

in at the conclusion of this frenzied dance that honors the god of the Philistines. He is mocked by Delilah, the High Priest, and the populace, and then, as other dancing ensues, he pulls down the temple upon his enemies and himself.

Rossini's *William Tell*, based on the play by Schiller, evokes a Swiss mountain atmosphere. In the course of the pastoral opening act, there is a rustic wedding celebration for three couples (*Passo a sei*) marked by target shooting among the peasantry (it will be remembered what an important part the arrow plays in the climax of this opera, when Tell is called upon to shoot an apple from the head of his son, Jemmy). And in the third act, which takes place in the square before the palace of the arrogant governor, Gessler, there are the stirring dances by the Swiss soldiery.

In Moussorgsky's great historical drama, *Khovantchina*, three op-posing leaders—the political liberal, Prince Galitzin; the religious fanatic, Dositheus, and the reactionary Prince Ivan Khovantsky—all go down to defeat and are lost in the welter of events which bring into being the newer Russia of the Romanoffs. Galitzin is sent into exile; Dositheus and his followers burn themselves alive, and the tigerish Khovantsky is murdered on his own country estate, while residing there in voluntary exile. This old voluptuary sits watching his slaves perform a series of sensuous Persian dances. Shortly afterward, a call (counterfeited) comes from the Czar, asking Khovant-sky to forsake his exile and return to court. As Prince Ivan, in answer to the summons, puts on his huge fur cape and takes hold of his jeweled cane, he is stabbed to death by an assassin.



Ballet Music From The Opera

Anatole Fistoulari
Paris Conservatoire Orchestra

Contemporary opera has few balletic interludes; however, a century ago, hardly any large-scale work could expect production in a first-class theater unless it included a ballet. The place allotted to the dancers usually came in the second act—or later—so that regular subscribers to the opera, if they arrived late (as they most often did), would miss only some of the singing and none of the choreography.

And some of the patrons took a strikingly personal interest in the ballet girls; a hundred years ago, the Paris Opera used to be called, with some justification, "the antechamber to a seraglio."

Most of the famous ballet interludes in 19th-century grand opera were expected to provide atmosphere and "chic," rather than any strongly dramatic motivation. The ice-skating episode in Meyerbeer's *Le Prophete*, the Dance of the Hours from Ponchielli's *La Gioconda*, and the divertissements at the court of Alfonso XI in Donizetti's *La Favorita* are examples of purely decorative movement in opera, as are also the contents of this disc. Occasionally, though, dance provided a genuinely dramatic outlet for the works of this period. In Auber's *La Muette de Portici* (also known as *Masaniello*), the heroine, Fenella, is a mute who—by means of balletic gesture, sets the tragedy in motion. And all of Paris was rocked, in 1831, by the scene in Meyerbeer's *Robert le Diable* wherein the hero has led astray through the elaborate dancing of a band of ghosts of faithless nuns. The ballet of infernal spirits in Verdi's *Macbeth* and the *Walpurgis-nacht* from Boito's *Mefistofele* (where dancers and chorus form a single

unit) are other sequences with dramatic motivation but most opera ballets, in essence, are designed to please the spectator through visual delights on stage and scintillating music in the pit.

In Verdi's *Aida*, the second act is full of opportunities for visual interest and splendor. The first scene reveals the haughty Egyptian princess, Amneris, lying indolently on her couch, surrounded by numerous attendants. She is entertained briefly by the antics of a group of Moorish slaves—little children whose dance, both choreographically and musically, is full of pointed humor. The following episode brings the triumphal scene, where the only limitations imposed upon the operatic gloire are those of the size of the stage itself. Egypt has won a mighty victory over the Ethiopians, and the King, with the officialdom of his country, is ready to welcome the victorious general, Radames, back to Thebes. There is a grand march, punctuated by much palm-waving; then a brilliant ballet is staged. Verdi did not generally excel in writing for the dance, but here he produced music that is memorable for its rhythmic vitality and dazzling color, so well adapted to a big operatic stage.

Saint-Saens, in *Samson and Delilah*, has used the ballet as a deceptive point of repose, the launching ground for the rocket, which fires the dramatic climax of the opera. By "repose," one means a resting point in an architectural, and not balletic, sense ... for there is plenty of action in the exotic *Bacchanale*, which takes place in the Temple of Dagon during the final scene of the opera. Samson, already blinded, is brought

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- 1 Verdi: Aida Act II - March & Ballet 8:15
- 2 Saint Saens: Samson & Delilah Act III Bacchanale 6:48
- 3 Rossini: William Tell Act I Passo a sei & Act II Soldiers Dance 11:38
- 4 Moussourgsky: Kovantchina Act IV Dances Of The Persian Slaves 6:14

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