

Dancing Polish Romanticism: Bronisława Niżyńska's *Chopin Concerto* and the Balet Polski

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Abstract

This article analyses Bronisława Niżyńska's (Bronislava Nijinska) leadership of the Balet Polski Reprezentacyjny's (Polish Ballet Representative) inaugural 1937-1938 season as a study of the Second Polish Republic's assertion of national identity. I analyse the ballet, *Chopin Concerto*, as a choreographic representation of Polish culture for the company's international debut at the 1937 Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne in Paris, as well as how audiences in London and Paris perceived the choreographic representations of Poland. I preface the Balet Polski's debut with an analysis of the cultural geo-hierarchy that pervaded Europe's post-imperial system in the interwar years. To do so, I foreground Europe's cultural cartography with Larry Wolff's conception of Europe as a continent divided between East and West, while also incorporating Pascale Casanova's literary mapping of centre and periphery. Concurrently, I adopt choreographic analysis of *Chopin Concerto* to question canon and cultural hierarchies. The research framework delineates the difficulty Poland, as a new nation in the post-imperial system, faced in its effort to dismantle narratives of cultural inequality.

Keywords

Poland, Bronislava Nijinska, Ballet, Chopin, Cultural Diplomacy, Canon, Centre-Periphery

Introduction

Created by Jan Lechoń in 1937, the Balet Polski Reprezentacyjny was an artistic ensemble that presented Polish ballet to global audiences.¹ Beginning at the 1937 Exposition Internationale des Arts et Techniques dans la Vie Moderne in Paris, the company subsequently travelled to perform in London and thirty-three German cities, before embarking on a domestic tour in Poland. Balet Polski's tour was an especially meaningful endeavour for Second Republic Poland; this was the first moment that Poland's renewed sovereignty, in its twenty years of existence, had been represented by a national ballet troupe on the European stage. Unfortunately, the Balet Polski performed for just two seasons before the outbreak of the Second World War curtailed the company's artistic development.

The Balet Polski presented five ballets that embodied Poland's national mythos. Conceived of and staged in just a few months, the five ballets – *Chopin Concerto*, *The Eternal Apollo*, *The Recall*, *The Legend of Cracowie*, and *The Song of the Earth* – exemplify an interesting national self-conception as they depict Polish culture across differing genres.² Integral to the ballet company's existence was the presence of a Polish balletmaster; Bronisława Niżyńska (Bronislava Nijinska) was nominated as a candidate for this important role as she was both 'Polki z pochodzenia i wychowania', and an acclaimed choreographer in Europe.³ Commonly associated with Diaghilev's Ballets Russes and her renowned brother, Vaclav Niżyński, Bronisława Niżyńska became one of Europe's foremost choreographers. Her best-known

¹ Jan Lechoń was an established poet, who, at the time, was the cultural attaché to the Ambassador in Paris. Arnold Szyfman, 'Powstanie Baletu Polskiego w 1937 Roku', in *Leon Wójcikowski*, eds. Jarosław Iwaszkiewicz et al. (Warszawa: Prasa, 1958), 50-60. I wish to thank this article's reviewers for their time and feedback.

² The respective Polish titles are: *Concerto E-moll*, *Apollo i Dziewczyna* (the English translation was not literal, but adapted to its English audiences), *Powrót*, *Baśń Krakowska*, and *Pieśń o Ziemi*. The paper references them by their original Polish titles. To understand the ballets, I consulted the Nijinska Archives at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C. and the Jerome Robbins Dance Collection at the New York Public Library. Retained in Washington D.C. are costume and scenography sketches by Balet Polski designers, photographs of rehearsals and performances, librettos, and choreographic notes by Niżyńska. The Narodowe Archiwum Cyfrowe contains photographs of the Balet Polski in their Łazienki Park studios while the company was still rehearsing in Warsaw prior to their tour. However, the repository does not contain photographs of the company while they danced in London and Paris (there are images from their tour to Germany). The Nijinska Archive, however, contains photographs taken by the Lipnitski photo studio in Paris. I have chosen to use these photographs because of their relevance to the Balet Polski performances abroad, and also because there were more photographs from which to select. Hereafter, I refer to the Nijinska Archives as Nijinska archives, LOC. The Lisa Arkin Papers within the collection will be referred to as Arkin Papers, LOC. Resources from the Jerome Robbins Dance Division will be referred to as NYPL.

³ *Ibid*, p. 52. Szyfman describes Niżyńska as a 'Pole by origin and upbringing'. Translations are my own. To accurately represent Niżyńska's origins, I use the Polish spelling of her name.

ballets, *Les noces* (1923) and *Les biches* (1924), signalled a new chapter of abstraction and symphonic movement in twentieth-century ballet. Niżyńska's leadership was integral to re-establishing Polish national ballet. Likewise, from her memoirs, it is clear that Niżyńska's arrangement with Balet Polski was significant to her both professionally and personally.

Yet, the inaugural season of the Balet Polski remains an underappreciated chapter in the histories of Niżyńska's career and Polish ballet. Despite the company's cultural ambassadorship, it features but briefly, if at all, in histories of Polish ballet.⁴ Ciepliński, in his overview of Polish ballet, only briefly mentions Niżyńska's name, but duly notes the high level of artistic standard she brought to the Balet Polski.⁵ Yet, other accounts are less forgiving of Niżyńska. In her article, Pudełek completely omits Niżyńska's name in her mention of the Balet Polski's 1937-1939 existence.⁶ Jan Witkiewicz and Juliusz Multarzyński prescribe Niżyńska's inability to 'attract the best Polish dancers scattered all over the world' as the reason that, 'in spite of all the effort, the group never attained a high artistic level'.⁷ Yet, such an admonishing view of Niżyńska's leadership fails to take into account the rapid, disciplined training her dancers underwent, and the warm reception of the Balet Polski in Paris, London, and across Germany.

This article considers two historical accounts which have, but in a few instances, been considered separately: Niżyńska's choreographic leadership of the Balet Polski and Second Republic Poland's assertion of its European status.⁸ Although a few publications have analysed this chapter of Niżyńska's career from a dance history perspective, the significance of the 1937-1938 season in Polish cultural history remains underestimated.⁹ Dance scholars such as Lynn

⁴ The Polish dance scholar, Janina Pudełek takes a critical stance towards Niżyńska's contribution to Polish ballet. See Janina Pudełek, 'The Polish Mishaps of Serge Lifar and Bronislava Niżyńska,' *Dance Chronicle* 27, no. 2 (2004), 199-216.

⁵ Jan Ciepliński, *A History of Polish Ballet, 1518-1945* (London: Veritas Foundation, Publication Centre, 1983), p. 75.

⁶ Janina Pudełek, 'The Influence of the Lack of Sovereignty for 150 Years in Partitioned Poland on the Forming of National Traditions in Ballet,' NYPL. In the Nijinska Archives remain just a couple Polish reviews. As I was unable to travel to Poland, I was unable to access these domestic reviews.

⁷ Jan Stanisław Witkiewicz and Juliusz Multarzyński, *Balet w Polsce: Ballet in Poland* (Warszawa: Iskry, 1998), p. 22.

⁸ Hege Haaland, 'Polish Identity and Relations to Europe', in *Bulwark, Bridge, or Periphery?: Polish Discourse on Poland and Europe*, edited by Hege Haaland (Oslo: Norwegian Institute of International Affairs (NUPI), 2001), 51-59.

⁹ Considerations of gender and movement are well-represented in the extant scholarship examining Niżyńska's impact on dance at large. Lynn Garafola has published an extensive amount of material regarding Niżyńska's role as a female choreographer in bridging the disparate development of female and male movement in the Ballets Russes. Her recent biography of Niżyńska is the most comprehensive to date and examines seminal works that redefined the female onstage. Lynn Garafola, *La Nijinska: Choreographer of the Modern* (Oxford University Press, 2022).

Garafola and Lisa Arkin assess the Balet Polski's debut season in the context of Niżyńska's life, but this article addresses the unanswered question of how the Balet Polski contributed to Poland's international self-assertion.¹⁰ The existing evidence makes clear that Niżyńska's choreography was integral to shaping the perception of Poland through the prism of dance.

To understand the political location of Second Republic Poland, I use Pascale Casanova's literary mapping of centre and periphery to consider canon and minor works, while also employing Larry Wolff's divided East-West imagining of Europe.¹¹ The two cartographic systems, which use the relative scale of 'familiarity' and 'unfamiliarity', evaluate the cultural hierarchy of nations by dealing with reception and how certain nations categorise others as 'unknown', 'mysterious', or 'minor'. I overlay these two intellectual maps of Europe upon the Balet Polski's inaugural tour to assess the reception of Poland's self-identification on the ballet stage.

This article assesses not only the centre-periphery dynamic that is prevalent in literary studies, but also the West-East divide that colours much of European history. As such, this paper combines both models to ascertain where Eastern European nations were located by their West European counterparts. Furthermore, I examine *Chopin Concerto* to provide a more granular understanding of Niżyńska's choreographic representation of Poland and the nuances of the cultural hierarchy that affected Balet Polski's European debut. That is, how does the reception of *Chopin Concerto* exhibit a distinct location of Poland in relation to Western Europe?¹² By analysing the choreography and its reception accordingly, I argue for Niżyńska's mediation of ballet between Poland and the world ballet stage. This thread of enquiry also serves as a point of departure in understanding the potential reasons as to why Poland encountered such difficulty in superseding the hierarchical divide of centre-periphery.

¹⁰ Lisa Arkin's article is the first examination which focuses exclusively on this period of Niżyńska's career. See Lisa C. Arkin, 'Bronislava Nijinska and the Polish Ballet, 1937-1938: Missing Chapter of the Legacy,' *Dance Research Journal*/24, no. 2 (1992), 1-16. Building on Arkin and Pudetek is a more recent article written in Polish. See Joanna Sibilska-Siudym, 'Bronislava Nijinska and the Polish Ballet,' *Bulletin of Vaganova Ballet Academy*, no. 2 (2016), 57-68.

¹¹ Pascale Casanova, *The World Republic of Letters* (Cambridge, Mass.: London, Eng.: Harvard University Press, 2004). Also, Larry Wolff, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*, (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1994).

¹² The Balet Polski performed a reduced repertoire during the domestic tour; it so follows, Polish reviewers considered the repertoire entirely differently. For the purpose of this article, which is a study of British and French reception of the Balet Polski, I isolate foreign reception of the company in order not to conflate two differing discourses based on discrete input (performance repertoire).

I. Locating Poland, Locating Niżyńska: Historical Backgrounds

The Balet Polski's debut occurred while Poland was redefining itself politically and artistically after over a century and a half of imperial subjugation. Following the rebirth of Polish independence, the nation re-established itself on Europe's map. Yet, what remained to be determined was where Poland, as a nation-state, would place itself in the geo-hierarchy and whether the other European nations would accede. In its infancy, the Second Polish Republic lacked a normal political structure and community life; without formal state institutions, contemporary writers continued in the legacy of forerunning poets and writers by providing 'moral succor, advice, counsel, direction' to the Polish public.¹³ Consequently, from this new chapter in Polish history came forth a new literary experience that united the Polish canon with the modernisation of poetic expression and language.¹⁴ With the expansion of groups such as Młoda Polska and Skamander, the new literary sphere developing in Poland discovered inspiration in folk provincialism and cosmopolitanism alike as the nation's cultural landscape adjusted to the new political reality.¹⁵ The varying styles and modes of expression which arose during the Second Republic reflect the complexity of establishing a unilateral national literature, particularly in the wake of political self-assertion. The expansive creativity in literature was mirrored by an interest in creating a national style of ballet as Warsaw's Teatr Wielki staged national ballets and the regional theatres of Łódź and Poznań experimented with similar themes in their ballet productions.

The absence of a national Polish presence in ballet provided an opportunity for the Polish government to create one in 1937. The formation of the Balet Polski occurred rapidly: in less than one year, the ensemble had rehearsed five new ballets and completed its foreign and domestic tour.¹⁶ The difficulty of this undertaking must be underscored; due to the fractured nature of Poland's ballet scene, the ensemble's dancers required rigorous training in the basics of ballet. Niżyńska's task was therefore not only to lead the Balet Polski during their tour abroad,

¹³ Manfred Kridl, 'Polish Literature,' in *Poland*, ed. Bernadotte E. Schmitt (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1945), p. 285.

¹⁴ Ibid, p. 286.

¹⁵ For an expanded, transhistorical study of Poland's literary tradition and the changes it underwent, see Agnieszka Polakowska, Przemysław Czapliński, Joanna Nizyńska, and Tamara Trojanowska. *Being Poland: A New History of Polish Literature and Culture since 1918*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2018).

¹⁶ Szyfman, p. 50.

but also to build the company from its foundation.¹⁷ Niżyńska's reputation as a balletmaster and her Polish descent proved seminal to her reception abroad as the Balet Polski's lead choreographer.

Curiously, Niżyńska's biography is one which exaggerates, or perhaps magnifies, the intellectual binaries of centre-periphery and cosmopolitan-provincial which Casanova and Wolff map onto the geography of Europe. Niżyńska's engagements with Diaghilev's Ballets Russes cultivated her into one of Europe's leading ballet choreographers, and her creativity benefitted from the rich exchange of artistic concepts and innovations occurring in Europe's artistic centre. However, the places she was associated with – namely St Petersburg and Paris – rendered her unfamiliar to the domestic debates and considerations of Poland's artistic milieu. Yet, to locate Niżyńska's identity on the Paris-St Petersburg axis proves difficult as her career also flourished in the nodal points of cities such as Kyiv, Buenos Aires, and Warsaw.

By this point in the 1930s, Niżyńska was a renowned choreographer who collaborated closely with artists such as Igor Stravinsky to explore the boundaries of ballet modernism. Niżyńska's choreographic innovation is imperative to understanding ballet choreography as a new mode of national representation for Poland. The Polish Ministry of Foreign Affairs leveraged Niżyńska's celebrity as conduit for the international ballet scene to receive Polish ballet. Her celebrity was not lost on the audiences of Paris and London, who were familiar with her choreographic originality as exhibited in ballets choreographed for the Ballets Russes and Ida Rubenstein. At the forefront of choreographic modernity, Niżyńska facilitated multidirectional exchange by bringing modernist ballet to Poland and choreographically presenting Polish culture for audiences abroad.

Niżyńska's geographic movement embodied the active, exploratory nature of a choreographer moving between European cultural centres and cities still developing their own artistic vision of modernity; as a result, Niżyńska's choreography bears a fluid identity, which like herself, cannot be associated strictly with any one locale. As such, Niżyńska embodied the excitingly transnational form of existence which modern ballet experienced prior to the Second World War. After a few decades of collaboration and exploration by independent ballet troupes, ballet would return to the comfort of the national theatres which, for centuries, had supported the art by providing it a state-ensured home and governmental patronage. Thus, this pre-war

¹⁷ It must be noted that from the inception of the project, there existed a gender disparity. Niżyńska was dismayed upon arrival when she realized her responsibility was to be shared with Schiller, who held the position of artistic director. Szyfman expands more on this topic in 'Powstanie Baletu Polskiego w 1937 Roku'.

chapter of ballet history is exceptional – Niżyńska united the tradition of national ballet theatres with the experience she gained from the transnational period of ballet's expansion.

In the next section, I consider Europe through intellectual cartographies to theoretically understand how small nations used international forums to stake a political or cultural claim. The critical mappings of Europe's geo-hierarchical structure by Pascale Casanova and Larry Wolff clarify the cultural detachment that hindered the acceptance of the Balet Polski as a serious company.¹⁸ The models posited by these two authors depict a distinct threshold – West/East and centre/periphery – which divide the geographic scale of recognition and acceptance. These studies provide a framework whereby the reception of Niżyńska's choreography for Balet Polski can be interpreted as evidence of the exclusion facing Poland in its attempt to incorporate itself into Europe's cultural landscape.

II. Europe's Hierarchical Cartography

In *Inventing Eastern Europe*, Larry Wolff explains the historical location of Poland between Western and Eastern Europe, two geo-cultural poles which defined 'each other by opposition and adjacency'.¹⁹ Drawing on a number of Western European travelogues, Wolff clarifies the intellectual profile of mystery and confusion which formulated the conception of Eastern Europe as Western Europe's 'complementary other half in the eighteenth century'.²⁰ *Inventing Eastern Europe* gazes from Western Europe towards the East to demonstrate the 'oppressive idea of Eastern Europe' that existed until the fall of the Iron Curtain.²¹ Wolff proposes that the disunion of Europe between East and West was a cultural distinction whereby the Enlightenment's neologism of 'civilization' in Western Europe was complemented by the 'barbarism and backwardness' of Eastern Europe.²² The dominions between the Prussian border and Asia were subordinated to a 'paradox of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion' as an 'intellectual project of demi-Orientalization'.²³

¹⁸ While the scope of Casanova's theory is global, I apply it only within the European context for the purpose of my article.

¹⁹ Wolff, p. 5. Spatial constrictions prevent me from expanding further into Tomasz Zarycki's expansion of the centre-periphery debate and postcolonial theory in the Polish context. See Tomasz Zarycki, *Ideologies of Eastness in Central and Eastern Europe*, (BASEES/Routledge Series on Russian and East European Studies, 2014).

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid, p. 15.

²² Ibid, pp. 5-6.

²³ Ibid, p. 7.

That Poland received the Diplome de Grand Prix award at the 1937 International Exposition represented an Eastern European nation's evaluation 'with respect to a standard set in Western Europe'.²⁴ The accolade implied the nation was no longer relegated to the space 'between barbarism and civilization'; rather, the recognition of Balet Polski brought Poland away from the cultural category of a 'less known' nation towards that of a 'well known' one.²⁵ Wolff uses these terms to illustrate a gradient in Europe's cultural cartography, with obscurity and cultural backwardness colouring Eastern Europe's mapped presence.²⁶ The Balet Polski's 1937-1938 tour can therefore be viewed as a case study that demonstrates how an Eastern European nation was perceived when approaching Western Europe.

To supplement how Wolff's proposed division of West and East interacts with the company's 1937 debut, I refer to Pascale Casanova's *The World Republic of Letters*. Casanova depicts world literature as a 'relatively unified space characterized by the opposition between the great national literary spaces' and those 'that are poor by comparison'.²⁷ Viewing the literary sphere from Paris, which she nominates as the 'Greenwich meridian of literature', Casanova defends her literary map as a continuum.²⁸ This proposed model of world literature supposedly defies binary opposition or linear hierarchy as it consists of a large number of nations subject to external political control, colonial rule, and linguistic domination.²⁹ Yet Casanova contests the endowments of mature literary spaces against those which emerged later, demonstrating that within the gradient there still exists an oppositional binary—not unlike the West/East axis Wolff postulates.

Casanova employs a vocabulary of 'antiquity', 'canon', and 'greatness', which she defends as apolitical, but in fact relate to the political foundations of a nation. Casanova's argument separates nations with the privilege of time, whose literatures flourished progressively, from those lacking time, whose struggle for liberation required a literary revolution.³⁰ In essence, the national literary space develops an internal structure that mirrors the organisation of the world literary space.³¹ Therefore, the centre-periphery and dominant-minor binaries of Casanova's

²⁴ Ibid, p. 95.

²⁵ Ibid. Regarding the Polish case, Ryszard Nycz argues against the conception of a monolithic, unified national memory. He discusses the nation's varied memory and its impact on literature in Ryszard Nycz, 'Polska pamięć,' *Teksty Drugie*, no. 6 (2016), 7-14.

²⁶ Ibid, p. 173.

²⁷ Casanova, p. 83.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid, pp. 83-84.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

world literary map result from the disparities of accumulated time in differing national literatures. In turn, universality and modernity can only be achieved by national literary spaces once works can stand independent of national politics.

Considering the maps of Wolff and Casanova concurrently, the cultural topography of Europe becomes three-dimensional. Wolff's model assesses the continent horizontally on an East-West axis, whereas Casanova's does so vertically by looking down from the Greenwich meridian. Wolff depicts Europe as a binary continent separated at the Prussian border, within which qualities of 'civilised' or 'exotic' appear as hues colouring the differing regions. Casanova surveys writers from Ibsen to Kiš to demonstrate how marginality increases as the radius from the centre extends; however, her relative phrases 'dominant/dominated' and 'central/peripheral' also divide Europe between two cultural poles. Nonetheless, from both proposed cartographies emerges a stratified configuration of Europe – divided in two yet organised by a gradient of cultural maturity and authority. The rift which divides Europe in both models creates a two-tier organisation, one which proves difficult to traverse when nations wish to approach centrality or civilisation. Balet Polski's journey from East to West, from the periphery to the centre is a case study which responds to both hierarchical maps of Europe and proves the small nation's experience of cultural misunderstanding.

Of the ballets Niżyńska staged during this season, the evidence indicates that *Concerto e-moll*, or *Chopin Concerto* (as it was later referred to), was particularly impactful. In their appraisal of Balet Polski, reviews of the company's touring performances in Paris and London remarked on the beauty of *Chopin Concerto* and their evaluation of the company dancers. The next section views *Chopin Concerto* within a wider context of Polish Romanticism to uncover the ballet's context in Poland's artistic tradition.

III. Connecting Poland's Past to Present: Chopin Concerto

As the libretto states, the 'choreography of this ballet is, like the music, composed of three sections and equally does not have a literary programme, but an exclusively pure form of dance composition'.³² *Concerto e-moll* was a symbolic composition as it was written in 1830, and one of the few works created by Chopin in Warsaw prior to his departure from Poland. The libretto qualifies *Concerto e-moll* as the 'initiation of the enormous creative trajectory and is one of the most beautiful works by the genius of Chopin'.³³ The libretto's overview of the Concerto's

³² 'Concerto e-moll', Balet Polski Polish programme.

³³ Ibid.

origins sheds light on why Chopin's later national works, such as a polonaise or mazurka, were not selected. Although these musical numbers would establish a framework within which Niżyńska could formulate another folkloric ballet, *Concerto e-moll* originated prior to Chopin's emigration and therefore stands as a composition reflecting the composer's Polish life, rather than his memories of his homeland. Furthermore, Chopin's legacy was well-established as Poland's national composer, whose music 'dawned on an astonished world, Europe suddenly became aware of Poland as a small country capable of great art'.³⁴ Stephen Williams, London's *Evening Standard* reporter, remarked that it was 'fitting that [Balet Polski] formed recently to develop and perfect national art of ballet for Poland' should base a ballet on Chopin's music.³⁵

To understand the ethereal nature of Chopin's music and its extension in Niżyńska's ballet, one must also consider the influence of Polish Romantic literature. Chopin's music was certainly affected by Romantic literature and its principles as he engaged with Polish Romantics in Warsaw and later also in Paris.³⁶ The Polish intelligentsia, like its German counterparts, were intrigued by the ideas of the *Frühromantik* 'concerning art's relationship to the unconscious' and the metaphysical traversing made possible in dreams.³⁷ Without the limitations of physical space and time, there was potential for the creative process to be expanded and reveal the experiences that corporeality prohibited. That dreams allowed for creative and emotional exploration beyond one's body became increasingly important for Chopin as his health deteriorated and he was unable to return to Poland.³⁸ The interpretation of his music as dreamlike or coloured by twilight provides another dimension by which to experience Chopin's music.

With the consideration of the physical/metaphysical experience in Romantic literature and music, the scenography foregrounds Niżyńska's interpretation of Chopin and artistic purity. In his stage design, Waław Borowski brought to life Chopin's Romantic dreamscape: a tranquil terrain rests easily below an expansive, calm sky while fluttering leaves and a flowing curtain

³⁴ 'Chopin Concerto for Polish Ballet,' Stephen Williams, *Evening Standard* (London), 10 December 1937, Lisa Arkin Papers, Nijinska Archive, LOC.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Halina Goldberg, 'Chopin's Oneiric Soundscapes and the Role of Dreams in Romantic Culture,' in *Chopin and His World*, ed. by Jonathan D. Bellman and Halina Goldberg (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), pp. 32-34. This chapter expands on Chopin's attendance of events hosted by Mickiewicz while in Paris, the frequent placement of Chopin's music in relation to dreaming, and on Chopin's perceived interplay between dreams and nostalgia as influential upon the visual arts.

³⁷ Ibid, pp. 25-34.

³⁸ The tension between Chopin's spirit and his body are also remarked upon within his diary, of which Niżyńska maintained a copy. Pages from Chopin's Diaries, LOC.

frame the scenery. That the background is devoid of other locational cues renders the stage a space conducive for the exploration of the interrelationship between materiality and spirituality. The landscape is bare but recognisable, leaving space for the ballet's soundscape and danced movement to trace the forms and images of a Polish Romantic reverie.



Figure 1: Stage design for *Chopin Concerto* by Wacław Borowski, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library.

Before even considering Niżyńska's choreography for *Chopin Concerto*, the ballet reveals a rich consideration of Poland's artistic history. The ballet's structural reference to Romanticism's expansion of physical limitations to achieve pure art and beauty, as materialised by Borowski's stage and costume design, visually supplement Chopin's aural expression of Romantic ideals. The sensory factors enveloping Niżyńska's ballet refer to an epoch of Polish artistry which remained at the forefront of Polish culture and coalesce to frame Niżyńska's choreographic homage to ballet's Romantic tradition. As such, *Chopin Concerto* provides a cohesive remembrance of the Romantic era but revives it in the form of dance suitable for a new period in Poland's national experience.

Wrapped by Movement

The dancers of *Chopin Concerto* signal the traditional classical nature of the ballet – the ballerinas dance *en pointe* and the men wear classical ballet costumes of tunic and tights.³⁹ Yet Niżyńska's choreographic modernism is entrenched within the ballet as the dancers' positions combine classical ballet positions with nuanced alterations. As the photos reveal, the dancers' arms often occupied positions outside of the classical ballet lexicon, while their lower bodies remained within the boundaries of classicism. To potentially explicate why Niżyńska saw the upper and lower halves of the body as expressive of different dance styles, I refer to one of Niżyńska's choreographic notes, in which she wrote 'Тело окутано движением – движение танцует'.⁴⁰ That is, in Niżyńska's eyes, the dancer's torso was enveloped by movement, which in turn generated dance. This excerpt is illuminating in revealing how Niżyńska conceived of the dancers' *épaulement* and the texture of their gestures.

Following the use of *окутано*, each ballerina can be visualised as bearing a shawl. The motif of ballerinas dancing with shawls or scarves is customary – take, for example, the group 'Scarf Dance' in *La Bayadère*, Act I or the 'Shawl Variation' in *Raymonda*, Act I. In differing ballet contexts, the accessory is seen as an extension of the ballerina's body, introducing a new element of fluidity and movement intentionality to her actions. In some instances, as in *La Bayadère*, the scarf is a signifier of Oriental mystique, while in other occasions, it imbues the number with a sense of grace or partnered intimacy. Niżyńska's concept of movement as an intangible fabric wrapped around the ballerina seemingly reverses this relationship: the body expresses beauty by its reaction to movement, rather than using movement to create beauty. Consequently, I view Niżyńska's statement as the intention which determined her expression of danced beauty and its union with Chopin's music. Rather than moving in conjunction to the musical score, the ballerinas moved in reaction to, and therefore engaged with, Chopin's music.

Central to Niżyńska's choreography for *Chopin Concerto* was the partnership between the two female soloists, who, as Nina Youshkevich remembered, replicated 'two voices in the music'.⁴¹

³⁹ My use of 'classical' in this section refers to the tradition of the ballet academy. It is distinct from the classification of 'Classical', a term which would require a deeper discussion of its compatibility/incompatibility with Romanticism.

⁴⁰ 'The body is wrapped by movement – movement dances'. *Chopin Concerto* choreographic notebook, Nijinska Archives, LOC.

⁴¹ Nina Youshkevich, interview with Nancy van Norman Baer, December 1985, Nancy Van Norman Baer papers, Jerome Robbins Dance Division, New York Public Library. Nina Youshkevich was one of the troupe's standout stars and danced in leading female roles during this season. She worked with Niżyńska prior to the 1937-38 season and

Youshkevich recalled that the soloists' numbers was reflective of the melodious action of the music, as the dancing 'was like two answering voices very much in the music. You can hear one voice coming in then another voice'.⁴² The soloists were crucial to the interweaving of the choreography with Chopin's music, as evidenced by their separate positioning onstage. Niżyńska's choreographic notes and photos from rehearsals and performances reveal that the two female soloists remained visually distinct from the corps de ballet. Considering their sing-song choreographic interaction, Niżyńska's separation of the soloists from the corps can be interpreted as an embodiment of the musical melody floating above the harmony's rich texture.



Figure 2: Soloists and corps de ballet in arabesque arrangement, *Chopin Concerto*, Peggy Delius Photographs, London, 1937, Nijinska Archives, LOC.

sustained a close relationship with the choreographer and her daughter, Irina. She was already principal during the Ballets Russes' tour to Australia, before following Niżyńska to Poland for the Balet Polski.

⁴² Ibid. The other female soloist was Olga Stawska.

Niżyńska's utilisation of her corps de ballet, pictured above, exemplify the interweaving of movement and music integral to *Chopin Concerto*. The layering of the corps dancers provided an enmeshed, interconnected texture from which the dancing soloists surface – not unlike the dynamic between the score's harmony and its forthright melody. The texturing of the corps' bodies is significant not only because it distinguishes the leading dancers, but also because the interwoven cluster of dancers evokes an organic intimacy and physical connection. Across the stage, Niżyńska created a visual echo as all the dancers participate in a gradated, three-dimensional arabesque formation. The corps de ballet groups form two diagonals conjoining behind the extended link of the soloists' arabesques, resulting in all dancers facing an illusory apex. In doing so, the physical interactions of Niżyńska's corps comprise a dimension of choreographed beauty that reflected a united pursuit of ballet's ideals as the danced melody and harmony emulate each other.

In its concluding pose, as presented in Figure 3, *Chopin Concerto* culminates in a celebration of beauty as each member neatly fits into a puzzle-piece network of positions. Again, the proximity of the dancers creates an atmosphere of unity and familiarity, as they, in harmony, formulate a beautiful image of group dance. The soloists remain central, with high arabesque arms pointing to the sky – a reminder of the Romantic pursuit of artistic and spiritual ideals. Other dancers similarly expand their energy upward and outward as they pose in linear arabesques reaching through space. The curved arms and angled heads of the outermost female dancers arrange themselves as if they comfortably buttress the dancers in the centre who use the arc of their limbs to explore the stage's dimensions. The four male dancers in front similarly adopt diagonal poses – some pose in arabesque while others stand victoriously – but their diagonals extend and continue the arc formulated by the dancers in the centre. Rather than allowing the dancers' arc to dissolve as the stage ends, the four men in front trace lines in opposing directions to magnify the energy of the ensemble beyond the limitations of the stage.



Figure 3: Dancers in the concluding scene of *Chopin Concerto*, Lipnitzki Photographs, Paris, 1937, Nijinska Archives, LOC.

As such, Niżyńska's final image of *Chopin Concerto* uses the dancers' bodies to attain a rich timbre of choreographed grace and beauty as they interlock and complement each other. Niżyńska expands on the imagery of Romantic ballets and extends the principles of Romantic music and literature, which loom large in Poland's cultural memory, to demonstrate the capability of modern Poland's dancers. Yet, *Chopin Concerto* also displays Niżyńska's use of ballet to explore the revival of Romanticism's legacy, refashioned to vocalise the artistic culture of an independent, burgeoning Poland.

Chopin Concerto featured Niżyńska's choreographic brilliance, as she utilised abstraction in a distinct form to highlight Polish artistry. The ballet revived the musical tradition of Chopin but expanded his legacy to incorporate dance and moved artistry. It seems that these broader themes were not well received by audiences; the choreographic representation of Chopin was

considered poorly, as *News Chronicle* assessed Chopin Concerto as ‘a stiff test for pure dancing. Its length and constancy of mood make heavy demands’.⁴³ *Excelsior* described *Chopin Concerto* as a divertissement which was ‘imprudently disinterested in the romantic character of the score’.⁴⁴ These reviews seem to question Poland’s interpretation of its own artistic legacy, which raises the question of *which* European nations were permitted to canonise art.

As it related to Chopin’s legacy, it seemed Poland was denied access to its own music as the corps de ballet was perceived as ‘not up to it in either technique or appearance’, exhibiting a ‘suburban palais de danse rather than the streamlined exquisiteness of ballet’.⁴⁵ While the observation regarding the company’s inexperience is seemingly innocuous, in fact, it points to the perceived nascency of Poland’s presence in the landscape of European nations. English audiences perceived Balet Polski as a ‘new claimant to enter [the] international’ ballet competition, ‘bringing to bear the weight of [its] national heritage – the only weapon considered legitimate in this type of struggle’.⁴⁶ The reception of *Chopin Concerto* demonstrated that Western audiences were hesitant to incorporate Polish ballet into the oeuvre of Europe’s danced achievements, even if Poland revisited its own contributions to the continent’s legacy.

IV. Conclusion

Niżyńska’s use of abstraction and modernised choreography in *Chopin Concerto* defended Poland’s contemporaneity and awareness of Europe’s artistic innovations. Niżyńska’s choreography presented the Balet Polski as a modern ballet company: rather than err to the pious repetition of nineteenth century multi-act ballet masterpieces, Niżyńska’s modernised Polish ballets served as a counterpoint to her folk-inspired ballets by engaging with intellectual themes and discourses established in ballet modernism.⁴⁷ In doing so, Niżyńska released Poland from the ‘frozen landscape’ of ‘national preoccupations’, as Casanova described it, and instead located the nation in an artistic continuum that included the ancient and the medieval, but, most crucially, also the contemporary.⁴⁸ Poland therefore no longer inhabited the singular

⁴³ ‘Polish Ballet.’ *News Chronicle* (London), 17 December 1937, Lisa Arkin Papers, Nijinska Archive, LOC.

⁴⁴ ‘Les Ballets Polonais,’ *Excelsior* (Paris), 22 November 1937, Lisa Arkin Papers, Nijinska Archive, LOC.

⁴⁵ ‘Polish Ballet in London: Covent Garden Season,’ *Yorkshire Post* (Leeds), December 1937, Lisa Arkin Papers, Nijinska Archive, LOC.

⁴⁶ Casanova, pp. 36-40.

⁴⁷ The multimedia creativity of Niżyńska’s Polish ballets is evocative of Diaghilev’s original *Les Saison Russes*, which straddled nationalised folklore and universal modernism.

⁴⁸ Casanova, p. 111.

chronology of the folk, and the repetition of its pastoral themes, but instead cast its gaze across its own artistic achievements of the past while participating in Europe's contemporary artistic discourse. By its retrospection, Balet Polski's inaugural season embedded Poland within the historical narrative of Europe.

Balet Polski's Grand Prix award at the 1937 International Exposition validated the capability of danced self-expression in portraying the cultural richness of Poland. Furthermore, that reviews from locales as distant as Buenos Aires remarked on Balet Polski's Exposition performances as an 'apotheosis' to the 'brilliant season of international shows at the Exposition' points to the exposition stage as an intermediary platform by which Poland's art was projected to the world.⁴⁹ Thus, Balet Polski, even if just temporarily, placed its nation at the centre of the world's cultural capital, whose newspapers and theatregoers absorbed the presence of ballet's fresh, Polish company.

Balet Polski's tour as cultural envoy cannot be viewed without recalling its original objective; Poland wished to cement itself into the fabric of Europe – its history, culture, and forward outlook. As Haaland describes the relation between Polish identity and the European sphere of recognition, 'Poland manifests itself on the international scene by becoming/being/staying European'.⁵⁰ Yet the London reviews of Balet Polski disclosed there remained cultural barriers to Poland's consideration as an autonomous European nation-state: could Poland's presence be understood without considering its adjacency to Russia? The subtext to the Covent Garden reviews raises the question of whether or not Poland could finally locate itself within the legion of culturally central nation-states, or whether this was a temporary moment of recognition in a prolonged effort to remove itself from the label of minor status. However, the challenge facing Second Republic Poland was a matter of ascertaining to what degree it was accepted as European.

Poland, according to Larry Wolff, inhabited a specific place in the gradient of barbarism and civilisation that distinguished between Europe's Western and Eastern spaces. The French considered Poles 'the last people in Europe' in the late-eighteenth century, and Rousseau's presentation of Poland's issue of 'national survival without political independence' in *Considerations on the Government of Poland* had its 'greatest triumph among the

⁴⁹ 'En Paris fué inaugurada una semana de "ballets" polacos,' *Nacion* (Buenos-Aires), 22 November 1937, Lisa Arkin papers, Nijinska Archives, Library of Congress.

⁵⁰ Haaland, p. 54.

revolutionary generation in France'.⁵¹ This calls to mind Haskell's *Ballet-to Poland* insofar as both pieces of literature use Poland as a vehicle by which to avow the political foundation of European society.⁵² On the eve of the First Partition of Poland, Rousseau considered the erasure of Poland from the European map as an exercise by which to explore the theoretical foundations of national identity. On the other hand, *Ballet-to Poland* attempted to maintain Poland's cartographical presence in the wake of the Nazi invasion of 1939. The juxtaposition of the two literary works demonstrates the consideration of Poland as a frontier space in the European map – a nation that was equivocally accepted as European, and therefore liminal. The political consideration of Poland elucidates the need for a ballet intermediary such as Niżyńska, as the nation's culture was just beyond understanding by its Western neighbours.

Yet, Niżyńska's Polish ballets neither solidified an exotic visualisation of Eastern Europe, nor established a new conception of Polish culture. The explosive impact of her brother's choreographed savagery and barbarism still remained a couple decades later, as his sister attempted to use Polish folklore to illustrate another aspect of Slavic heritage. Niżyńska, unlike her brother, utilised the vivacity of joy and celebration to bring Slavic archaism centuries forward and into the heart of modernised dance. Juxtaposing the two siblings and the companies they choreographically shaped – Niżyński and the Ballets Russes, dialectically compared to Niżyńska and Balet Polski – reveals a comparison that cannot be simplified to the cultural size of the represented nation. Niżyński's imaging of paganistic Russia stunned Parisian audiences, but, in doing so, simultaneously confirmed a longstanding image of Eurasian crudity and violence. On the other hand, Niżyńska's Polish choreography enchanted Parisian and London audiences by rejecting the image of Eastern Europe which her brother created. Instead, she reinforced a pacified image of Poland. Although Niżyńska had already established a reputation for innovating movement, the Balet Polski repertoire stood in the shadow of her former works, such as *Les Noces*.

As I identify the issue, audiences were still able to distinguish Niżyńska's choreographic style in the Balet Polski choreography, but her Polish ballets did not deliver innovative reimaginations of Poland and its traditions. While the repertoire of Balet Polski solidified the national roots of Poland, it failed to project Poland's presence as a modern nation-state. The repertoire,

⁵¹ Wolff, p. 242.

⁵² Arnold L. Haskell, *Ballet-to Poland* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1940). Arnold Haskell's book, *Ballet-to Poland*, was published in 1940 in aid of the Polish Relief Fund. In the shadow of Poland's invasion by Nazi Germany in 1939, Arnold Haskell, a renowned British dance critic, utilised the imagery of Polish ballet to underscore the acuteness of Poland's political subjugation.

including *Chopin Concerto*, was too rooted in Poland's past, and too incoherent in its definition of Poland's legacy, to validate why Poland belonged in the central view of European culture. As a small nation, Poland could not uproot itself from the liminal space between acknowledgement and acceptance.

However, one must remember that Niżyńska was operating within the framework of Poland's self-conception, which provided entertaining novelty to the ballet stage, but did not represent the modernism that had recently redefined Poland's domestic culture. Despite its union of modernity and tradition, the Balet Polski repertoire remained rooted in *couleur locale* motifs and imagery. Herein lies the applicability of Casanova's theory, that national heritage and folk themes remain peripheral because they are localised to a time in the history of a specific place. *Chopin Concerto* was stimulating to foreign audiences as it engaged with contemporary ballet discourse and its enlargement of Chopin's legacy embodied Polish Romanticism in this new epoch of Poland's existence. Yet *Chopin Concerto* stood as but one ballet which expanded the frontiers of a Polish artistic legacy and absorbed its audiences in a dialogue of how Poland was capable of reshaping European art. Nonetheless, *Chopin Concerto* similarly did not endure in European repertoire, and its envisioning of Romanticism remains misunderstood.

The success of the Balet Polski at the 1937 International Exposition exhibited that small nations do experience temporary moments of recognition by the cultural centre. Casanova is correct in her assertion that consecration by the cultural centre is a difficult task for minor nations, but her model is one which does not address the differing degrees of acknowledgement. The experience of Balet Polski in 1937-38 refutes Casanova's imagining of the national culture as behemoth; the new ensemble demonstrated that representatives of national culture can be applauded in cultural centres, even if the nation itself remains peripheral. Furthermore, the distance between centre and periphery can be incrementally approached, particularly when aided by mediating agents, rather than needing to be traversed at once. The centre-periphery divide is therefore not an undisputed binary; perhaps a better system is a multi-level construct as small nations are, as Casanova posits, prevented from standing as cultural equals to their dominant counterparts.

This article examines dance, a non-verbal art, to test applications of centre-periphery models. Accordingly, as I interpret it, in non-verbal art the relation between nations is liable to change and does not stand fixedly through time. As Niżyńska validates, individuals can play a vital role in elevating a nation's status, even if only temporarily. While this paper focuses on one specific ballet in Polish ballet history, it aims to contribute to the extant literature that explores the

interaction between dance and national self-expression. Consequently, there exists a wide remit of applications that would benefit from viewing dance lexicon as geographically symbolic and expressive. Future extensions of this article can be adapted to include postcolonial theory or take a comparative approach across geographic boundaries.

Throughout the twentieth-century, ballet has been shaped by individuals such as Niżyńska, who used dance to reimagine society's representation onstage. Where Niżyńska's contribution to the Balet Polski failed was the lack of boldness with which she approached national topics; the ensemble's performances provided entertaining ballets but failed to push the boundaries of Poland's imagination by Western Europe or the nation's definition of itself. Yet, the recognition of the Balet Polski at the 1937 International Exposition stands testament to the international achievement which peripheral nations can obtain despite being considered culturally minor. Although enduring changes to a small nation's consideration are difficult to achieve, short-term recognition still assists in moving the nation closer to cultural centres. Thus, as the success of Niżyńska and Balet Polski exemplifies, the order of national cultures can be gradually climbed, although the geo-hierarchy created by Western Europe made this instance of Poland's ascension difficult.

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