

Opus 19/The Dreamer

Ballet Notes

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Choreography: Jerome Robbins

Staged by: Susan Hendl with the assistance of Lindsay Fischer

Music: Sergei Prokofiev, *Violin Concerto No. 1 in D Major (1917)*

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Costume Design: Ben Benson

Lighting Design: Jennifer Tipton

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Premiere: New York City Ballet, 1979

The National Ballet of Canada Premiere: 2005

The dual title of *Opus 19/The Dreamer* hints at one reason for the ballet's elusive power: the work is both abstract, distanced by the relatively generic "Opus 19" (a reference to its chronological place in composer Sergei Prokofiev's *oeuvre*) and vaguely narrative, a ballet about "The Dreamer." Created in 1979 for Mikhail Baryshnikov during that dancer's brief sojourn with New York City Ballet, *Opus 19/The Dreamer* evokes the mood of a mysterious dream-like quest for something unknown, or perhaps only unrecognized.

Prokofiev's brilliant concerto was written in 1917 but its premiere was delayed for six years, in part due to the Russian political situation. Eventually, in 1923, the concerto was performed in Paris under the distinguished baton of Koussevitsky once a violinist could be found who was willing to play this dissonant, bittersweet, oddly compelling work with its blend of romanticism and modernity. In the audience were Picasso and Pavlova.

Dance and music are firmly linked here; the choreography emerges cohesively from the score. The first movement, *andantino*, begins with a hushed tremolo in the strings while the solo violin enters *sognando*, dreamily, with a lyrical theme that will recur at the end, both of this movement and of the whole concerto. Centre stage, the dreamer moves almost in place for the first part of his solo. Behind him huddles a group of barely visible dream-folk, six men and six women, whose movements often dimly echo his. His dance expresses his hesitancy, isolation, and yearning to be part of the group. Are we sensing the plight of Baryshnikov, new to the company, confronted by the close-knit NYCB dancers? Here as elsewhere, the spare choreography demands a strong presence and emotional depth, not technical virtuosity.

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A group of women enters on pointe to pizzicato strings as the man watches from the side. Suddenly one woman emerges from the group and hurls herself at him. They dance, occasionally interrupted by the other men and women, until the main theme is repeated – and the man repeats the yearning gestures that opened the ballet. In a very magical moment, the dancers form a straight line from front to back, and the woman braids her way backwards through the shifting line until she disappears.

The second movement, a chromatic scherzo with violent rhythms, unites the man and the woman again but still he longs for more complete integration into the group.

In the third movement, the bassoon states a faintly threatening, faintly comical, new theme, and the choreography hints at Russian folk dance. Finally the musical theme from the first movement recurs to accompany the man's longing gestures, and the woman has vanished. The line of dancers from front to back re-forms, and the woman weaves her way invisibly from back to front. The ballet ends with the couple reunited – until waking?

– Penelope Reed Doob