

# Mikhail Fokine's Choreographic Heritage in Yugoslavia

(Nadezhda Mosusova, Belgrade, Serbia)

## Abstract

Mikhail M. Fokine (1880-1942), the well known Russian ballet reformer, once the leading dancer of the Maryinsky theatre and Russian Seasons of Sergei Diaghilev, choreographer of both institutions and other world famous operas and ballet companies, never visited the Balkan states. In spite of this fact, twelve ballets from the rich Fokine opus were seen first in Yugoslavia, thanks to Diaghilev's dancers and Fokine's followers, Elena Poliakova and Margarita Froman. Among Fokine's twelve "Yugoslav" ballets, there are ten creations conceived for Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes*, one independent, *The Dying Swan*, choreographed in 1907 for Anna Pavlova, entering subsequently the Maryinsky's repertoire, and *The Golden Cockerel* composed for the *Ballets Russes de Colonel de Basile* in 1937.

## 1. Introduction

Regarding ballet and the situation in the period before the First World War, there was a small theatrical dance tradition in the South Slav countries under the Austro-Hungarian rule, including centres as Zagreb, Ljubljana and Sarajevo. However, at the same time there was not even a trace of ballet to be seen or to be practiced in the Kingdom of Serbia.

At the beginning of the 1920's in the newly established Kingdom of Serbs, Croats and Slovenes (later called Yugoslavia), Ljubljana and Zagreb kept their modest dancing tradition going, while Belgrade, ruined in the Great War, had to start many cultural activities from scratch.

Enormous changes had come to the Serbian as well as Slovenian and Croatian (also Bosnian and Macedonian) parts of Yugoslavia after the Russian October overturn in 1917. In 1920 a great wave of refugees from all over Russia inundated both eastern and western countries of Europe, coming to the Balkans via the Black or Adriatic seas. Many of them were artists of drama, opera, or ballet, so theatres in the three main cities of Yugoslavia, as well as other centres such as Sarajevo or Skopje, invited the newcomers to join them in cooperation. Among them were two Diaghilev's stars, ballet artists Elena Poliakova (1884-1973) and Margarita Froman (1896-1970) (followed by the brother Maksimilian) all three dancing in Mikhail Fokine's productions.

## 2. Productions and Reproductions

From the lists in the appendix we see that the Fokine's work in Yugoslavia was represented in general by his output created before the First World War, mainly for the famous company of Sergei Diaghilev, in which Poliakova and Fromans participated. Thanks to them, Yugoslavia was able to see ten of Fokine's choreographies, staged for Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes*, *Les Sylphides*, *Scheherazade*, *Polovtsian Dances*, *Spectre de la rose*, *Le Carnaval*, *Les Papillons*, *Firebird*, *Petrushka*, *Tamara*, *Daphnis and Chloe*, and one independent *The Dying Swan*. *The Golden Cockerel*, created for *Colonel de Basil Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo* stays apart. Seven of those ballets were, in the opinion of some, among Fokine's *chef d'oeuvres*<sup>1</sup>

When following Yugoslav performances, we exempt Ljubljana after premieres of *Sylphides* and *Scheherazade* because after 1921 there were no more of Fokine's "children" or "grandchildren", remaining in that city, Poliakova having left the Slovenian capital in 1922 to be installed in Belgrade. Margarita Froman and her artistic family (one sister and three brothers) settled in Zagreb in 1921. They organized ballet schools in Zagreb and Belgrade

respectively, and being engaged in national theatres started immediately to mount ballets from the Fokine heritage. It was a great “hit” in Zagreb in 1923 to have Stravinsky’s *Petrushka* performed by Maksimilian, Margarita and Valentin Froman, with stage and costume designs by Pavel and piano played in the orchestra by Olga Froman.

Often Fokine’s ballets appeared in Yugoslavia under different names: *Visions of Night* instead *Sylphides*, *Invitation to the Dance* or *Deceived Pierrot* instead of *Spectre de la rose*. Looking at programmes from both cities, Zagreb and Ljubljana, we observe that the ballets made by two illustrious ladies or other choreographers are sometimes labeled “after Fokine”, but it could happen that the name of Fokine was omitted. There is no information about these lady choreographers being in contact with Fokine after their emigration to Yugoslavia, or being in a position to ask Fokine’s permission to stage or change the titles (or scenarios) of his ballets. In any case, there was no possibility in Belgrade or Zagreb to compare local productions with original choreographies, taking also into account that Fokine himself changed his choreographic conceptions over the years, some of his early works being constantly revived by him for various dancers and companies..

Compositions of Chopin contained in *Les Sylphides* were to be orchestrated anew by Czeck composer Antonin Balatka (conductor of the Ljubljana Opera) for local purposes in Ljubljana and Belgrade. In Ljubljana and Belgrade *Les Sylphides* had seven parts. In Zagreb, Margarita Froman mounted a mini-*Chopiniana* containing only three pieces, whereas Fokine’s first *Chopiniana* (renamed *Les Sylphides* by Diaghilev) consisted of five pieces, to which he later added more of Chopin’s music, depending on possibilities. How can one talk about authenticity after so much differences? What to say about *Les Papillons*, *Le Carnival* or *Daphnis and Chloe*? It is only known that when visiting Yugoslavia in 1935, Chaliapin praised Margarita Froman for following a genuine Fokine choreography in his *Polovtsian Dances*, made by her for Zagreb and Belgrade when the entirely Borodin’s opera was staged. Fedor Chaliapin remembered Fokine’s spectacle of Diaghilev’s *Ballets Russes* in Paris (which was left preserved for years in the repertoire of Maryinsky Theatre, within Borodin’s opera).

Fokine’s choreographic achievements in emigration were not mounted in the Balkans but from his late creative period the ballet version of Rimsky-Korsakov’s opera *The Golden Cockerel* performed in Belgrade deserves a special mention.

### **3. The Golden Cockerel/Le Coq d’Or by Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov: Previous History**

The opera was composed during 1906 and 1907, to a versed libretto by Vladimir Bel’sky after Aleksandr Pushkin’s tale in verse about the golden cockerel (*Skazka pro zolotogo petushka*, 1834). While Pushkin’s fairy-tale contains a hidden allusion to the tsarist regime of the epoch. Belsky’s libretto is a very open satire on the tsarism of his time, reflecting the actual situation of the Russian government, who could not cope with the Japanese war in 1904 and domestic uproars in 1905. The opera was premiered in Moscow by Zimin’s private company on October 7 1909 in the Solodovnikov Theatre, conducted by Emil Cooper, directed by Petr Olenin, with set and costume design by Ivan Bilibin.

The *Cockerel* is conceived in three acts with prologue and epilogue. The title role is performed by a soprano, mainly singing behind the scene. Vladimir Bel’sky in his libretto depicted what the scene and costumes should look like, suggesting precisely their shape and colours. Ivan Bilibin who was the first to create sets for the performance did not however pay attention to the visual details given by Bel’sky in his stage remarks.

Following the suggestions of Mikhail Fokine<sup>2</sup>, Sergei Diaghilev included the work in his *Ballets Russes*, transforming Rimsky-Korsakov’s scenic composition into an opera-ballet of a special kind with a double cast of singers and dancers, organized by Aleksandr Benois. The choreographer was Fokine with the same singers as in Zimin’s production, stars of the

St. Petersburg Maryinsky. The cockerel was presented as a string puppet, with the voice heard off stage. Natalya Goncharova's stage design and costumes were a "revelation of brilliant color and primitive fantasy". She was also led by her own vision, not taking into account Bel'sky's suggestions for costumes and colors. The premiere took place in Paris Grand Opéra on May 24 1914, "and this at once became the chief feature of the season", to quote Diaghilev's director Sergei Grigoriev<sup>3</sup>, who staged the piece with Charles Wallts and Orest Allegri.<sup>4</sup>

The dancer-protagonists in the opera-ballet were Tamara Karsavina as Shemakhan Empress, Aleksei Bulgakov as Tsar Dodon, his sons Afron and Gvidon played by Sergei Grigoriev and Maksimilian Froman, with Enrico Cecchetti as the Astrologer. Disregarding the triumph of Fokine and his stars the work was opposed by the Rimsky-Korsakov family as was the case with Fokine's *Scheherazade*. Diaghilev was compelled to drop *The Cockerel* from the repertory in France, but not in other places. Thus the opera-ballet was shown in London and elsewhere without arguments about the Bern convention on copyrights.

#### 4. The Fokine's Ballet in London 1937

After the death of Diaghilev, Fokine revived *The Golden Cockerel* with the company *Ballet Russes de Colonel de Basil* as a ballet piece only. For Fokine's purpose, the two-hour Rimsky-Korsakov's opera was deprived of vocal parts and condensed by Nikolai Tcherepnin into a forty five minute orchestral composition i. e. ballet music (the limited time requested by de Basil). Three acts with an introduction and epilogue from Rimsky-Korsakov's work were reduced to three ballet scenes with prologue and epilogue.

Presented in Covent Garden on September 23 1937, conducted by Efrem Kurz, with sets and costumes by Natalya Goncharova, *The Golden Cockerel* was praised as a masterpiece of both choreography and design, its sets executed by Prince Aleksandr Shervashidze and its costumes by Barbara Karinska.<sup>5</sup> No less enthusiasm was shown for the ballet's interpreters. This time, in London, the golden bird (after the artificial one used in the opera and opera-ballet production for Paris) really came into focus through the splendid performance by Tatiana Riaboushinska. Irina Baronova was a gorgeous Empress of Shemakhan.

"This was to be de Basil's most costly production so far, with three changes of scene and one hundred fifty costumes."<sup>6</sup> If one counts *The Cockerel*'s participants on the performing list it becomes evident that fifty six dancers had to change costumes three times. It is worth mentioning that the curtain was designed and created by Goncharova. In fact she "recreated her curtain and other design from the original 1914 production, especially in second scene. However, the 1937 version was more elaborate".<sup>7</sup> In addition to the facts and data quoted above, one is to be informed that Goncharova was helped in her great work both times by the colleague and partner Mikhail Larionov.<sup>8</sup> As in the opera-ballet the costumes of the King and his court were made in Russian way, while those of the Empress and her entourage were presented in a free Eastern stylization. Marquez who relied in his quoted book on "oral history" told by Diaghilev's and de Basil's *étoiles* (see his acknowledgments), tells us about the choreography performed in two ways:

"Russian folk for Dodon's court, and Eastern-Hindou style for the Queen of Shemakhan and her people. The balletic highlights were provided by the Golden Cockerel and the Queen, the only roles danced on *pointe*. The Cockerel's steps were performed in turn-in position, with the exception of some pirouettes and rapid promenades in attitude back... The choreography for the Queen was an attempt to convey the Oriental atmosphere through balletic technique. It was one of Fokine's most intricate virtuoso parts and its continuity in the second scene made it more exhausting. Even when not dancing the Queen was rarely off her points."<sup>9</sup>

To conclude the report with the most important statement:

“The ballet impressed its audience as the most magnificent spectacle since the war (the First World War - NM), a return to the early works of Diaghilev, romantic in its exoticism, color, emotion, fantasy, and legend.”<sup>10</sup>

### **5. The Fokine/Joukowsky's *Cockerel* in Belgrade (1939)**

It is a pity that one cannot depict in this way the choreography, stage and costume design of the *Cockerel* in Yugoslavia, presented on June 2 1939 in Belgrade. The foregoing history shows what kind of art and glamour the Belgrade ballet had to compete with.

The new production of Rimsky-Korsakov's opera 1937 instrumental version consisted of four scenes and epilogue. It was choreographed after Fokine by Anatol Joukowsky (1905-1998), artist and leader of the Belgrade Opera ballet ensemble. He had seen the performance in London and asked Fokine for permission to reproduce the ballet in Belgrade. This is the first time we learn about somebody from Yugoslavia asking Fokine for his permission.

Joukowsky claimed in his letter written to the author of this paper in April 1993, that he received Fokine's permission, with notes, contrary to rumours saying that he had not. Whatever the truth, how did Joukowsky manage to obtain the score and orchestral material? The score had not been published and de Basil needed it for his own performances, so Fokine could not have given the score for the *Cockerel* to Joukowsky. The librettist Bel'sky, living in Belgrade as an *émigré*, considered he was also to be asked for permission concerning Rimsky-Korsakov's music. Bel'sky was – in the words of L'udmila Barsova - against the Rimsky-Korsakov opera in Tcherepnin's ballet version (which he did not see).<sup>11</sup>

Following Joukowsky's testimony (of which printed proof is also to be found in Barsova's writings quoted above, concerning correspondence between Bel'ski and the composer's son Mikhail Rimsky-Korsakov) the Serbian composer Stevan Hristich conceived the shortened orchestral arrangement of the Rimsky-Korsakov's opera for the Belgrade performance. This score was not printed, either. Scenery by Vladimir Jedrinsky made after Goncharova (Joukowsky's information) contributed to the splendid creation of the choreographer and the dancing team of the Belgrade troupe: Natasha Boshkovich was Empress of Shemakhan, The Cockerel was played by Elena Korbé, Tsar Dodon was performed by Anatol Joukowsky himself, Prince Afron by Aleksandr Dobrohotov, Prince Gvidon by Slavko Erzhen, Polkan by Vladimir Lebedev, the Astrologer by Oleg Grebenshchikov, and Amelfa was Zora Markovich.

For *The Cockerel* the choreographer brought to the stage thirty eight dancers of high quality, but we do not know how much he could or wanted to follow Fokine's style. There were two virtuoso female dancers in the Belgrade ensemble, Boshkovich and Korbé who could cope with the very demanding roles of Empress and Cockerel.

*The Cockerel* was also a seemingly costly enterprise for the Belgrade Opera which was warmly applauded by the local audience. Jedrinsky saved money, but with modest means he made the production glow in gold and bright colours. There were only five performances in June 1939. Some critics were not enchanted. They did not want “naïve fairy tales” but rather some drama with contemporary meaning, thus ignoring the original and actual message of the composer and his librettist: a warning against idle and shortsighted leaders closing their eyes to increasing danger, failing to notice the menacing war, which was actually to start by the Nazis in Europe within three months.

For Yugoslavia, the Second World War began in April 1941 when Belgrade was bombed by the Germans, its National Theatre with the Opera and Ballet destroyed. Nothing remained of the beautiful Jedrinsky sets and costumes, and - which is most regrettable - the ballet score. Bel'sky himself left Serbia during the war, his home destroyed by American bombs in 1944, together with his precious archives and memoirs, which could tell us a lot about the musical and theatrical life in Belgrade, also about the performance of *Golden*

*Cockerel* in Belgrade which, according to Russian sources, upset him very much because of his disapproval of Hristich's musical arrangement.<sup>12</sup> Was this the only reason to be upset?

## 6. Epilogue

In 1942 a notice appeared in the Serbian press announcing the death of Mikhail Fokine. The event would not normally be unusual, but it was war – a war against Slavic and other European peoples. Like the Soviet Union in June, Yugoslavia and Greece were attacked by the Germans on the same day, 6<sup>th</sup> April 1941. The Kingdom of South Slavs no longer existed, Serbia was occupied by Germans (Austrians), Hungarians, Bulgarians and Albanians. In the ruined country cultural life did not cease to exist, theatres were working, concerts and other musical performances continued in Serbia. The opera and ballet of the Belgrade (once Royal) National Theatre continued to run, albeit with a limited repertoire. There were no Russian operas to be seen, but Russian music was heard in excerpts from Tchaikovsky's ballets, performed in numerous divertissements. From Fokine's opus *Chopiniana*, *Le spectre de la rose* survived, often performed, and *Le Carnaval* was premiered.

The end of the war brought heavy turbulences, also to Belgrade Ballet. Many dancers mostly Russians, left Serbia during the war, among them outstanding choreographers like Poliakova and Joukowsky. The latter mounted several of his pieces in the capital of Bulgaria after living Belgrade in 1943, but not the *Golden Cockerel*. Emigrating to the Western world, via Vienna and finally reaching the United States, Joukowsky ended his career in San Francisco as teacher of ethno dances with no opportunity to continue the work he had led so successfully in Belgrade. Thus some exquisite choreography made for the Belgrade ensemble was lost forever.

Several Fokine achievements were reconstructed after the Second World War in Belgrade, so that the repertoire lived on *Scheherazade* for several years, with impoverished stuff, revived by Marina Olenina, who danced in the first Belgrade *Scheherazade* by Poliakova, also *Polovtsian Dances* together with the opera to which they belong. *Les Sylphides* and other pieces of Fokine were sometimes also to be seen. Post-war Zagreb saw Margarita Froman again, working on remnants of her pre-war Fokine repertoire, the last being *The Polovtsian Dances*, until she left for the United States in 1955.

When in 1950 the ballet in Novi Sad was established, some Fokine choreographies like *Scheherazade* were mounted by Marina Olenjina, but *The Cockerel* was never again to be seen in the Balkans before or after the War II, except in Serbia. It is remembered as a daring but unique event of the Belgrade National Theatre's dancing company.

## 7. NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> According to John Martin, who "after Fokine's death in August 22, 1942, categorized *Le Coq d'or* as one of the ten masterpieces of Fokine's seventy creations, along with *Les Sylphides*, *Petrouchka*, *Prince Igor*, *Le spectre de la rose*, *Carnaval*, *Scheherazade*, *Firebird*, *Don Juan* and *Paganini*." See Vincente Garcia Marquez, *Colonel de Basil Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo 1932-1952*, New York, 1990, p. 199,

<sup>2</sup> See his reminiscences titled *Against the Current*, Russian version, Leningrad 1981, p. 173 (М. Фокин, *Против течения*).

<sup>3</sup> *The Diaghilev Ballet 1909-1929* by S. L. Grigoriev, translated and edited by Vera Bowen, Constable, G.B., 1953, p. 99.

<sup>4</sup> *Etonne moi! Serge Diaghilev et Les Ballets Russes aux Editions Skira*, Milan, Monte Carlo, 2009, Russian version, Fond "Ekaterina", Moskva 2009, p. 208.

<sup>5</sup> Marquez, *Colonel de Basil Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo 1932-1952*, p. 189.

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<sup>6</sup> continues Marquez, p. 193

<sup>7</sup> Marques, *ibidem*

<sup>8</sup> *Serge Diaghilev et Les Ballets Russes*, p. 81.

<sup>9</sup> Marquez, p. 199.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 194.

<sup>11</sup> The ballet was on the repertoire of the company *Colonel de Basil Ballets Russes* until 1948 (see Marquez, p. 200)

<sup>12</sup> Людмила Барсова, *Ответ мне зоркое светило...*, Изд. «Культура плюс», Санкт Петербург 2013, стр. 41. See also *Н. А. Римский-Корсаков, Переписка с В. В. Ястребцевым и В. И. Бельским*, Составитель, автор вступительных статей, комментариев, указателей Л. Г. Барсова. Санкт-Петербургская государственная консерватория им. Н. А. Римского-Корсакова, «Русская культура», Санкт Петербург 2004, стр. 226.

## 8. APPENDIX

### Ljubljana

Elena Poliakova 1920 Les Sylphides, 1921 Scheherazade

### Zagreb

Margarita Froman 1921 Visions of Night (Chopin), Deceived Pierrot (Weber)  
1922 Scheherazade, Les Papillons, Polovtsian Dances (when the opera  
“Prince Igor” was premiered)

1923 Petrushka, Tamara

1924 Le Carnaval

1934 Chopiniana

Fedor Vasiliev 1928 Firebird

Ana Roje and

Oskar Harmosh 1941 Invitation to the Dance (Weber)

Ana Roje 1942 The Dying Swan

### Belgrade

Elena Poliakova 1923 Les Sylphides, Scheherazade

Aleksander Fortunato

1925 Polovtsian Dances

Maksimilian Froman

1927 Polovtsian Dances

Margarita Froman 1927 Les Papillons

1928 Firebird, Petrushka

1929 Polovtsian Dances (when the opera “Prince Igor” was premiered)

Anton Romanowski

1930 Invitation to the Dance (Weber)

1931 Scheherazade, Daphnis and Chloe

Anatol Joukowsky (pupil of E. Poliakova)

1937 Invitation to the Dance, Polovtsian Dances

1939 The Golden Cockerel

Boris Romanov 1939 Tamara

Milosh Ristich (pupil of Olenjina and Romanowski) 1939 Le spectre de la rose

Natasha Boshkovich (pupil of Poliakova and Preobrajenska)

1941 Les Sylphides 1943 Le Carnaval

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One can also get another look on the Fokine's repertoire in Yugoslavia

*Les Sylphides*

Les Sylphides	Ljubljana	1920
Visions of Night (Chopin)	Zagreb	1921
Les Sylphides	Belgrade	1923
Chopiniana	Zagreb	1934
Les Sylphides	Belgrade	1943

*Le spectre de la rose*

Deceived Pierrot (Weber)	Zagreb	1921
Invitation to the Dance (Weber)	Belgrade	1930
Invitation to the Dance	Belgrade	1937
Le spectre de la rose	Belgrade	1939
Invitation to the Dance	Zagreb	1941

*Scheherazade*

Ljubljana 1921, Zagreb 1922, Belgrade 1923, 1931

*Polovtsian Dances*

Zagreb 1922, Belgrade 1925, 1927, 1929, 1937

*Petrushka* Zagreb 1923, Belgrade 1928, 1931

*Tamara* Zagreb 1923, Belgrade 1939

*Le Carnaval* Zagreb 1924, Belgrade 1943

*Les Papillons* Zagreb 1922, Belgrade 1927

*Firebird* Zagreb 1928, Belgrade 1928

*Daphnis and Chloe* Belgrade 1931

*The Golden Cockerel* Belgrade 1939

*The Dying Swan* Zagreb 1942

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## 9. LITERATURE

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## Biography

**Nadezda Mosusova**, musicologist and composer, scientific advisor of the Musicological institute SANU (Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts) and professor of music history at the Belgrade Faculty of Music (now in retirement). Finished studies and made her career in Belgrade, obtaining PhD at the Ljubljana University. The main fields of her research include music in Serbia and other Slavonic countries (musical nationalism), opera and ballet of the 19th and 20th centuries, impact of Russian emigration on the music and theatre in Europe and both Americas. Also author of monographs on Serbian composers, numerous studies concerning analysis and aesthetics of the musical stage, participant of many theatrical and musicological congresses at home and abroad, collaborator of opera and ballet encyclopedias, member of domestic and foreign societies as Union of Serbian Composers in Belgrade, Society Ferdinand Gonseth (Switzerland) and the member Executive Board of International Council of Dance (CID-UNESCO) in Paris-Athens. Coordinator of the Project Contemporary Serbian musical scene of SANU and former member of the Jury for Monaco Nijinsky Dance Award in Monte Carlo. As a composer she wrote mainly chamber music.