emergence of psychopathological analysis and
existentialist pessimism after 1945, especially
noticeable in literature but also in ballet libretti and
theatre manuscripts, can be ascribed directly to
World War II (Hauser 1974:790). With the notion
of the so-called Parisian after-War Ballet
Existentialism, many works were performed
dealing with subjects such as death, the
undermining of value systems. In some cases these
went as far as perversity and decline. A good
example of this tendency is Le Jeune Homme et la
Mort (1946). Milhaud’s first two American ballets,
Les Cloches (1945) and Adame Miroir (1948), can
already be described as paradigmatic of the
existentialist crisis after World War II (Seipp
1996:117). However, Hindemith was expected by
Massine, whom he had met up with again in the
United States, to create only orchestral versions of
piano pieces by Carl Maria von Weber for a ballet
with the proposed title, Ballet nach Sprichwörten
und nach Bildern von Pieter Brueghel. This of
course Hindemith refused to do. The anomaly was
that in 1952 Massine’s big rival, George
Balanchine, could do the ballet première in New
York of the imaginative Webern orchestral
transformations of Hindemith’s Symphonic
Metamorphosis. For the rest of his ballet
production during these years, Hindemith mostly
had plans and did sketches for ballets on comic
subjects.

Conclusion

To return to the ballet scene in Paris and more
specifically to Milhaud, one can only conclude that
from 1945 until about 1968 there was a general
lack regarding the excitement of the avant-garde
productions of the 1910 and 1920s, such as might
be found in the distinct cross-cultural influences
that may be traced in the Milhaud ballet, La
Création du Monde, as well as in its German
counterpart, the 1938 Hindemith ballet,
Noblissima Visione. In his ballet scores Milhaud
confirms and reflects the fundamental pendulum
between conservatism and modernism that was
prevalent in the French ballets between 1910 and
1960, having made not only a decisive, but also a
proactive contribution to the French, and I believe
possibly the global ballet of the twentieth century.

Notes

1 This article is a reworking of a paper read at the Jahrestagung, Gesellschaft für Musikforschung,
Saarbrücken, 30 September 1999.
2 La Creation du monde. This can be regarded as the most honourable musical literature of jazz written by
the whites (own translation).
3 This possesses its own charm; ... nevertheless carrying the personality of its author (own translation).

References

spätere Ballettszenarien.’ Über Hindemith. Aufsätze zu Werk, Ästhetik und Interpretation. Ed. Susanne Schaal and
Luitgard Schader. Mainz: Schott.


