To Catch A Nightingale  
*Reconstructing Le Chant du Rossignol*  

By Kenneth Archer and Millicent Hodson

We did not set out to catch a nightingale. From 1988 to 1991 we traveled through three continents interviewing dancers who worked with George Balanchine in his youth. We were reconstructing his *La Chatte* from 1927 and *Cotillon* from 1932. Four of the *grandes dames* who shared their memories of these ballets kept referring back to *Le Chant du Rossignol* from 1925, Balanchine’s first creation after he left the Soviet Union, his first production for Sergei Diaghilev and his first project with Igor Stravinsky. Often the Balanchine ballerinas said to us, “George already tried that idea in *Le Chant*”, evoking the profuse and colourful eclecticism the choreographer would soon abandon with his neoclassical *Apollon Musagète* in 1928. References accrued in our notebooks. Suddenly we realized that this nightingale ballet had caught us. So many historical “firsts” attracted us, of course, but also the relevance of the ideas involved: *Le Chant* is based on the fairytale about a nightingale whose song cures an ailing Chinese emperor, a parable about nature’s power to heal, about beauty as a force or regeneration, about the need for culture in the political sphere.

Resolved to find the missing pieces and put the ballet back together, we spent the next decade, in the midst of other commitments, searching systematically. We located costumes in seven countries, tracked visual documents and press accounts throughout Europe and studied at the Matisse archive in Paris and the residential museum in Nice. Throughout the process we did drawings for our dance and design dossiers, showing the costumes in motion and the use of the decor, working meanwhile in our studio to shape the ballerinas’ clues into concrete movement. In the summer of 1999 we set to work with the costumier, décorateur, technicians, dancers and staff at Jean-Christophe Maillot’s company, Les Ballets de Monte-Carlo. The parts began to form a whole.
Three-quarters of a century separate the 1925 version of Le Chant du Rossignol from the spectacle premiered at the Holland Dance Festival in 1999 and staged in Monaco for the Fête National in 2000. Yet the costumes by Henri Matisse have parallels on recent pages of Vogue and Elle, such as duvet coats, hoods and cagoules, graphics on garments and chiffon encrusted with glass. It is not just the proverbial process of history repeating itself: Matisse identified in oriental design what would prove to be recurring trends in twentieth and twenty-first century fashion.

And in his decors Matisse reconceived the art of China’s Ming dynasty and the Tibetan tanka, an object lesson for postmodernists. The reinvention of chinoiserie in Stravinsky’s score and Balanchine’s choreography also resonate today in the multicultural mix of contemporary music and dance.

When Diaghilev commissioned the remake of this ballet, Balanchine had never heard of Matisse. The painter had collaborated with choreographer Leonide Massine in 1920 to help turn Stravinsky’s 1914 opera Le Rossignol into a ballet. The production by Matisse and Massine clung to operatic props and staging effects which, by instinct, Balanchine deleted in 1925. “Simplification of the stage mechanism is carried considerably further”, noted The Observer comparing the two versions after Balanchine’s London premiere on 24 July 1927.

Liberation of line and reduction of palette may have been foreign to Balanchine under the banner of Matisse, but the choreographer—just turned twenty-one and fresh from Soviet revolutions in life and art—grasped the modernism of the French master. Balanchine’s scenic deletions and the Constructivist trend of his experimental dance made the Matisse aesthetic work better onstage than it had for Massine in 1920.

Balanchine did not slavishly follow the scenario, not even the shortened one in the 1925 Ballets Russes programme. A London Times critic, in an advance
story on 19 July 1927, declared: “Hans Christian Andersen would hardly have
recognized—though I think he might have been awed by—this mimetic
version of his charming tale”. Stravinsky’s opera was familiar to Balanchine
who had danced in the ensemble when Petrograd’s innovative theatre
director, Vsevelod Meyerhold, presented an avant-garde production at the
Mariinsky Theatre in 1918. Meyerhold had seated singers on benches and
surrounded them with dancers, emphasizing the horizontal axis of the stage.
We realized it was probably Meyerhold’s *mise-en-scène* that showed
Balanchine how to exploit the Emperor’s static central placement in Matisse’s
decor.

Ballet designers usually seat monarchs to the side so that dancers have the
full use of the stage diagonals. But Matisse put his throne and dias at the top,
dead centre, establishing two polarized points of reference: the Emperor
upstage and the public downstage. Balanchine devised his dances in *Le
Chant* as a double mirror image, reversing movement on either side of the
perpendicular and addressing it to both the fictional audience—the
Emperor—and the real one beyond the footlights.

Tamara Geva, Balanchine’s teenage wife
in their Soviet days and performer in his
experimental works, told us how he used
the same hard-edged, gymnastic style in
*Le Chant du Rossignol*. She also recalled
that “Petrogradians were mad about jazz
and George made pocket money playing
ragtime and blues for cabarets and silent
 cinemas”. These passions, Geva said,
shaped the dances of the Mandarins and
other court figures in *Le Chant*.

Alexandra Danilova, the next love in the
young choreographer’s life, admired his
ingenuity in turning the Petipa
conventions they knew so well from the
imperial theatre into devices for his new
ballet. Her favourite, she confided to us, was Balanchine’s adapted Entrance
of the Shades from *La Bayadere* for his procession of Court Ladies when
they believe the Emperor has died.

The star role of *Le Chant* was created on fourteen-year-old Alicia Markova,
displeasing Danilova and other Ballets Russes principals Felia Doubrovska,
Alice Nikitina and Ninette de Valois. To appease them Balanchine embedded a \textit{pas de quatre} in the female corps, calling these dancers, endearingly, “the divas”. At the centre of the reconstruction is Markova’s solo as the Nightingale. In 1995 we worked with her and Nancy Reynolds of the George Balanchine Foundation on a video documentary of Dame Alicia teaching her role to a student dancer. At the time she related many anecdotes and details. Markova was as key to the reconstruction of her role as she had been to its creation seven decades earlier.

The intriguing character of Death in \textit{Le Chant} became progressively important in Balanchine’s version. Massine had made the original role on Lydia Sokolova whom Balanchine inherited for his own choreography. Once the chance came, however, Balanchine cast the long-limbed Doubrovska as Death and extended the choreography. We were able to document Balanchine’s rehearsals with Doubrovska in the notebooks of Diaghilev’s regisseur, Sergei Grigoriev, in the Dance Collection at Lincoln Center. Doubrovska once mentioned in conversation, years before our reconstruction, that her part in \textit{Le Chant} was a precursor to the Siren in \textit{Le Fils Prodigue}, which Balanchine created on her in 1929. Death’s stalking, predatory moves and her ambiguous sexuality belong to the archetypal \textit{femme fatale} of the 1920’s, and Geva said this sort of “Balanchine woman” owed something to the \textit{Salome} of his mentor, Kasyan Goleizovsky.

Yet Death was a rich role fro the outset, the result of Matisse’s research at the Musée Guimet in Paris as well as in London at the Victoria and Albert and British Museums. We followed in the artist’s tracks, discovering the figure of the Tibetan demi-goddess, the Red Dakini, from whom Matisse derived the dark scarlet of Death’s costume, her brass ribcage and the necklace of skulls.
which in Balanchine’s ballet is her undoing. The violence of the *pas de deux* shocked critics. In *Comoedia* on 22 June 1925, André Levinson recoiled as Death “put her foot on the spine of the frail and white Nightingale” but he was won over by what he deemed a new classicism in this Balanchine duet. Matisse found other treasures for *Le Chant* in the oriental collections. His costume for the Warriors is based on the guardian kings of Buddhist ritual who protected the cardinal points of sacred spaces. We were able to view in storage what we deduced the artist had seen at the Guimet—eighth century polychrome wooden sculptures retrieved from cave temples in western China. Matisse copied their armour and dragon-mouth sleeves, wigs, beards and even the terracotta of their skin. The Ballets Russes used body make-up in this colour, but for the reconstruction we accepted the suggestion of our costumier Jean-Michel Laine and gave the Warriors terracotta mesh sleeves.

Balanchine never had occasion to discuss sources with Matisse. Intuition must have made him transform the Warriors from the comic acrobats they are at the start of the ballet into otherworldly guardians trying to keep Death at bay. Death moves right through the protective shield of Warriors. Each time they just miss seeing her. Our rendering of the Warriors’ prelude to the duet of Death and the Nightingale is a synthesis of our Matisse studies and conversations with Illaria Obidennaia, a Court Lady in *Le Chant*, who remembered the complex Warrior role danced by her husband Marian Ladre.

The dramatic conflict in the original fairy tale, and even in Stravinsky’s opera, was the contest between the Nightingale, with her natural, healing song, and the high-tech entertainment of a mechanical bird brought to court as a gift to help the Emperor, who is evermore gravely ill. Balanchine made the Mechanical Nightingale—a role he did himself at the 1925 premiere—into a *tour de force* of choreographic wit, a kind of parody of his own angular modernity. A nine-year-old in the London audience never recovered from the spell of this dazzling character. Philip Dyer grew up to be a Ballets Russes expert and founding director of the Theatre Museum. The erratic gestures “really made him sparkle,” Dyer told us, reminiscing with the delighted satisfaction of youth.

Drawings by Millicent Hodson, Death striking the Nightingale’s spine and Death invisible to one of the Warriors.
In 1923 Balanchine proposed to the Mariinsky that he choreograph *Le Sacre du Printemps*, which would have been his first Stravinsky project, preceding *Le Chant* by two years. The Mariinsky rejected the proposal. Nijinsky’s original choreography from a decade before was already a legend and Stravinsky’s music was rarely heard in Russia. But *Sacre* was on Balanchine’s mind in that period and he seems to have found the pathos of the Chosen One in the Nightingale, who in his version of the story, expires from the effort of vanquishing Death.

The crux of the tale for Balanchine was the power struggle over the Emperor’s life. In Stravinsky’s opera and Massine’s ballet, Death is charmed out of victory by the Nightingale. Not so in the work of Balanchine, straight off the streets of Petrograd, where, as Danilova reminded us, “Death was all around, even when you did not see it.”