

George Balanchine

George Balanchine is the foremost contemporary ballet choreographer of the 20th century. He was born Georgiy Melitonovich Balanchivadzen on January 22, 1904 in St. Petersburg, Russia. His father was an opera singer and composer who was one of the founders of the Tbilisi Opera and Ballet Theatre. His mother loved ballet and thought of it as a way out of the lower ranks of society. Because of what his father did for a living and what his mother loved, Balanchine started playing piano at the age of five and he was attending the Imperial Ballet School at the age of nine.

At the Imperial Ballet School Balanchine was a student of Pavel Gerdt. He made his ballet debut with the Maryinsky Theatre Ballet Company in their production of *The Sleeping Beauty*. He would go on to become a member of their corps de ballet by 17. Also during this time, with the ballet company, Balanchine was experimenting with his own choreography. His choreographed first work was a pas de deux called *La Nuit* featuring him and a fellow female student.

After he graduated in 1921, Balanchine continued to dance in the corps de ballet for the Maryinsky Theatre now named the State Theater of Opera and Ballet. He also enrolled in the state's music conservatory, the Petrograd Conservatory. Some of the topics he studied were advanced piano, music theory, harmony and composition. His extensive knowledge of music and composing gave Balanchine the ability to effectively communicate with composers and also allowed him to reduce orchestral scores on the piano. This helped to translate the music into dance.

In the summer of 1924, Balanchine and three other dancers, including his wife, were allowed to leave what was the newly formed Soviet Union as a dance troupe called the Soviet State Dancers. They were on a dance tour of Western Europe however they did not return to the Soviet Union. From a tour stop in Germany the four dancers fled to Paris. The founder of Ballet Russes, Serge Diaghilev, invited them to audition for him and they were hired for his company. After the departure of the Ballet Russes ballet master, Diaghilev made Balanchine ballet master.

Balanchine was ballet master at Ballet Russe until 1929 when the company was dissolved after Diaghilev's death. During his time with Ballet Russe he created 9 ballets which include *L'Enfant et les Sortilèges*, his first ballet with the company, *Le Chant du Rossignol* and *Prodigal Son*. He worked with composers such as Igor Stravinsky, Claude Debussy, and Maurice Ravel and some of the artists who designed sets and costumes were Pablo Picasso and Henri

Matisse. Balanchine suffered a serious knee injury during this period which limited his dancing and may have helped him decide to commit to choreography full time.

After Ballet Russe dissolved Balanchine spent the next few years working on different projects that brought him all over Europe. He choreographed for the Danish Ballet, made a movie in England, staged dances for Britain's Cochran Revues, and began working for the new Ballet Russes, Ballet Russes Monte Carlo. He choreographed three ballets *Cotillon*, *La Concurrence*, *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme*. After leaving the Ballet Russe, Balanchine formed Les Ballets 1933 where during the company's first and only season he created six ballets in collaboration with artists such as Bertolt Brecht, Kurt Weill, and Henri Sauguet.

During Les Ballets 1933 London engagement Balanchine met American arts patron Lincoln Kirstein who convinced him to head to the United States to open a ballet school. Balanchine wanted to open a school to develop dancers with strong technique that followed his particular style. Balanchine arrived in New York October of 1933 and he and Kirstein got to work on their school, the School of American Ballet. Classes began January 2, 1934 just three months after Balanchine had arrived in the United States. The School of American Ballet is still in existence today and the school is home to dancers of the New York City Ballet and other ballets around the world.

The first ballet Balanchine created for the school was *Serenade* which was choreographed to music composed by Tchaikovsky. He would also begin what would become a 50 year collaboration with the composer Stravinsky. In 1946 Balanchine and Kirstein would work together to create a dance troupe they called Ballet Society. The Ballet Society would eventually find a permanent home and be renamed the New York City Ballet. Balanchine would remain the artistic director of the ballet until his death in 1983. With the New York City Ballet Balanchine created and revived many ballets that we love today.

Resources:

George Balanchine Foundation: <http://www.balanchine.org/01/bio4.html>

New York City Ballet: <https://www.nycballet.com/Explore/Our-History/George-Balanchine.aspx>