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### **Balance, Flow, and Space: Michel Fokine, Henri Matisse, Argentine Tango, Balinese Dance**

The ways in which choreographers, genres, cultures, and visual artists define balance, organize the flow of movement, and sculpt bodies in space is the topic of this essay. The Russian ballet of Mikhail Fokine, Argentine tango, Balinese dance and the artistic vision of Henri Matisse all provide illustrations of how form is embodied in balance flow, and space. In particular, these examples share a similar aesthetic which is based on unconventional phrase length, off-center placement, and unorthodox use of space.

Keywords: Russian ballet, Argentine tango, Balinese dance, Henri Matisse, embodied knowledge, cultural conventions, flow, space, balance, stillness, asymmetry, clowns

#### **Prelude**

Bodies moving through space and carving it around them is the heart of all dance. How different cultures, choreographers, and genres organize the flow of movement, define balance, and organize the relationship of bodies to the space around them is my focus here. Movement, no matter what kind, interests me; probably dancers never lose this fascination with all the ways the human body can move and create meaning. Dancers begin with form. My first dance language was Russian ballet, taught by dancers with the Diaghilev Ballets Russes, but I never realized the significance of that particular dialect until I encountered other dialects of ballet and then other languages altogether – flamenco, tango, and as an observer many, many more. Three genres

– Argentine tango and Balinese dance, the Russian ballet as conceived by choreographer Mikhail Fokine – offer possibilities for examining form as it is embodied in questions of balance, flow, and space. While differing in presentation, these three genres share a predilection for body-attitudes that incorporate off-center placement; they play with unconventional phrase length punctuated by points of stillness; lastly, they carve unconventional shapes and attitudes in space. Springing from three very different cultural traditions, they share a similar aesthetic. Lastly, we turn to painter Henri Matisse, who worked with Diaghilev’s Ballet Russes and was a great fan of dance who also took great pleasure in the company and work of musicians, clowns, and acrobats. Not surprisingly, his work displays uncanny similarities in its use of space, flow, and balance. While not an embodied form, Matisse’s work, especially his work for the Ballets Russes and his series *Jazz*, does capture in both its form and intention similar use of space, flow, and off-center forms. Examining this aesthetic across dance, music, and visual art allows us develop a vocabulary to speak about it more generally.

### **Balance, Flow, Space**

Some genres and choreographers prefer forms whose flow is contained within phrases while others privilege movement that spills across phrases and is accented by moments of stillness. In music, *agogic* and *rubato* refer to a kind of musical fluctuation applied to *tempi* such that time is stolen from certain notes and made up on others in the same phrase. Like flow, balance differs across dance genres with some presenting steps, gestures, postures that are in balance or that hit balance-points; others seem always to move through balance never staying long so that one’s interest is caught by bodies and movement that seem off-center. Finally, and complicated by the notion of balance, some genres present the body in relationship to spaces that are carved into conventional forms while others explore the odd shapes created by bodies angled off-balance and unconstrained by measures. In dance, the matter of space is always two-fold: there is body space and then

there is the space in which the body moves.<sup>1</sup> Russian ballet, Argentine tango, and Balinese dance share this seeming off-balance body attitude, play with phrase length and stillness, and present unconventional shapes and attitudes in space. Theirs is a complicated relationship with conventions, including contexts in which the conventions seem to be ignored or turned on their head. Contemporary choreographer Twyla Tharp does this in *As Time Goes By*, a wicked parody of classical ballet. The case of clowns and clown-like figures, for example in Balinese dance-drama, in Fokine's ballet *Petrouchka*, and in much of Matisse's work, offer powerful embodied commentary on conventions about social institutions and cultural values. In Russian ballet, it was the extraordinary choreographer Mikhail Fokine who, chafing against the constraints of the 19<sup>th</sup> century classicism of Marius Petipa, created a way of moving that challenged all the conventions.

Fokine's unorthodox uses of space, flow and balance were captured in drawings, painting, and observations by Henri Matisse, the French painter who grew up with dance both in the French countryside and in Paris, and understood the bodies that were its instruments and the forms they brought to life. He once said: "Drawing is like making an expressive gesture with the advantage of permanence." This was his gift to all the dancers and performers he drew, painted, and immortalized in cut-outs, giving them a life beyond those few moments on the stage. His dancers were Isadora-like, Ballets Russes nymphs and fantastical birds, caught in motion and at rest. He also gave permanence and off-balance stability to circus performers, clowns, acrobats, jazz musicians and dancers. He created costumes and sets for Diaghilev's company and later for its new incarnation with Alicia Markova. He liked the human figure better than landscape or still life and dancers were perfect figures, especially those that inhabited Paris at the time – exotic creatures of a kind of voluptuous purity who moved between high society and the demi-monde. His drawings realize his goals of serenity, balance,

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<sup>1</sup> Mostly notable for his radical exploration of body, form and space, is choreographer William Forsyth, in particular, the notion of kinesthetic isometries, illustrated by his comments on his 1993 ballet, *Quintet*, in which he described his goal as "tracing a space around an arabesque rather than doing an arabesque" – Royce, *Anthropology of the Performing Arts: Virtuosity and Artistry in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, 96.

and purity, capturing the essential nature of dancers, acrobats, circus performers, clowns.

Matisse caught dancers in motion, especially the drawings he did for an edition of Stéphane Mallarmé's *L'après-midi d'un faune*. The original poem was written in 1876, the edition with Matisse's illustrations was published in 1930-32 as *Poésies*. In between, in 1894, Debussy composed the score as an homage. Nijinsky's choreography in 1912 embodied poem and music. All the contributors to the realization of the several manifestations were part of a revolutionary turn that saw performances as collaborations between equally gifted artists.



Figure 1. Henri Matisse, *La danse* (first version), 1909

## Balance

Embodied forms like dance have to contend with balance on a fundamental level – one maintains it or one loses it. Balance is matched with counterbalance and the equilibrium established is what allows the maintenance of equilibrium. It is a matter of distributing weight. Beyond this one universal, dance genres play with balance in different ways.

Extending the pose can take the form of physical extension of head, legs, and arms – think of the arms stretching forward and back in an *arabesque* with the leg reaching backward. The balance is maintained through the most minimal of movements – gaze, breath, and impulse and the appropriate distribution of weight. The drawing below of an *arabesque* and an *attitude en arrière* shows this. These are two steps of a linked set of movements from Aurora's Act 1 variation in *Sleeping Beauty*.

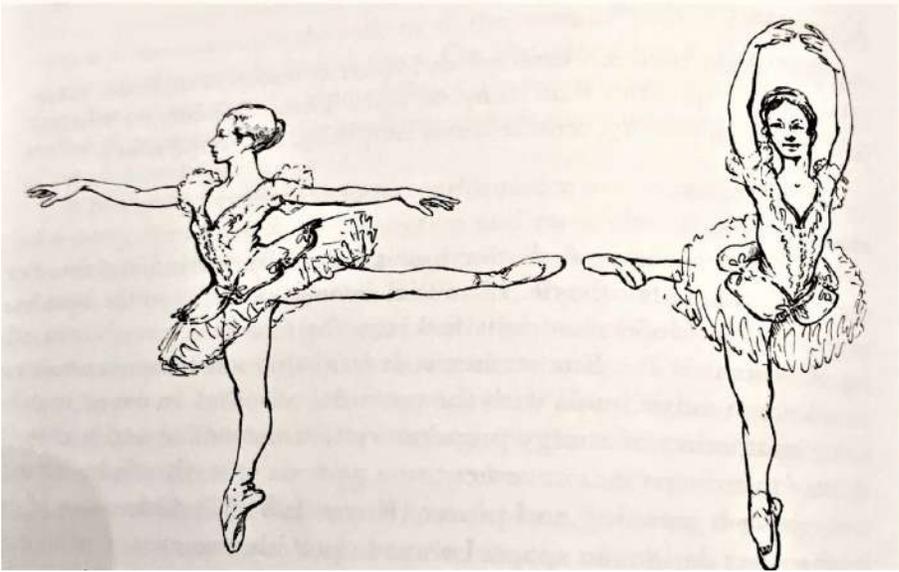


Figure 2. Drawing by Della Collins Cook, after drawings by Selene Fung in Laurencia Klaja, *A Ballerina prepares: Classical Ballet Variations for the Female Dancer* (Doubleday, 1982)

The ballet was one of Marius Petipa's last works and is an excellent example of 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian classical technique. It is easy to see the way in which the body weight is distributed as well as the significance of a vertical plumb-line. It also shows the *en face* placement of the body. In all the great three-act ballets of Petipa, *en face* meant facing the audience with hips and shoulders square. More importantly, hips and shoulders remain square regardless of which of the *croisé* (crossed) or *effacé* (opened) positions the dancers turn.

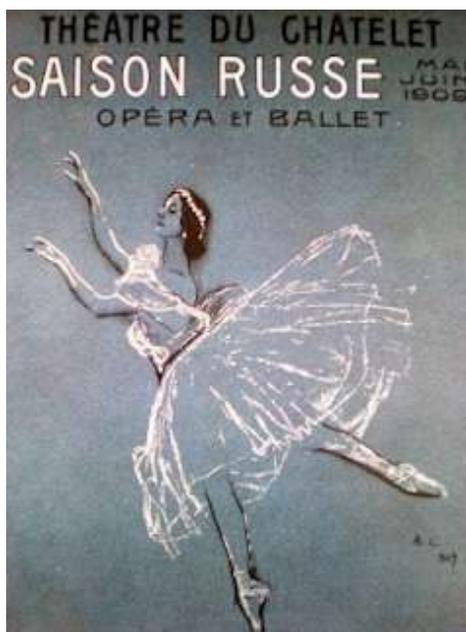
This was ballet before Mikhail Fokine.

Natalia Makarova, trained in the Vaganova School, adept in Fokine's choreographic style, and thoughtful about movement, provides an excellent description of how one maintains a particular kind of balance that belongs to Fokine's *Les Sylphides*: "While still, one must always be on the brink of movement. The ballerina, holding an arabesque on *pointe*, is not poised like a statue, but must seem to be leaning forward, resting in this position only momentarily, to flow almost immediately into the next movement."<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Makarova, *A Dance Autobiography*, 118.



**Figure 3.** E. O. Hoppe, Ballerina Tamara Karsavina performing in the ballet *Les Sylphides*, 1918



**Figure 4.** 1909 Ballets Russes souvenir program, Anna Pavlova in *Les Sylphides*



**Figure 5.** Natalia Makarova in *Other Dances*. Photographed by Max Waldman.

This is an excellent description of balance and flow in Russian ballet under choreographer and dancer Mikhail Fokine and of dancers trained in what became the Vaganova School. That notion of balance is linked closely to his use of flow, moving across phrases, liberal use of moments of stillness – the dancer appearing on the brink of movement, her body humming with movement past and prefiguring the future.

Fokine, trained at the Imperial School of the Marinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg, believed that ballet should be interpretive or dramatic and that choreography had to use equally inspired music. His training in dance, painting, and music, made him a likely partner in Diaghilev's enterprise, bringing together all the arts in creations that could not succeed without each one of them. His autobiography presents his teaching goals which made it possible for him to achieve new style of ballet:

I tried to make the student not content with just having a superficial connection between the movements... but to seek to interpret the phrases, the accents, the musical nuances and whole phrases. I stressed the extension of the lines of the body... I elongated the attitude... I noticed that... the head failed to participate

in the movements of the body. The arms were curved in a stereotyped circle; the body was invariably straight and always directly facing the audience. I developed the *épaulement*, with one and then the other shoulder to the audience.<sup>3</sup>

This kind of *épaulement* allows the arms and upper body to move around the vertical axis of the spine, an innovation that made choreography such as that of *Shéhérezade* so radical and astonishing.



**Figure 6.** Fokine in *Schéhérazade*.  
Harry Ransom Collection, UT Austin

*Schéhérazade*, premiered in the 1910 Paris season, was one of the first Orientalist ballets. Fokine's use of a radical *épaulement* is seen in the photo of him above. Shoulders, arms, and head angle in different directions. Crossed legs also mark different directions. Looking at the overall pose, the upper torso angles in the opposite direction from the lower. Finally, the triangular space marked out by the forearms and hands is repeated in the triangle made by the legs. In the image of

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<sup>3</sup> Fokine, *Fokine: Memoirs of a Ballet-Master*, 70.

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Fokine and Karsavina in *Firebird* below, we can see the same opposition of shoulders and hips as well as the body carving triangles of space. Parisian audiences were enraptured by this daring new choreography, the new music, and the stunning and voluptuous sets and costumes.



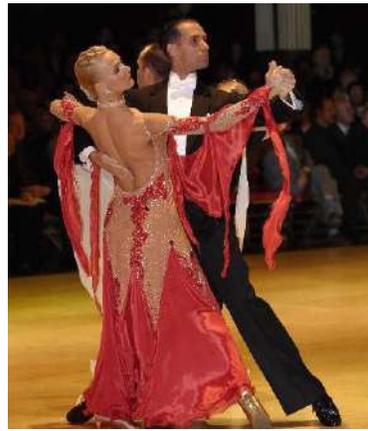
**Figure 7.** Tamara Karsavina and Mikhail Fokine in *The Firebird* by Igor Stravinsky. Ballets Russes de Serge Diaghilev, 1910

## **Tango**

In the case of partnered dance, especially the Argentine tango, the two participants use their weight to allow each other to maintain a balance that would be impossible in the case of an individual. We can see this clearly in the close embrace of the couple in the Argentine tango that brings together heads, shoulder, arms, and upper body. Their hips do not touch. They make a kind of pyramid that maintains itself only by the opposing weight. In the tango milonguero or apilado, we can see very clearly how two dancers communicate movement, mood, music all through touch and improvisation that embroiders on basic tango steps in response to each other and to the music. It is the best kind of listening in which each voice has an equal share. Milonguero-style tango is typically danced with a slightly leaning posture that typically joins at the shoulders of the dancers. In most cases the style is danced in a close embrace. Usually the woman's head and body is so close to her partner that her left hand is placed far behind her partner's neck. The couple maintains a constant upper body contact and often doesn't loosen their embrace to accommodate turns or *ochos*. The physical nature of balance is seen at the level of meaning when one examines the basis of tango in a technique, formal and codified, that allows the dancers to embroider and go beyond the technique at the same time that it offers the safety and comfort of being held within the known. Stage tango uses a partnering position that is the opposite of Argentine tango... hips are the contact point with the upper bodies leaning away from each other.



**Figure 8.** Marcela Durán and Carlos Gavito in a classic Argentine tango



**Figure 9.** Goldcoast Ballroom Tango Competition

Argentine tango is largely improvised – this means that you cannot rely on steps and choreography to make a partnership work. The intimacy of tango lies in having to dance silence with another person. The intimacy lies exclusively in the dancing. This is a kind of vulnerability that demands everything, that demands transparency. Ultimately, the process of leading and following is more of a conversation between partners, rather than a kinetic command issued by the leader.

Carlos Gavito, one of the great masters of Argentine tango, speaks of the tango but his images are equally appropriate to Fokine, Balinese dance, and what Matisse so ingeniously captured:

The secret of tango is in this impossible moment of improvisation that happens between step and step. It is to make the impossible thing possible, to dance silence... A good dancer is one who listens to the music... We dance the music not the steps. Anybody who pretends to dance well never thinks about the step he's going to do, what he cares about is that he follows the music. You see, we are painters, we paint the music with our feet. Musicians play an instrument and use their fingers, their hands. Dancers use their toes.

Beatriz Dujovne, author of *In Strangers Arms*, one of the best books about tango, elaborates the difference between social tango and stage tango:

Social dancers express what their hearts feel to the music, to their partners, and to particular movements on the dance floor. They improvise. They dance for themselves, introspectively. Shunning the external world, their eyes turn inward. This circumspect dance comes from a different heart and culture than the stage tango.<sup>4</sup>

### **Balinese dance**

Sally Ness (2008) provides a provocative analysis of Mead and Bateson's work in Bali in a chapter on inscription of gesture:

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<sup>4</sup> Dujovne, *In Strangers Arms*, 4-5.

The recognition of the technical challenges inherent in Balinese classical dance, a recognition that was gained as a consequence of Bateson's extensive experimentation in documenting through non-verbal means the whole of Balinese cultural life, inspired a unique interpretation of Balinese dance movement. He noted, "[...] the metaphor of postural balance... is demonstrably applicable in many contexts of Balinese culture." (xvii) He concluded his study with the following finding: "It seems that the Balinese extend to human relationships attitudes based upon bodily balance, and that they generalize the idea that motion is essential to balance." (xviii)

Ness describes this in slightly different terms: "The body of the classical Balinese dancer serves as an explicit living reminder, both in performance and in daily life, not only of an aesthetic form but also of a reasoned method of understanding, and standing 'under' the logic of Balinese cultural 'balance'."<sup>5</sup>

Ness continues:

Bateson's observations of Balinese dance focused specifically on the manner in which postural balance was maintained in ritual performances during highly complex phrases of danced gesturing. Balinese rhythmically syncopated and fast-paced gesturing involved the isolation and orchestration of a large number of limb and torso areas. Bateson was impressed by the extraordinary limb control, endurance, and meticulous precision required for the limb movements to be performed in a manner judged to be aesthetically correct. The performances, in his view, turned the seemingly simple activity of maintaining an upright posture into something akin to a tightrope act.<sup>6</sup>

Balance and the asymmetry of positions in Balinese dance relies upon angular postures of limbs – arms, hands, legs, feet, head. Shoulders are in a raised position rather than 'down the back' as in ballet, fingers are curved backward and articulated, feet are also articulated. The photograph of master teacher Kakul teaching a young student illustrates these articulated postures.

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<sup>5</sup> Noland and Ness, *Migrations of Gesture*, 20.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

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Argentine Tango, Balinese Dance*



**Figure 10.** Nyoman Kakul teaching Purpa in 1973. Leonard Pitt, *My Brain on Fire*, 2016.



**Figure 11.** Condong dancer Luh Andawarati,  
Sara Gambina, photographer, photo courtesy of Gamelan Sekar Java.

The multiple levels of articulations in the face, eyes, hands, arms, hips, and feet are coordinated to reflect layers of percussive sounds.

Legong illustrates most of the ways in which balance and articulation of parts of the body and face can be used in Balinese dance. It probably began as royal entertainment. Unmarried girls are the preferred performers and are taught from a very young age. It has also been associated with possession trance though the dance is more stylized than other possession rituals. The two little actresses are accompanied by a third dancer called a *condong* or attendant. She sets the scene, presents the dancers with their fans and later plays the part of the raven in the story.

### **Flow**

Trained as a musician as well as a dancer, Fokine saw all the ways in which movements, gestures, and stillness could be in relationship to music. He phrased movements across the musical bars, used agogic and *rubato*, that is, saving time and space with one movement in order to lengthen another.<sup>7</sup> Moments that, under Petipa, would have been static poses became way-stations; movements flowed outward, impulse coming from the center of the back, so that they were not isolated gestures of arms, legs, feet. For Fokine and the composers with whom he worked, there was no formula that dictated the correspondence between movement and music. Neither did Fokine use the same approach in all his ballets. *Les Sylphides* (orig. *Chopiniana*) uses long, flowing movement phrases, minimal “steps,” stillness rather than pose. It is all of one piece, looping back on itself. He created this ballet in three days, having thoroughly absorbed the music, planned the dramatic content, and thought out the dancers. Fokine was fortunate in having dancers like Karsavina and Nijinsky who understood quickly and intuitively what Fokine wanted and who were committed to the choreography rather than to their individual prominence. They and Fokine were in agreement that it was the style and sense of the ballets rather than the technique that mattered.

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<sup>7</sup> Royce, *Anthropology of the Performing Arts: Virtuosity and Artistry in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, 27-28.

How Fokine used flow was different from one ballet to another. Perhaps the most complicated ballet in musical terms was *Petrouchka* to Stravinsky's score. Musically, the score is full of variations of *tempi*, signaling the charged and ever-changing emotional states of the characters. Asymmetry keeps the listener further off-balance, enough so that Fokine used square, angular rhythms in many of the group dances.

For the dancers in the leading roles, I tried to create puppet-like, unnatural movements, and, at the same time, to express in these three movements, totally different characters...so that in spite of the puppet-like movements the audience would be forced to respond and sympathize.<sup>8</sup>

To demonstrate *Petrouchka*'s lack of will, each of his movements begins just a fraction of a second behind the beat. So we, together with *Petrouchka*, feel ourselves pulled along.

What is constant across all his choreography is a finely-honed collaboration with the music, sometimes with the kind of sweeping legato line that so characterizes the Russian ballet, sometimes with polyphonic rhythms for different groups and individuals, sometimes with moments of silence and stillness but always in the service of the drama of the story.

While Fokine's choreography demonstrates that there is great freedom of phrase length, what lies within the range of the acceptable is generally agreed upon and deviation from this makes for great comedy.

One of the wittiest caricatures of classical ballet, *As Time Goes By*, by Twyla Tharp, was at its funniest when she prolonged poses well beyond what they would normally be, including an *arabesque* exiting into the wings which lasted seconds, with the dancer growing longer and longer, until her supporting leg was at a forty-five degree angle to the floor.

## **Tango**

The understanding and practice of phrasing, stillness, and disjunctures as much as the form defines Argentine tango. Especially

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<sup>8</sup> Fokine, *Fokine: Memoirs of a Ballet-Master*, 191.

in that mysterious state in partnering where everything comes together kinesthetically and the dance becomes magical. There is not only improvisation in the dancing couple but also in the collaborative improvisation between dancers and musicians. The tango provides rich opportunities for examining the kinesthetic give and take of partner dancing.

One crucial feature that distinguishes tango, from so many other forms, is its incorporation of stillness as a fundamental characteristic of the form. It is startling in its effect, akin to the use of silence in music. We may see tango stillness as a defying of the conventions we assign to dance, the art of movement. We may “see” more in those moments than we do in the movements that many would think of as defining the form. It is in the disjunctures that we are forced to see the sense of the whole.

A Gavito-Durán performance is an excellent demonstration of the use of stillness, as well as of the off- the- center-axis postures. In their dancing, we can see most of the basic elements: *caminar* (walk), *cruce* (cross), *ochos* (figure-eight), *ganchos* (leg hooks), *giros* (turns), *contragiros* (turns in the other direction), *sacadas* (displacements), *boleos* (this expression comes from *boleadoras*, balls linked with cords, thrown to hunt animals), *llevadas de pie* (moving foot by foot), *cortes* (cuts), and *quebradas* (breaks). And we see the fundamental importance of the walk.

“The beginning and the end of the tango is the walk” as Luis Borges said. And *tangueros*, like Miguel Zotto, would agree:

Tango is like writing a letter, it has a beginning, periods, commas, stops and an end. If you are doing figures and giros all the time, people don’t see anything and that is why there is the walk - the invention of the people. In this dance of the people... all the famous couples have used the walk, and they use it constantly. The tango is on the ground, it is caressing the floor. It is the ball of the foot supporting the weight of the body, right on the axis and each person on his/her own axis.

All the other elements are embellishments on the walk. What one does is determined by the walk and that element is determined by the music – “we dance the music, not the steps.”

### **Balinese Dance**

The relationship between music and dance is a complicated one. Multiple levels of articulations in the face, eyes, hands, arms, hips, and feet are coordinated to reflect layers of percussive sounds. The balance between movement and stillness, between sweeping movements that cover much of the stage area and more confined gestures depends on the genre of dance. Legong is more narrow than the warrior dances. The great drama of Rangda and Barong ranges across much of a community. Keris dancers, as part of this drama, also cover more space. These and the clowns take more license in terms of form and flow and space.

Teruna Jaya is another standard in the Balinese repertoire – it is written in Kebyar (“to flare up”) style, meaning it is characterized by sections that are full of unpredictable, irregular rhythms, and wild contrasts of dynamic and tempo. It was originally danced by two women, but today it is usually done as a solo. This dance requires remarkable strength and energy for all the changes in speed, dynamics and mood. It begins with one of the longest examples of this style of music, and the composition is a tour de force of Balinese virtuosic style.

### **Space**

Space must be considered both as the shapes made by the angles of the body in relationship to its plumb-line, and by the patterns made by the moving body in the performance space. Matisse comes close to describing the dual aspects of space when he said: “The entire arrangement of my picture is expressive; the place occupied by the figures, the empty spaces around them, the proportions, everything has its share.” One can see this in his drawing of single figures as well as in the larger murals and oils.

## **Space in Fokine's Russian Ballet**

Fokine made radical changes in how space was configured, both the spatial arrangements of the dancers' bodies and the way dancers flowed across the space of the stage. In the former, his introduction of *épaulement* at once brought a kind of dynamism that was absent in the static *en face* world of Petipa. Bodies could and did twist around their center-line and wrapped themselves around each other in revolutionary *pas de deux*. Fokine also did away with the Petipa spatial and programmatic arrangements for corps and soloists, court scenes, the obligatory lakeside/forest scenes, and the national character performances. He also abandoned the *grand pas de deux* structure rigidly composed of solo variations for male and female dancers, a partnered *pas de deux*, and a coda. When he used a *corps de ballet*, the dancers faded in and out of the whole stage space instead of being assigned formations in unmoving lines and half-circles. When he used crowds, he used them as they would behave at a fair or a festival or a harem scene, making the classical movement natural. All of these changes eliminated the frequent pauses allowing dancers to take bows that were a mainstay of the Petipa era. Dancers, set designers, composers and musicians were liberated from all the hallmarks of the Petipa era. What mattered most to Fokine was the drama of each work; the virtuosity lay not in the technical feats but rather in dancers' abilities to convey a meaning above the form, a through-line, if you will.

## **Tango Space**

In Argentine tango, the dancers' chests are closer to each other than are their hips, and often there is contact at about the level of the chest (the contact point differing, depending on the height of the leader and the closeness of the embrace). In close embrace, the leader and the follower's chests are in contact and they are dancing with their heads touching or very near each other. In open embrace, there can be as much space as desired between the partners, but there should always be complete contact along the embracing arms to give

optimum communication. Since Argentine tango is almost entirely improvisational, there needs to be clear communication between partners. Even when dancing in a very open embrace, Argentine tango dancers do not hold their upper bodies arched away from each other as in ballroom or competition tango; yet, each partner is not always over their own axis, there are even styles that demand a constant leaning against each other. Whether open or closed, a tango embrace is not rigid, but relaxed, like a loose embrace.

The footwork creates interesting patterns built by the intertwining of the legs enhanced by rapid changes of direction. The larger pattern is created out of this intimate space as the couple moves across the floor in more and more complicated combinations of legs and feet. The intertwined legs and feet of the two dancers fit perfectly together as if belonging to one mind. In moving around a dance space, the leader negotiates a counter-clockwise circuit and uses more or less space depending on how crowded the salon becomes.



**Figure 12.** Milonga, Buenos Aires, Photographed by Valeriano Fernandez



**Figure 13.** Milonga, Buenos Aires, Photographed by Valeriano Fernandez

### **Balinese dance and space**

The spaces made by the angular and asymmetrical movements and gestures in Balinese dance carve intricate shapes around the dancer's body. The turned-out position of legs and feet make triangles that shift as the dancer moves from one location to another. As we look at these spaces, we can see the sense of Bateson's conclusion that motion sustains balance. That notion is not dissimilar to what Fokine's choreography achieves. In both cases, if one were to arrest bodies that are off the center-line, it would be difficult if not impossible to maintain balance; it is the moving through these positions that allows a performance that always rights itself in the through-line of motion.



**Figure 14.** Legong Lasem, photo courtesy of Gamelan Sekar Java

Balinese use of performance space ranges from the more contained Legong to the extravagance of the great dramas like Barong. Similarly, gestures in relation to the center-line of the body are much less dictated in the dance-dramas where witches move freely, where the clowns disrupt expectations, and where the kris dancers, in trance, are freed of many limitations.

The dance-dramas that revolve around the forces of Good and Evil in the characters of Rangda the Witch and Barong the Dragon include virtually every style of Balinese dance form and performance as well as large cast of characters including Rangda and Barong, monkeys, Legong dancers, clowns, self-important magistrates, and kris dancers. *Trance and Dance in Bali*, was a film made by Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead on December 16, 1937 of a performance that they commissioned. According to anthropologist Ira Jacknis, the trance ritual they filmed was, “not an ancient form, but had been created during the period of their fieldwork.” In 1936, as Jacknis continues, a Balinese group had “combined the Rangda or Witch play (Tjalonarang) with the Barong and kris-dance play, which was then popularized with tourists.”<sup>9</sup>

Big dance-dramas that last for many hours are staged with the expectation that the audience will wander in and out of the performance space. The performance is geared so that there are frequent moments of plot unfoldings, of eye-catching movement, of comings and goings of characters. It is a style that builds upon the inherently interesting uses of asymmetry, interrupted flow, and unexpected use of space. Audience members know the plots and the actors so they go to see a particular performance – to see what was different, what caught people’s attention. Importantly, the clown figures as well as the trance dancers are not bound by any script; theirs are performances improvised around a set of actions or plot devices or dictated by the spirits of the trance state.

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<sup>9</sup> Jacknis, “Margaret Mead and Gregory Bateson in Bali: Their Use of Photography and Film.”



**Figure 15.** *Gan*, Mountain Spirit dancer, White Mountain Apache, Photographed by Anya Peterson Royce

### **Afterthoughts**

I have examined three aspects of form in three dance genres. Balance, flow, space are qualities that in dance exist and are displayed only in and through the bodies of the dancers. How they are manifested in those bodies, however, is shaped by sound and the architecture of performance. In flow, in particular, sound is a key component in the shape that flow takes and its resonance with the dancer's body. Space refers to the space of the dancer's body as well as the space through which the dancer moves. Each of these genres defies a particular set of conventions to create complicated distributions of weight and configurations of balance; to phrase movement across musical bars playing with time, beat, and accent; and to cut unconventional patterns in space. Henri Matisse played with these same conventions in the visual realm of art. We see it most clearly in his late-life paper cutouts bound together in a series called *Jazz* where his love of clowns, acrobats, and theatre folk is given bold expression in primary colors, off-centered figures of acrobats, or an Icarus falling against a brilliant dark blue sky filled with bright yellow stars. Much of Matisse's philosophy about art revolved around questions of space, the flow of line, balance and its opposite. Here is one of his summing-up thoughts about what art, his art, is all about:

Expression, for me, does not reside in passions glowing in a human face or manifested by violent movement. The entire arrangement of my picture is expressive; the place occupied by the figures, the empty spaces around them, the proportions, everything has its share.<sup>10</sup>

In their own cultural context, each of the dance genres and Matisse's work, finds roots in a creative process that demands that dancers and choreographers challenge conventions of the genre while at the same time they honor the sense behind cultural preference. We see the latter more clearly for all that it is challenged.

### **A coda for clowns**

Clowns, no matter what the genre, are beings outside the normal constraints. From Petrouchka to Balinese clowns to clown figures in communal dances to circus clowns, they are the disjunctures that help us see. Communal dances among indigenous peoples of the American southwest often contrast the unconstrained dancers with the adherents of the communally-approved. In the winter solstice celebration for the Tewa of San Juan Pueblo, for example, the white and black clown/spirit dancers, coming in from the outside reaches of the pueblo, meander through the four quadrants, stopping to sniff the air and ground, or swish their whips. Their steps are light, irregular, away from the ground – the opposite in both form and pattern from the lines of dancers whose choreography keeps them together, feet stabbing into the ground, bodies bent slightly forward from the waist, in perfect synchrony with each other and the music. Another example of contrasts comes from the *Gan* dancers of the White Mountain Apache. These spirits of the mountains are masked and enter the celebrations in dances that are out of balance, made up of bodies turned and turning in the kind of *épaulement* described by Fokine – shoulders and hips in opposition to each other, the entire body a spiraling from head to foot. They are outsiders, spirits come into the square, straight-line spaces of the rest of the community.

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<sup>10</sup> Flam, *Matisse on Art*, 36.

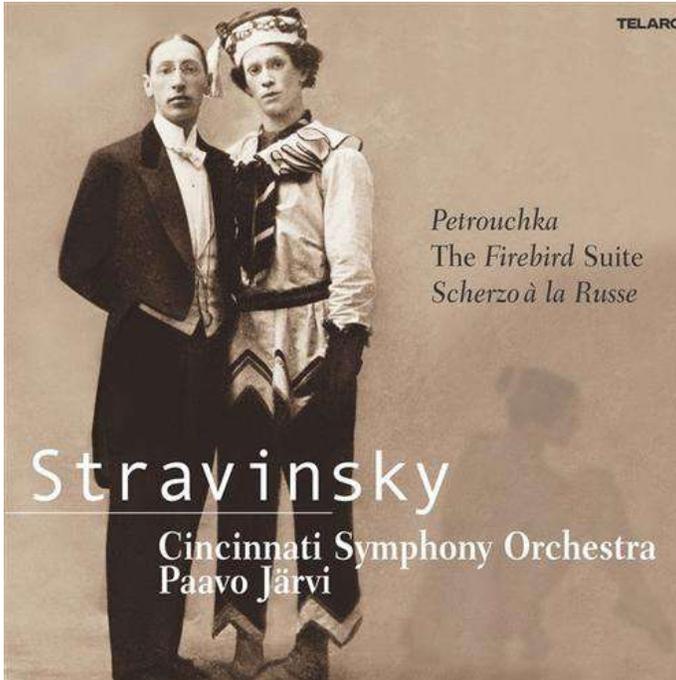


**Figure 16.** *Gan*, Mountain Spirit dancer, White Mountain Apache,  
Photograph by Anya Peterson Royce

Mikhail Fokine played upon meanings associated with postures and use of space to contrast the opposing lovers, Petrouchka and the Moor, who are vying for the favor of the Ballerina. Petrouchka's whole posture is turned in upon itself – feet turned in, arms hanging turned in at his sides, hands encased in heavy mittens so they lose the ability to articulate fingers, feet in shapeless boots, his head tilted down at an awkward angle. He takes up little space, disappearing into himself. It signals helplessness, a pathetic figure. This impression

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is reinforced by his movements beginning a fraction of a second behind the musical beat. The Moor's posture is expansively turned out: legs wide apart and turned out, arms held out away from his body, head angled high... a commanding posture that takes up a lot of space.



**Figure 17.** Nijinsky as *Petrouchka*, with Stravinsky, 1911

Matisse recognized the importance of clowns, indeed had a great fondness for them, portraying them as off-balance to the point of losing their center – perhaps a metaphor for their place as outsider voices in society. Matisse acknowledged in his art and by his life that creativity takes courage. His clowns, dancers, acrobats, and circus performers made those courageous metaphorical leaps of creating themselves against the common grain. In doing so, I like to think they remind us of where the center is and of what we learn if we find the courage to step beyond.



**Figure 18.** Matisse—clown, from *Jazz*. Photograph by Anya Peterson Royce

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