

## INNOVATIVE BALLETS IN THEATERS OF WESTERN EUROPE: STAGE ACTION AS A PLAY OF MEANINGS

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### *Abstract*

*The article is devoted to the actual problem of the «play of meanings» in the symbolic direction in modern choreography, presented in the theaters' staging in Western Europe. The research goal is to identify the modern ballet features, which actively uses innovative methods. The study objectives are to collect and analyze the opinions of art experts and critics on the issues of modern ballet in Western European theater productions. The analysis period was chosen for the three years 2020-2022.*

*The research methodology is based on a systematic approach and includes the methods of the general scientific group (analysis, synthesis, deduction, induction), as well as a number of special methods: content analysis of scientific literature on the research topic; sociological survey method; as well as the method of statistical analysis. The survey results were analyzed using the Neural Designer program (a tool for advanced statistical analytics) and translated into a graphical diagram format for clarity of perception.*

*Answers in 60 questionnaires were evaluated by the average score for each analysis criterion, which made it possible to bring all the calculations to a 10-point scale. Based on the results of the study, the article author concluded the following: in modern productions, symbolism manifests itself as the dominance of «body language» over musical informativeness, over stage design. The action development takes place within the classical framework, but with the use of a postmodern concept regarding the dance choreography.*

*Key words: symbolism, European ballet, choreography, postmodern, musical art, plastic dance.*

### **Introduction**

The origin of ballet art began long before our era. Even among primitive tribes, ritual and cult rites were accompanied by rhythmic movements resembling a dance. Later, in ancient Greece, where great

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attention was paid to the development of all the arts, especially the theater, tragedies were staged. In them, one of the characters was the choir, which not only commented on what was happening on the stage, but also danced. These dances can be considered a prototype of ballet [17, p. four].

The ballet roots, like any other art, are in folk art. It was the source not only of the ballet dance itself, but also of theatrical dance performances. The prototype of ballet is folk dances with singing, during which the dancers reproduce the content of the song in their movements.

At its inception, ballet used much of what was associated with movement and dance in the colorful and colorful life of the Middle Ages, and then the Renaissance (solemn processions, tournaments, masquerades, balls). These spectacles have acquired a special beauty since the end of the XV century, when Leonardo da Vinci, Raphael and other great artists took part in their design. But ballet as an integral theatrical action appears only at the end of the XVI century.

A specific feature of ballet, which distinguishes it from all other art forms, is choreography. The art of ballet is often called «animated painting» or «visible music». Indeed, dance and music are related to each other: both «speak without words», both unfold in time and are subject to rhythm. Separate dance movements, as well as musical intonations, are so expressive that they can convey a whole range of human emotions.

Dance is not only related to music, since cannot exist without it, even if the participation of music is limited to rhythmic accompaniment. The music value in ballet is not limited to the role of simple accompaniment. Dance draws its figurative content from music. Music is a kind of «poetic text» for dance.

So, in the ballets of P.I. Tchaikovsky the main component was music. Without destroying the ballet genre traditions, P.I. Tchaikovsky managed at the same time to create an innovative dramaturgy of the ballet with a new content. The composer gave effectiveness to the previously static forms of the ballet adagio, dance suites – classical and characteristic, mass dances. The composer endowed pantomime with a dramatic function. Thanks to the bright, embossed imagery, the music in Tchaikovsky's ballets acquired the ability to outline the characters' characters and stage situations. The main ballet element has become a symphonic dance, the origins of which go back to the symphony, opera and chamber music [18, p. 22].

Symbolism is one of the largest trends in art (literature, music and painting), characterized by experimentation, the desire for innovation. Symbolism arose in France in the 1870 – 1880 and reached its greatest development at the turn of the XIX and XX centuries, primarily in

France itself, as well as in Germany, Belgium, etc. The Symbolists radically changed not only the content and forms in various forms of art, but also the very attitude towards the meaning of artistic creativity.

In the current conditions of postmodernism predominance in all art forms, ballet is becoming an arena for bold and sometimes risky experiments with form and symbols on stage. At the same time, the classics in new interpretations become the main field for this kind of innovation on Western European theatres [19, p. 55].

The most striking example of classics and innovations synthesis is the 2019 production at the Theater du Chatelet, Paris, of the classical «Giselle» ballet. As part of the European tour, choreographer Akram Khan will present his version of the greatest romantic ballet of the XIX century on the stage of the Châtelet Theater in Paris.

A bright modern interpretation of classical ballet has already won the love of the audience and the admiration of critics around the world. Russian viewers could appreciate the choreographic interpretation of Akram Khan on the stage of the Bolshoi Theater as part of the «Theater Festival by A.P. Chekhov».

Akram Khan's choreography is an incredibly passionate interweaving of classical ballet and ancient Indian dance, and his «Giselle» is some completely new genre that, even without being named, captures the viewer's attention, does not let go for a minute. In Khan's production, there are fewer classics, but the psychology and symbols of meaning are more pointed.

The indisputable semi-airiness of classical ballet does not interest the choreographer, just like the exaggerated dramatic experiences of people and their shadows of romanticism era with sensual sighs. His performance is about working people, whose position is literally close to that of a slave, oppressed by bourgeois masters. In such social inequality (although the second act is a separate, already third world), Giselle is a kind, a little naive, but not sentimentally open to the world girl. She knows what humiliation is, hard work in a factory, dirty clothes and the lack of rights of the lower stratum of society.

The continuity of the action makes one admire the choreography: either a crowd stage, or a solo, or a duet; either a male dance or a female dance. And everything rapidly replaces each other in the semi-darkness of the stage, and it is the complete opposite of the bright, light first act of the classic «Giselle». The meaning is: «There is no joy here, because real life is not fun».

The scene of Giselle's madness again differs from the usual pantomime of the traditional production of the 19th century: here a powerful round dance around the unfortunate deceived girl slowly shrinks, literally trampling Giselle, betrayed by Albert, and she passes into the

afterlife world. Now the heavy concrete wall, the border between reality and ephemerality, is tightly closed, resisting unwanted guests. Here, the dancers are already putting on pointe shoes, which, however, does not make them lighter.

These are vengeful deceived women, more like the witches of medieval fairy tales, angrily banging on the floor with sticks than the cloudy shadows of the victims of unhappy love. Their hands are contorted, their fingers are splayed, their hair is casually loose. Giselle enters the underworld. She skillfully moves «pas de bourré suivi», and Giselle is still hesitantly stepping on her fingertips, now and then, falling on her full foot. Further, in the ways of body language, the already traditional forgiveness with the power of love and an incredibly lyrical duet are shown. However, forgiveness does not bring happiness.

Albert remains in front of impregnable concrete. With the departure of Giselle, the whole scene is filled with an unbearable emptiness and darkness, in which concrete with traces of human hands imprinted on it does not let go forward or backward. On the example of one ballet staging, one can see the following main innovative techniques that are used in all the productions, analyzed in the empirical study:

- 1) the play of light and shadow, color and black and white and gray (discolored) background;
- 2) play of meaning through «body language» and innovative dance choreography;
- 3) expression of music;
- 4) dance expression;
- 5) stage design.

The identified features can be transformed into the criteria for the analysis that we carried out in the course of an empirical study.

## Materials and methods

The research materials were 40 ballet productions in theaters in Germany, France, Switzerland, Italy and Belgium for the period 2020-2022. The peculiarity of the material is that all ballet performances were presented online due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Table 1. Distribution of research materials within the study period.**

Theatre	Number of ballet performances		
	2020	2021	2022
Badisches Staatstheater Karlsruhe (Germany)	4	4	3

Theatre du Chatelet (France)	2	2	4
Grand Théâtre de Genève (Switzerland)	2	3	4
Étoile Ballet Theatre (Italy)	1	1	2
Opera Ballet Vlaanderen (Belgium)	3	3	2

Responses to a survey among 60 experts from foreign countries - critics and art historians were also used as research materials. The survey was conducted on the social network Twitter from August 1 - 20, 2022.

The questionnaire consisted of 12 questions, two questions for each analysis criterion:

1. How much do symbolism predominate in the production over traditional ballet?
2. How often is the scene itself used as a symbol?
3. How often is body language used as a symbol?
4. To what extent is the realization of the director's ideas possible with the help of a synthesis of innovation and traditional ballet techniques?
5. How recognizable is the production using postmodern methods?
6. How much has the quality of productions improved compared to the classical versions?
7. How useful are innovative techniques for the development of ballet?
8. How much does the synthesis of approaches lead to a change in the principles of contemporary ballet choreography?
9. How much easier is the director's idea to be realized with the help of symbolic dance than traditional choreography?
10. Please, rate the quality of modern stage design.
11. How expressive is the music in modern productions?
12. How expressive is dance in modern productions?

The survey was conducted in the English-language segment of the social network Twitter. The material was collected in several stages, determined by the logic and objectives of the study. The empirical study was carried out in three stages (Table 2).

**Table 2. Stages and timing of empirical research.**

Empirical research stages	Survey schedule
Collecting material	1-10. 08. 2022
Sampling	11-14. 08. 2022

Analysis of examples	15-20. 08. 2022
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The research methodology is based on a systematic approach and includes the methods of the general scientific group (analysis, synthesis, deduction, induction), as well as a number of special methods: the content analysis of scientific literature on the research topic; sociological survey method; as well as the method of statistical analysis.

**Table 3. Methods and objectives of the study.**

Method group	Research objectives
General scientific methods	Scientific synthesis of the information received Analysis of scientific literature on the research topic
Special methods	Content analysis of advertising texts Sociological survey Statistical generalization of the obtained results

The survey results were analyzed using the Neural Designer program (a tool for advanced statistical analytics) and translated into a graphical diagram format for clarity of perception.

The answers in 60 questionnaires were evaluated by the average score for each analysis criterion. So, it became possible to bring all the calculations to a 10-point scale.

**Table 4. Methodology for evaluating respondents' answers according to the analysis criteria.**

Criterion	Rating scale
Symbolism	1-3 low level 4-6 average level 7-10 high level
The body language	
Postmodern influence	
Stage design	
Expressive dance	
Expressive music	

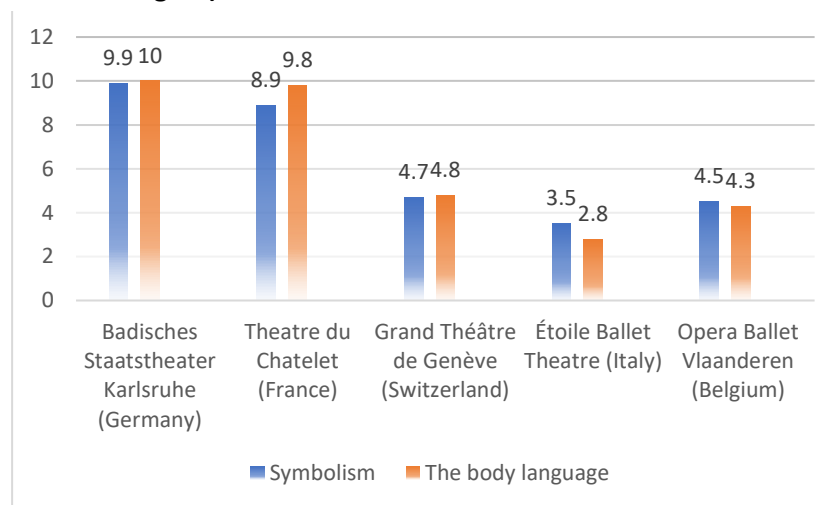
Each criterion was thus evaluated based on the translation of qualitative data into quantitative ones: 1-3 points low level, 4-6 average level, 7-10 high level of a particular criterion in advertising texts.

This method of analysis made it possible to generalize the data obtained in the course of a survey among experts in the field of modern ballet choreography.

## Results

As can be judged from the data shown in Figure 1, the experts rated symbolism and the technique of «body language» in the choreography of the German and French theaters at a very high level. The Swiss productions received an average score on these criteria, while the Italian and Belgian productions received a low and an average score, respectively. As a result of the study, the following results were obtained (Figure 1).

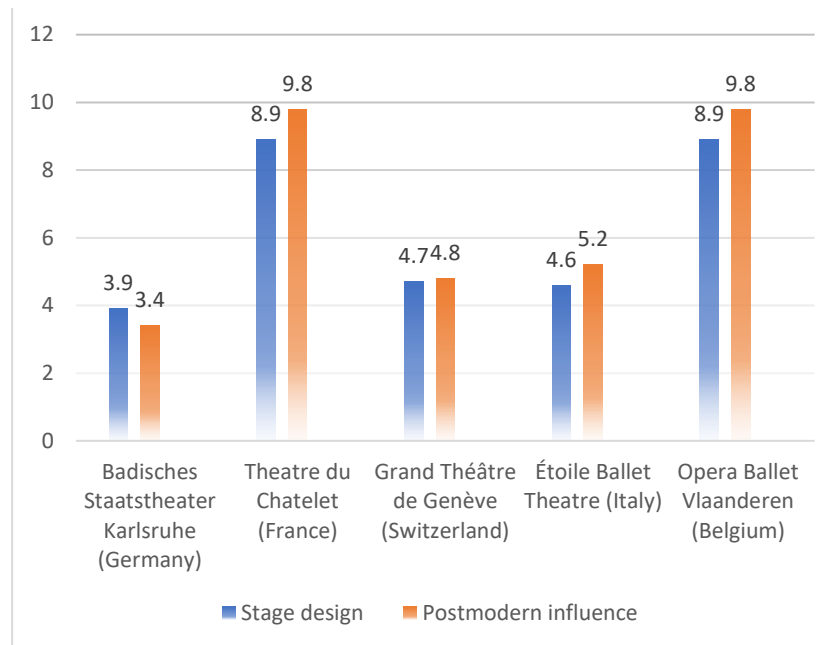
**Figure 1. Expert evaluation of the quality of ballet performances using symbolic innovative means (compiled by the author using Neural Designer)**



In the comments to the questionnaire, the experts noted that in order to develop innovative ballet in Belgium and Italy, it is necessary to go beyond the framework of classical ballet with a postmodern interpretation. That is, reworked classic choreography does not go well with classical music. It is necessary to develop a new ballet on new subjects and on the basis of new music.

Similar results were obtained for the other two criteria: the influence of postmodernity and stage design (Figure 2).

**Figure 2. Expert evaluation of the quality of ballet performances using postmodern tools (compiled by the author using Neural Designer)**



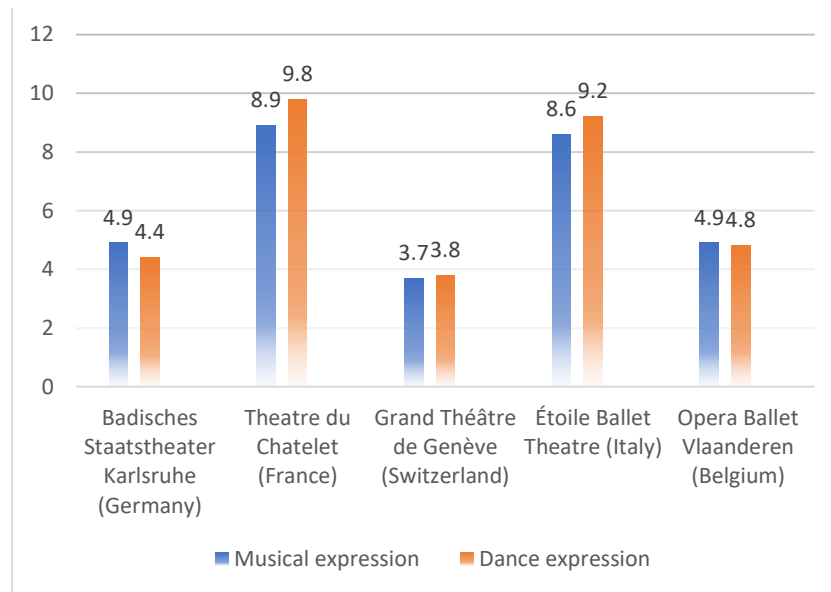
As can be judged from the data shown in Figure 2, the experts rated the criteria «postmodern influence» and stage design in the productions of the Belgian and French theaters at a very high level. The Italian productions received an average score on these two criteria, while the German and Italian productions received a low score.

In the comments to the questionnaire, the experts noted that in the absence of scenery on the stages of the Italian and Belgian ballet theaters, it is necessary to improve the scenography towards the symbolism of light and shadow in order to show the action dynamics. The static nature of the choreography brings a certain minus to the productions of the Italian theater, and too much immersion in the concept of postmodern in the German theater leads to a loss of meaning in favor of the spectacle of the production.

As a result of the survey of experts, data were also obtained on the criteria «expression of music» and «expression of dance» (Figure 3).



**Figure 3. Evaluation by experts of the quality of ballet performances using musical and dance expression tools (compiled by the author using Neural Designer)**



As can be seen from the data shown in Figure 3, the experts assessed the criteria for the means of musical and dance expression in the productions of the French and Italian theaters at a very high level. The Italian productions received the highest score on these two criteria, while the German and Belgian productions received an average score, respectively. In the comments to the questionnaire, the experts noted that the «play of meanings» is best revealed through the expression of dance in Italian productions, while Swiss productions do not have a high level of musical expression, unlike German music. Nevertheless, the development of modern innovative ballet in the countries of Western Europe, according to experts, is on the path of modernizing and reworking the classical libretto into symbolic modern choreography.

## Discussion

Partially, our research results are confirmed in studies by C. Acet [1], V. Boer, J. Jansen, A. Tjon-A-Pauw, F. Nack [2], S. Bruhm [3], K. Darda [4], C.T. Dunagan [5], E.V. Kiseeva [6,7].

Modern ballet schools in Europe are considered in the works by such authors as I.S. Kornishina [8], E.V. Kovsheva [9], S.V. Lavrova [10], Liu Yang, Zhengxi Qian [11], M.E. Loewe [12], S.T. Makhlina [13], N. Mankovskaya [14].

The thesis about the predominance of spectacle with meaning and form over content in modern ballet productions in European theaters is confirmed in the works by such authors as E. Moghaddam, J. Sadeghi, F. Samavati [15], A.A. Osintseva [16], A.V. Popovichev, Yu.Yu. Usachev [17], H. Regitz [18].

In their works, Ch. Thurner [22], A. Trisnawan, N. Rokhim [23], T.A. Volkova, A.E. Kislitsa, C.S. Koshman [24], Weiyang Wang [25] consider the problem of the semantics of modern ballet as a special form of art, strongly influenced by the American dance tradition in the XXI century. The works by individual Western European choreographers are analyzed in the studies by S. Temel, T. Temel [21], H.L. Wesseling [26], Wu Sh., Lu S., Cheng L., Li Z [27].

Our thesis that symbolism can be traced in the modern choreography of Western European ballet is confirmed in the works by such authors as Xinyu Dou, Hanjin Li, Lin Jia [28], Shuang Wu, Zhenguang Liu, Shijian Lu, Li Cheng [19], P. T'Jonck [20].

Nevertheless, with a rather extensive historiography of the topic under study, it is necessary to conduct new empirical research in relation to new trends in the ballet of Western European countries.

## **Conclusion**

As a result of the study, the following conclusions were made:

1. In the productions of the theaters of Western Europe, the reworking of classical ballet music of the XX century under the author's choreographic innovations dominates. This does not lead to the formation of a new ballet school, but leads to the degradation of the musical and entertainment components of modern productions.
2. The conducted empirical study showed that the experts assessed the quality of modern choreography in its symbolic part as average (the average score for all productions).

Thus, in the end, it can be stated that in modern productions, symbolism manifests itself as the dominance of «body language» over musical information, over stage design. The action development takes place within the classical framework, but with the use of a postmodern concept regarding the staging of the dance.

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