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## Yvette Chauviré, ballerina – obituary

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Yvette Chauviré in Swan Lake in 1973 Credit: Ullstein Bild / ArenaPAL

Yvette Chauviré, the dancer, who has died aged 99, was rated as France's greatest classical ballerina of the 20th century, acclaimed for her elegance, daring and fastidiousness, and influencing generations of future French stars, including Sylvie Guillem.

A Parisian whose beauty was likened by some to Greta Garbo's, Yvette Chauviré was regarded as the icon of the French classical ballet much as Margot Fonteyn was Britain's. She was even dubbed "La Chauviré Nationale". The two ballerinas were close in age, and Rudolf Nureyev

worshipped both of them.



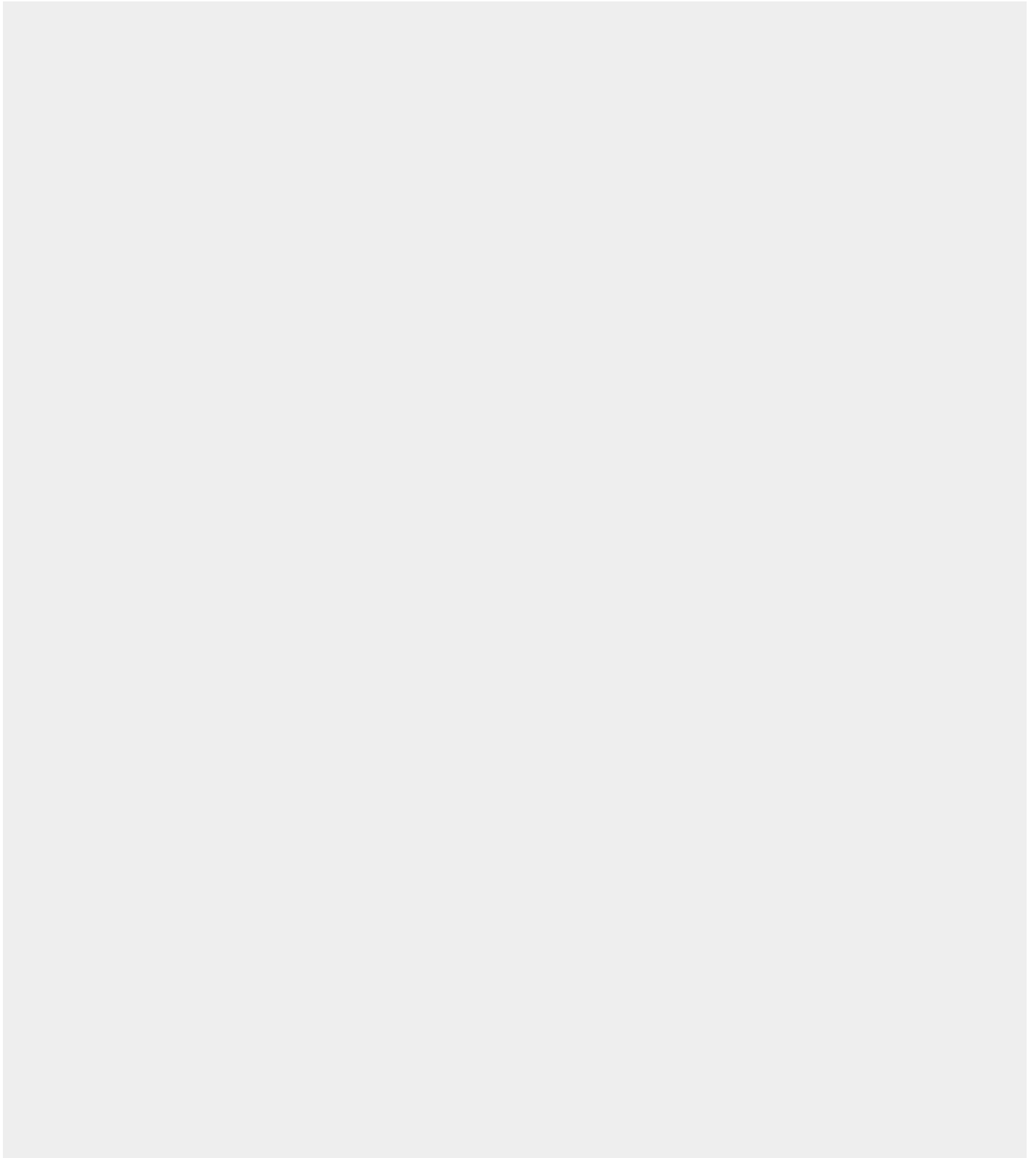
Rudolf Nureyev and Yvette Chauviré dance Les Sylphides in 1962 Credit: ANL/REX/Shutterstock

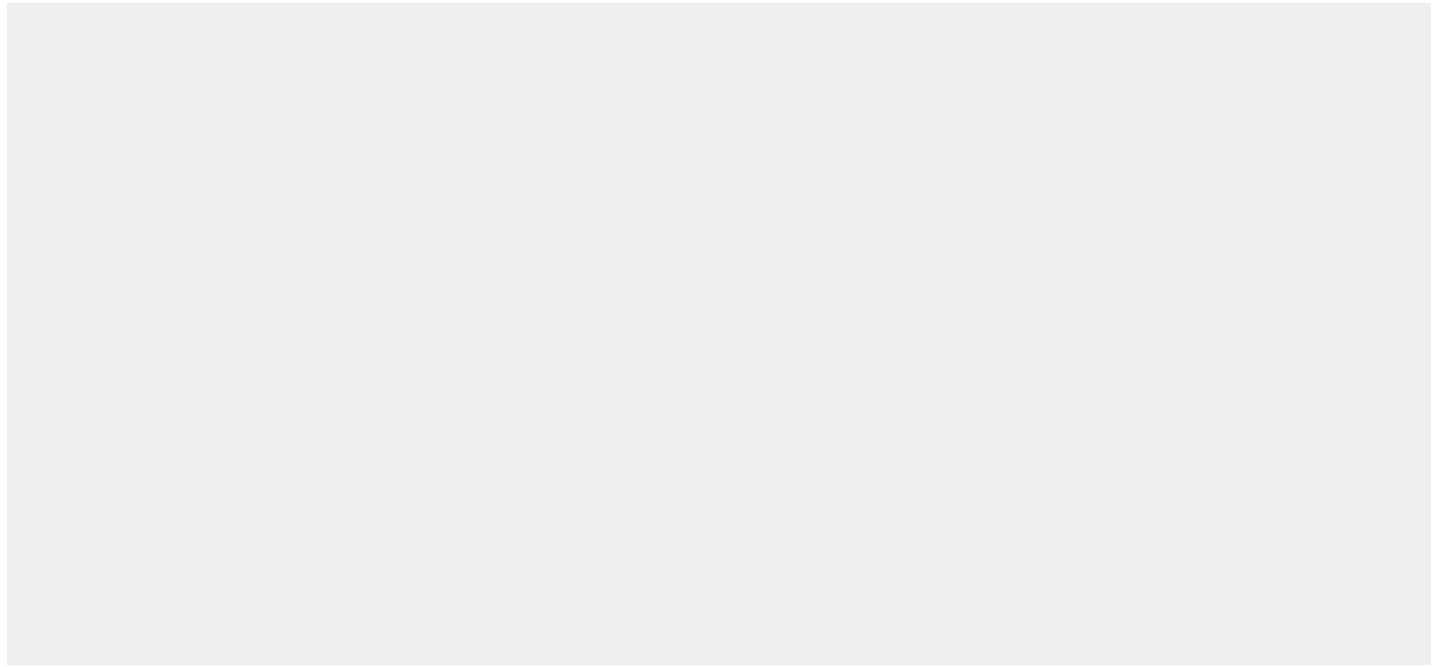
It was Chauviré whom the young Nureyev expected to be his first great Western partner when he defected in Paris on a Kirov Ballet tour in June 1961, and they would become lifelong friends. The Russian star wanted to make his debut at the Paris Opera Ballet with the great Chauviré, but the French government vetoed it under pressure from the Soviets.

Their Royal Ballet debut the following year, as guest stars in Les Sylphides and Giselle, was rated more of a triumph for Nureyev than for Yvette Chauviré, whose style was felt by leading British critics to be more

punctuated by poses than a liquid flow. During that season Nureyev danced as often with Chauviré as with Fonteyn, his eventual partner, leading to comparisons between the two prima ballerinas in which the older Frenchwoman suffered.

However, Yvette Chauviré was, like Fonteyn, one of the tiny handful of performers granted the honorary accolade of prima ballerina assoluta, won by fewer than 10 dancers in 20th-century world ballet history.





The young Yvette Chauviré in a photograph published on the cover of Life magazine in 1938 Credit: Console/ANL/REX/Shutterstock

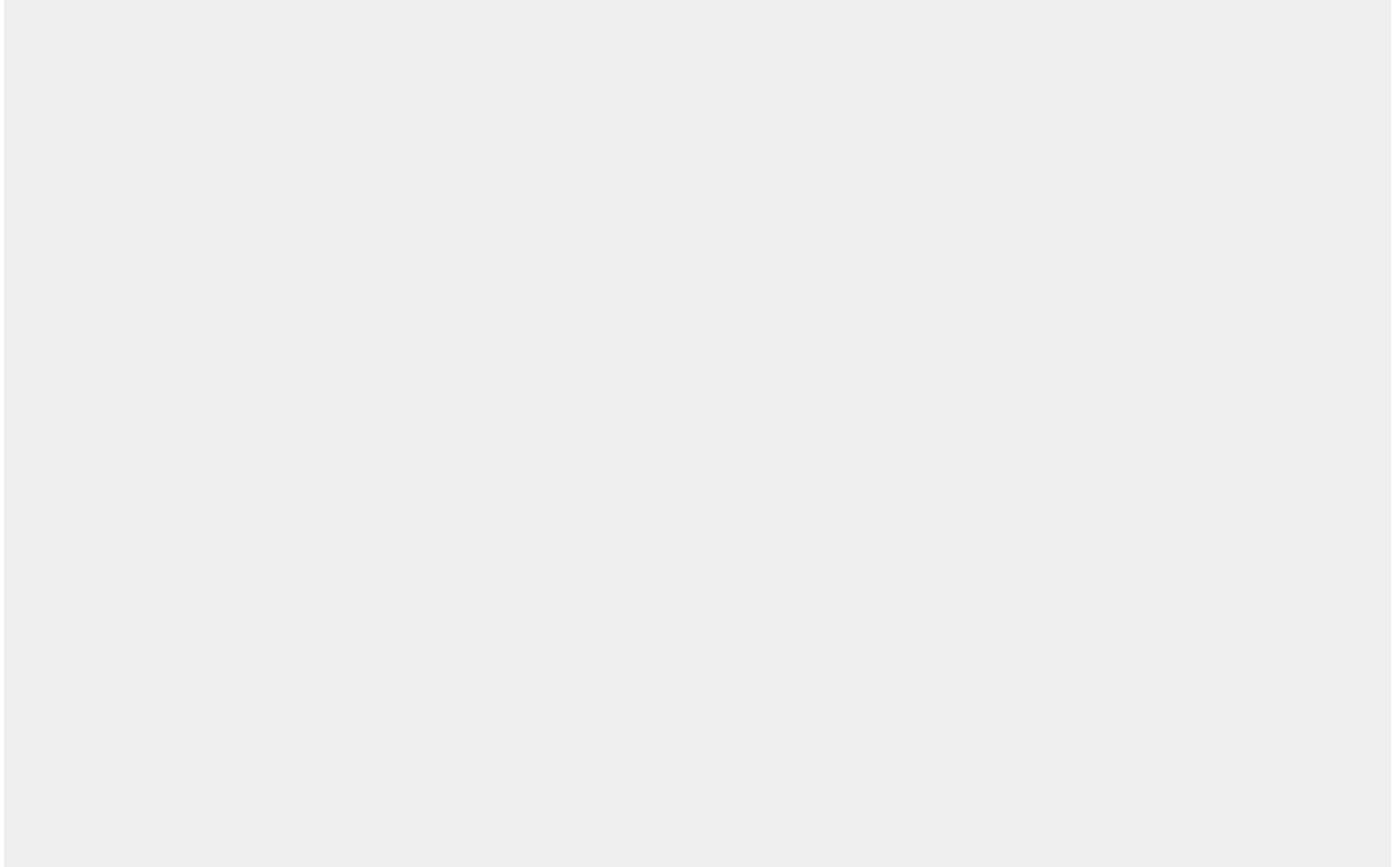
Born Yvonne Chauviré on April 22 1917 in Paris to Berthe and Henri Chauviré, she was a prodigious child, starting serious ballet lessons at the age of 10, and only three years later being hired into the Paris Opera Ballet by the last superstar of Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes, Serge Lifar.

He sent her to specialist Russian émigré teachers to add lyricism to her brilliance, and she spent much of her early career as muse to his choreographies, a major part of the Paris Opera Ballet repertoire, first starring in *Le Roi nu* (1936).

A year later, already a principal dancer at 20, she starred in the first full-length feature film about ballet, Jean Benoît-Lévy's *La Mort du Cygne* (1937), in which she played one of two rival ballerinas involved in a jealous dance student's sabotage. The film won the Grand Prix du Film Français at the 1937 Paris Exposition, and Yvette Chauviré was a cover star in America's *Life* magazine at the film's US release (retitled *Ballerina*) in 1938.

Lifar found in Yvette Chauviré the inspirational muse for his creations, notably an 18-minute solo dance portraying the goddess Istar, after which he promoted her to a privileged new rank of "étoile". His more enduring ensemble creations starring Yvette Chauviré included *Suite en blanc* (1943), in which she danced the insouciant, alluring Cigarette Girl, *Mirages* (1947) and *La Péri* (1957).

Yvette Chauviré repaid Lifar with lasting loyalty, once leading the dancers out of the Opéra after stagehands downed tools in protest at suspicions that he was collaborating with the Germans. When in 1944 Lifar was dismissed by the French government, Chauviré resigned to go with him to Monte Carlo, where he created further ballets for her, and she began an international career.

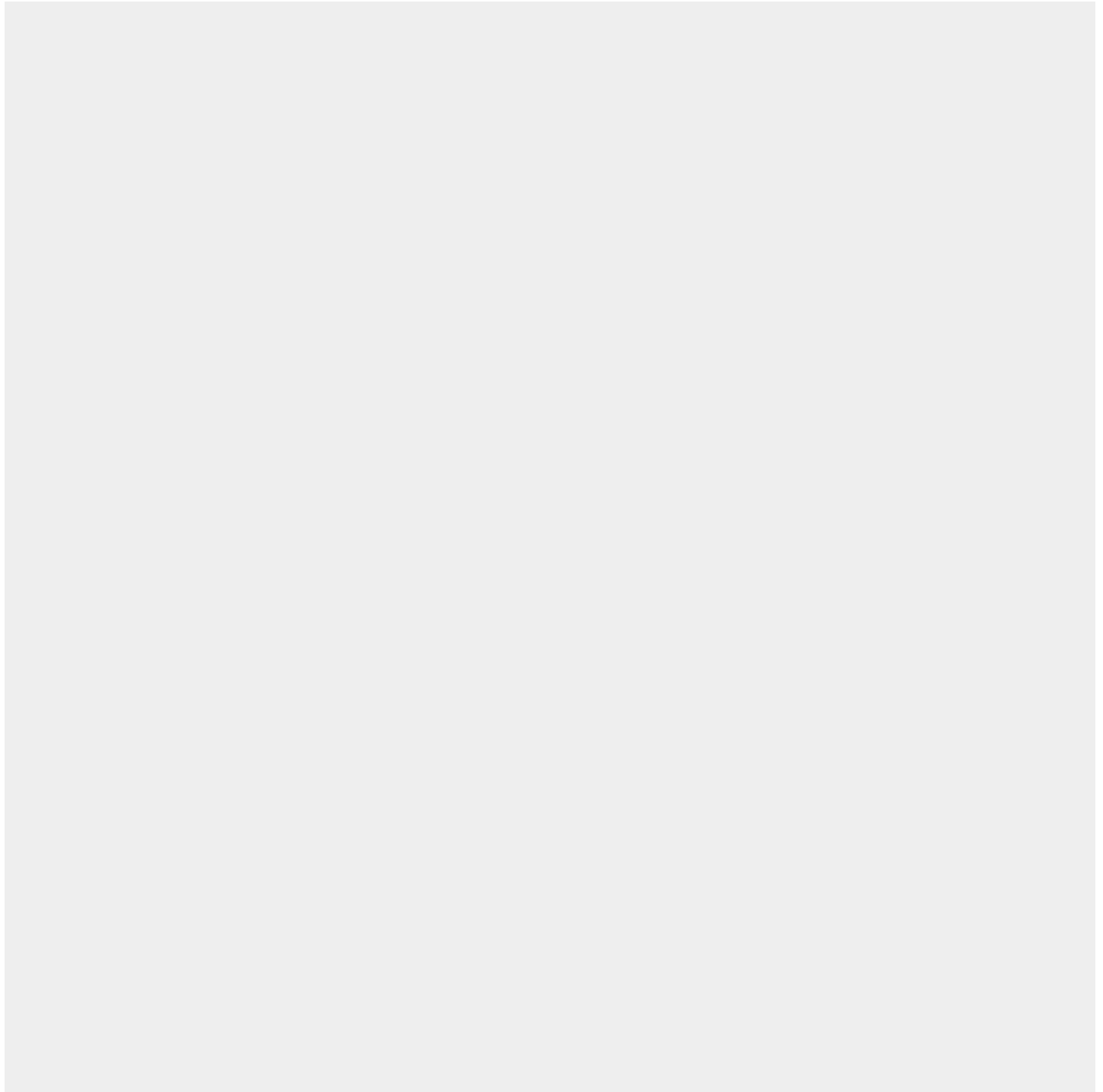


Yvette Chauviré in *Le lac des cygnes* at the Paris Opera in 1972 Credit: Rex Features

She returned with Lifar to the Paris Opera Ballet in 1947, widening her repertoire and global appearances. In addition to new Lifar creations, she enjoyed the virtuoso display piece made for her by her former teacher, Viktor Gsovsky, the *Grand Pas Classique* (1949), made with the Ballets des Champs-Élysées, and his tragic *La Dame aux camélias* (1957), with the Berlin Ballet. She acquired a starring role when the British choreographer John Cranko went to Paris to make *La Belle Hélène* (1955) to the effervescent Offenbach score.

Yvette Chauviré came only belatedly to the classical canon, dancing her first *Giselle* with Serge Lifar at the age of 30. In that ballet above all she sealed her reputation as an exquisite stylist and sensitive tragic artist, dancing it for 25 years until well in to her fifties, and stating in her 1961 autobiography that

she had been partnered by 33 different Albrechts so far. By the time she retired from the stage in 1972, in the same role, her partners had also included both Nureyev and his rival for top global male honours, Erik Bruhn. In 1974 she created her own version of Giselle, still performed by La Scala Ballet.



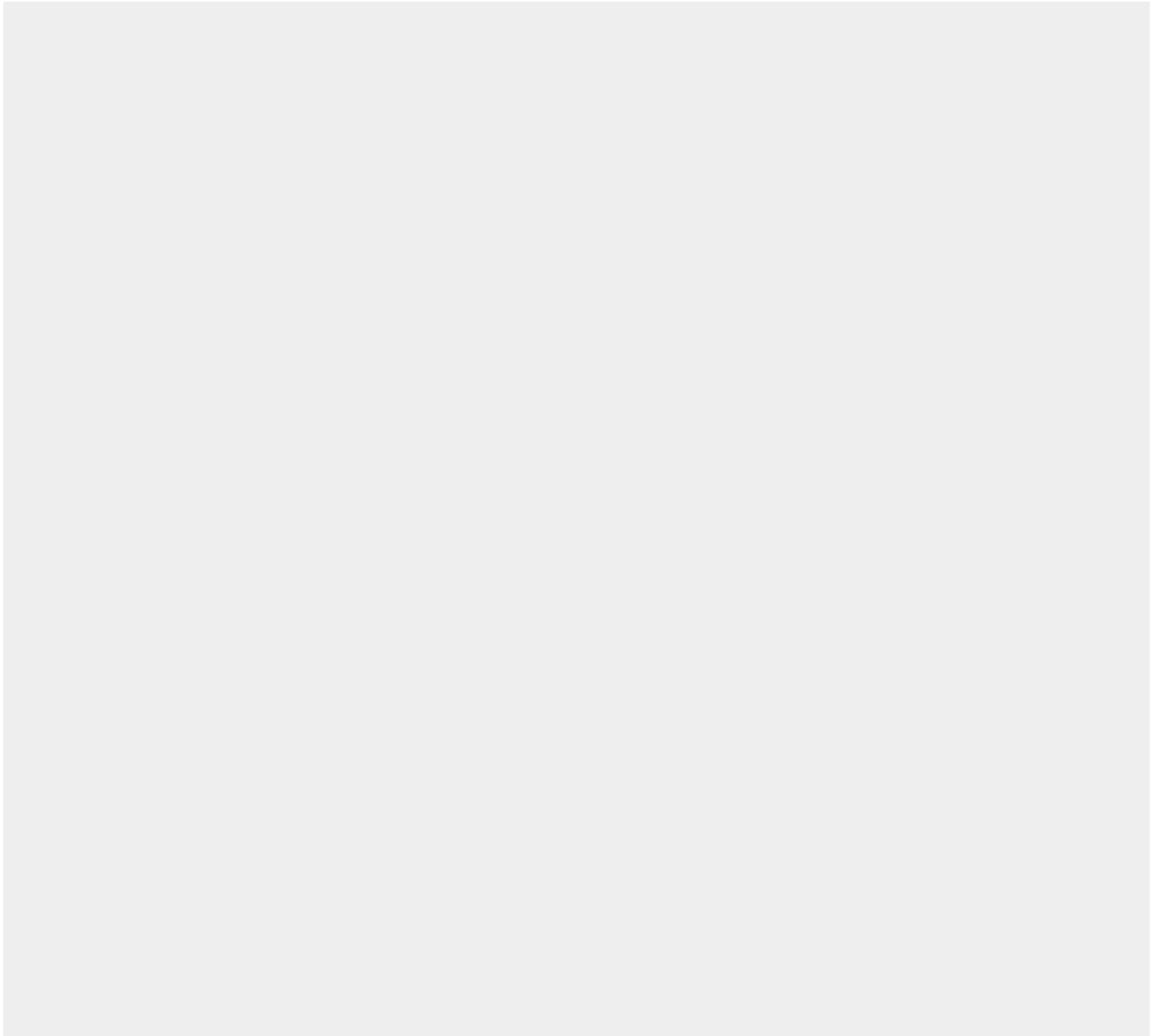
Yvette Chauviré in Concerto to the Stars at the Paris Opera in 1956 Credit: Roger-Viollet / ArenaPAL

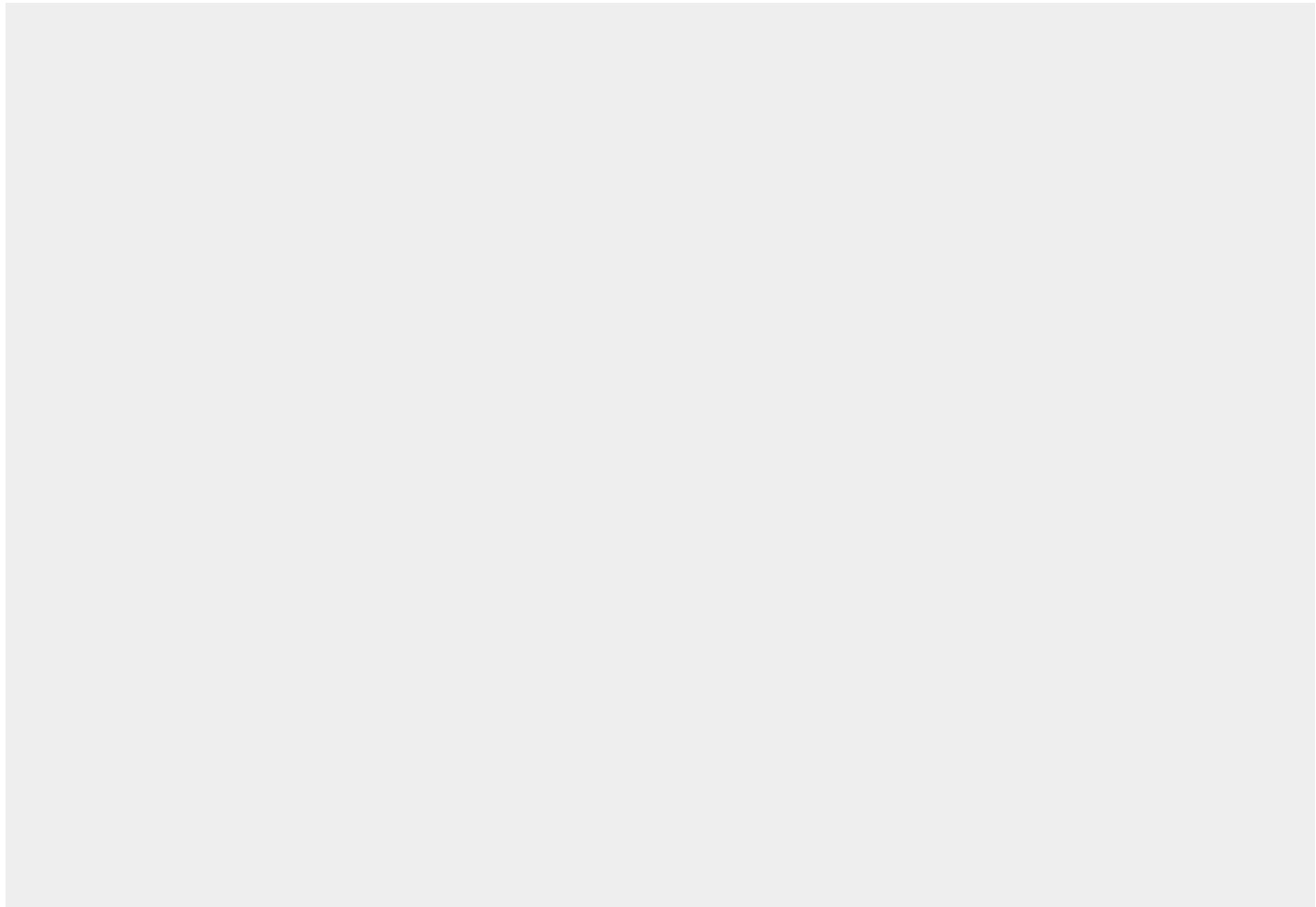
Yvette Chauviré performed as a guest star with the world's great companies, including the London Festival Ballet and the Royal Ballet, where she danced Giselle in 1958 (with Alexis Rassine) and The Sleeping Beauty, Giselle and Les Sylphides (with Nureyev) in 1962. Soon afterwards she became director

of the Paris Opera Ballet school, from 1963 to 1968, and then Paris's International Academy of the Dance. But she continued to take the character roles of the queens and mothers in the classics.

When Nureyev became artistic director of the Paris Opera Ballet, he asked Yvette Chauviré to play a character role in his blockbusting new production of *Raymonda*, a Russian classic. This led to her presence at her home company as the key teacher to Nureyev's brilliant roster of newcomers, and a television documentary about her in 1988.

Yvette Chauviré wrote two volumes of autobiography in which she expressed mounting concern that for dancers the constant temptation to be "hi-tech" in their technical tricks was trumping the emotional and lyrical side of dancing.





Yvette Chauviré after receiving the medal of Commander of the National Order of Merit in 1972 Credit: AFP/Getty Images

Yvette Chauviré was honoured many times by her country, her awards including the Grand Cross of the National Order of Merit, and she was created a Grand Officer of the Legion of Honour in 2010.

She married the Russian émigré artist Constantin Nepo, who died in 1976. They had no children.

**Yvette Chauviré, born April 22 1917, died October 19 2016**

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