

The Ideological Origins of the Nationalization of Russian Ballet in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century

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ABSTRACT

The article analyses the process of nationalization of Russian ballet in the first half of the nineteenth century. The study of the development of the Russian ballet is placed within the context of political and social thought in the Russian Empire during the first half of the nineteenth century. The nationalization of Russian ballet refers to the process of forming the Russian ballet style. The process of nationalization of Russian ballet was synchronized with the prevalence of romanticism and nationalism in Russia in the nineteenth century. In Russian theatres, ballet content shifted from the classicalism of Western Europe, represented by ancient Greek mythology, to historical themes that showcased Russian national characteristics. In the field of ballet education, dance and drama were separated, and Russian ballet techniques were formed. Therefore, the development of Russian ballet in the first half of the nineteenth century reflected the transformation of Russian social thought, namely, the shift from Westernization to nationalization and Russification. It is worth noting that Charles Didelot played an important role in the process of nationalizing Russian ballet, and his career and creative journey can be seen as a concentrated display of the development of Russian ballet and social ideological changes.

Keywords: *Russian ballet, nationalization, Ideological Origins, Charles Didelot, Russian nationalism, Russian education*

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During the critical period of the development of ballet in Russia in the first half of the nineteenth century, it was also an important focus of attention in the field of history. Previous studies on the changes and continuities of Russian ballet in the early nineteenth century exist. Those studies studying this topic analyze the situation from different perspectives. Firstly, scholars focus on ballet education, which is seen in these studies as an important part of Russian dance education. This field of research is represented by T.A. Filanovskaya. She views ballet education as an important part of Russian dance education and places the professionalization of Russian dance education in the first half of the nineteenth century in the context of Romanticism (Filanovskaya, 2011a, pp. 253-267). In another of her articles, she discusses the impact of cultural policy on ballet education (Filanovskaya, 2009, pp. 47-56). Furthermore, the contribution of individual dancers to the development of Russian ballet has been a focus of scholarly attention. For example, Samuel Cross in his article *The Russian Ballet Before Dyagile* takes a detailed look at Charles Didelot's tenure in Russia and argues that he was an important figure in the development of Russian ballet in the early nineteenth century as a style in its own right and as "a factor in the international development of plastic art" (Cross, 1944, pp. 19-49). Building upon existing research, this paper will examine the ideological origins of the nationalization of Russian ballet in the first half of the nineteenth century, within the context of social thought and culture, starting with Charles Didelot's career in Russia and the reforms in ballet education that began in the 1830s.

CHARLES DIDELOT AND THE BIRTH OF RUSSIAN NATIONAL ELEMENTS IN BALLET

The history of ballet started in the fifteenth century in Italy; it is a way of socializing and entertainment for nobles during ceremonies during the Italian Renaissance. The history of ballet in Russia started much later. In Russia, ballet appeared in the seventeenth century and finally established itself as a genre in the nineteenth century (Krasovskaia, 1958, p. 7). After the introduction of ballet to Russia, another major historical point for Russian ballet was the establishment of the Imperial Ballet School by the Empress Anna Ioannovna in 1738, and this school played a major role in the development of Russian ballet history. Since the Petrine Reforms, the Russian Empire exhibited a tendency towards Westernization in its culture, which also influenced the development of Russian ballet in the eighteenth century. Many foreign ballet masters were invited to the Imperial Ballet School in Russia, including French dancer Jean Baptiste Lande and Italian ballet master Canziani. During the eighteenth century, then, choreography was established in Russia by immigrant foreigners (Cross, 1944, p. 23). Consequently, Russian ballet before the nineteenth century lacked a distinctive style of its own and primarily imitated Western ballet forms. It was not until the arrival of Charles Didelot in Russia in the early nineteenth century that this situation began to shift.

Charles Didelot is a French ballet master who teaches ballet classes and also creates ballet choreography. He was born into a family of ballet dancers from Sweden on March 28th, 1767. His father was a dancer at the Royal Swedish Ballet. Influenced by his family environment, Didelot started to learn ballet at a very young age. As a young man, Didelot spent a considerable amount of time studying ballet in Paris under the teacher Jean Dauberval. After becoming a professional ballet dancer, Didelot continued to study dance in Paris under the teacher Jean Dauberval and also performed in

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several ballets in London in the late 1780s. It was his experience performing in London that brought a classical style to Didelot's ballet (Krasovskaia, 1958, p. 101). Afterwards, Didelot worked successively in places such as London, Bordeaux, and Paris (Schmidt, 1988).

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Westernization in the cultural sphere remained a trend in Russian society. In 1801, the former Imperial choreographer Charles Le Picq proposed inviting Charles Didelot to be the new chief choreographer because of Didelot's understanding of ballet and all the achievements Didelot had made in the field of ballet. Because of this, Didelot went to Russia for the first time in 1801 and made his debut as the principal dancer in the Imperial Theater in St. Petersburg. In the following year, 1802, Didelot began serving as head of the theater school attached to the Imperial Theaters in St. Petersburg. In 1806, Didelot suffered a leg injury, and his wife, the talented ballet dancer Ross, passed away, ending his dance career. Didelot's term continued until 1811, and throughout this period, he infused Russian ballet with a classical style and had a significant impact on the development of Russian ballet.

Didelot brought his classical ballets, *Flora and Zephyr*, to Russia in 1803. It premiered in London in 1796 and was later modified and performed at the St. Petersburg Imperial Theatre. The ballet is based on Greek mythology and tells the love story between the god of the west wind, Zephyr, and the flower god Flore ("Flore et Zéphire", n.d.). In this ballet, Didelot also used a plot that was quite common at the time. The fickle Zephyr, in love with the goddess of flowers, Flora, was unfaithful to her, admiring other nymphs and dancing with them. Cupid told Flora about this, and the offended goddess hid from Zephyr. Then came remorse. Zephyr swore his fidelity and,

after various trials, won back Flora's love (Krasovskaia, 1958, p.105). Using ancient Greek gods as the main characters in the plot perfectly showcases Classicism. Similarly, the theme of ancient Greek mythology appears in Didelot's other works, such as his ballet *The Adventures of Telemachus* in 1807 and *Cupid and Psyche* in 1809, which was also based on ancient Greek mythology.

In terms of technological breakthroughs, Didelot utilized the 'flying machine'. This invention was created in 1795 by Didelot himself. The 'flying machine' allows dancers to dance on their toes and also fly in the air, as dancers can be suspended in the air. By making dancers stand on their toes before being lifted, dancers will be seen as weightless. However, this technique was abandoned later as the strings-to-life dancers could be noticed by the audience easily.

In an unforeseen turn of events, Didelot's tenure in Russia was terminated rather abruptly in 1811. This timing aligned with a pivotal moment in the trajectory of Russo-French relations. In 1803, the Napoleonic Wars broke out in Europe. In 1811, the relationship between Russia and France deteriorated rapidly. There is no direct evidence that Didelot left Russia because of his French nationality, as the official reason given was "serious illness" (Krasovskaia, 1958, p.119). After his departure, Didelot went to London to continue his ballet career.

Didelot's contributions to Russian ballet were uniquely valuable during that era. While ballet training and performances continued in St. Petersburg after his departure, his post remained vacant. Already in the spring of 1812, Naryshkin, the director of the Imperial Theatres, personally contacted Didelot, inviting him to return to his position in Russia. In the letter, Naryshkin not only expressed his apologies to

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Didelot but also stated that the Russian people were all longing for his return. After that, in 1815, the administration of the Russian theater reopened discussions with Didelot. On May 7th, in the report to the Committee established for resolving matters pertaining to the Imperial Theatres, Prince P. I. Tyufyakin, the Vice-Director of Theatres noted, that ballet-master Didelot is very useful and necessary for the imperial theaters (Krasovskaia, 1958, pp.139-141). Following a warm invitation from the St. Petersburg theatre administration, Didelot returned to Russia in 1816 and once again served as head of the theater school attached to the Imperial Theaters in St. Petersburg.

Significantly, in the second stage of Didelot's career (1816-1829), a shift towards a romantic character in his productions emerged. The dramaturgy of these works focused on ordinary, humanized characters with their passions and internal conflicts. In Russia, Didelot found ballet dancers with emotional openness, commitment to their roles, and a spiritual and emotional embodiment of the characters they portrayed (Katysheva, 2019. p. 185). The Romanticism and Russian national elements present in Didelot's ballets were undoubtedly intertwined with the burgeoning Romantic movement that swept through Europe following the Napoleonic Wars. Guided by Romanticism, many Russian intellectuals, including Pushkin, traveled to southern Russia and the Caucasus to seek their national cultural roots, strengthening their sense of Russian identity.

In 1823, Didelot choreographed the ballet *The Prisoner of the Caucasus*. This ballet was choreographed for his student E.I. Istomina (Pushkin, 1960, pp. 496-497), who is a ballet dancer who worked for the Imperial Russian Ballet in the early nineteenth century and is the first Russian dancer en pointe, meaning that she

is the first dancer to rise on their toes in Russia. The ballet *The Prisoner of the Caucasus* is a nineteenth-century Russian ethnic themed ballet, based on the poetry of Alexander Sergeevich Pushkin. In fact, *The Prisoner of the Caucasus* is the first play based on a Russian Text in the history of Russian ballet, and this symbolizes the start of ballet based on Russian culture. The poem was written during the Caucasus War in Russia, telling the story of a captured Russian officer in the Caucasus Mountains with the help of the daughter of a mountain chief (Pushkin, 1960, pp. 496-497). This drama has a strong stage presentation of Russian ethnic customs, with Didelot delving into Caucasian folk customs and using Caucasian folk melodies for the music. The costume design is full of exotic features, such as Cherkess robes and short sword accessories, and the dance choreography also incorporates mountain folk dance elements, such as fast rotations and stomping rhythms ("The Prisoner of the Caucasus", n.d.). For Pushkin himself, the distinctive nature and aesthetic elements of the dance allowed Didelot to express a romantic vision in *The Prisoner of the Caucasus* while simultaneously encapsulating the essence of a truly national theatrical tradition (Katysheva, 2019, p. 186).

The Prisoner of the Caucasus concluded Didelot's period of vibrant creative activity, a time of intense dedication and considerable impact. What followed was a downturn, precipitated by a wave of conservatism in Russian society, a time when groundbreaking concepts could no longer find expression. Intriguingly, *The Prisoner of the Caucasus* itself harbored premonitions of transformation, distinct hints of Russian ballet's identity in both the immediate and long-term future (Krasovskaia, 1958, p. 153).

Didelot departed the St. Petersburg Theatre in 1832 following a dispute with Duke Gagarin concerning the staging of the

ballet *Syuyumbika*, or *The Conquest of the Kazan Khanate*. Beginning in the 1830s, the national character of Russian ballet transitioned from the content of productions to the realm of ballet training (Krasovskaia, 1958, p. 164; Swift, 1974).

ACCELERATION OF NATIONALIZATION OF RUSSIAN BALLET

After the 1820s conservatism gradually became dominant in Russian social thought, a trend particularly evident in the field of education. In the 1830s, Minister of National Education Uvarov proposed the “Orthodoxy, Autocracy and Nationality” doctrine, often referred to as the “Triad”. The seeds of this doctrine were sown during the reign of Alexander I. In 1818, Uvarov, in a speech at a significant meeting of the *Glavnyi Pedagogicheskii Institut*, spoke of love for the fatherland, faith, and the state (Lavrinenko, 2016). In Uvarov’s view, the European ideas of liberty, equality, and fraternity, as well as the wave of nationalism, constituted a social storm that “almost involuntarily induced despair.” Therefore, defining Russian nationality and disseminating it through education was “a task inextricably linked to the fate of the fatherland” (Uvarov, 2014, pp. 134-135). It is not difficult to notice that, since the 1830s, Russian ballet education also began to develop its own style.

From the introduction of ballet to Russia until the early nineteenth century, the development of ballet education in Russia was based on the continuous learning of Western ballet education.

Peter the Great introduced the idea of Westernization, which means to adopt the culture and practices of Western Europe. Therefore, many German playwrights, Italian opera masters, as well as French and Italian ballet masters, came to Russia, introducing

Western European teaching systems to Russia. Professional Ballet Education in Russia started on May 4th, 1738, when the Queen of Russia, Anna Ioannovna, issued a declaration establishing the Imperial Ballet School. In 1826, with the establishment of the Ministry of the Imperial Court, the Imperial Ballet School was incorporated into its extent of jurisdiction, and from this time, the Imperial Ballet School became a closed institution with rules and regulations, including rules such as no student can go out of the school except special permission. German theatre, Italian opera, architecture, and painting, and French and Italian ballet became firmly established in Russia. Foreign actors, musicians, and ballet masters became the first teachers to introduce Western European educational systems to Russia (Filanovskaya, 2010, p.129). For this period, from the ballet style to the regulations for the school, Russia was learning from Western Europe’s established ballet system. The establishment of professional ballet schools in Russia, frequent tours by foreign ballet companies, and the arrival of famous ballet choreographers and masters from Western Europe laid the foundation for the rapid progress of Russian ballet in the nineteenth century (Dong, 2022, p. 100).

Since the nineteenth century, foreign and Russian choreographers in Russia drew inspiration from Western Europe, especially French and Italian ballet styles, and started to develop ballet with Russian characteristics, which symbolizes the reform of ballet education in Russia since the 1830s (Katysheva, 2019). Ivan Valberkh, the first native-born Russian ballet master, teacher, and choreographer, created many nationalism-theme ballets and played a key role in the development of the style of Russian ballet. Ivan Valberkh choreographed ballets based on patriotic themes, such as the War of 1812, and incorporated Russian folk-dance elements into ballet, helping with the

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development of Russian style ballet. Another ballet choreographer who pushes the nationalism in Russian ballet forward is Adam Glushkovsky. Adam Glushkovsky went to Moscow in 1812. When choreographing, Adam Glushkovsky integrated Russian folk dance and narrative traditions into ballet, and this helps to establish the unique Moscow ballet style. This can be seen in shows he choreographed, such as *Ruslan and Ludmila*. This shift in the theme and style of choreography shows the rise in nationalism in the ballet world, and the formation of a unique style of Russian ballet that is separate from other styles of ballet.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, nationalization of Russian ballet can also be seen by the fact that the course structure and teaching methods were modified, shaping what is now called the Russian style of ballet. Charles Didelot reformed the education system of Russian ballet. Didelot increased the number of students, extended the training time, and introduced a systematic course structure. This creates a more rigorous and systemic approach for ballet education. When teaching ballet, Didelot emphasizes the combination of technical training and artistic expression, promoting the idea of being a thoughtful dancer. This requires ballet dancers to go beyond mechanical movements, which is different from the ballet training previously, where ballet dancers only did mechanical and technical training. This artistic preference of integrating drama into ballet performance shapes the Russian style of ballet (Filanovskaya, 2011b, p. 265). Together, the discipline and the depth of emotional expression define the Russian ballet identity, making it separate and different from other styles of ballet in other countries.

CONCLUSION

The first half of the nineteenth century is the time of the start of nationalist elements in

Russian ballet. Various factors, including cultural and social values, political relationships between Russia and other countries, and the development of the Russian ballet standard, cause this.

After reviewing past studies, this paper focuses on a French ballet master, Charles Didelot. Charles Didelot contributed greatly to the establishment of the Russian ballet standard and the emergence of nationalist ideals in the ballet world in Russia, as he helped to standardize the Russian ballet system and choreography that incorporates nationalistic story, theme, and music. This helps to see the development of nationalistic ideology in Russian ballet in the first half of the nineteenth century from a unique and focused perspective, and from this one person, the general trend can be seen.

The transfer of the learning ballet education system from the West to establish the Russian style of ballet in the early nineteenth century also proves the nationalism's role in Russian ballet. Russian ballet initially borrowed heavily from Western techniques and pedagogy, especially from French and Italian. In the early nineteenth century, local Russian ballet masters and foreign ballet masters worked in Russia. They adapted the imported ballet system to fit Russian cultural values and aesthetics, creating a distinct Russian style of ballet that served as a symbol of Russia.

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