

Adolphe Adam,
Master of the
Romantic Ballet,
1830-1856

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By

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and Nicholas Lester Fuller

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Adolphe-Charles Adam. Daguerreotype by Pierre Petit (1856)

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26. Adam *Le Corsaire* Valse
27. *Le Corsaire* Russian Version 1899
28. Margot Fonteyn and Rudolf Nureyev in the *Drigo* Pas de Deux
29. *Le Corsaire* recording Richard Bonyngé (Decca, 1990)
30. *Le Corsaire* piano score Northern Lira
31. Adam portrait
32. Adam portrait

INTRODUCTION

Adolphe-Charles Adam (1809-1856) is best known as the composer of *Giselle* (1841). But he wrote 14 ballet scores, and albeit without the full recognition he deserves, decisively influenced the development of the musical theatre of the 19th century. His work marks the first highpoint of the Romantic ballet, after the pioneering work of Louis-Ferdinand Hérold (with *La Somnambule* 1827 and *La Fille mal gardée* 1828). The actual creation of the Romantic ballet of moonlight and ambiguous magic came in the Act-3 *Ballet des Nonnes* in Meyerbeer's *Robert le Diable* (1831). This hugely important development was clinched by *La Sylphide* (1832), with a scenario by Adolphe Nourrit and choreography by Filippo Taglioni whose daughter created the principal roles in both works, and came to epitomize the new school of aerial grace, of night and dreams. Hérold was considered a serious composer of opera. Jean-Madeleine Schneitzhoeffter wrote a full-scale score uniquely tailored to the demands and mood of the scenario with its interaction of the real and the supernatural worlds, of goodness destroyed by evil magic, against a romantic background of Scottish folklore. Nevertheless, ballet music was still considered a secondary genre, subservient to the dance, and inferior to the symphonic form. But it was largely due to Adam that this genre came to boast both charming melodic and rhythmical features and complex musical structures.

Adam was the son of a famous pianist, Jean-Louis Adam (1758-1848), and attained his worldwide popularity as a composer of *opéra-comique*, noted for their melodic wealth, fluency and high-spiritedness. But he was also the author of symphonic music, cantatas, masses, vocal and instrumental music, choral pieces and both instrumental and orchestral arrangements. His 14 ballet scores were both reflective of the heritage of the age and also the vector of transformation to a new type of more substantial, symphonic and formally complex score that found its most familiar expression in the works of Léo Delibes, Ludwig Minkus, Peter Illych Tchaikovsky and Alexander Glazunov.

After working in the Parisian vaudeville theatres and graduating from the Conservatoire, life was disturbed for Adam by the 1830 Revolution and the later outbreak of cholera. He sought refuge in London with his brother-in-law Pierre Laporte. Here he wrote his first ballet *Faust* (ch. Deshayes,

1833) for the Royal Opera at Covent Garden. His first major contribution to the Romantic ballet came with *La Fille du Danube* (ch. F. Taglioni, 1836), a supernatural undine (water nymph) story written for Marie Taglioni, and a great success. Both scenario and music look forward to *Giselle*. This was followed by *Les Mohicans* (ch. A. Guerra, 1837), a North American tale of British soldiers and Native Americans based on Fennimore Cooper's novel, which did not appeal for a variety of reasons.

Invited by Marie Taglioni and Tsar Nicholas I to St Petersburg, Adam wrote *L'Écumeur de mer* (ch. F. Taglioni, 1840), a story of Greek pirates that anticipated his last ballet *Le Corsaire* on a similar theme. On his way back to France, Adam stopped off in Berlin, and at the request of King Frederick William III, wrote and produced an opera-ballet *Die Hamadryaden* (ch. P. Taglioni, 1840), this time featuring the sylphs of the trees, and again starring Marie Taglioni.

The return to France ushered in the most fruitful and inventive period of Adam's dance composition. He produced the masterpiece *Giselle, ou Les Wilis* (ch. J. Coralli and J. Perrot, 1841) based on the Germanic-Slavonic legend of young brides who die before their wedding days and return at night as phantoms to haunt and destroy perfidious men. It featured the new sensational star Carlotta Grisi and the famous Lucien Petipa in the principal roles. The work, with its wonderfully delicate and integrated score, is still considered the very essence of the Romantic ballet. It spread rapidly all over the world: first produced in London, St Petersburg and Vienna (1842), in Berlin and Milan (1843), and in Boston (1846). It became the principal display piece for ballerinas of all future generations, and also offered a complex virtuoso role for the male dancer. This was followed in rapid succession by *La Jolie Fille de Gand* (ch. Albert, 1842), a realistic story with dream sequence, one of the most sumptuous productions ever mounted by the Paris Opéra, again with Grisi and Petipa. Next came Adam's masterpiece of danced comedy, *Le Diable à quatre* (ch. J. Mazilier, 1845), with Grisi and Petipa in double dual roles of Polish aristocrats and peasants.

Adam now returned to London to provide *The Marble Maiden* (ch. Albert, 1845) for Drury Lane, an adaptation of the Greek legend of Psyche, with Adèle Dumilâtre and Lucien Petipa. His return to Paris saw the efflorescence of the composer's art in a succession of brilliant works: *Griseldis, ou Les Cinq Sens* (ch. Mazilier, 1848), a love quest moving from Bohemia to Moldova, with Grisi and Petipa, a brilliant production sadly interrupted by the 1848 Revolution. *La Filleule des fées* (composed

with H. F. de Saint-Julien, ch. J. Mazilier, 1849), a story of good and bad fairies and a christening party that would influence Tchaikovsky's *Sleeping Beauty*. The work contained sensational transformation scenes, and again featured Grisi and Petipa.

The last years of Adam's life saw the composition of *Orfa* (ch. J. Mazilier, 1853), an unusual Icelandic legend about the transition from the dispensation of the old gods under Loki to a new era presided over by Odin, starring this time Fanny Cerito and Petipa, with a brilliant compact score. Adam's last ballet was *Le Corsaire* (ch. J. Mazilier, 1856), based on Byron's long poem of piracy in the Aegean, the ultimate rescue plot, with epic scenes of slave market, pirate cave, harem and seascape. The principal roles were taken by Carolina Rosati and the great mime artist Segarelli. The production featured a sensational tempest and shipwreck engineered with technical bravura by the mechanist Victor Sacré. The scenario stimulated Adam to his most tremendous dance score, full of melody, rhythmic propulsion, passion and symphonic amplitude, rising to glorious heights in the final scenes. This work was revived in Paris in 1867 (with interpolation by Delibes) and in Russia in 1899. It has recently enjoyed great modern popularity, albeit with a score only partially by Adam.

Adam's music was steeped in the style and mood of contemporary opera—both the smooth, song-like *bel canto cantilena* and the melodic vigour and drama of *opéra-comique*, all invested in his own powerful control of instrumentation and orchestral sonority. He used systems of recurring motifs in his best scores and studiously avoided borrowing from others and from himself. Each score is further tailored to the mood and style of its fictional world. Adam set new standards of musical integrity in the composition of his scores, and provided a challenging model for all composers who worked in this genre after his death. His 14 ballets scores are a treasure trove proffering extraordinary musical delight.

**THE BALLETS
OF ADOLPHE-CHARLES ADAM**

1. *LA CHATTE BLANCHE/THE WHITE CAT*

- Pantomime-Ballet in 2 acts
- Scenario: English popular theatre
- Choreography: unknown
- Music: Adolphe Adam and Casimir Gide
- Scenery: unknown
- First performance: Paris, Théâtre des Nouveautés 26 July 1830

This “English pantomime” was Adam’s first ballet but, Pougin notes, was almost never performed at all, due to the July Revolution.¹

On 28 April 1830, Adam produced his second pastiche at the Théâtre des Nouveautés. It was called *Rafaël*, with the text by Théaulon. The three-act work used music taken from Bellini, Winter, Mercadante, and Haydn. The piece, of a strongly Gothic nature, obtained only a mediocre success. At the same time, Adam took the first steps along the path that would lead him to great success in his career: the composition of ballet. He wrote the music for *The White Cat / La Chatte blanche*, an English pantomime to be given at the theatre. He worked in collaboration with Casimir Gide, who was making his debut as a composer. This was a bad time, however, politically speaking. The horizon was darkening, and the storm burst with the Revolution of July. Stage production was rendered all but impossible. In any case, the Minister would not give his permission for the work to be mounted, as it exceeded the privilege granted to the Nouveautés. (Parisian theatres could only perform certain genres, according to government decree. The Nouveautés specialised in ballads, *opéras-comiques*, satires, and political plays.) However, the directors obtained direct permission from King Charles X to present a few scenes at Saint-Cloud to entertain the Duc de Bordeaux and the young Orléans princes. These were enchanted by the striking footwork exchanges between the Clown and Pantalón. After the ministerial ban was lifted, the first full presentation took place on 26 July 1830. The next day, Charles X published the July Ordinances, suspending the liberty of the press, dissolving the Chamber of Deputies, and excluding the middle-class from future elections—among other measures. The barricades went up, so the second performance of *La Chatte* did not immediately take place. But the work was taken up again

later, and eventually reached some 100 performances. The papers reported that the Théâtre des Nouveautés would mount a benefit concert for the families of those killed during the upheaval of 27, 28, and 29 July. The programmes contained the spectacle *Sir Jack* and the second performance of *La Chatte blanche*. During the interval, the orchestra played the *Marseillaise*. Prices were not raised, and other theatres followed the lead of the Nouveautés with similar benefit performances—notably the Théâtre-Français.²

Notes

¹ Pougin, *Adolphe Adam*, p. 75.

² Le théâtre des Nouveautés donnera ce soir une représentation au bénéfice des familles des citoyens tués ou blessés dans les journées des 27, 28 et 29 juillet. Le spectacle se composera de *Sir Jack* et de la deuxième représentation de *la Chatte blanche*, *Le Figaro*, 2nd August 1830. Dans l'entr'acte, l'orchestre exécutera *la Marseillaise*. Le prix des places ne sera pas augmenté. Plusieurs autres théâtres, notamment le Théâtre-Français, donneront demain de semblables représentations. Tous les autres suivront sans doute cet exemple.

2. *FAUST*

- Ballet in 3 acts
- Scenario: Pierre Laporte
- Choreography: André-Jean-Jacques Deshayes
- Music: Adolphe Adam
- Scenery: William Grieve
- First performance: London, the King's Theatre, 26 February 1833
- Principal dancers:
 - Albert (François Decombe)
 - Jules Perrot
 - Antoine-Louis Coulon
 - Pauline Leroux
 - Pauline Montessu

Adam's sojourn in London lasted nine months. He returned to Paris to assist at the premiere of *Le Pré aux clercs* (15 December 1832). Thanks to the intervention of Hérold, he was reconciled with his family. While in London, Adam's brother-in-law, Pierre Laporte, had taken over the management of the King's Theatre. He gave Adam the scenario for a big ballet in three acts which Adam set to music while still in Paris.

The ballet was called *Faust*, and had been devised by the author and dancer André-Jean-Jacques Deshayes (1777-1846). The work was based on Goethe's *Faust*, into which, *The Times* noted, Deshayes had "interwoven several scenes from that extraordinary piece of diablerie, *La Tentation* [music by Halévy], which created so strong an interest a few months ago in Paris". This included the scene where an army of demons descends an enormous staircase.

Adam worked assiduously and left for London on 21 January 1833, having completed the score. Rehearsals began immediately, with Albert in the title role. The premiere was on 16 February, and the work was performed until early March. Adam noted that it enjoyed great success, especially the music.¹ Some of the score was used again when he came to write *Giselle* many years later. The original score appears to be lost.