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**Awakening The Sleeping Beauty: The Creation of National  
Ballet in Britain**

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# Awakening *The Sleeping Beauty*: The Creation of National Ballet in Britain

For the Royal Opera House in Covent Garden 1946 began with a flurry of activity, as the Sadler's Wells Ballet Company hastily put together a new production of Tchaikovsky's *The Sleeping Beauty*.<sup>1</sup> Its premiere would mark the building's postwar re-opening, as well as the troupe's inaugural performance as its resident ballet company. This prestigious event was supported by a huge – £10,000 – grant from the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA), with which new costumes and sets were commissioned from eminent stage designer Oliver Messel.<sup>2</sup> If the significance of the occasion contributed to the industrious atmosphere, recent events had created more work than was usual even for a new production. For the past six years, the Opera House, on lease to Mecca Cafés, had 'done its bit' for the war effort as a dance hall: arias had been replaced by the dulcet strains of Glenn Miller, divas by soldiers dancing away the horrors of war. Restoring its former glory was no small undertaking. The dance floor and two bandstands had to be removed, the red silk chairs brought out of storage and the building repainted. At the same time, postwar shortages made it hard to source the materials required for Messel's extravagant new designs. The set had to be created from camouflage paint, while costumes and lampshades were cobbled together from the staff's clothing coupons. Pressed for time and unfamiliar with the large venue, ballet company and orchestra rehearsed simultaneously in the main auditorium, surrounded by seamstresses and set constructors. The shortage of male dancers also meant that the company's principal male ballerina, Robert Helpmann, had to dance two roles, Carabosse and Prince Florimund. For the guardians of elite culture, the Opera House's wartime conscription as a

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1 The Sadler's Wells Ballet was originally known as the Vic-Wells Ballet (1931-1939) and later as the Royal Ballet (1956 onwards). There was also a Sadler's Wells Opera Company, similarly named after the Sadler's Wells Theatre in Islington, London. Here, 'Sadler's Wells' refers to the ballet company, unless otherwise indicated.

2 In 1945-1946, CEMA allocated £25,000 to Covent Garden, which suggests how generous the budget for *Sleeping Beauty* was. Paul Kildea, *Selling Britten: Music and the Market Place* (Oxford, 2002), 119.

1 dance hall had been nothing short of tragic; so when the building finally re-opened on 20 February  
2  
3 1946 in 'its rightful role', they were quick to proclaim a triumph.<sup>3</sup>

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5  
6 The idea of performing *Sleeping Beauty* had come from John Maynard Keynes – the celebrated  
7  
8 economist and onetime chairman of CEMA and the Covent Garden Committee.<sup>4</sup> The ballet held a  
9  
10 personal significance for Keynes, not least because the Ballets Russes's 1921 production had provided a  
11  
12 'gilded backdrop to the first weeks of [his] love affair' with Lydia Lopokova, whom he later married.<sup>5</sup>  
13  
14 By all accounts, Sadler's Wells founder Ninette de Valois eagerly supported his proposition, claiming  
15  
16 that she had been 'haunted' by the ballet's 'beauty' since childhood.<sup>6</sup> In the event, it seemed that a more  
17  
18 topical ballet could not have been chosen. The Opera House's transformation appeared magical: having  
19  
20 survived 'the grimmest sequel of nights that it had known', the building could finally 'awaken [...] from  
21  
22 its long sleep'.<sup>7</sup> The Sadler's Wells' circumstances made the choice of *Sleeping Beauty* all the more  
23  
24 appropriate. The move to Covent Garden signified the company's coming of age and consolidated  
25  
26 Margot Fonteyn's place at its head.<sup>8</sup> In the words of de Valois, it could 'awaken at last, in a sumptuous  
27  
28 court: fitting reward for years of regal patience in adversity'.<sup>9</sup> As luck would have it, the company's final  
29  
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31

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33 3 'Swing to Ballet', *News Review* (28 February 1946), Royal Opera House Archive, Sadler's Wells Ballet Cuttings 1942 –  
34 1946, ROH/RBB/4/5 (henceforth ROH/RBB/4/5).

35 4 Webster, 'Lord Keynes', *Covent Garden Books*, vol.1: Ballet, 1946-1947 (Norwich, 1948), 10 & 63.

36 5 What is more, Keynes reportedly subsidised a 1931 production of *Aurora's Wedding*, staged by members of the Ballet  
37  
38 Rambert and the Vic-Wells: Judith Chazin-Bennahum, *The Ballets of Antony Tudor: Studies in Psyche and Satire* (Oxford,  
39  
40 1994), 26; Judith Mackrell, *Bloomsbury Ballerina: Lydia Lopokova, Imperial Dancer and Mrs John Maynard Keynes* (London:  
41  
42 Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 2008), 395.

43 6 Ninette de Valois, *Come Dance With Me: A Memoir 1898-1956* (London, 1957), 167.

44 7 Elizabeth Frank, *Margot Fonteyn* (London, 1958), 66.

45 8 Margot Fonteyn danced the lead role in alternation with Pamela May, Beryl Grey and Moira Shearer. Cyril W.  
46  
47 Beaumont, *The Sleeping Beauty as Presented by the Sadler's Wells Ballet* (London, 1946), provides a detailed account of this  
48  
49 event, including photographs. A full cast list can be seen at 'The Sleeping Beauty (1946)', *Royal Opera House Collections*  
50  
51 *Online*. Available at <<http://www.rohcollections.org.uk/production.aspx?production=798&row=1>> [accessed 6  
52  
53 August 2013].

54 9 De Valois, *Come Dance*, 167.

pre-war performance had been *Aurora's Wedding*, an excerpt from the third act of *Sleeping Beauty*, which made the parallel even stronger.<sup>10</sup> The audience, only too ready to be relieved of postwar austerity, dressed up for the occasion.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, for Britain's moneyed elite, the opulence on stage and in the auditorium assuaged a widespread fear that 'all the grace and elegant things from the old world had passed permanently away': as Keynes explained, 'it caused an extraordinary feeling of uplift when it was suddenly appreciated that perhaps they had not entirely vanished'.<sup>12</sup> Even the 'strong scent of mothballs' would not mar this prestigious event.<sup>13</sup>

If this was a landmark in both the Opera House's and the Sadler's Wells' history, it was also recognised as a turning point for British art.<sup>14</sup> From the outset, plans to re-open the building as a high art venue were bound up in the period's broad concern with the pursuit of a national culture. Not only did the initiative have financial support from government-funded CEMA, but the management had made explicit their desire to establish Covent Garden as a 'permanent home for British opera and ballet'.<sup>15</sup> On the opening night, the nationalist atmosphere was reinforced by the presence of the royal family and singing of the national anthem.<sup>16</sup> This agenda was more radical than it might sound. For one thing, prior to this, CEMA's principal focus had been on facilitating amateur music making, drama and

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10 *Ibid.* See also Alexander Bland, *The Royal Ballet: The First 50 Years* (London, 1981), 53, 56.

11 The *London Evening News* reported that 'nearly everyone was in full evening dress'. Stephen Williams, 'The Garden Blooms Again', *Evening News*, ROH/RBB/4/5; see also 'Dinner at 11', *Evening Standard*, ROH/RBB/4/5.

12 Robert Skidelsky, *John Maynard Keynes: Fighting for Britain, 1937-1946* (London, 2000), 463. David Cannadine has explored the decline of the British aristocracy during the twentieth century: *The Decline and Fall of the British Aristocracy* (New Haven and London, 1990), especially 606-36.

13 Frank, *Fonteyn*, 65.

14 The conflation of British and English was common during the 1940s, although a growing number of people objected to the slippage. It is beyond the scope of this article to explore England's complicated relationship with 'Britain' in any detail. Suffice it to observe that, in the discussions about national ballet, critics frequently slipped between 'British' and 'English', often using the latter in relation to dancers or style, and the former to denote the art form they sought to establish. In general, I use 'English' only when it is in contemporary sources.

15 'British Ballet', *Manchester Guardian* (26 October 1945), ROH/RBB/4/5.

16 John Shand, 'Covent Garden Restored: A Theatre of Magnificent Tradition', *Manchester Guardian* (20 February 1946), 4.

1 art outside London. It was only following John Maynard Keynes's appointment as Chairman in April  
2 1942 that its approach began to shift to reflect Keynes's own priorities, namely the funding of  
3 professional companies (especially ballet companies) whose presence in the capital might transform it  
4 into 'a great artistic metropolis'.<sup>17</sup> For another, in the past, London's most celebrated theatres had  
5 primarily been reserved for foreign companies, not least because of the public's long-standing belief  
6 that Britain was – as ballet critic Arnold Haskell put it – 'a fundamentally inartistic nation'.<sup>18</sup> The high  
7 regard in which audiences held foreign art complicated notions about what the establishment of a  
8 British national culture might mean. In particular, it provoked a tendency to conflate the epithet  
9 'national' with international renown. Writing for *The Listener* in 1940, for example, E.M. Forster offered  
10 the 'supremacy' of German music as evidence that when 'a culture is genuinely national, it is capable  
11 [...] of becoming super-national'.<sup>19</sup> For the likes of Keynes, this slippage made the pursuit of  
12 international prestige a priority – and in the 1940s, the Sadler's Wells' recent ascendancy made ballet the  
13 most promising vehicle.

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17 John Maynard Keynes, 'The Arts Council: Its Policy and Hopes', *The Listener* 34 (12 July 1945), 31-2; Skidelsky, *John Maynard Keynes*, 291. CEMA was founded shortly after the onset of war to ensure the continuation of cultural activities for the duration. It partnered with the Sadler's Wells in January 1943, paving the way for the ballet company's eventual move to Covent Garden in 1946, after Keynes had secured the building's lease. Numerous scholars have charted CEMA's increasingly elitist outlook. For example, see F.M. Leventhal's seminal article, "'The Best for the Most": CEMA and State Sponsorship of the Arts in Wartime, 1939-1945', *20th Century British History* 1 (1990): 289-317; and Kildea, *Selling Britten*, 117-47. Keynes's personal interest in ballet, and comparative disinterest in opera, has also been widely remarked: see above, p.2; Norman Lebrecht, *Covent Garden: The Untold Story* (London, 2000), 46-8.

18 Arnold Haskell, *The National Ballet: A History and a Manifesto (with an overture by Ninette de Valois)* (London, 1947), 67.

19 Forster characterized such super-national culture as having 'generosity and modesty, it is not confined by political and geographic boundaries, it does not fidget about purity of race or worry about survival, but, living in the present and sustained by the desire to create, it expands wherever human beings are to be found'. He went on to suggest that the Nazi's suppression of creative freedom would stifle national art, making it impossible for German culture to 'become super-national or contribute to the general good of humanity'. E.M. Forster, 'Three Anti-Nazi Broadcasts', in *Two Cheers for Democracy* (Frome and London, 1951), 43-54; 45-6. See also *ibid.*, 'Two Cultures: The Quick and The Dead', *The Listener* (26 September 1940), 446-7.

1  
2 To put all this another way, those pursuing a national culture trod an uncertain path: between  
3  
4 the belief that it should somehow ‘spring naturally’ from the people; and that, in its most developed  
5  
6 form, a national art would secure Britain’s place at the forefront of an international culture.<sup>20</sup> Accounts  
7  
8 of Covent Garden’s re-opening have tended to share an assumption that the two approaches – the  
9  
10 former characterised as populist, the latter as elitist – were incompatible. Within this dualistic  
11  
12 framework, it is small wonder that this event has been viewed as a defining moment in the Keynesian  
13  
14 administration’s turn away from amateur organisations towards professional ones: as evidence, in Paul  
15  
16 Kildea’s words, of its ‘narrow vision of British culture’.<sup>21</sup> Even when scholars have attempted to  
17  
18 account for the variety of Arts Council activities in postwar Britain, Covent Garden’s position remains  
19  
20 uncontested: seemingly the paradigm of high culture, it offers an easy example of the elite end of the  
21  
22 spectrum.<sup>22</sup> That Keynes died just a few weeks after the re-opening has also contributed to the  
23  
24 tendency to view this occasion as part of his legacy.<sup>23</sup>  
25  
26

27  
28 In this article, I explore an alternative perspective – one inspired by recent scholarship that has  
29  
30 used the idea of middlebrow culture to uncover the messy relationship between lowbrow and highbrow,  
31  
32 popular and elite.<sup>24</sup> By re-situating the events that led up to 20 February 1946 within the broader history  
33  
34 of mid-century British ballet culture, I demonstrate that the vision of a grand opera house as a centre  
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38 20 Forster, ‘Two Cultures’, 446.

39  
40 21 The chapter on the Arts Council in Kildea’s *Selling Britten* is typical of this one-sided approach: ‘The Arts Council’s  
41  
42 Pursuit of “Grand Opera”’, 117-47.

43  
44 22 For instance, see Richard Weight, ‘“Building a new British culture”: The Arts Centre Movement, 1945-53’, in *The Right  
45  
46 to Belong: Citizenship and National Identity in Britain, 1930-1960*, eds. Weight and Abigail Beach (London and New York,  
47  
48 1998), 157-80; 160.

49  
50 23 Keynes’ deteriorating health famously led to his collapse just before the premiere, leaving his wife to play host to the  
51  
52 various dignitaries. His untimely death came barely a month later.

53  
54 24 In particular, see Christopher Chowrimootoo’s work on Britten’s operas: ‘Bourgeois Opera: *Death in Venice* and The  
55  
56 Aesthetics of Sublimation’, *Cambridge Opera Journal* 22, 2 (July 2010): 175-216; ‘The Timely Traditions of *Albert Herring*’,  
57  
58 *Opera Quarterly* 27, 4 (2011): 379-419; and Laura Tunbridge, ‘Frieda Hempel and the Historical Imagination’, *Journal of  
59  
60 the American Musicological Society* 66, 2 (2013): 437-74.

1  
2 for national culture had a more complicated relationship with the notion of populism than historians  
3  
4 have acknowledged.<sup>25</sup> In particular, I suggest that the desire to satisfy elite audiences remained in uneasy  
5  
6 tension with the period's heightened concern for the artistic needs of the general public. In advancing  
7  
8 such an argument, I hope to do more than simply offer a revisionist reading of Covent Garden's  
9  
10 postwar *Sleeping Beauty*. I also want reveal why the medium of ballet proved so awkward to appropriate  
11  
12 as a vehicle for national culture – a question that involves not only this art form, but one that also helps  
13  
14 to nuance our understanding of how the European art music canon contributed to the pursuit of  
15  
16 'national culture' in mid-century Britain.  
17  
18

### 21 ***The Sleeping Beauty Revisited***

24 The re-opening of the Opera House was undeniably an extravagant affair. Between the 'sumptuous  
25  
26 production', elegant evening dresses and 'high, unbashful voices of the type that used to be heard only  
27  
28 at Covent Garden and the Royal enclosure at Ascot', the event had all the trappings of the *ancien*  
29  
30

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35 25 Populism is a notoriously slippery concept. For one thing, it is difficult to pin down exactly what constitutes 'the  
36  
37 people'; for another, 'populism' is most often used in a derogatory way, with the result that even its most obvious  
38  
39 proponents rarely self-identify as populist. See the editors' 'Introduction: The Sceptre and the Spectre' in *Twenty-First*  
40  
41 *Century Populism: The Spectre of Western European Democracy*, eds. Daniele Albertazzi and Duncan McDonnell (Basingstoke,  
42  
43 2008). The idea of 'cultural populism' is similarly nebulous, no more so than in its relation to art music. While Jim  
44  
45 McGuigan argues that '[a]ny form of culture that appeals to ordinary people could reasonably, in my view, be called  
46  
47 "populist culture"', he also observes that '[t]he popularisation of classical music [...] is a very particular case since, by  
48  
49 and large, the most popular forms of culture are not generally disseminated from "high" to "low" in such a way'. Jim  
50  
51 McGuigan, *Cultural Populism* (London, 2002), 2-3. For the purposes of this article, I use the word in its broadest sense to  
52  
53 refer to 'support for or representation of ordinary people or their views; speech, action, writing, etc., intended to have  
54  
55 general appeal', with the caveat that the attempts to 'support' or 'represent' the public discussed here represent  
56  
57 intellectual aspirations for a populist culture, as much as they reflect the public's cultural preferences. 'populism, n.',  
58  
59 *OED Online*. Available at <<http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/147930?redirectedFrom=populism>> [accessed  
60  
November 7, 2013].



1 *régime*.<sup>26</sup> But behind this ostentatious exterior, some important administrative changes had taken place.  
 2  
 3  
 4 In particular, the new management had lowered tickets prices, reduced the number of boxes and  
 5  
 6 implemented a more flexible dress code (invitations to the opening night specified ‘evening dress,  
 7  
 8 uniform, or day clothes’<sup>27</sup>) – policies that proved controversial with patrons of the Sadler’s Wells Ballet  
 9  
 10 and Opera House alike. Speaking on behalf of the former, K.M. Howick wrote to the London *Evening*  
 11  
 12 *News* a few days before the opening night, decrying the manager’s idea of ‘popular’ prices.<sup>28</sup> His  
 13  
 14 objection was twofold. First, that the affordable seats – the gallery and the slips – were those that  
 15  
 16 offered, at best, a poor or restricted view. Second, that in the past the same company could have been  
 17  
 18 enjoyed without causing such damage to the bank balance: at the Sadler’s Wells, gallery seats cost 1s  
 19  
 20 (and, in the smaller theatre, were closer to the stage), while 9s could buy a seat in the stalls; equivalent  
 21  
 22 seats in the Opera House were priced at 2s 6d and 16s respectively.<sup>29</sup> At the same time, Opera House  
 23  
 24 gallery regulars expressed disappointment at the decision to make this part of the auditorium bookable;  
 25  
 26 meanwhile the wealthier members of the audience objected to ‘the well-worn statements of inverted  
 27  
 28 snobbery’ that welcomed an informal dress code.<sup>30</sup> (In the event, the audience seem largely to have  
 29  
 30 ignored the dress-down code: while reports of ornate evening wear abounded, the *Daily Express* alone  
 31  
 32 alleged that ‘three-quarters of the audience were in day clothes. And in the stalls there were women  
 33  
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26 Williams, ‘The Garden Blooms Again’.

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 39 27 ‘Covent Garden Opera And Ballet Restored’, *The Times* (19 February 1946), 2.

40  
 41 28 K.M. Howick, ‘Ballet for All’, *Evening News* (15 February 1946), ROH/RBB/4/5.

42  
 43 29 During the war, the Arts Theatre Club in Great Newport Street also offered lunchtime ballets at a shilling a time.

44  
 45 ‘Shilling Ballet’, *Picture Post* (5 October 1945), 26-9. In its seminal years, CEMA was also committed to low ticket prices:  
 46  
 47 at its second meeting, the Council agreed that organisations would only be eligible for funding if they guaranteed that  
 48  
 49 ‘not less than twenty-five per cent of the tickets at each concert should be sold for 1/- or less’. C.E.M.A.: Minutes of  
 50  
 51 the Second Meeting (18 January 1940), Arts Council of Great Britain: Records, 1928-1997, Victoria and Albert Museum  
 52  
 53 Archive, London (henceforth ACGB Records), EL1/3: Minutes for 1st-6th meetings of the Committee for the  
 54  
 55 Encouragement of Music and the Arts, January 1940-March 1940.

56  
 57 30 Regulars asserted that ‘the friendships made in a Covent Garden queue are among the most important in life’. ‘Opera at  
 58  
 59 Covent Garden’, *The Times* (10 January 1946), ROH/RBB/4/5; ‘Re-opening of Covent Garden’, *Truth* (15 February  
 60  
 1946), ROH/RBB/4/5. See also ‘The Clubbable Queue’, *The Times* (20 February 1946), ROH/RBB/4/5.

1 without stockings'.<sup>31</sup>) That the management went ahead with their reforms in spite of these objections  
2  
3 points to the fact that their primary motivation was ideological rather than commercial.<sup>32</sup> In the words  
4  
5 of a *Times* journalist, such changes were designed to 'usher in a new and democratic era in the history of  
6  
7 the famous opera house without losing any of its traditional splendour'.<sup>33</sup>  
8  
9

10 Nevertheless, the opulence both on- and off-stage came under fire from multiple angles. The  
11  
12 'galleryites' attacked the Opera House's wealthier patrons, asserting that their 'expensive seat[s] and  
13  
14 expensive clothes' belied a true appreciation of art.<sup>34</sup> A letter to *The Manchester Guardian* similarly  
15  
16 questioned the cultural integrity of the rich, as the author voiced concern that the Sadler's Wells'  
17  
18 relocation would leave it 'as commercial as any glittering nitwittery on Shaftesbury Avenue'.<sup>35</sup>  
19  
20 Meanwhile, an *Observer* critic compared the general public's interest in ballet to their enthusiasm for a  
21  
22 'full dollarful of Virginian "fags" and Hollywood's lovey-dovey'. *Sleeping Beauty's* appeal, the author  
23  
24 maintained, was its promise of 'Escape and yet again escape!':  
25  
26

27  
28 No shadow of [Benedick's "February face"] hangs over the magic toy-shop of the dance,  
29  
30 where queue-weary and justly fractious housewives may, for an hour or two, be transmuted  
31  
32 into good-humoured ladies. In our drab, unpainted towns we besiege our painted stages.<sup>36</sup>  
33  
34  
35

36 Indeed, in the eyes of many contemporary commentators – and contrary to what scholars have  
37  
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40  
41 31 'No Stockings in Ballet Stalls', *Daily Express* (22 February 1946), ROH/RBB/4/5.

42 32 Money, however, also came into it: as Richard Witts explains, by the middle of the war, the aristocracy 'no longer had  
43  
44 the means to sustain through exorbitant subscriptions the kind of sparkling international seasons Beecham had  
45  
46 presented in the thirties'. Richard Witts, *Artist Unknown: An Alternative History of the Arts Council* (London, 1998), 132.

47 33 'Covent Garden Opera And Ballet Restored', *The Times* (19 February 1946), 2.

48 34 'Re-opening of Covent Garden', *Truth* (15 February 1946), ROH/RBB/4/5.

49 35 Shaftesbury Avenue is the heart of London's West End, a theatre district that by the 1940s was renowned, among other  
50  
51 things, for spectacular musical productions. T.F. Lodge, 'Covent Garden', *The Manchester Guardian* (4 February 1946),  
52  
53 ROH/RBB/4/5.  
54  
55

56 36 'Comment', *The Observer* (17 February 1946), 4. 'Benedick's February Face' is a reference to Shakespeare's *Much Ado*  
57  
58 *About Nothing*.  
59  
60

1 subsequently claimed – the management’s attempt to mediate between populist and elitist demands was  
2 reflected both in the balletic medium (of which more later), and in de Valois’s particular choice of ballet.  
3  
4 On the one hand, as a product of Russia’s imperial past, *Sleeping Beauty* harked back to a pre-democratic  
5 era of aristocratic extravagance.<sup>37</sup> On the other hand, by the 1940s it also had a populist resonance  
6 which, although discussed in less overt terms than the changes to ticket prices and dress code,  
7  
8 nevertheless drew criticism from certain quarters. A point of particular contention was the accessibility  
9 of Tchaikovsky’s music, a characteristic that, since the turn of the century, had secured its popularity  
10 with Britain’s emerging middlebrow public, while contributing to its low reputation in intellectual  
11 circles. His balletic compositions – not helped by their theatrical context – epitomised his shortcomings.  
12  
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14  
15 Perhaps the biggest issue was his reliance on melodies that, at least in the eyes of his detractors,  
16 were ‘too “catchy”’, uncomfortably sentimental, even effeminate.<sup>38</sup> As Sadler’s Wells music director  
17 Constant Lambert noted, Tchaikovsky was often ‘regarded as a cross between a sentimental woman  
18 novelist and a painter of Academy problem pictures’.<sup>39</sup> To make matters worse, when such melodies  
19 were repeated multiple times in the same movement (as they frequently were), it seemed to draw  
20 attention to the sectional nature of the music, undermining the sense of large-scale formal development  
21 associated with the highly prized German symphonic tradition. ‘Tchaikovsky’s melodies,’ one writer  
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37 Recent political events surely heightened the significance of this gesture to the past. Even after Britain and Russia had become allies in 1941, the British government remained highly suspicious of Communism – so much so that it took steps to limit its influence in Britain. For example, once Russia became an ally, the BBC had cancelled its weekly broadcast of allies’ national anthems, to avoid having to add the *Internationale* to their number. Paul Addison, *The Road to 1945: British Politics and the Second World War* (London, 1975), 134.

38 Lambert, ‘Tchaikovsky and The Ballet’, in *The Sleeping Princess: Camera Studies*, ed. Gordon Antony (London, 1940), 15.

39 Constant Lambert, ‘Tchaikovsky Today’, *The Listener* 23 (2 May 1940), 905. In vogue during late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Britain, problem pictures were ambiguous scenes from modern life that sought to stimulate discussion through the diversity of their possible meanings. Art critics usually dismissed the genre on account of its aesthetically conservative style, reliance on narrative and popularity with women. Pamela M. Fletcher, ‘Masculinity, Money and Modern Art: *The Sentence of Death* by John Collier’, in *English Art 1860-1914: Modern Artists and Identity*, eds. David Peters Corbett and Lara Perry (Manchester, 2000), 84-99.

1 explained 'are essentially tunes rather than symphonic themes. They are direct and final statements, not  
2 the premises of a lengthy argument'.<sup>40</sup>

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4  
5  
6 One passage in *Sleeping Beauty* that invited such critique was the *Pas d'Action* from Act II, in  
7 which the Prince sees a vision of Princess Aurora. The number opens with a lilting melody in 6/8,  
8 scored for a solo cello accompanied by minimal strings and woodwind (Example 1), which is notable  
9 for its similarity to the second subject of the slow movement of Tchaikovsky's Symphony No.5  
10 (Example 2).<sup>41</sup> The theme is built of two memorable motifs: an opening gesture, which outlines a  
11 descending tonic triad before coming to rest on a dominant seventh (bb.3-4); and a syncopated scalic  
12 figure (bb.5-6). After 8 bars, the phrase dovetails with a second, modified statement of the theme.  
13 While much of the number's melodic material is derived from these opening bars, the theme itself is  
14 heard only twice more during the *Pas d'Action*: during bb.68-82, where it is scored first for unison cellos  
15 and clarinet, and then for the same plus violins, violas and oboes. Despite this, commentators went to  
16 some lengths to contrast the theme's repetitive treatment in the ballet with its supposed evolution in  
17 the Symphony. One critic, for example, described the balletic version as 'a melody simply stated and  
18 then repeated with various instrumental elaborations, but never *developed* symphonically', whereas in the  
19 Symphony, he claimed, it 'is worked out at length and brought to a great climax'. Somewhat unusually,  
20 for this writer the lack of development in the former was grounds for praise: it reflected the composer's  
21 sensitivity to the 'limitations of his medium'. But while lauding the ballet music's 'aptness of  
22 characterization', he also accused it of being formulaic: 'one is astonished to find that the movements  
23 nearly all conform to one of two or three stereotyped patterns of the simplest type'.<sup>42</sup>

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46 The political climate of the 1940s added an interesting twist to this critical malaise. Earlier in the  
47 century, commentators had often denounced Tchaikovsky's music as insufficiently Russian – a

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40 Lambert, 'Tchaikovsky and The Ballet', 20.

41 Critics often noted the similarity. For example, see *Ibid.*, and Dyneley Hussey, 'The Composer and The Music', in *The Sleeping Beauty*, ed. Sacheverell Sitwell (London, 1949), 45-6.

42 Hussey, 'The Composer and the Music', 45-6 & 50.

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‘superficial’, ‘vulgar’ imitation of Western bourgeois culture.<sup>43</sup> Now, however, his advocates sought to redeem his melodic lyricism on the grounds that it distinguished the composer from the German tradition. One such was music critic Edwin Evans, who suggested that ‘[i]t shows how far removed Tchaikovsky was from German pedantry, which dismisses as *Kitsch*, or mere ear-tickling, any music with a captivating tune’:

It implies that Tchaikovsky regarded, as every musician should, the distinction between good and bad as cutting deeper than any antithesis of serious and light – or, to put it colloquially, “classical” and “popular” – music. It explains how his ballet music came to be, not only among the best of its kind, but among the best he wrote.<sup>44</sup>

Reviving an old trend, Evans styled the music’s emotional appeal as evidence of the composer’s Russianness, and then used this as grounds for praise.<sup>45</sup> His argument was characteristic of an emerging body of criticism that sought ‘at last’ to take ‘the man and his music seriously’.<sup>46</sup> Beyond the obvious political motivations for such re-appraisals, this trend might also have been motivated by a need to elevate Tchaikovsky’s music so that it could pass as suitable fare for a national company.

The lyrical melodies were not the ballet score’s only aesthetic issue: equally problematic was its heightened theatricality. The orchestral introduction was a case in point. The ballet opens with a noisy

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43 Constant Lambert, ‘Tchaikovsky and The Ballet’, 15. This lengthy article is a defence of Tchaikovsky, in which Lambert challenges accepted stereotypes of the composer’s music.

44 Evans, ‘The Ballets’, 185.

45 Lambert similarly claimed that Tchaikovsky was now ‘regarded by many people as not only the most important of the Russian composers but also as the most Russian of them at heart’: ‘Tchaikovsky Today’.

46 Martin Raymond, ‘Music’, *The Observer* (3 March 1946), 2. In addition to the Lambert and Hussey articles on Tchaikovsky’s ballet music already cited, this change of heart was reflected in the publication of two broader book-length studies: Abraham’s edited volume *Tchaikovsky*, which provided an introduction to the composer’s lesser-known works; and Herbert Weinstock’s *Tchaikovsky* (London, 1946), which claimed to be the ‘first full-length biography’ of the composer in English. For the history of Tchaikovsky’s reception in Britain, see Gareth Thomas, ‘The Impact of Russian Music in England 1893-1929’ (Ph.D. thesis, The University of Birmingham, 2005), 5-13, 30-7.

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2 allegro vivo, during which a full orchestra (minus the harp) plays repeated *fff* chromatic chords and  
3 arpeggios. The prominent timpani rolls and syncopated cymbal crashes add to the sense of drama  
4 (Example 3). Such passages seemed to pose a problem even for Tchaikovsky's advocates. In a lavish  
5 collection of essays published by the Sadler's Wells to promote their work, for example, writer Dyneley  
6 Hussey noted the less-than-subtle way in which the composer sought to seize the audience's attention:  
7 the 'sharp accents and unstable tonality are calculated to arouse excitement'. 'It is all rather garish and  
8 blatant by absolute standards', he continued, 'but it serves its purpose admirably'.<sup>47</sup> In other words, it  
9 was precisely because Tchaikovsky's music did its job so well that it made critics uneasy.

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11 The narrative that had grown up around the original (1890) production did little to simplify  
12 matters. In brief, when theatre director Ivan Vsevolozhsky invited choreographer Marius Petipa and  
13 Tchaikovsky to collaborate on a new ballet for St. Petersburg's Mariinsky Theatre in 1888, he made  
14 explicit his hopes that it would move beyond 'the predictable rhythms of made-to-order ballet music' to  
15 realise a 'higher' artistic ideal.<sup>48</sup> The result – which fused the popular Italian *ballet-féeries* with  
16 seventeenth-century French and contemporary Russian aristocratic traditions – received a decidedly  
17 mixed reception.<sup>49</sup> Nevertheless, by the 1940s, *Sleeping Beauty* was widely considered to have been a  
18 turning point in the history of ballet music: in Lydia Lopokova's words, it marked the moment when  
19 'the first great musician [...] decided to compose expressly for the ballet', liberating the medium from  
20 the formulaic approach of 'hack' composers.<sup>50</sup> The unusual freedom that Tchaikovsky was reportedly  
21 given in the compositional process inspired claims that this was the first balletic *Gesamtkunstwerk*.<sup>51</sup>

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44 47 Hussey, 'The Composer and The Music', 37.

46 48 For a detailed account of the circumstances surrounding its creation, see Jennifer Homans, *Apollo's Angels: A History of*  
47 *Ballet* (London, 2010), 270-9; Tim Scholl, "Sleeping Beauty," *A Legend in Progress* (New Haven and London, 2004), 1-29.

49 49 Although it was a huge success with the general public, critical opinion was divided: while some considered the music  
50 too symphonic, the narrative too 'thin' and the choreography too 'elaborate', others – according to Scholl, 'mostly  
51 music critics' – hailed a new era in the history of ballet: Scholl, "Sleeping Beauty," *A Legend in Progress*, 2.

53 50 Lydia Lopokova, 'Music and Choreography', *The Music Bulletin* 8, 2 (1926): 45-6.

55 51 In 'The Composer and His Music', Hussey recounted how Petipa had given Tchaikovsky only vague guidelines for the  
56 composition (for example, requesting simply 'a little introduction for a *Pas de Six*', rather than specifying a precise  
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Such pretensions promised to elevate the work, but they were also a reminder of the extent to which the music was bound up with – or, as detractors would have it, restricted by – the demands of another medium. For many critics, Tchaikovsky’s ‘skill in writing to the demands of the choreographer’ was overshadowed by a belief that, in general, the ballet music did not stand up to the ultimate test: it ‘would not be congruous in the concert-hall’.<sup>52</sup> Aside from the obvious formal constraints imposed by the medium, the music’s ‘illustrative’ nature posed a significant issue for critics.<sup>53</sup> From the moments of high drama, to those of sentimental lyricism, the score seemed to tap into broader anxieties about ballet audience’s love of emotive spectacle – a penchant that the traditions of Opera House attendance made it hard to ignore. For if the lavishness of the occasion was reminiscent of the moneyed excess of pre-war patrons, in the eyes of certain critics it also came perilously close to the glamour that drew large crowds to – and incited intellectuals’ discontent with – lowbrow forms of entertainment.

Despite Covent Garden’s illustrious history, then, the 1946 production of *Sleeping Beauty* was far from unequivocally highbrow. Rather, the management’s desire to retain the venue’s historic prestige while attracting a more diverse audience was timely. It reflected a preoccupation that had plagued both CEMA’s and the Sadler’s Wells’ work from their respective inaugurations: how, in the famous words of the former’s first slogan, to ensure that ‘the best’ in art reached ‘the most’. The difficulty as far as ballet was concerned, however, was that the characteristic that drew such large audiences – the art form’s spectacle – also threatened to undermine its prestige. Of course, this tension between prestige and popularity was specific neither to these organisations nor to mid-century Britain: since at least the late nineteenth century, intellectuals had been debating how they might broaden access to high culture without compromising its elite status.<sup>54</sup> Nevertheless, during the 1930s and 1940s, when political

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number of bars): 36-7. See also Tim Scholl, *From Petipa to Balanchine: Classical Revival and the Modernization of Ballet* (London, 1994), 21-45.

52 Lambert, ‘Tchaikovsky and The Ballet’, 21.

53 *Ibid.*

54 Nor was it unique to ballet: opera trod a similarly fine line between popularity and prestige, spectacle and art. As Chowrimootoo explains, while one moment it was ‘being denounced as a bastion of elitism’, the next it was ‘being charged with prefiguring “some of the worst abominations” of the culture industry’: ‘Bourgeois Opera: *Death in Venice*

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2 circumstances were heightening calls for cultural renewal, this problem became intertwined with  
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4 nationalist rhetoric in a new way. Indeed, as a brief exploration of the Sadler's Wells' evolution reveals,  
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6 critics' ambivalence towards balletic spectacle went to the heart of a pervasive uncertainty about what  
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8 'British' ballet might look like.  
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## 10 11 12 **The Pursuit of a British Ballet** 13

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16 The first decades of the twentieth century witnessed an explosion of ballet in Britain. While charting  
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18 these developments in any detail is beyond the scope of this article, it is important to note the two  
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20 principal contexts in which they took place, if only because it was against this backdrop that the Sadler's  
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22 Wells came into being. On the one hand, from the late nineteenth century, the idea that art might be  
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24 appropriated as a means of moral and spiritual development for the masses inspired (among other  
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26 things) what became a nation-wide trend for founding ballet schools.<sup>55</sup> On the other, during the 1910s  
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28 and 1920s, the presence of Diaghilev's Ballets Russes in London offered the theatre-going public an  
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30 alternative encounter with the art form.<sup>56</sup> For those who were eager to establish a British ballet tradition,  
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32 perhaps the biggest challenge posed by the synchronous development of such contrasting enterprises  
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34 was the resulting uncertainty about what actually constituted ballet. Was it something practised by  
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38 and 'The Aesthetics of Sublimation', *Cambridge Opera Journal* 22, 2 (July 2010): 175-216. But while opera producers,  
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40 battling against higher production costs and lower ticket sales, tended to 'play for safety and stick to the orthodox  
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42 repertory', the ballet, thanks in no small part to Diaghilev's legacy, 'throve on modernity': Dent, *A Theatre for Everybody*,  
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44 111. See also Garafola, *Ballets Russes*, especially 76-97; Homas, *Apollo's Angels*, 290-340.

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46 55 Mary Neal and Isadora Duncan played a seminal role in this: see Edward J. Dent, *A Theatre for Everybody: The Story of the*  
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48 *Old Vic and Sadler's Wells* (London, 1945), 102-4. The weekly 'Round the Classes' articles in the *Dancing Times* are a  
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50 testimony to the significance of this movement. Belief in the edifying power of art also inspired numerous musical  
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52 enterprises. For examples, see Catherine Dale, *Music Analysis in Britain in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries*  
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54 (Ashgate, 2003); Charles McGuire, *Music and Victorian Philanthropy* (Cambridge, 2009).

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56 56 For the Ballets Russes in London, see Garafola, *Diaghilev's Ballets Russes*, 300-34; 360-74; Gareth Thomas, 'Modernism,  
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58 Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes in London, 1911-1929', in *British Music and Modernism, 1895-1960*, ed. Matthew Riley  
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60 (Aldershot, 2010), 67-91.



1 exceptional foreign artists in elitist venues? Or could it encompass the range of styles and new  
2 repertoire developing around Britain in ballet schools and young companies?<sup>57</sup>

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6 By the early twentieth century, British audiences' tendency to believe that the best in culture had  
7 to be imported from abroad was nothing new.<sup>58</sup> It was all but inevitable that, having won favour with  
8 London's cosmopolitan-minded elite, the Ballets Russes quickly came to be seen as the pinnacle of  
9 balletic achievement – a judgement that led, in Lynn Garafola's words, to a widespread conviction that  
10 ballet 'was not the art taking root in dance studios around the country (which they ignored), but an  
11 imported "craze".<sup>59</sup> The implications for British dancers were far from promising: as Covent Garden  
12 Manager David Webster explained, 'many people in England refuse to believe that there can be a  
13 British Ballet Company of quality'.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, many aficionados went so far as to maintain that 'there  
14 were two different things: ballet and Russian Ballet'.<sup>61</sup>

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26 Despite this, even before Diaghilev's death in 1929 left a gap in the market, his troupe's success  
27 began to elicit calls for the establishment of a British ballet tradition that might attain a similar stature.

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30 Ballet-lovers imagined not just a company of world-class dancers, but also a network of indigenous  
31 choreographers, designers, musical directors and composers, who could build a national repertoire.

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34 Among the entrepreneurs to respond was the young de Valois who, inspired by Diaghilev's example,  
35 gave up her place in his company to open the Academy of Choreographic Art. Founded in March 1926,  
36 de Valois's Academy aimed to provide a space in which young people could develop an interest in  
37 classical ballet and in which aspiring talent could be cultivated to the highest level.<sup>62</sup> But her vision did  
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57 Ballet, as conceived by mid-twentieth-century audiences and practitioners, was a recent (late-nineteenth-century) phenomenon. McLean, *Dying Swans*, 13-14; 35.

58 For a general discussion about British audiences' love-affair with continental artists, see Ralph Vaughan Williams, *National Music and Other Essays* (London, 1963), 4-5.

59 Garafola, *Diaghilev's Ballets Russes*, 373.

60 David Webster, 'Editorial: Covent Garden', *The Arts Council of Great Britain Monthly Bulletin* 69 (January 1946), 1-3; 1.

61 Evans, 'Nationalism and the Ballet', *Dancing Times* 391 (April 1943), 310.

62 Of the many ballet schools established during the first decades of the twentieth century, the only one that came close to rivalling de Valois's was that of Marie Rambert, founded seven years previous in 1919. The success of her enterprise led

1 not end there: de Valois also hoped that her school might ultimately become the basis of a repertory  
2 company. Whereas commercial theatres employed artists on a production-by-production basis and  
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4 consequently tended to show established box office favourites that guaranteed high returns, repertory  
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6 theatres aimed to offer longer-term contracts. The advantage of the latter model was two-fold: it  
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8 promised job security, allowing artists to focus on developing their skill; and it gave the flexibility for a  
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10 greater variety of works – including new or experimental ones – to be staged. Shortly after opening her  
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12 Academy, de Valois approached Lilian Baylis, manager of the Old Vic, to ask whether the theatre might  
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14 provide a home for her embryonic company. Despite finding in de Valois a kindred spirit, Baylis could  
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16 at first only offer temporary work: already housing an opera and a theatre company, the Old Vic could  
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18 not accommodate any more enterprises. However, Baylis had plans to acquire a second theatre, the  
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20 Sadler’s Wells; when she finally opened this new venue in 1931, de Valois’s troupe became resident.<sup>63</sup>  
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25 This partnership brought far more than a building: it also required the company to adopt the  
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27 Old Vic Foundation’s ethics, which were rooted in the work of late nineteenth-century social reformers.  
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29 More specifically, the Old Vic had been founded by Baylis’s aunt, Emma Cons, to provide a teetotal  
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31 entertainment venue in the deprived area of Lambeth. Driving this enterprise was a belief that any  
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33 aspiring person could ameliorate her existence by pursuing ‘all those activities and studies that make life  
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35 grander, lovelier, sweeter, more human, more divine, more vivid, more humorous’: the ‘things of the  
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37 mind’ rather than the ‘things of the body’.<sup>64</sup> Whereas many reformers focused on schemes designed to  
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42 to the founding of the Ballet Club at the Mercury Theatre in 1930, which subsequently became the Ballet Rambert.

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44 Mary Clarke, *Dancers of the Mercury: The Story of Ballet Rambert* (London, 1962).

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46 63 Zoe Anderson provides an account of the formative years of this partnership in *The Royal Ballet: 75 Years* (London,  
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48 2006), 7-65. In the interim, de Valois’s enterprise had also been supported by the Camargo Society, an organisation that  
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50 began in 1929, when ballet critics Philip Richardson and Arnold Haskell persuaded a group of former Ballets Russes  
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52 dancers and enthusiasts to provide financial support and performance opportunities for British ballet. Angela Kane and  
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54 Jane Pritchard, ‘The Camargo Society Part I’, *Dance Research* 12, 2 (1994): 21-65.

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56 64 W. Margrie, *The Romance of Morley College: From a Back Room to a Palace of Culture* (London, 1934), 19. Cons was supported  
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58 by Samuel Morley, whose input led to the off-shoot educational initiative that became Morley College (of which  
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60 Margrie was a student): Dennis Richards, *Offspring of the Vic: A History of Morley College* (London, 1958). Baylis took over

1  
2 teach amateurs, hoping that increased public participation in the production of art would revive  
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4 homegrown culture, the founders of the Old Vic had a different vision: they imagined the public as a  
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6 broad collective that would patronise performances of the best art. By the 1930s, the paternalistic  
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8 impulse to promote high art to the general public as a means of moral and social betterment was  
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10 becoming ever more intertwined with national cultural renewal, not least because the broadening of the  
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12 franchise and subsequent rise of Socialism foregrounded the government's obligation to its citizens. In  
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14 many respects, de Valois's repertory theatre model was well placed to deliver this 'Gospel of Culture'  
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16 (as a beneficiary would have it).<sup>65</sup> As she explained, the long-term outlook brought freedom from  
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18 commercial constraints; rather than treating the theatre as 'a community luxury' designed to give the  
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20 people what they wanted, managers could instead realise its potential as 'a community necessity': a  
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22 means of public edification.<sup>66</sup> Providing high quality entertainment that attracted a broad appeal  
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24 promised to encourage cultural renewal.  
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28 But while there was a long tradition in Britain of reformers appropriating spoken drama and  
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30 even music to social and political ends, the idea of a ballet troupe fulfilling this mission brought new  
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32 challenges. Ballet's potential as a vehicle for social reform depended on its elevation from the displays  
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34 traditionally staged as music hall 'entertainment'. For although these venues provided an important  
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36 training ground for aspiring dancers (de Valois herself began her professional life dancing at the  
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38 Lyceum Theatre), their productions were often regarded by the cultural elite as 'frivolous' and  
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40 consequently 'disreputable from the moral point of view'.<sup>67</sup> Even when a more highbrow tradition  
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42 began to emerge in Britain in the wake of the Ballets Russes, the art form's negative associations with  
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44 spectacle lingered. For one thing, the celebrity culture that quickly grew up around dancers was  
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46 uncomfortably similar to that which surrounded the stars of emerging mass media, especially  
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51 managing the theatre in 1898. The subsequent acquisition of the Sadler's Wells Theatre allowed her to expand her  
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53 aunt's philanthropic mission into North London.  
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55 65 Magrie, *The Romance of Morley College*, 20.

56 66 De Valois, *Invitation*, 79.

57 67 Dent, *A Theatre for Everybody*, 102.  
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Hollywood cinema. When this star appeal was combined with lavish sets and theatrical music, the overall effect was often sensational to a point that commentators found unnerving.

The word most frequently employed to sum up these traits – ‘glamour’ – had lowbrow connotations that critics consciously evoked. An early chronicler of the Sadler’s Wells noted:

I am well aware that [glamour] is a horrible Hollywoodised word, but it is no good blinking the fact that glamour is precisely the appeal of Ballet. It has largely lost its real meaning, and today stands for the escape from reality which one very large section of the public finds in the cinema, and another and much smaller section (not, alas, necessarily the more intelligent, but certainly the more imaginative) finds in the Ballet.<sup>68</sup>

Haskell similarly suggested that, ‘in its theatrical sense’, glamour described ‘the emotion conveyed by the circumstances of a performance rather than by the intrinsic merit of the performance itself. ‘The film stars’, he continued, ‘have glamour for millions because of publicity, and publicity is a very strong ingredient of glamour. [...] Glamour is clearly something external, since an incognito can kill it stone-dead’.<sup>69</sup> The problem with glamour was not just its supposedly meretricious appeal; the cultural elite also worried that such spectacle encouraged the wrong sort of audience engagement. As Wilfrid Mellers explained, virtuosic displays appealed precisely because they enabled the audience to forget the ‘failures, nostalgias and disappointments resulting from a lack of creativity’ in their own lives.<sup>70</sup> Their enjoyment was premised on ‘complete passivity’: ‘In no sense is [watching such performances] an activity of mind and body [...] Rather is it a supine relinquishment of emotions along the channel of least resistance’.<sup>71</sup> In short, even in its supposedly highbrow form, ballet often suffered from exactly the same shortcoming as lowbrow ones: a reliance on spectacle that threatened to foster indolence and escapism.

From the outset, critics demonstrated a clear desire to dissociate the Sadler’s Wells from the

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68 P.W. Manchester, ‘English and Russian – A Contrast’, in *Vic-Wells: A Ballet Progress* (London, 1942), 63-8; 63.

69 Arnold Haskell, ‘The Birth of English Ballet’, *Journal of the Royal Society of Arts* 87 (June 1939): 784-806; 798, 800.

70 Wilfrid Howard Mellers, ‘Musical Culture To-day: A Sociological Note’, *Tempo* 7 (June 1944): 2-5; 3-4.

71 *Ibid.*

1 more problematic aspects of balletic glamour. When de Valois's company performed its first full  
2 evening of ballet at the Old Vic, for example, the *Manchester Guardian* praised her 'gift of making the  
3 most of the fundamentals of her medium', which allowed her to 'dispense with elaborate accessories'.<sup>72</sup>  
4 A decade later, when praising the company for surpassing 'their exotic rivals' (i.e., the Ballets Russes),  
5 another critic was careful to note that they had done so through 'brilliance of personality' rather than  
6 spectacle: 'There is about the whole Company a spirit of friendliness and co-operation which is  
7 delightful to see, but which does not make for glamour'.<sup>73</sup> Such comments were rarely substantiated by  
8 reference to particular aspects of a production's choreography, décor or music. Instead, critics based  
9 their assertions on more nebulous qualities. One, for example, claimed that 'what these ballets lack is  
10 the Russian feeling, that intangible but quite definite atmosphere which the Wells will never achieve  
11 simply because it is English'.<sup>74</sup> Displaying an age-old ambivalence towards spectacle, these writers  
12 imagined that the distinctive feature of British ballet might be restraint: its appeal would lie in its artistry  
13 rather than recourse to anything sensational.  
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30 From another perspective, however, diminishing the element of spectacle risked putting off the  
31 very section of the public that Baylis had hoped to attract. In May 1942, an article in the *Dancing Times*  
32 suggested that some of the general public had avoided attending the ballet because they lay 'too great an  
33 emphasis on the education value of the art to the detriment of the 100 percent entertainment value'.<sup>75</sup>  
34 The public, it seemed, did not always want to be edified. But de Valois was adamant that 'entertainment'  
35 was not something to which ballet should aspire: the notion that it 'was meant to be "good  
36 entertainment"', she asserted, was what 'drove [it] into the music-halls 60 years ago, and left it there to  
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45 72 E.B., 'The Vic-Wells Ballet: A Special Performance', *The Manchester Guardian* (7 May 1931), 7.

46 73 Manchester, *Vic-Wells*, 63.

47 74 *Ibid.*, 71.

48 75 S. Blackford Smith, 'Ballet Hoo for Children: An Experiment in Propaganda', *Dancing Times* 380 (May 1942), 393-4. It is  
49 obviously impossible to know what the general public really thought about ballet, although a survey about 'the value of  
50 ballet' carried out by the officers of Eastern Command following a series of lectures by Joan Lawson revealed that, of  
51 those who responded, 25 per cent 'rated it high – as something more than mere entertainment', while 37 per cent  
52 believed 'that its value was purely that of entertainment'. 'The Army and the Ballet', *Dancing Times* 405 (June 1944), 401.  
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2 die for a period of 25 years'.<sup>76</sup> In the most extreme cases, critics even argued that an absence of  
3 audience approval was evidence of artistic merit. One such was Beryl de Zoete, who viewed the  
4 'generally carping reception' of Frederick Ashton's *The Wanderer* as 'really rather a hopeful sign':  
5 recalling the wisdom of Jean Cocteau, she asserted that the greatness of new works of art would only  
6 become apparent with time.<sup>77</sup>  
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11 In as much as ballet's distance from superfluous spectacle increased its potential to edify, the  
12 outbreak of war assisted the Sadler's Wells' social mission: the limits on resources precluded anything  
13 other than the most simple *mise-en-scène*. But with the art's growing popularity, its association with the  
14 wrong sort of spectacle was compounded from another angle: the unruly behaviour of a certain  
15 segment of the audience. Agreeing on where the line fell between appropriate and excessive enthusiasm  
16 had long been a challenge for ballet devotees; but the wartime ballet boom only exacerbated the issue.  
17 Just as it seemed that ballet might finally dissociate itself from over-extravagance, its heightened  
18 popularity became a new thorn in the side of those who wanted to establish it as a prestigious national  
19 art.  
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### 35 **Balletomania!**

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37 Ballet-going, since the war, has become one of this nation's new habits, like (and generally  
38 involving) queuing, or Spam.<sup>78</sup>  
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44 When war broke out, the Sadler's Wells had just arrived in Leeds on their annual tour of the provinces.  
45 Faced with the closure of all British theatres, the company was disbanded with immediate effect and  
46 the new season, due to begin on 18 September, was postponed. It was, however, barely a matter of  
47 weeks before the theatre ban was revoked. The Sadler's Wells had soon re-formed in Cardiff and  
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54 76 De Valois, cited in Haskell, 'The Birth', 784.

55 77 Beryl de Zoete, 'Review of *The Wanderer*', (January 1940), ROH/RBB/4/4.

56 78 Caryl Brahms, 'About the Ballet', *Good House Keeping* (February 1946), 40-1, 78; 40. Spam was processed, tinned meat  
57 that became a staple food in Britain during the war.  
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1 planned a tour with a ‘small but representative repertoire’; by the end of December, they had returned  
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 3 to London for a trial season.<sup>79</sup> This set the trend for subsequent years, during which the company, with  
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 5 a busier schedule than ever before, spent an unprecedented time on tour, performing in unfamiliar  
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 7 venues, from factory canteens to military camps.<sup>80</sup> Shortly after the Blitz began, there was a further  
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 9 opportunity to contribute to the war effort when the Sadler’s Wells Theatre was requisitioned as a  
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 11 shelter for bombed civilians, requiring the dancers to establish a temporary London base at impresario  
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 13 Bronson Albery’s New Theatre in St Martin’s Lane.<sup>81</sup>  
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16  
 17 By all accounts, the busy performance schedule and time spent on the road were exhausting;  
 18  
 19 but not without benefits. Refusing to be limited by the dearth of male dancers, props and musicians,  
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 21 the company carved out a special role for itself in wartime Britain – so much so that, by the mid-1940s,  
 22  
 23 its calm defiance of anything that threatened to sabotage its efforts made it a symbol of British  
 24  
 25 resilience.<sup>82</sup> What is more, it allegedly ‘gained thousands of new friends in London and all over the  
 26  
 27 country in towns where Ballet had never been seen before’.<sup>83</sup> So much so that, by April 1945, the  
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31 79 For a detailed account of the company’s war years, see Mary Clarke, *The Sadler’s Wells Ballet: A History and An*  
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 33 *Appreciation* (London, 1955), 149-66. Whose decision it was to reform the company remains unclear: de Valois has  
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 35 traditionally been credited with instigating the tour, but a citation in Ashton’s biography suggests that he felt it was his  
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 37 achievement: ‘Ninette – *wonderful* Ninette – said that a woman’s place is in the home and she went away and  
 38  
 39 disappeared. She absolutely abandoned us. But that’s never written about. When Ninette saw it was going to work she  
 40  
 41 came back and took the whole thing in her hands again’. Julie Kavanagh, *Secret Muses: The Life of Frederick Ashton*  
 42  
 43 (London, 1996), 256.

44 80 Between the end of December 1939 and September 1940, for example, the company gave 70 performances over 24  
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 46 weeks in London; during the equivalent period the following year, it spent only 13 weeks in London, but gave 110  
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 48 performances. Clarke, *The Sadler’s Wells*, 168.

49 81 The school continued on the top floor of the old building throughout this period, shutting only for three months in  
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 51 1944 at height of V1 bombs. Bland, *The Royal Ballet*, 66; de Valois, *Come Dance With Me*, 141-4.

52 82 While male dancers remained subject to conscription laws, female artists of conscription age who were regularly  
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 54 engaged in ‘the more important forms of cultural entertainment’ could gain exemption, if their managers requested it.  
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 56 De Valois, *Come Dance With Me*, 145.  
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58 83 Manchester, *Vic-Wells*, 49. Such stories are typical of accounts of British culture in the Second World War. Historians  
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*Dancing Times* could report that ballet audiences had reached an all-time high and included a broader cross-section of the population than ever before.<sup>84</sup> This newfound popularity won the company sizeable profits, allowing it to pay off debts on the theatre and school in Colet Gardens. Against the odds, its financial position at the end of the war was far stronger than at the start.<sup>85</sup> More significantly, it consolidated the company's claim to the status of national institution. As actor and theatre director Michael Redgrave explained, '[t]o produce an Aeschylus, or a Michelangelo [...] you have got to have a culture resting on the whole nation; a pyramid of which these men represent the top, the base being the people – a truly national culture'.<sup>86</sup> If any organisation met these criteria, it was the Sadler's Wells, a troupe that, in Haskell's words, was 'more truly national than any State institution, since it was born out of the sixpences of the masses'.<sup>87</sup> Intertwined with a larger narrative about culture's place in the 'people's war', the company's wartime experiences made them an emblem of the new democratic era that war promised to usher in.<sup>88</sup>

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have debated whether the reported increase in the popularity of high art during wartime was a reflection of reality, or rather a left-leaning intellectual imaginary. For example, see Nick Hayes, 'More Than "Music-While-You-Eat"? Factory and Hostel Concerts, "Good Culture" and the Workers', in id. and Jeff Hill (eds.), *Millions Like Us? British Culture in the Second World War* (Liverpool, 1999), 209-35; 210.

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84 'The Sitter Out', *Dancing Times* 415 (April 1945), 290-2.

85 Clarke, *The Sadler's Wells*, 18. In 1947, the ballet school was expanded: Homans, *Apollo's Angels*, 427.

86 Cited in Jack Lindsay, *British Achievement In Art and Music* (London, 1945), 3.

87 Haskell, 'The Birth', 798. A *Manchester Guardian* critic similarly claimed that, 'having added wonderfully to its stature even in the war years', the company 'had now been truly accepted as the country's national ballet company': 'Ballet First-Night at Covent Garden', *Manchester Guardian* (22 February 1946). Despite the Old Vic Foundation's aims, it is unclear to what extent Baylis's theatres were ever patronised by the poorer members of the public: what little evidence of audience make-up survives is hearsay and contradictory. It seems that, although 'the opera gallery certainly used to include a good many of a more humble class', the theatres 'were kept going by a middle-class audience [and] especially if any sort of star was performing, the audience was quite obviously a West End one'. Dent, *A Theatre*, 134, 120.

88 The other British company that played a major part in the democratisation of ballet was the Ballet Rambert. However, this troupe was more severely disrupted by war than the Sadler's Wells: in 1941, the company was forced to disband after it became financially unviable to continue; it reformed in 1943, having agreed to partner with CEMA. Clarke,



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However, not everyone considered the ballet's popularity with the 'vast armies of "nomadic" theatre-goers' a positive sign.<sup>89</sup> De Valois, for instance, sensed that, with their 'tastes [...] dangerously catholic and reactions more emotional than intellectual', the public's interest in ballet had all the trappings of a fad.<sup>90</sup> Indeed, perhaps the greatest challenge for those who believed that national culture should be founded on populism was how to transform the general public into an intellectual audience deserving of even the most prestigious institutions. But fear that mass audiences were driven more by emotion than intellect had only been compounded by Britain's recent experience of war. The heightened emotional atmosphere of the early 1940s seemed to increase the visceral appeal of the arts: music, dance and drama provided a way for people to process and transcend the trauma of wartime living. Speaking of Ashton's *Dante Sonata*, produced during the final months of 1939, one critic noted:

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a few people [...] dislike it for precisely the same reason that it means so much to the rest of us. Because it *is* an emotional wallow, and they do not approve of such escapism. But most of us feel at times, and particularly in these days, that the world is too much with us, and we would give anything to be able to roll on the floor and tear our hair and scream. "Dante Sonata" does it for us.<sup>91</sup>

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Unlike many pre-war ballets, *Dante Sonata* could not be accused of an overload of spectacle: with monochrome costumes representing the forces of good (white) and evil (black), the small group of dancers performed barefoot against a simple backdrop designed by Sophie Fedorovitch. But in many critics' minds, the ballet, even shorn of elaborate décor, still failed to inspire an intelligent response from its audience.

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To make matters worse, the behaviour of enthusiasts only confirmed ballet's emotive impact. The phenomenon of mid-century ballet fanaticism was so remarkable that a new word entered the

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*Dancers of the Mercury*, 117-47.

89 Ninette de Valois, *Invitation to the Ballet* (London, 1937), 78.

90 *Ibid.*

91 Manchester, *Vic-Wells*, 45-6.

1 vernacular: 'balletomane'.<sup>92</sup> For those who self-identified as such, 'balletomane' evoked a passionate –  
 2 and, by all accounts, histrionic – enthusiasm for ballet: frenzied applause, showering of the stage with  
 3 bouquets, obsessive knowledge about ballerinas and a tendency to criticise technique were prominent  
 4 characteristics. The word was quickly appropriated by detractors, for whom it denoted anything from  
 5 'cheerfully uncritical' to 'a lack of good sense', or even complete hysteria.<sup>93</sup> One critic, for example,  
 6 poked fun by likening balletomania to a 'contagious and sometimes chronic' illness that, 'at the mere  
 7 mention of ballet, seems either to paralyse or convulse what may be an otherwise well-balanced  
 8 intellect'.<sup>94</sup> Put simply, although far from passive, balletomanes' emotionality seemed uncomfortably  
 9 close to the escapist attitudes that intellectuals associated with mass consumption. At the same time, it  
 10 played into ballet's negative image as an effeminate art form that was performed and patronised  
 11 primarily by women and dandies, an association that war had made it only more urgent to lose.<sup>95</sup> What  
 12 is more, balletomanes' behaviour – which another critic compared to that of 'football fans when their  
 13 team has scored a goal' – contravened accepted theatre etiquette.<sup>96</sup>

14 De Valois was not the only one to fear that such unmeasured support might in the first place  
 15 encourage complacency among dancers, or later – when the trend passed – undermine their

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92 The *Oxford English Dictionary* notes that this term is of French origin and first appeared in Britain in a *Musical Times* article of 1923. *Oxford English Dictionary*, 'balletomane' [online]. [www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com) [accessed 20 April 2011]. A search of 'British English' texts on Google Ngram suggests that usage of this word soared during the 1930s, peaking in the mid-1940s.

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93 W.A. Wilcox, 'Well, The Ballet's Good', *Sunday Dispatch* (2 July 1948), Red Shoes Press Cuttings-1, BFI Archive; Raymond Mortimer, 'Ballet Design', *The Listener* 30 (21 October 1943), 476.

94 Nicholas Bentley, *Ballet-hoo* (London: Michael Joseph, 1948), 76.

95 De Valois similarly felt the need to defend ballet against its feminine connotations. She argued that, although women are great pioneers, real balletic maturity would only be achieved when men took charge, as they could master feminine dancing more easily than women could master masculine dancing. By 1957 she could proclaim that 'We are returning to the golden age of ballet again with one of its original truths reaffirmed, namely, the proper emphasis on the male choreographer, dancer and ballet master'. De Valois, 'What Makes a Dancer's Life?', in *Step by Step: The Formation of an Establishment* (London, 1977), 187-97; 188; and 'The English Ballet', in *Step by Step*, 82-90; 83.

96 Beverley Baxter, 'Customers Were Right' (4 December 1943), ROH/RBB/4/5.

1  
2 confidence.<sup>97</sup> In her history of the Vic-Wells, P.W. Manchester noted:

3  
4 the indiscriminate applause from so large a section of the audience is a distressing feature  
5  
6 of modern ballet-going, a situation which has grown more acute with the sensational war-  
7  
8 time boom in Ballet. [...] It is dangerous for the dancers to know that they will be greeted  
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10 with identically the same ovation whatever their performance may have been like.<sup>98</sup>  
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14 Manchester worried that such unmeasured enthusiasm would have a negative impact on standards,  
15  
16 posing a threat to British ballet's development. She continued: 'Unless they can be taught to develop a  
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18 critical appreciation of all that goes to make Ballet, unless they can learn to recognise true artistry as  
19  
20 opposed to surface tricks, then English Ballet may find itself back in the dark ages of the old Empire  
21  
22 days'.<sup>99</sup> Balletomanes' behaviour was problematic precisely because it undermined attempts to  
23  
24 dissociate ballet from spectacle: such elaborate displays of enthusiasm were awkward proof of the art  
25  
26 form's visceral appeal.  
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30 To complicate matters further, balletomanes' blind devotion was often couched in the language  
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32 of elite opinion. Priding themselves on their superior knowledge, they were 'like a religious community,  
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34 asserting strenuously that they alone [held] the true faith universal'.<sup>100</sup> Worse still, they were clearly able  
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36 to infiltrate the spheres in which the boundaries of good culture were negotiated: 'the chief offenders',  
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38 explained de Valois, were not found 'in the commercial theatre, where the audience openly and  
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40 honestly are supposed to go for superficial amusement', but 'in our serious theatres, built for the  
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42 edification and progress of the true specialised audience'.<sup>101</sup> A Trojan horse denouement was equally  
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97 De Valois, *Imitation*, 97-104.

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48 98 Manchester, *Vic-Wells*, 84.

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50 99 *Ibid.*, 84. The Empire Theatre was a music hall in London.

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52 100 Dent, *A Theatre*, 118.

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54 101 De Valois, *Imitation*, 105. De Valois's words bring to mind Virginia Woolf's famous 'Middlebrow' essay, in which she  
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56 argued that 'the true battle [...] lies not between highbrow and lowbrow, but between highbrows and lowbrows joined  
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58 together in blood brotherhood against the bloodless and pernicious pest who comes between' – the middlebrow: *The*  
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60 *Death of the Moth, and Other Essays*. Available online at <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/> [accessed 10 July 2014].

1 likely within the press – perhaps more so, given that ballet criticism was only just beginning to be  
2 recognised as a reputable discourse.<sup>102</sup> In the eyes of their critics, balletomanes' most common trait was  
3 their single-minded obsession with dancing: the 'true connoisseur', they argued, addressed this 'only  
4 after the ballet has been considered as a whole'.<sup>103</sup> Reviewers were necessarily forthright in exposing  
5 heretical utterances within their ranks. In a 1941 review of de Valois's *Orpheus* published in the *Dancing*  
6 *Times*, ballet-lover Eveleigh Leith asserted that it is 'extremely difficult (psychologists may tell us that it  
7 is impossible) to be fully conscious of two sensory impressions at one moment'.<sup>104</sup> In the following  
8 edition, Evans hit back:

19 Because their [balletomanes'] technical knowledge of [...] ballet is often above the average  
20 they are apt to consider themselves the very salt of the ballet audience whereas the truth is  
21 that, whatever their age, they are old fogeys, behind the times, having failed to grasp the  
22 three-dimensional aspect of the modern ballet, which consists of dance, music and décor.<sup>105</sup>

23 If disparaging remarks cut deep, it was because balletomanes' conduct drew attention to the very things  
24 that made ballet's claim to the status of high art problematic.

25 When it came to the question of founding a national institution, the diverse audience for ballet  
26 that had reached an all-time high during the war was as much a hindrance as a boon. Indeed, just as it  
27 seemed likely that the Sadler's Wells might finally take on the role of Britain's first national ballet

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42 102 The monthly *Dancing Times*, founded in 1894, became the first widely successful national dance periodical after it was  
43 purchased by Philip Richardson and T.M. Middleton in 1910. It covered a range of dance styles, from ballroom and  
44 music hall to ballet, and featured regular updates on the international ballet scene. Arnold Haskell was the first ballet  
45 critic to be employed by a newspaper – the *Daily Telegraph* – after his 1934 monograph *Balletomania* made him famous.  
46 'About', *Dancing Times*. Available at <<http://www.dancing-times.co.uk/about>> [accessed 2 August 2013]; Haskell,  
47 *Balletomania*, 3rd ed. (Harmondsworth, 1979), 285.

48 103 Haskell, *The National Ballet: A History and a Manifesto*, 2nd ed. (London, 1947), 41.

49 104 Eveleigh Leith, 'Afterthoughts on "Orpheus"', *Dancing Times* 371 (August 1941), 603-4.

50 105 Edwin Evans, 'Seeing and Hearing', *Dancing Times* 372 (September 1941), 659-60. Evans's criticism was somewhat  
51 ironic, given that his contributions to the *Dancing Times* tended to focus almost exclusively on ballet music.

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2 company, its trustees went so far as to argue that the grounds on which the company had become 'truly  
3 national' – working throughout the war to bring 'the best to the most' – were the very things that now  
4 put its chances of an illustrious future in jeopardy. Edward Dent summarised the dilemma thus:  
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9 Are we to return [...] to the Royal Victoria Hall in Waterloo Road and Sadler's Wells  
10 Theatre in Rosebery Avenue, and resume our activities as we left them in 1939? Or are we  
11 to change our policy altogether and set to work to become the National Theatre and the  
12 National English Opera? If we aim at becoming these, that means that we must take the  
13 lead in the entire dramatic and musical life of the country. If we go back to being "the  
14 People's Theatre and the People's Opera" we resign ourselves definitely to a permanently  
15 subordinate status.<sup>106</sup>  
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25 His words rehearsed the old contention between popularity and prestige that pervaded discussions  
26 about national culture. When it came to the re-opening of the Opera House, however, these supposedly  
27 incompatible ideals turned out to have more in common than Dent thought.  
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### 34 **Anglicising a Russian Classic**

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37 The 'pretty paradox' of an Opera House re-opening with a season of ballet did not go  
38 unnoticed.<sup>107</sup> Just a month before the great day, the management were still trying to appease  
39 disgruntled opera lovers. The Sadler's Wells Ballet Company, Webster explained in CEMA's  
40 *Monthly Bulletin*, were 'possibly the most internationally famous British theatrical company'. Opera  
41 had not weathered the war as well,<sup>108</sup> the resulting absence of an opera troupe of comparable  
42 standing meant that the Sadler's Wells residency was the surest foundation for what Webster  
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51 106 Dent, *A Theatre*, 133. Dent was a governor of the Sadler's Wells Opera Company.

52 107 Williams, 'The Garden Blooms Again?'

53 108 The perceived absence of an opera company suitable for the re-opening complicated CEMA's plans, because Mecca's  
54 contract gave them the rights to renew their lease unless the building was needed for opera. Frances Donaldson, *The*  
55 *Royal Opera House in the Twentieth Century* (London, 1988), 40-2; Witts, *Artist Unknown*, 131-53.  
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1  
2 hoped would become a very British institution:

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5 it augurs well for the new regime at Covent Garden that its first company should be one  
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7 whose dancers and choreographers are British, whose productions are largely designed by  
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9 British artists, and many of whose scores are contributed by British composers.<sup>109</sup>  
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12 However, invoking the troupe's national credentials was a risky publicity strategy: their perceived  
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14 Britishness was perhaps their biggest challenge. As noted previously, aficionados and experts  
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16 alike maintained that the Ballets Russes' unparalleled standard had placed them at the forefront  
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18 of an international ballet culture. Although the ever-improving quality of the Sadler's Wells  
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20 dancers had gone some way to narrowing this divide, they had not yet trumped the Russian  
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22 troupe's hegemony. To do so, it seemed, they would have to compete on their rival's terms. So it  
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24 was, for its Covent Garden debut, that Keynes suggested not a ballet from the burgeoning  
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26 repertoire by British choreographers that de Valois had worked so hard to promote over the past  
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28 two decades, but instead a Russian classic.<sup>110</sup> With the war over, the possibility of elaborate  
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30 staging was no longer a pipe dream. In a bid to do justice to the illustrious heritage of building  
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32 and ballet, producers and audience readily embraced the opportunity for excess, glamour and  
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34 spectacle.  
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39 But how exactly did the critics deal with this conspicuously opulent affair? Following de  
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41 Valois's lead, those who had formerly sought to distance the Sadler's Wells from ballet's dubious  
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43 tendency towards spectacle changed their tune. Put simply, they now appropriated the glamorous  
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45 Russian heritage as evidence of British achievement.<sup>111</sup> Russianness, then, became a quality to  
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48 109 Webster, 'Editorial', 2.

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50 110 See above, fn.22.

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52 111 *The appropriation of a purportedly 'international' culture for nationalist ends was, of course, unique neither to Britain*  
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54 *nor to the twentieth century. Other recent studies of this phenomenon include Tamsin Alexander's work on the role of*  
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56 *Russian opera in shaping French, British and Czech national identity around the turn of the twentieth century: 'Tales of*  
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58 *Cultural Transfer: Russian Opera Abroad, 1866-1906' (Cambridge PhD Thesis, 2014); and Gundula Kreuzer's study of*  
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60 *Verdi and the Germans: From Unification to the Third Reich (Cambridge, 2010).*

1 which British dancers aspired, but from which they paradoxically sought to distinguish  
2 themselves. This dynamic had interesting ramifications for the inaugural production. Critics  
3 themselves. This dynamic had interesting ramifications for the inaugural production. Critics  
4 considered the choice for the opening night ‘encouragingly significant’ on account of the work’s  
5 status as ‘the most famous of all classical ballets’ – an assertion whose confidence obscured the  
6 term’s problematic history. For one thing, the canon was a product of recent years and the work  
7 in question had in fact only been referred to as a ‘classic’ in public since 1939.<sup>112</sup> Another issue  
8 was ballet’s history as an oral and physical tradition that had been sustained by advanced dancers  
9 passing on routines to younger ones. Ballerinas tended not to memorise anything beyond their  
10 own roles. Consequently, although ballet was centuries old, only a handful of ‘classics’ had  
11 survived, almost all of which were a product of nineteenth-century France or Russia. Realising  
12 the difficulties this posed for the survival of the repertoire, Nicholas Sergeyev had devised a  
13 system of choreographic notation, with which he had sketched more than twenty of Petipa’s  
14 ballets. However, as Jennifer Homans has explained, these records were incomplete, not  
15 endorsed by Petipa and in a variety of hands.<sup>113</sup> Nonetheless, to de Valois this repertoire  
16 conveyed ‘the glories of an ancient and extravagant past’, a past that she desired to reproduce.<sup>114</sup>  
17 Since Sergeyev’s record was the closest to an original, the 1946 production was based on his  
18 reconstruction of Petipa’s choreography, with only a few exceptions: Ashton created a new  
19 Garland dance in Act One and turned the Jewel Fairies’ dance into a *pas de trois*; and de Valois  
20 choreographed ‘a short Russian number, “The Three Ivans”’, after Nijinska.<sup>115</sup>

21 British dancers’ ability to reproduce this Russian repertoire was seized on by critics who sought  
22 to affirm the Sadler’s Wells as the inheritors of an international tradition. Hubert Fitchew argued that

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23 112 ‘Ballet First-Night’; Beth Genné, ‘Creating a Canon, Creating the “Classics” in Twentieth-Century British Ballet’, *Dance*  
24 *Research* 18, 2 (December 2000): 132-62; 148.

25 113 Homans, *Apollo’s Angels*, ix-xix; 420.

26 114 De Valois, *Invitation to the Ballet*, 142.

27 115 Anderson, *The Royal Ballet*, 90.

1  
2 the ‘arrival of native artists, creative and interpretative’ was ‘a legacy inherited from Diaghileff’.<sup>116</sup> That  
3 various former members of the Ballets Russes taught at the Sadler’s Wells Ballet School and consulted  
4 on productions – a notable example is Tamara Karsavina – can only have encouraged belief in such a  
5 lineage.<sup>117</sup> In a discussion of ballet’s ‘true line of succession’, Haskell made an even stronger claim: that  
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10 ‘when we see those [of Petipa’s ballets] that have survived – *Le Lac des Cygnes* and *Le Mariage d’Aurore* –  
11 Petipa, and all the dancers who have performed in them, live once again. The line goes on unbroken to  
12 our day’.<sup>118</sup> His nonchalant slippage from Petipian past to present enabled him to use the French  
13 master’s Russian classics to justify Britain’s current claims to greatness. But if the apparent fluidity of  
14 these identities made such appropriation possible, it also made it hard to define what exactly made a  
15 repertoire national: contradictions abounded. While de Valois, for instance, stated that Russian ballet  
16 had only been recognised in Western Europe once its ‘national element’ had developed, she also argued  
17 that ‘Petipa may have been a Frenchman, but this bore little relation to his work, which was of an  
18 orthodox international classical form’.<sup>119</sup> Haskell similarly claimed that Hilda Munnings, who danced  
19 with Diaghilev’s troupe using the name Lydia Sokolova, ‘for all her English birth, can only be thought  
20 of as a Russian dancer whose fine work was a valuable contribution to a great Russian organisation’.<sup>120</sup>  
21 Such assertions sat uneasily with the common belief that national expression was natural or innate – an  
22 idea that inspired Joan Lawson’s suggestion that an English ballet might emerge if dancers combined  
23 the best elements of Italian, French and Russian ballet with an ‘English spirit’.<sup>121</sup> For the most part, the  
24 Arts Council sought to encourage ‘British’ culture by giving priority to native artists, even as they  
25 sought to establish a national performance tradition built from the European heritage. But, as Lawson’s

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116 Hubert Fitchew, ‘English Ballet’ (7 January 1940), ROH/RBB/4/4.

117 For Karsavina’s involvement, see Anderson, *The Royal Ballet*, 124, 143-5.

118 Haskell, *Balletomania*, 25.

119 De Valois, *Invitation*, 180-1. Elsewhere, when speaking about ‘certain *international* influences’ on English ballet, she noted

‘the Russian ballet in Western Europe as personified in the Diaghilev Russian Ballet’ had been ‘the main guiding force  
on the artistic and creative approach of the English ballet in the theatre’. De Valois, *Step by Step*, 85.

120 Haskell, ‘The Birth’, 789-90.

121 Joan Lawson, ‘An English School of Dancing’, *Dancing Times* 386 (November 1942), 60-2.



1 words suggest, the notion that there was an innate dimension to national expression continued to shape  
2  
3 ideas about what it meant for European art to be appropriated for national ends.  
4

5  
6 At the same time, if the classics' nebulous Russian essence reinforced their prestige, it also  
7  
8 threatened to lock them in a time warp, making them 'museum pieces', out of touch with contemporary  
9  
10 tastes.<sup>122</sup> Lambert was among those to express concern that the emphasis on classics might hinder the  
11  
12 development of 'experimental ballets', leaving Britain with 'a superb body of executants living  
13  
14 artistically speaking in the past'.<sup>123</sup> Haskell, on the other hand, argued that new productions of the  
15  
16 classics were crucial to their survival: 'otherwise the work dates and a living classicism becomes sterile  
17  
18 academicism'. In a rare acknowledgement of the complicated ontological status of the classics, he  
19  
20 continued:  
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23  
24 No carbon copy of a classic would have any meaning to a contemporary audience. A work  
25  
26 is continually modified from night to night, by a change of cast. It is this very fact that  
27  
28 makes the classics enduring.<sup>124</sup>  
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31  
32 But how much of a work could be modified without undermining its status was less clear. Directors  
33  
34 walked a fine line between respectful reproduction and artistic stagnation.  
35

36  
37 The one aspect of the classics that it was usually deemed acceptable for producers to tamper  
38  
39 with was the design, provided that the 'romantic element' was maintained.<sup>125</sup> Design was also the area in  
40  
41 which previous productions by British companies of *The Sleeping Beauty* had most notably fallen down –  
42  
43 a shortcoming that had not gone unnoticed: "The Sleeping Princess", one critic complained in 1942,  
44  
45 'the most brilliant of all [the classical ballets] in the first place, suffers most in its English translation. It  
46  
47 is so obviously designed to be treated with the utmost lavishness', but this was 'simply not  
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53 122 Martin, 'Sadler's Wells'.

54 123 De Valois, *Invitation*, 142; 'The Sitter Out' (June 1940), 531.

55 124 Haskell, *Balletomania*, 56-7.

56 125 *Ibid.*, 57.  
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1 forthcoming'.<sup>126</sup> If drab costumes and sets had been an attempt to limit British ballet's spectacle, the re-  
2 opening of Covent Garden demanded a different approach. Messel's wealthy upbringing, expertise and  
3 magical imagination made him an apt choice for the new production.<sup>127</sup>  
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8 Keen to emphasise the design's cosmopolitan purview, critics reported that Messel had drawn  
9 inspiration from a broad European heritage, including Watteau's water colours and the seventeenth-  
10 and eighteenth-century Italian Bibiena family, whose ornate baroque architecture had similarly inspired  
11 Léon Bakst's designs for Diaghilev's *The Sleeping Princess* 25 years before. (The era was that of Charles  
12 Perrault's *La Belle au Bois Dormant* (1697), on which the ballet was based.) At the same time, they also  
13 noted the influence of British art, such as 'early Romantic scene-painters [...] like "Warwick" Smith',  
14 whose paintings of "[p]recipices, mountains, torrents, wolves, rumbling" and other paraphernalia of  
15 the Alps' informed the 'moonlit forest-scene with its brave clash of pink and puce, lemon and scarlet  
16 against the sombre browns and purples of the background'.<sup>128</sup> This last artist was an apt point of  
17 reference not just on account of his nationality: his paintings had been 'for English amateurs' (or so  
18 Hussey claimed), which suggested Messel's broad appeal. To defend the designer against possible  
19 charges of unoriginality, Hussey also argued that from this eclectic frame of reference he had 'woven  
20 [...] his own individual style'.  
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36 How the ballet music fitted into this nationalist agenda was less obvious. While critics  
37 welcomed the commissioning of new costumes and sets as a way of anglicizing the design, and pursued  
38 the idea of an English style in the dancing, they devoted far fewer words to the question of how  
39 Tchaikovsky's score might be appropriated as 'British ballet music'. The reasons for this silence are far  
40 from clear, not least because there certainly was a general consensus among critics that music would  
41 play a crucial part in the successful establishment of a national institution: paying greater attention to  
42 the unity of dance and music, they argued, promised a way for British companies to better their Russian  
43 predecessors. Haskell, for example, praised the Sadler's Wells for having 'a policy of musical integrity':  
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54 126 Manchester, *Vic-Wells*, 70.

55 127 For Messel's background, see John Gielgud, *Oliver Messel: A Biography* (London, 1986).

56 128 Dyneley Hussey, 'Music – Covent Garden Re-Opened', *Britain To-Day* (May 1946), 34-5.  
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1  
2 'While the Russians marked time musically', this troupe 'reconciled those often warring elements, music  
3  
4 and movement, doing violence to neither'.<sup>129</sup> Several first night reviewers claimed to recognise such a  
5  
6 quality in *Sleeping Beauty*: the *Observer* critic, for example, reported that the dancing was 'true to the spirit  
7  
8 of Tchaikovsky's music'.<sup>130</sup> Typically, however, he failed to present any evidence for this judgement.

9  
10 Nor – like most of his fellow commentators – did he give even a passing nod to the orchestra or  
11  
12 director.

13  
14 From the opening night, critics responded enthusiastically to de Valois's anglicised Russian  
15  
16 classic. Where previously she had been 'severely criticised in many quarters for attempting anything  
17  
18 without calling upon the help of a good number of foreign artists; this, in particular, with reference to  
19  
20 the male dancers', her doubters now found themselves eating their words: the season at the Royal  
21  
22 Opera House was unanimously acclaimed a great success.<sup>131</sup> The Sadler's Wells, it seemed, had finally  
23  
24 trumped the great impresario, staging a ballet that even he had failed to make successful.<sup>132</sup> Ticket sales  
25  
26 confirmed the troupe's achievement. Initially planned to show until 23 March, the run ended up being  
27  
28 significantly extended: over almost 19 weeks, more than a 250,000 people attended the Opera House's  
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30 longest ballet season to date.<sup>133</sup> This was British ballet at its Russian best, a first-class spectacle worthy

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129 Haskell, *National Ballet*, 55-6.

130 Martin Raymond, 'The *Sleeping Beauty*', *The Observer* (24 February 1946), 2.

131 De Valois, *Come Dance*, 168-9.

132 Diaghilev's attempt to stage this ballet under the title *The Sleeping Princess* in 1921 had left him bankrupt. Various factors contributed to this failure. The ballet was longer and in a different tradition to that with which Ballets Russes audiences were familiar. The performance was also hindered by the small theatre and the fact that some of the stage effects did not work – for example, the forest snapped in half. Jane Pritchard, *The Ballets Russes in England Episode 1* [radio broadcast], BBC Radio 4 (23 February 2010) 11.30am-12.00pm. Critics subsequently argued that Diaghilev had been too far ahead of his time: John Martin, 'The Dance: Premier', *The New York Times* (9 October 1949), 10. Diaghilev allegedly changed the ballet's name because 'some of his Auroras were far from being beauties'; it was not until 1946 that the work's former title was reinstated by de Valois in honour of the occasion. Frank, *Margot*, 65.

133 Frank, *Margot*, 67. During the opening weeks, *Sleeping Beauty* was the only ballet performed: preparing it had absorbed most of the company's resources. From 18 March, a broader schedule included *The Rake's Progress*, *Nocturne*, *Miracle in the Gorbals*, and two new ballets: Helpmann's *Adam Zero* to music by Arthur Bliss and Ashton's *Symphonic Variations* to

1  
2 of a war-weary but victorious democracy.  
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6 It would be hard to deny that the re-opening of Covent Garden marked a new sensibility for British  
7  
8 ballet. The return to peace, combined with the Sadler's Wells elevation to the status of a national  
9  
10 company, created a new space for an indulgence in glamour, grandeur and high spectacle. The practices  
11  
12 that had encouraged Britain's royalty, nobility and later Bohemian aesthetes to patronise the Ballets  
13  
14 Russes – the same practices that had cemented Diaghilev's troupe's place at the forefront of a  
15  
16 cosmopolitan, international high culture – were now appropriated by the pioneers of British ballet for  
17  
18 their own ends. Having out-grown the amateur dance studios in which it had taken root, having  
19  
20 surpassed the standards demanded by its broad wartime audience, British ballet eagerly embraced even  
21  
22 those aspects of the Russian tradition from which it had formerly sought to distinguish itself. *Sleeping*  
23  
24 *Beauty* proved an apt vehicle: with its enchanted plot and sumptuous new costumes and sets, the  
25  
26 production did anything but shy away from excess. The irony, of course, was that, whereas in the past  
27  
28 ballet's tendency towards spectacle had threatened its chances of becoming a prestigious art form, the  
29  
30 new theatrical context transformed this same characteristic into a mark of prestige. So if the spectacle  
31  
32 on stage was at all excessive, if the audience's enthusiasm was unduly exaggerated, critics, rejoicing in  
33  
34 the country's achievement, silently turned a blind eye and a deaf ear. The commitment to developing a  
35  
36 cultural vehicle that was at once international, yet reflected the moderate sensibilities of the country's  
37  
38 intelligentsia, had been abandoned at the final hurdle.  
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43 To reduce the re-opening of the Royal Opera House to an unmitigated triumph for elite culture,  
44  
45 then, is to miss the more nuanced insight that this event gives into national culture as it was imagined in  
46  
47 mid-century Britain. The Sadler's Wells' transition to a national institution rehearsed – rather than  
48  
49 resolved – the period's broader anxieties about the boundaries between mass and elite culture,  
50  
51 popularity and prestige, national and international appeal. This performance offers a snapshot of a  
52  
53 moment when it still seemed possible that the foundation of a people's culture might go hand-in-hand  
54  
55 with the promotion of an elite tradition centred on the European canon: the idea of a democratic  
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58 César Frank's work of the same name. Clarke, *The Sadler's Wells*, 201-10.  
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60

1 national institution that could represent Britain on an international stage did not yet seem impossible.  
2  
3  
4 The decision to lower ticket prices and scrap the white tie dress code was a clear gesture to democracy  
5  
6 that reflected the management's commitment to broadening access to high art, not so much by  
7  
8 encouraging amateur participation, as by diversifying audiences. At the same time, the prioritization of  
9  
10 foreign repertory helped to alleviate the potentially negative connotations of this new audience. Indeed,  
11  
12 rather than viewing de Valois's choice of ballet as evidence of Britain's artistic shortcoming, critics and  
13  
14 artists alike sought to appropriate this purportedly 'international' heritage to nationalist ends. Since the  
15  
16 European canon continued to garner huge respect in Britain, they hoped that the successful  
17  
18 reproduction of this repertoire would bring the prestige that Britain sought. In other words, it was  
19  
20 precisely because of its Russian heritage that *Sleeping Beauty* was such an appropriate choice for de  
21  
22 Valois's aspiring national company: it promised international acclaim.  
23  
24

25  
26 By combining appeals to the prestigious Russian legacy with a large dose of spectacle and the  
27  
28 optimistic climate of postwar London, the producers of *Sleeping Beauty* hoped to chart a middle-ground  
29  
30 for national culture, attracting a broad audience for high art without undermining its elite cultural status.  
31  
32 They could only realise this idealistic imaginary by quietly obscuring a paradox: the very things that  
33  
34 made ballet well positioned to navigate a path between popularity and prestige also made it a  
35  
36 problematic vehicle for national culture. In another context, critics would have deemed its glamour and  
37  
38 accessibility unedifying. But to have done so on such an illustrious occasion would not only have been  
39  
40 uncharitable; it would also have risked exposing the hypocrisies of an elite that delighted in spectacle as  
41  
42 readily as did the masses from which they sought to distinguish themselves. With the guardians of high  
43  
44 culture eager to proclaim a new, democratic era in the history of the Opera House, such inconsistencies  
45  
46 were best glossed over – or, better still, ignored.  
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112

# № 15 a) Pas d'Action

(Сцена Авроры и принца Дезире)  
(Scène d'Aurore et de Désiré)

Andante cantabile

Flauto piccolo

2 Flauti

2 Oboi

Corno inglese

2 Clarinetti (B)

2 Fagotti

4 Corni (F)

2 Pistoni (B)

2 Trombe (B)

3 Tromboni e Tuba

Timpani

Arpa

Andante cantabile

Violini I

Violini II

Viole

Solo Violoncelli

Altri

Contrabassi

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I 10

Ob. *mp*

Cl. *p mp p*

Fg. *p mp p*

V. I *mp pp*

V. II *p mp p pp p*

Vle *p mp p pp p*

Vc. *mf p mf*

Cb. *p mp p pp p*

Pochissimo più animato

20

C. I. *mf mp p*

Cl. *mf mp p*

Fg. *mf mp p*

Cr. *mf mp p*

V. I *p mf mp p mf mp*

V. II *p mf mp p mf mp*

Vle *p mf mp mf mp*

Vc. *f mp p f dim. mp*

Cb. *mf mp p mf mp*

Symphony No. 5 in E Minor, Op. 64

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44 **Tempo I** **B** *(♩ = 54)* **animando** **riten.**

Fl. I II *pp* *mf* *ff*

Ob. I *pp* *mf* *ff*

Klar. I II *p* *pp* *mf* *ff*

Fag. I II *p* *pp* *mf* *ff*

Hr. I II III IV *p* *pp* *p cresc.* *mf* *f* *mf*

Viol. I *p* *mp* *cresc.* *f* *riten.*

Viol. II *pp* *con noblezza* *mp* *cresc.* *f* *riten.*

Viola *p* *con noblezza* *mp* *cresc.* *f* *riten.*

Vcll. *pp* *pizz.* *f* *arco*

Kb. *pp* *f*

49 *(♩ = 54)* **animando** **C** **Poco più mosso** *(♩ = 69)*

Fl. I II III *pp* *mp* *mf* *cresc. poco a poco*

Ob. I II *pp* *mp* *mf* *cresc. poco a poco*

Klar. I II *pp* *mp* *mf* *cresc. poco a poco*

Fag. I II *pp* *mp* *mf* *cresc. poco a poco*

Hr. I II III IV *pp* *p* *mf* *mf cresc. poco a poco*

Pos. III *pp* *p* *mf* *mf cresc. poco a poco*

*(♩ = 54)* **animando** **C** **Poco più mosso** *(♩ = 69)*

Viol. I *p* *cresc.* *mf* *con desiderio* *cresc. poco a poco*

Viol. II *pp* *con desiderio* *mf cresc. poco a poco*

Viola *pp* *p* *cresc.* *mf* *con desiderio* *cresc. poco a poco*

Vcll. *pp* *pizz.* *cresc.* *mf* *con desiderio* *cresc. poco a poco*

Kb. *pp* *arco* *cresc. poco a poco*



# INTRODUCTION

*Allegro vivo*

10 Flauto piccolo *fff*

11 2 Flauti *fff*

12 2 Oboi *fff*

13 Corno inglese *fff*

14 2 Clarinetti (A) *fff*

15 2 Fagotti *fff*

16 4 Corni (F) *fff*

17 2 Pistoni (A) *fff*

18 2 Trombe (A) *fff*

19 3 Tromboni e Tuba *fff*

20 Timpani *fff*

21 Piatti *fff*

22 Gr. cassa *ff*

23 Arpe

24 *Allegro vivo*

25 Violini I *fff*

26 Violini II *fff*

27 Viole *fff*

28 Violoncelli *fff*

29 Contrabassi *fff*

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