

Music and dance in rare harmony

Viktor Fedotov, who has been with the Kirov Ballet and Opera for more than 30 years, explains to Ismene Brown why conducting a ballet is as fulfilling as conducting a symphony

TEXT AS SENT

IT WAS the great ballerina Lesley Collier's farewell performance at Covent Garden last July. At the age of 48, with a foot injury not quite healed, she knew that by dancing Giselle, the greatest role in all ballet, she was risking blighting the last memories of her career with failure rather than glory. Part-way through a cruelly exposed solo in the second act, she was already exhausted, and her foot was agony.

"I thought, I'm not going to make it to the end. Paul Connelly saved my bacon. He was watching me closely, he could see when I wasn't going to quite make it - and he *made* me get to the end. He paused here and there to let me rest; he speeded up when I was going to run out of steam. He helped me, and I was aware that he was helping me. He was simply wonderful."

Paul Connelly was not, as you might suppose, a hypnotist sitting in the audience, nor was he Collier's dancing partner - that was Irek Mukhamedov. Collier did not actually know Paul Connelly at all. He was her conductor for the night.

The ability to sense when a dancer needs help is what dancers say is the single most important quality that a ballet conductor can have - one that can turn potential trouble into resounding triumph, as Collier achieved on her last night.

What happens when a dancer and conductor fall out is much more obvious; though not generally as audible as it was last June during a Royal Ballet performance of Swan Lake in America, when Irek Mukhamedov, dancing Prince Siegfried, furiously called out to the conductor to speed up. Rudolf Nureyev was once left gasping during a runaway Covent Garden performance, "Wait for me, wait for me", as he tried to complete his steps.

Such indignities could not happen in this autumn's run of Royal Ballet Swan Lakes, because the arrival of Viktor Fedotov from the Kirov Ballet and Opera in St Petersburg to guest-conduct at Covent Garden has brought dancers and musicians into rare accord - this man is not only a great musician, he is a simply marvellous ballet conductor as well.

Not for him any idea that ballet conducting is a second-best activity for someone who would rather be leading a symphony, which is an idea with some currency in Britain.

"There is only good music and bad music," says Fedotov, a thin white-haired man of 62 with a Bugs Bunny grin. He became a conductor at 15, and has been based at the Kirov for more than 30 years. Nowhere else but in Soviet Russia would a ballet conductor serve so long. He has probably conducted more Swan Lakes than any man alive, but he denies ever being bored by the piece: "You see the same sun every morning, but are you bored with it? Music is exactly the same as life."

The difference between symphonic and ballet conducting is the scope of responsibility. Once the curtain goes up, says Fedotov, "everything is down to me. If the stage needs more light, I indicate to the stage manager. If catastrophe happens, I have to fix it.

"ONCE in 1972, when the Kirov Theatre had just been reconstructed, with new stage and new technical facilities, we were performing Don Quixote. Ninella Kurgapkina was dancing the famous fouettés when I noticed that her legs were getting shorter and shorter with each turn. I suddenly realised that a new trap in the stage was giving way. I had no alternative but to stop everything. She climbed out of the pit, found a solid bit of stage to dance on, and we started the fouettés again."

Imagine if he had been one of those conductors who keeps his nose in the score. She might have been under ground before he noticed.

The ballet conductor has a complicated balance to strike between the orchestra, his own musical instincts about the work, and the dancers - chiefly, of course, the ballerina.

The orchestra, it goes without saying, feels that the ballerina has too much say. John Bakewell, principal double bass of the Royal Opera House orchestra, which plays opera, ballet and symphonic concerts, says it rankles with players to see musical masterpieces, such as Elgar's Enigma Variations or Tchaikovsky's Serenade, "utilised - that is the proper word here - rather than respected," to make a ballet.

Another concern is the liberties that even "musical" dancers take. "I remember when Natalia Makarova danced here, she had a very idiosyncratic way of dancing that looked very musical and lyrical on the stage, but in fact was bending the tempo so much that as a musician in the pit, unable to see her, you felt this wasn't musical at all. Sometimes we just have to accept that music is subservient

to the dancers.”

Meanwhile, the ballerina protests that she doesn't want such power. Deborah Bull, the Royal Ballet principal who has just danced two Swan Lakes with Fedotov, found his desire to let her dictate the pace less liberating than one might expect.

“Usually at the Royal Ballet we listen to the conductor and follow him. I'm a bit nervous about Fedotov's concept of following me because if he has any delay in getting the orchestra with him, I'll end up dancing off the music.

“In my first performance at one point in a solo in Act 2 I struck a rather good balance and couldn't quickly get off it into the next movement, and he allowed me to hold it, so the next four bars were slower. Perhaps he was too indulgent of me!”

Indulgence may be how Bull sees it, but Fedotov sees it as his natural duty, just as, when he conducts opera, he might allow a tenor to hold a high note. His care with individual dancers comes from his long experience at the Kirov, a time during which his musicmaking helped such luminaries as Nureyev, Natalia Makarova, Irina Kolpakova and Mikhail Baryshnikov to shine at their best.

“I need to love the ballerina so that I can find the tempos that suit her,” he says. “I watch her in (piano) rehearsal. I learn her style, the way she turns, the height of her jumps, I look for her natural instincts and interpretation. For something like Odile's 32 fouettés, I note her height, whether she has little feet or big feet, because that will affect her speed of turning. Once I have watched her in rehearsal and understood her, I don't have to rehearse with her.”

Appreciation, right down to her foot-size - love doesn't come any more more perfect than that.