

**America in the Transatlantic Imagination:
The Ballets Russes and John Alden Carpenter's *Skyscrapers***

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Abstract/Résumé

During its twenty-year lifespan, the Ballets Russes (1909 to 1929) was celebrated for bringing together illustrious artistic and cultural figures to collaborate on exotic productions based on Russian, Spanish, English and French themes. Notable by its absence from the Ballets Russes' exotic interests is the culture and music of America, and this despite that during the 1920s Americans culture was a source of fascination and unease in the European cultural imagination. The Ballets Russes' impresario, Serge Diaghilev, is recognized as holding the culture of the New World in disdain, yet nonetheless commissioned a "typically American" ballet score from Chicago composer John Alden Carpenter in 1923, which resulted in a score featuring a skyscraper-inspired machine aesthetic, and the inclusion of jazz and spirituals. Carpenter's ballet was dropped by the Ballets Russes before production and was ultimately premiered as *Skyscrapers: A Ballet of Modern American Life* by the Metropolitan Opera Company on 19 February 1926.

This thesis seeks to better understand Diaghilev's perceived disdain for American culture, the reasons that caused him to avoid the inclusion of an American ballet in the Ballets Russes' repertory, and his motives for commissioning a score from Carpenter. Drawing on archival documents from the Library of Congress, I construct a historical narrative of the commission and offer insight into the complex politics of patronage in the Ballets Russes. Furthermore, I position *Skyscrapers* as a product of cultural transfer, thus illustrating the manner in which Carpenter conceived of his ballet as an American work for an international audience. Finally, I examine the Metropolitan production of *Skyscrapers* and how it perpetuated racial stereotypes and participated in the debates about the mechanization of American life during the 1920s.

Au cours de son existence les Ballets Russes (1909-1929) ont été célébrés pour avoir rassemblé des figures artistiques et culturelles illustres afin de produire des productions exotiques sur des thèmes russes, espagnols, anglais et français. Notable par son absence des intérêts exotiques des Ballets Russes est la culture et la musique des États Unis, et ce malgré le fait que durant les années 1920 l'Amérique était une source de fascination et de malaise dans l'imaginaire culturel européen. L'impresario des Ballets Russes, Serge Diaghilev, est reconnu pour avoir cultivé peu d'intérêt pour la culture et la musique du Nouveau Monde; néanmoins il a tout de même passé une commande en 1923 pour un ballet "typiquement américain" au compositeur de Chicago, John Alden Carpenter. Ce ballet intègre une esthétique de mécanisation inspirée des gratte-ciels et incorpore des références aux genres du jazz et du spiritual afro-américain. Le ballet de Carpenter n'a pas été monté par les Ballets Russes et a finalement été créé le 18 février 1926 sous le titre *Skyscrapers: A Ballet of Modern American Life* par le Metropolitan Opera Company.

Cette thèse vise à mieux comprendre l'attitude de Diaghilev envers la culture américaine, les raisons qui l'ont poussé à vouloir inclure un ballet sur des thèmes américains dans le répertoire des Ballets Russes, et enfin les motivations qui sous-tendent sa commande à Carpenter. S'appuyant sur des documents d'archives de la Library of Congress, je reconstitue l'historique de la commande et offre un aperçu de la politique complexe au sein des Ballets Russes. En outre, je positionne *Skyscrapers* comme un produit de transfert culturel, illustrant ainsi la manière dont Carpenter a conçu son ballet comme une œuvre américaine pour un public international. Enfin, j'examine la production newyorkaise de *Skyscrapers*, sa tendance à perpétuer des stéréotypes raciaux et la façon dont elle participait aux débats entourant la mécanisation de la vie américaine dans les années 1920.

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Introduction

During the twenty-year lifespan of the Ballets Russes (1909 to 1929), the famous ballet company was celebrated for bringing together illustrious figures of art and culture to collaborate on exotic productions. The Ballets Russes' repertory included spectacles based on stories and myths derived from several national cultures that were served by scores equally inspired by national styles and origins: *Le tricorne* (1919) composed by Manuel de Falla was based on a the nineteenth-century Spanish novella entitled *El sombrero de tres picos*, Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* was given a surrealist spin to music by British composer Constant Lambert in 1926, Jean Cocteau and Erik Satie engaged with Parisian popular culture in the landmark 1917 production of *Parade*, Igor Stravinsky's early ballets (*L'oiseau de feu*, 1909; *Pétrouchka*, 1911; *Le sacre du printemps*, 1913 and *Les noces*, 1923) assimilated Russian folk-material, and finally, Soviet Russia was evoked in Serge Prokofiev's *Le pas d'acier* of 1926. Notable by its absence in the Ballets Russes' exotic subjects is an American ballet, and this despite that during the 1920s American culture was a source of fascination and unease for the European cultural imagination. The impresario of the Ballets Russes, Serge Diaghilev (1872-1929), is often recognized as holding New World culture in disdain, and yet, in 1923 he *did* commission a "typically American" ballet score from Chicago composer John Alden Carpenter (1876-1951), which resulted in a score featuring a skyscraper-inspired machine aesthetic, jazz and spirituals. Carpenter's ballet was dropped by the Ballets Russes before production and was instead premiered by the Metropolitan Opera Company in New York City as *Skyscrapers: A Ballet of Modern American Life* on 19 February 1926, based on the themes of America at work and play.

In this thesis I seek to better contextualize Diaghilev's commission to Carpenter by reevaluating the impresario's opinion of American culture; by examining possible motives that

would have prompted him to want to produce an American ballet; and by outlining how Carpenter's compositional career caught the attention of Diaghilev and influenced the impresario's decision to commission an American for a ballet for the Ballets Russes. I also examine the score Carpenter wrote for Diaghilev in terms of transatlantic networks and the notion of cultural transfer (as an American ballet conceived for an international audience), as well as discuss how the Metropolitan production of *Skyscrapers* may be viewed in the context of contemporaneous debates about the perpetuation of racial stereotypes and the mechanization of American life in the 1920s.

Ballet is an interdisciplinary art and thus necessitates an interdisciplinary approach, particularly when discussing ballet of a high-collaborative nature like the Ballets Russes. This thesis draws on sources from the fields of dance, literature, and fine arts as a means of better understanding Carpenter's music in relationship to the institutional and artistic constraints of the genre, as well as the particular cultural forces and social networks at work within the Ballets Russes.

This thesis draws upon materials located in the John Alden Carpenter Collection housed at the Music Division of the Library of Congress in Washington D.C.¹ This collection contains many of Carpenter's scores in various states of completion, photographs, scrapbooks, programs and a wealth of correspondence. Letters Carpenter wrote to Ellen Borden (his mistress during the time *Skyscrapers* was commissioned and composed, and who he would marry in 1933 after his first-wife's death) contained in this collection are invaluable for piecing together the narrative of the commission from Diaghilev during the composer's trip abroad in 1923. Additional archival

¹ John Alden Carpenter Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington D.C. These letters, as well as other material from the Carpenter collection, will be referenced in proceeding footnotes as "C-DLC."

materials from the Adolph Bolm Collection and Serge Diaghilev/Serge Lifar collection at the Library of Congress are also referenced in this thesis.²

Literature Review

There has been extensive literature published about the Ballets Russes and its impresario. The large body of work by dance historian Lynn Garafola dominates Ballets Russes scholarship; her numerous articles approach the company from a variety of perspectives, and her monograph *Diaghilev's Ballets Russes*, which outlines in three sections the “art,” “enterprise,” and “audience” of the ballet company, is widely referenced.³ In this book, Garafola coins the term “lifestyle modernism” to describe the popular trend of representing an elevated “everyday” in the arts, which has been taken up in proceeding literature, notably Richard Taruskin’s *Music in the Early Twentieth Century*, and is adopted in this thesis.⁴

For Diaghilev’s personal and professional life, I have turned primarily to Richard Buckle’s book *Diaghilev*, which chronologically outlines Diaghilev’s life and career, as well as *Diaghilev: A Life* by Sjeng Scheijen, which focuses on Diaghilev’s personal life and relationships.⁵ A collection of essays edited by Garafola and Nancy Van Norman Baer looks into particular aspects of Diaghilev’s life and the Ballets Russes, and contains a useful appendix of every opera and ballet produced by Diaghilev (the chapter “Adolph Bolm in America” by Suzanne Carbonneau is referenced in this thesis).⁶ *Diaghilev and the Golden Age of the Ballets Russes 1909-1929*, edited by Jane Prichard and published by the Victoria and Albert Museum of

² Adolph Bolm Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.; Serge Diaghilev/Serge Lifar Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C. Materials from these collections will be referenced as “B-DLC” and “D-DLC,” respectively.

³ Lynn Garafola, *Diaghilev's Ballets Russes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 115; Richard Taruskin, *Music in the Early Twentieth Century: The Oxford History of Western Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).

⁵ Richard Buckle, *Diaghilev* (New York: Atheneum, 1979); Sjeng Scheijen, *Diaghilev: A Life*, trans. Jane Hedley-Prôle and S.J. Leinbach (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

⁶ Lynn Garafola and Nancy Van Norman Baer, ed. *The Ballets Russes and Its World* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

London (which houses many Ballets Russes artifacts), contains several colour photographs of scenery, costumes, sketches and photos from their Ballets Russes collection, as well as timelines of important events, productions, and tours of the company.⁷

Valuable information about Diaghilev and his ballet company is found in the memoirs of those who worked directly with the impresario. Memoirs of Ballets Russes dancers, such as Tamara Geva (1907-1997), Lydia Sokolova (1896-1974) and Alice Nikitina (1904-1978), provide insight into the hierarchical relationships within the ballet and contain descriptions of Diaghilev's complex character.⁸ Books written by Léonide Massine (1896-1979), the Ballets Russes' main choreographer from 1915 to 1921, and writings by *premier danseur* Serge Lifar (1905-1986), who was with the ballet for the last years of Diaghilev's life, contain memories by men who were exceptionally close to the impresario both professionally and personally.⁹ The composers who wrote music for the Ballets Russes also remember Diaghilev and their activities with the company in published sources, including Vernon Duke (also known as Vladimir Dukelsky) (1903-1969), Darius Milhaud (1892-1974), Serge Prokofiev (1891-1953) and Nicolas Nabokov (1903-1978).¹⁰ Edward L. Bernays (1891-1995), the publicist of the Ballets Russes' 1916 American tour, provides insight into the impresario's first and only visit to the New World in his autobiography, which is beneficial in any discussion concerning Diaghilev's reaction to

⁷ Jane Pritchard, ed. *Diaghilev and the Golden Age of the Ballets Russes* (London: V&A Publishing, 2010).

⁸ Tamara Geva, *Split Seconds: A Remembrance* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972); Lydia Sokolova, *Dancing for Diaghilev*, ed. Richard Buckle (San Francisco: Mercury House, 1960); Alice Nikitina, *Nikitina: By Herself*, trans. Baroness Budberg (London: Allan Wingate, 1959).

⁹ Léonide Massine, *My Life in Ballet*, ed. Phyllis Hartnoll and Robert Rubens (London: Macmillan, 1968); Serge Lifar, *Serge Diaghilev, His Life, His Work, His Legend* (New York: De Capo, 1940).

¹⁰ Vernon Duke, *Passport to Paris* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1955); Darius Milhaud, *Notes Without Music: An Autobiography*, trans. Donald Evans (New York: De Capo, 1970); Sergei Prokofiev, *Sergey Prokofiev Diaries 1915-1923: Behind the Mask*, ed. trans. Anthony Phillips (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013); Nicolas Nabokov, *Old Friends and New Music* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1974).

and understanding of America.¹¹ Boris Kochno (1904-1980), who created a handful of librettos for the Ballets Russes and acted as Diaghilev's personal assistant (and with whom he shared intimate relations as well), published the book *Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes*.¹² This source discusses the Ballets Russes' feature productions chronologically, and contains pictures and transcriptions of letters the impresario had sent to him, all of which have proved valuable to this thesis. Through these sources we may read intimate, unfiltered remembrances of the inner-workings of the Ballets Russes that only those who had experienced it directly could convey.

Of all the sources surrounding Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes (and of which this literature review only provides a sampling), few mention Diaghilev's commission to Carpenter. In a footnote in *Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes*, Garafola briefly uses Carpenter's commission to illustrate the seriousness of a forthcoming American tour, however she does not discuss the relevance of the commission in terms of the Ballets Russes artistic aesthetic.¹³ In "Adolph Bolm in America," Suzanne Carbonneau discusses the ex-Ballets Russes dancer's collaborations with Carpenter, and mentions in a footnote Carpenter as being the "only American composer with whom Diaghilev ever considered working."¹⁴ Buckle describes Carpenter as someone "who kept bothering" Diaghilev to stage one of his ballets, when the impresario had indeed requested it.¹⁵

In the monograph *Prokofiev's Ballets for Diaghilev*, Stephen D. Press includes a brief discussion of the commission of *Skyscrapers* to set up a discussion of its seminal influence on Prokofiev's ballet *Le pas d'acier*. Press writes that Diaghilev's commission to Carpenter was a

¹¹ Edward L. Bernays, *Biography of an Idea: Memoirs of Public Relations Counsel* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965).

¹² Boris Kochno, *Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes*, trans. Adrienne Foulke (New York: Harper and Row, 1970).

¹³ Garafola, *Diaghilev's Ballets Russes*, 457n26. Garafola mistakes the year of Diaghilev's commission to Carpenter as 1924, when according to a letter Carpenter wrote to Ellen, Diaghilev requested the score on 5 July 1923.

¹⁴ Suzanne Carbonneau, "Adolph Bolm in America," in *The Ballets Russes and Its World*, ed. Lynn Garafola and Nancy Van Norman Baer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 377n17.

¹⁵ Buckle, *Diaghilev*, 463.

misunderstanding: that, “he had not actually received a commission.”¹⁶ In my thesis, I argue against Press’s interpretation and claim that Diaghilev’s request for a score to Carpenter was sincere.

The most extensive conversation about the commission and production of *Skyscrapers* appears in a monograph by American music specialist Howard Pollack, *John Alden Carpenter: A Chicago Composer*, a 2001 republished edition of Pollack’s *Skyscraper Lullaby: The Life and Music of John Alden Carpenter* (1994).¹⁷ Pollack’s book is the only study devoted to the career of Carpenter, and contains two chapters dedicated to *Skyscrapers*: “The Making of *Skyscrapers*,” and “The Reception of *Skyscrapers*.” Much of the biographical information and aspects of Carpenter’s career in the periphery of *Skyscrapers* mentioned in this thesis stems from this source; however my work on *Skyscrapers* and Carpenter’s associations with the Ballets Russes aims to complement the absence of this discussion in Pollack’s research. In his book, Pollack constructs the narrative of the commissioning process of *Skyscrapers* primarily from Carpenter’s perspective. Pollack does, however, ask questions regarding Diaghilev’s motive for the commission and why it was ultimately abandoned, yet their answers lay outside the scope of his book. As such, Pollack does not address the significance of the commission in the chronology of the Ballets Russes and how it reflects on Diaghilev’s relationship with the New World, nor does he point to the composer’s compositional career, at least his compositions in ballet, as being influenced by the Ballets Russes. In this thesis, by examining Carpenter’s career and the commission and composition of *Skyscrapers* in relation to the Ballets Russes, I seek to answer some of Pollack’s proposed questions and understand more fully the politics surrounding Diaghilev’s only American commission. Additionally, Pollack chooses to avoid a critical

¹⁶ Stephen D. Press, *Prokofiev’s Ballets for Diaghilev* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 223.

¹⁷ Howard Pollack, *John Alden Carpenter: A Chicago Composer* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995).

examination of Carpenter's appropriation of African-American culture in *Skyscrapers*, nor does he comment on the statement on American life suggested in the scenario of the ballet. In my thesis, I address these difficult issues by proposing that the ballet both perpetuates racial stereotypes and participates in the contemporaneous debate on the mechanization of American life.

There exists an abundant literature discussing the role and nature of Modernism in Europe during the early twentieth century. When using the term "Modernism" in this thesis, I adhere to the definition proposed by musicologist Richard Taruskin: "[Modernism] asserts the superiority of the present over the past (and, by implication, of the future over the present), with all that that implies in terms of optimism and faith in progress."¹⁸ When speaking of "highbrow" and "lowbrow" distinctions, I have accepted the predisposed cultural hierarchies commonly recognized in studies of twentieth century culture, such as Lawrence W. Levine's *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*.¹⁹ Consequently, as Levine points out, what constituted "lowbrow" culture is that which was "actively and regularly shared by all segments of the population," thus, popular entertainments, such as jazz/ragtime and popular songs, and the entertainments featured in vaudeville and music halls are typically considered "lowbrow."²⁰ Conversely, exclusive, "legitimate" culture stemming from or maintaining European traditions of the rich and powerful are deemed "high brow," or "high art."

What constituted "jazz" in the 1920s was interchangeable, as Nicholas M. Evans has explained in *Writing Jazz: Race, Nationalism and Modern Culture in the 1920s*, "from World War I into the 1920s, the lines separating what we now call jazz, ragtime, Tin Pan Ally,

¹⁸ Richard Taruskin, *Music in the Early Twentieth Century*, 1.

¹⁹ Lawrence W. Levine, *Highbrow/Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988).

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 234.

vaudeville music, and other relevant forms were quite unclear.”²¹ This thesis does not intend to study specific nuances in the musical language of any piece of music, but instead is interested in the cultural connotations (race and nationalism) that surrounded the music that was considered to be “jazz” during this period. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, I apply the methods of David Savran in *Highbrow/Lowdown: Theatre, Jazz, and the Making of the New Middle Class* and Jeffery H. Jackson in *Making Jazz French: Music and Modern Life in Interwar Paris* of using the term “jazz” for all music that was regarded as such, regardless of who may have written or played it.²² One exception to this general approach is my discussion of ragtime in Carpenter’s score for *Skyscrapers*, in which “ragtime” is viewed according to the precise characteristics that define the genre in contemporary scholarship.

Chapter Outline

The first chapter of the thesis (“The New World, Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes”) surveys Diaghilev’s opinion of America in order to prepare the reader for themes and issues that arise in Chapter 2. I demonstrate Diaghilev’s opinion of America as a country unable to appreciate the refinements of his ballet by discussing the impresario’s reaction to the controversies that aroused during the Ballets Russes 1916 American tour. I also propose that Diaghilev’s avoidance of American imports in the Ballets Russes was due to their “lowbrow” associations, and his resistance to the culture of the New World derived from his belief that it constituted a threat to European high art. I conclude the chapter by discussing the problematic nature of the ballet *Parade* (1917) in my characterization of Diaghilev and his artistic values.

²¹ Nicholas M. Evans, *Writing Jazz: Race, Nationalism and Modern Culture in the 1920s* (New York: Garland, 2000), 120.

²² David Savran, *Highbrow/Lowdown: Theatre, Jazz, and the Making of the New Middle Class* (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 2009), 27; Jeffery H. Jackson, *Making Jazz French: Music and Modern Life in Interwar Paris* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 10.

Chapter 2 (“Diaghilev’s American ‘Episode:’ John Alden Carpenter and *Skyscrapers*”) serves to reconstruct the historical narrative that led to the commission by Diaghilev of a “typically American” ballet from Carpenter, and to better understand the ultimate dismissal of Carpenter’s ensuing ballet score. The chapter provides a brief overview of Carpenter’s compositional career leading up to the commission, and emphasizes how the composer’s early career, particularly his first two ballets *The Birthday of the Infanta* (1917) and *Krazy Kat: A Jazz Pantomime* (1922), was shaped by the exotic and modernist aesthetics associated with the Ballets Russes. I rely on Carpenter’s correspondence to his mistress Ellen Borden as well as written accounts from figures in the Ballets Russes entourage to piece together the narrative of the commission from multiple perspectives. I challenge Stephen D. Press’ notion that the commission was a misunderstanding on the part of Carpenter and claim that it may be viewed as a strategic move by Diaghilev that may be understood for both financial and artistic reasons. The chapter closes with a discussion of why *Skyscrapers* was ultimately not produced by the Ballets Russes, concluding that Carpenter was merely an “episode” in the Diaghilev’s creative plan.

In Chapter 3 (“America at Work and Play: *Skyscrapers* and Jazz”) I discuss the ballet score Carpenter composed for Diaghilev and the ensuing production by the Metropolitan Opera Company in 1926. In Carpenter’s score, I highlight how the incorporation of both American and European aesthetics and musical idioms is the result of transatlantic cultural transfer, a phenomenon Annegret Fauser and Mark Everist have defined as “the migration of sets of practices or cultural materials from one geographical location to another.”²³ I critically examine the Metropolitan production of *Skyscrapers* as a collaboration between Carpenter, set and costume designer Robert Edmond Jones (1887-1954), and Broadway choreographer Sammy Lee

²³ Annegret Fauser and Mark Everist, *Stage Music and Cultural Transfer: Paris 1830-1914* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 6.

(1890-1968), and propose that the ballet participated in the perpetuation of degrading racial stereotypes while also constituting an artistic statement regarding the mechanization of contemporary American life. I include photos of the *Skyscrapers* production by the Munich National Opera in 1928 to support the conversation around the setting designs; although the designs are not from the Metropolitan production discussed in this thesis, the settings were very much influenced by the original backdrops, and thus supports the discussion contained in this chapter.²⁴

In the final chapter, I summarize the ideas presented in this thesis, and discuss how the Ballets Russes continued to shape Carpenter's career after *Skyscrapers* by the founding of the Chicago Allied Arts and his continuing interest in the ballet genre.

²⁴ Photographs of Jones' set designs for the Metropolitan production are published in Deems Taylor, "America's First Dramatic Composer," *McCalls Magazine*, April, 1922, 23.

CHAPTER 1

The New World, Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes

Many historians have concluded that the absence of an American ballet in the Ballets Russes repertoire is the result of Diaghilev's personal disdain for popular American cultural imports that were in vogue in Europe during the first half of the twentieth century. Surely, the numerous anecdotes relating Diaghilev's critique of American culture that figure prominently in this discussion (such as Boris Kochno's claim that the impresario had a "horror of jazz") has bolstered this idea throughout Ballets Russes scholarship.²⁵ However, at a time when America had grown to become an emerging cultural force in much of Europe, Diaghilev's feelings towards the New World, like those of many Europeans, were conflicted and complex. This chapter seeks to clarify and better understand the impresario's opinion of America and its culture in order to prepare the reader for themes and issues that arise during the discussion of Diaghilev's commission to Carpenter and the ultimate abandonment of his score in Chapter 2 of this thesis.

An examination of the negotiations between Diaghilev and the Metropolitan Opera Company for the Ballets Russes' American tours of 1916 and 1917, and the impresario's reaction to the controversy regarding the morality of two ballet productions, provides important information about Diaghilev's opinion of America. Through a reading of his correspondence and the recollections of those closest to him it emerges that Diaghilev viewed Americans as being unable to appreciate the productions of his troupe, although he nonetheless viewed tours of America as a crucial, albeit, last-resort option for keeping his enterprise financially afloat. These

²⁵ Boris Kochno, *Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes*, trans. Adrienne Foulke (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 222; For example, "[Carpenter] was apparently unaware of the impresario's aversion to jazz to say nothing of his dislike of American music in general," in Stephen D. Press, *Prokofiev's Ballets for Diaghilev* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 223.

documents also reveal that Diaghilev found American culture amusing, but vulgar, and therefore not appropriate for the high-art status he championed with the Ballets Russes. Furthermore, Diaghilev viewed the culture and economy of America as a threatening to European art traditions and his ballet. Taken together, these negative appreciations of the New World help explain why he was so apprehensive, even unwilling, to include an American ballet in the repertory of the Ballets Russes.

“A Most Idiotic Affair:” The Ballets Russes America Tours

The Metropolitan Opera Company had tried to contractually engage the Ballets Russes for an American tour as early as 1910 (only one year after the ballet’s first Parisian season), but it was not until the financial trials prompted by World War I that Diaghilev finally agreed to embark on the transatlantic journey.²⁶ Ballets Russes dancer Lydia Sokolova confirmed, “nothing but the desperate extremes of war could have made Diaghilev go to America,” and choreographer Léonide Massine recalled, “Diaghilev would have much preferred to be embarking on his usual seasons in Paris and London... he had only consented to go through with this ambitious undertaking because of the difficult situation created in Europe by the war.”²⁷ Diaghilev’s phobia of water may have also contributed to his apprehensions about bringing the Ballets Russes to America before the war, for as conductor Ernest Ansermet (1883-1969) recalled, “He was so afraid of the water, of crossing the ocean, that it made him feel antagonistic, coming to [America].”²⁸ Fear of drowning aside, it seems that Diaghilev’s skepticism towards American audiences, which in his mind were more accustomed to the fares of the music hall than to the art of the ballet, weighed heavily on his decision. William J. Guard (1862-1932), a press

²⁶ Lynn Garafola, *Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 213.

²⁷ Lydia Sokolova, *Dancing for Diaghilev*, ed. Richard Buckle (San Francisco: Mercury House, 1960), 72; Léonide Massine, *My Life in Ballet*, ed. Phyllis Hartnoll and Robert Rubens (London: Macmillan, 1968), 79.

²⁸ Edward L. Bernays, *Biography of an Idea: Memoirs of Public Relations Counsel* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965), 126.

representative of the Metropolitan Opera Company recalls that during contract negotiations the impresario asserted, “this is not a ‘show’ that I am going to take to America. It is an art exposition,” and Sokolova recalled Diaghilev as “doubtful that the New World had much to teach him or if it would be capable of appreciating the refinements of his repertory.”²⁹

Diaghilev was correct in concluding that the New World did not possess the long-standing balletic traditions of countries like Russia, France and Italy. The dance that prevailed in America during the first decades of the twentieth-century was primarily performed in “lowbrow” settings of vaudeville and dancehalls, and featured tap, stepping, interpretive, hula, and ballroom among other popular styles that “existed to titillate, decorate, or entertain, never to edify.”³⁰ What America learned of ballet was through foreign (usually Russian) ballet stars, notably the Mariinsky trained Anna Pavlova (1881-1931), who first appeared in America in 1910 and toured the country almost annually for the next fifteen years.³¹ In America there were few opportunities to learn classical ballet technique, and certainly no established American ballet tradition. It was not until 1909 that the Metropolitan Opera instituted America’s first dance school under the direction of Italian ballerina Malvina Cavallazzi (1862-1924) who taught the traditional Italian style of ballet. The school consisted of mostly foreign dancers until 1914, when there were enough American dancers to discontinue importing entire ballet casts.³² Most historians mark the beginning of an American style of ballet only in the 1930s with the work of impresario Lincoln Kirsten (1907-1991) and dancer/choreographer George Balanchine (1904-1983).³³

²⁹ William J. Guard, “A Talk with Serge de Diaghileff, Ballet Wizard,” *New York Times*, 9 January 1916, SM16.

³⁰ Nancy Reynolds and Malcolm McCormick, *No Fixed Points: Dance in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 2.

³¹ Reynolds and McCormick, *No Fixed Points*, 108.

³² George Dorris, “The Metropolitan Opera Ballet, Fresh Starts: Rosina Galli and the Ballets Russes, 1912-1917,” *Dance Chronicle* 35/2 (2012): 173-174.

³³ See Jennifer Dunning, “*But First A School:*” *The First Fifty Years of the School of American Ballet* (New York: Viking Penguin, 1985).

The Ballets Russes sailed into the New York harbour for the first time on 12 January 1916 for a two-month tour of northwestern cities between seasons at the Century Theatre in New York City and the Metropolitan Opera House.³⁴ While the overarching reception of the Ballets Russes by American audiences was relatively positive, a few incidents arose that would have perpetuated Diaghilev's cynicism with regard to American audiences. During their first engagement at the Century Theatre, two of the Ballets Russes' most successful productions came under fire by the Catholic Theatre Movement, an organization that sought to ensure popular entertainment was appropriate for American audiences; *L'après-midi d'un faune* was condemned for the faun-character's implied masturbation, and *Scheherazade* received criticism for depicting interracial sexual relations between black men and white woman. These accusations brought the Metropolitan Opera Company and the Ballets Russes to court, where Diaghilev defended his company by shifting the responsibility to culturally-conservative America, stating "'The Faun' has been given fifty times, and *Scheherazade* 150 times in other countries without the slightest objection."³⁵ Seeing that these ballets were performed in Europe without issue, Diaghilev was forced to see that the problem lay with American morals, stating: "I believe that my mind and the minds of those who planned and executed the ballets are less vicious than the minds of those that made the protest."³⁶ To Diaghilev's despair, the business manager of the Metropolitan, John Brown, approved of the court's request to modify the productions to make them more suitable for the American public.

As much as this controversy offended the impresario (he called it "a most idiotic affair"), the media attention served well for the Ballets Russes ticket sales. The *New York Sun* reported that the first post-court performance sold out with hundreds of additional people turned away at

³⁴ Richard Buckle, *Diaghilev* (New York: Atheneum, 1979), 303-304.

³⁵ "Russians Make 'Faun' Behave," *New York Tribune*, 26 January 1916, 3.

³⁶ "House Sold Out to See A Tamer Ballets Russes," *New York Sun*, 26 January 1916, 14.

the door.³⁷ Diaghilev took advantage of the attention the controversy had brought to the ballet by teasing reporters that they would have to “wait and see” if the court-ordered modifications were applied to the productions. Ultimately, the productions of *L’après-midi d’un faune* and *Scheherazade* were adjusted to meet the conservative standards, however Diaghilev did not let it go without a snide comment, for after the first modified performance the impresario approached Brown and other leaders of the Metropolitan Opera to mockingly remark, “America is saved!”³⁸

The Ballets Russes came across other issues during their first American tour. The ballet’s two-week engagement at Chicago’s Auditorium Building marked the first time the Ballets Russes performed to half-empty theatres for reasons historian Hanna Järvinen attributes to high ticket prices and the tendency of Chicagoans to dislike being treated as secondary in importance to New York audiences.³⁹ In Kansas City, the Deputy Chief of Police (who referred to Diaghilev as “Dogleaf, or whatever his name is”) threatened to “call down the curtain” on the Ballets Russes production if it was not “toned down to the decency of a high class city where they don’t stand for any monkey shines.”⁴⁰

From these events, Diaghilev’s prediction that America was unprepared for the high-art of his Ballets Russes was confirmed, causing him to declare “Americans still [seem] to think of ballet as light entertainment, to be enjoyed after a hard day at the office!”⁴¹ But still, the impresario allowed his ballet to embark on another fifty-two city American tour the following year, this time without his presence. Diaghilev saw this opportunity as an efficient method of making money to fund his European seasons, and while his ballet troupe was touring America

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ “Russian Ballet Modified,” *New York Times*, 26 January 1916, 12.

³⁹ Hanna Järvinen, “Failed Impressions: Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes in America, 1916,” *Dance Research* 42/2 (2010): 87; For more on the Ballets Russes in Chicago, see Nesta Macdonald, *Diaghilev Observed by Critics in England and the United States 1911-1929* (London: Dance Books, 1975), 154-160, 208.

⁴⁰ *Kansas Star*, 16 March 1916, quoted in Leslie Norton, *Léonide Massine and the 20th Century Ballet* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2004), 15.

⁴¹ Massine, *My Life in Ballet*, 80.

(under the direction of Vaslav Nijinsky [1890-1950], whose mental health was deteriorating), he was traveling Italy with Massine and a few of his closest collaborators planning new productions for his more important European audience. The impresario would look to America for potential tours at least two more times during the Ballets Russes' existence, but only during periods of extreme financial instability.

During the second tour of America in 1917, Diaghilev showed little concern as to how his ballet was being presented to American audiences, and allowed Nijinsky to produce two new ballets, *Till Eulenspiegel* and *Mephisto Waltz*, with virtually no input. As Romola Nijinsky, the wife of the dancer, remembers, "Vaslav began to speak to him about his new compositions, *Tyl* (sic) and *Mephisto Waltz*, but Diaghilev uncharacteristically showed no interest."⁴² Edward L. Bernays, the publicist of the Ballets Russes' first American tour, recalls the pressure from American audiences for the involvement of an American artist, claiming there was "agitation for some American participation in the ballet" that "became so vocal that, as a concession, someone suggested that an American designer do the décor and costumes for the forthcoming *Till Eulenspiegel*."⁴³ To satisfy this request, Nijinsky recruited young American scene designer, Robert Edmond Jones (1887-1951), who created backdrops in line with the "New Stagecraft." The New Stagecraft movement stemmed from the writings of theatre designers Adolphe Appia (Switzerland), Edward Gordon Craig (England) and Georg Fuchs (Germany), and promoted the fusion of acting, lighting and setting into a dramatic whole, and vouched for simplification of designs and stages shorn of literal detail, or "simplified realism."⁴⁴ Diaghilev did never see Jones' contribution to *Till Eulenspiegel*, for the ballet was produced exclusively in America,

⁴² Romola de Pulszky Nijinsky, *Nijinsky* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1934), 328.

⁴³ Bernays, *Biography of an Idea*, 122.

⁴⁴ Ralph Pendleton, ed., *The Theatre of Robert Edmond Jones* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1958), 15, 25.

however the aesthetic of the New Stagecraft was in line with Diaghilev's artistic values, particularly the attentive manipulation of light and shadows given the impresario's role as the ballet's lighting designer, a task he took quite seriously.⁴⁵ In later years, Jones described the project as one where "the artistic approach of old Russia and the artistic approach of new America met and fused for the first time in theatre history."⁴⁶ Diaghilev's abnormal withdrawal regarding artistic decisions being made under the banner of the Ballets Russes resulted in the only time an American successfully contributed to the Ballets Russes, and supports the notion that he viewed America as a last-resort opportunity to make money, while Europe was the place to make art.

"Palpably Vulgar:" Diaghilev on American Culture

During Diaghilev's stay in America in 1916, reporters were interested in the impresario's thoughts on America and its status in the arts. In interviews from this time, Diaghilev kept in mind that the readers of these articles were the same group of people who would buy tickets to his ballet and likely held back any anti-American sentiments he may have had, as one Milwaukee journalist noted, "[Diaghilev] couldn't be cornered into saying anything uncomplimentary about America or American audiences."⁴⁷ A lengthily statement published in the *New York Times* illustrates Diaghilev's opinion of American culture, and his advice for Americans artists:

Dear Sir, there is plenty of American art – good, virile, characteristic art. But how long is it going to take America, I wonder, to realize this? The idea here is still imitation of Europe, and in America that which is palpably vulgar and parvenu is beautiful, and that which is beautiful is, of course, vulgar.

For instance, when I marvel and am thrilled by the life and the power of Broadway at night, people laugh at me. They think I am joking. Well I am not joking. America will produce much great art when she has realized herself, but not before. Broadway is one of the genuine places in America. Broadway is certainly one of your sources of a strong and expressive art. But Americans, while they love it, will deny its

⁴⁵ Barry Jackson, "Diaghilev: Lighting Designer," *Dance Chronicle* 14/1 (1991): 6.

⁴⁶ Robert Edmond Jones, "Nijinsky and *Til Eulenspiegel*," *Dance Index* IV (1945): 44.

⁴⁷ Quoted in Buckle, *Diaghilev*, 304.

existence in their drawing rooms. It is unrefined! And they copy Europe. Copy Europe, and continue their futile attempts to establish here the art which is the result of centuries of culture originating in the temperament and the experiences of races which are daily receding further and further from the temperament and the experiences of American people.⁴⁸

Diaghilev's appreciation of Broadway and other forms of American entertainment was sincere. As Massine recalled, "The influence of popular culture [and] the polished professionalism of Broadway's musical comedies all interested [Diaghilev]."⁴⁹ The impresario was known to indulge in American amusements while in Europe, particularly since so many of his colleagues participated in such forms of cultural "slumming." French pianist and composer Jean Wiéner (1896-1982) remembered Diaghilev's presence at *Le boeuf sur le toit* (then called *The Gaya*, a bar where "one could enjoy performances of American Tin Pan alley, blues and dance tunes") with fellow artists Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), Misia Sert (1872-1950) and Boris Kochno.⁵⁰ The impresario had also reportedly attended the American Negro Revue *Blackbirds* (1928) at the Moulin Rouge, which he "so much enjoyed."⁵¹ Diaghilev encouraged American artists to creatively use these indigenous materials to forge a national identity separate from that of Europe, however he was actively opposed to the assimilation of this "palpably vulgar" (read: "lowbrow") American culture in European art, and most importantly in the repertory of the Ballets Russes. Sokolova wrote, "[Diaghilev] had admired the novelty of rag-time, the cakewalk, and Negro spirituals, but the day had not come when he could imagine his ballet borrowing subjects from the popular American art forms of vaudeville or cinema."⁵²

⁴⁸ Olin Downes, "The Revolutionary Mr. Diaghileff," *New York Times*, 23 January 1916; Buckle has acknowledged that this interview took place only four days after Diaghilev's arrival to New York City, thus the impresario likely had yet the opportunity to see much of the city at the time of the interview, Buckle, *Diaghilev*, 300.

⁴⁹ Massine, *My Life in Ballet*, 85-86.

⁵⁰ Nancy Perloff, *Art and the Everyday: Popular Entertainment and the Circle of Erik Satie* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 93.

⁵¹ Quoted in Buckle, *Diaghilev*, 521.

⁵² Sokolova, *Dancing for Diaghilev*, 72.

The importance of maintaining a “high-art” status in the Ballets Russes was particularly important to Diaghilev as his ballet gained a new audience-base during the war years. Before World War I, the Ballets Russes’ seasons were an affair exclusive to the plutocratic *haute bourgeoisie* of Europe; royalty, bankers, the press, and important cultural figures filled seats in the grand European theatres and auditoriums that the ballet frequented.⁵³ The impresario, once described as “an unscrupulous caterer to the corrupt tastes of a decadent upper-crust,” strived to maintain the ballet’s high-class associations to accommodate his fashionable audience (and perhaps even more so to encourage the opening of their pocketbooks to fund his enterprise).⁵⁴ However, the poor economic environment brought on by the onset of the Russian Revolution and World War I forced Diaghilev to present the Ballets Russes through outlets he would have never previously considered: America (as discussed above) and London music halls, therefore rendering the ballet more accessible to a wider, more varied audience.

Like the American tours, Diaghilev repeatedly refused to host his ballet in European music halls in pre-war years. Music halls were casual venues for rotating popular entertainment such as revues, theatre, dance, song, circus, with an informal atmosphere, and thus not acceptable for his high-art ballet.⁵⁵ Massine remembered, “Diaghilev was irritated by the music hall acts. He clearly resented having his productions sandwiched between performing dogs and acrobats and clowns.”⁵⁶ The Ballets Russes’ engagements at London music halls between 1918 and 1922 lowered the exclusivity of the ballet, and therefore opened it to a middle-class audience. Ballets Russes dancer Alice Nikitina recalled that having the Ballets Russes perform in music halls

⁵³ For an in depth discussion of the Ballets Russes’ changing audience, see Lynn Garafola, “Audience,” in *Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes*, 273-375.

⁵⁴ Nicolas Nabokov, *Old Friends and New Music* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1951), 71.

⁵⁵ Garafola, *Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes*, 213.

⁵⁶ Massine, *My Life in Ballet*, 129.

“meant for Diaghilev the defeat of his ambition. He was deeply hurt by it and suffered to see that one part of the world was too backward to appreciate his revolutionary talent.”⁵⁷

The new audience acquired through the American tours and stints in London music halls sustained the Ballets Russes through an era of financial uncertainty; Diaghilev himself admitted in a letter to Ansermet, “London has saved me.”⁵⁸ In spite of this, the impresario, as Lynn Garafola has noted, continually strived “to regain his company’s lost cachet and its erstwhile society public.”⁵⁹ To Diaghilev, “lowbrow” American culture would not assist in making his ballet a high-art affair, but instead cheapen his art to the standards of the country that he thought “[knew] nothing about art!”⁶⁰

Modernism and the Appropriation of American Culture: The Ballets Suédois

During the war years, the Ballets Russes experienced a shift of aesthetic. Historians often mark the 1917 premiere of the ballet *Parade*, with its all-star cast of collaborators (Jean Cocteau, Erik Satie, Picasso, and Massine), as the Ballets Russes’ first step into Modernism; Garafola credits the ballet as “a public notice of the switch in [Diaghilev’s] allegiance to the avant-garde.”⁶¹ Beginning with *Parade* and onwards, Diaghilev left behind the passé aesthetics of prewar Russian collaborators (such as artists Leon Bakst and Alexandre Benois) and plunged into partnerships with artists tied to Futurism, Cubism and Neo-Primitivism.

Many figures and schools of the protean European avant-garde celebrated idioms of American popular culture, such as jazz and cinema, as “refreshing” in war-devastated Europe, and consequently assimilated them into their own works. For example, composers of the French avant-garde, particularly certain members of *Les Six* like Darius Milhaud (1892-1974) and

⁵⁷ Alice Nikitina, *Nikitina: By Herself*, trans. Baroness Budberg (London: Allan Wingate, 1959), 60.

⁵⁸ Quoted in Garafola, *Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes*, 211.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 333.

⁶⁰ Tamara Geva, *Split Seconds: A Remembrance* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 349.

⁶¹ Lynn Garafola, *Diaghilev’s Ballets Russes*, 76.

Geroges Auric (1899-1983), used jazz influences in their scores in order to articulate a revitalization of French music that they deemed to be weighed down by the impressionism of Debussy and the musical legacy of Wagner.

In ballet culture, the Ballets Suédois assimilated American idioms and popular vernacular in their productions, which ultimately caused the Swedish company to surpass the Ballets Russes experiments in modernity. The Ballets Suédois, active between 1920 and 1925, worked within a similar modernist aesthetic championed by the Ballets Russes and attracted the same audience, which inevitably resulted in the two companies being compared to one another.⁶² The Ballets Suédois, however, distinguished itself from their Russian counterparts by embracing trends of American and popular culture in their ballet productions. Impresario Rolf de Maré (1888-1964), often referred to by the French press as the “Swedish Diaghilev,” explained the motive of the Ballets Suédois as seeking to “translate through ballet the image of our time” and having “a duty to be the expression of modern life.”⁶³

With productions such as *Sculpture Nègre* (1920) and *La création du monde* (1923) the Ballets Suédois worked in a territory the Ballets Russes had not much ventured: the perceived “primitiveness” of the African and African-American. As art historian Petrine Archer Straw has described, “the Ballets Russes favored a modernism harmonized with folk and classical forms, while the Ballets Suédois courted a modernist shot through with contemporary references in which black culture was an important source.”⁶⁴ *Sculpture Nègre* was a project by the Ballets Suédois choreographer, Jean Börlin (1893-1930), which the dancer designed a sculpture of an

⁶² For a detailed comparison of the Ballets Suédois and the Ballets Russes, see Lynn Garafola, “Rivals for the New: The Ballets Suédois and the Ballets Russes,” in *Paris Modern: The Swedish Ballet 1920-1925*, ed. Nancy Van Norman Baer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999).

⁶³ Quoted in Charles R. Batson, *Dance, Desire, and Anxiety in Early Twentieth-Century French Theatre: Playing Identities* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 102.

⁶⁴ Petrine Archer Straw, *Negrophilia: Avant-garde Paris and Black Culture in the 1920s* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2000), 67.

African mask and danced to Francis Poulenc's (1899-1963) *Rhapsodie Nègre* with costumes by Paul Colin (1892-1985), who in 1925 would be made famous for his posters for *La Revue Nègre* starring Josephine Baker.⁶⁵ In *La création du monde*, Milhaud composed a score inspired by the jazz music he heard while visiting clubs in Harlem to a scenario based on Swiss novelist and poet Blaise Cendrars' translations of African mythology.⁶⁶

Alongside the primitive African-American aesthetic, the Ballets Suédois produced a ballet showcasing the lighter side of popular America with *Within the Quota* (1923). With a scenario and designs by American expatriate Gerald Murphy (1888-1964) and music by composer and charismatic performer of American-style popular songs, Cole Porter (1891-1954) (orchestrated by Charles Koechlin), *Within the Quota* represented to Murphy, "nothing but a translation on the stage of the way America looks to me from over here."⁶⁷ The ballet satirically illustrated a Swedish immigrant's arrival to New York City, and featured exaggerated characters partially inspired by American cinema (such as a Millionaire, a Colored Gentleman, a Jazz-Baby, a Cowboy and America's Sweetheart, who ultimately whisks the Swede to Hollywood) accompanied by Porter's score featuring elements of jazz and ragtime, and parodies of silent movie music.

Porter was a member of the Ballets Russes social circle and a benefactor of the ballet company (partly because he had fallen "head over heels" for Kochno), however Diaghilev purposely ignored Porter's musical talents. As Kochno remembered, "Diaghilev never talked to [Porter] about his music and pretended not to know that this charming, high-living 'American in

⁶⁵ Pascale De Groote, *Ballets Suédois* (Ghent, Belgium: Academia Press, 2002), 20.

⁶⁶ In his autobiography, the composer states, "At last in *La création du monde*, I had the opportunity I had been waiting for to use those elements of jazz to which I had devoted so much study. I adopted the same orchestra as used in Harlem, seventeen solo instruments, and made a wholesale use of the jazz style to convey a purely classical feeling." Darius Milhaud, *Notes Without Music: An Autobiography*, trans. Donald Evans (New York: De Capo, 1970), 118.

⁶⁷ "American Ballet in Paris Tonight," *New York Herald*, 25 October 1923.

Paris' was a composer."⁶⁸ Upon hearing of the Ballets Suédois commission to Porter, Diaghilev wrote to Kochno, "Cole is writing a ballet... Danger!"⁶⁹ The "danger" alluded to in this letter can be interpreted in two ways. Firstly, Diaghilev may have had concerns about Porter's treatment of the ballet genre, given that his musical output lay mainly in the popular music stream with contributions to revues, comedies and musicals. Porter's inevitable application of popular American techniques to ballet would be, in the eyes of Diaghilev, a manner of lowering the cultural status of the art form. Another interpretation may be that the impresario perceived a ballet by Porter as a competitive threat to the status of the Ballets Russes.

Within the Quota was one of the Ballets Suédois most successful productions on their American tour in 1923/1924. *La création du monde*, however, had to be removed from the program during the tour because it was considered "too modernist" for the American audience, resulting in de Maré, like Diaghilev, to view American audiences as an "infantile public that went to the theatre for relaxation and a good laugh and was completely uninterested in the creative and the innovative."⁷⁰

Unlike the Ballets Suédois, Diaghilev avoided using American culture as a means of representing a modernist aesthetic, and instead expressed avant-gardist tendencies through different outlets; as Garafola has described, the Ballets Russes approached modernism while still "married to the traditional ballet themes and genres."⁷¹ One modernist trend Diaghilev did support is Garafola's concept of "lifestyle modernism."⁷² In order to cast off the melodramatic, mythical scenarios of the prewar repertoire (such as *Pétrouchka*), lifestyle modernism instead

⁶⁸ Sjeng Scheijen, *Diaghilev: A Life*, trans. Jane Hedley-Prôle and S.J. Leinbach (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 405; Kochno, *Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes*, 222.

⁶⁹ Kochno, *Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes*, 222.

⁷⁰ Erik Näslund, *Rolf de Maré: Art Collector, Ballet Director, Museum Creator*, trans. Roger Tanner (Alton, UK: Dance Books, 2009), 349.

⁷¹ Garafola, *Diaghilev's Ballets Russes*, 82.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 115.

used the “everyday” as a bases for ballet. For example, Francis Poulenc’s 1924 ballet *Les biches*, as Taruskin notes, was “plotless,” and “simply portrayed a soirée, hosted by a rich society matron, at which girls in summer dresses danced and flirted with young men in bathing suits.”⁷³ Several other Ballets Russes productions followed this trend, including *Parade* (representing the “everyday” of the music hall), and Milhaud’s 1924 ballet *Le train bleu* (which depicted an afternoon at a fashionable vacation spot).

America as a Threat

Diaghilev’s refusal to produce an American ballet with the Ballets Russes may also be understood at the impresario seeing the wealth and culture of the New World as a threat to European art and traditions. Thus by promoting an American ballet, he would be contributing the dominant culture. Diaghilev showed resentment towards the economic prosperity he found in America. As war-torn Europe led to poor economic environments in many European countries, the New World was continuing to grow more powerful and more moneyed. Upon his return from the first American tour, Diaghilev expressed to his confidant Misia Sert, “It’s inconceivable! A country where there are no beggars. Not one! It can’t have any atmosphere, any local colour. What would Italy be without her beggars!”⁷⁴ Diaghilev’s association of wealth with the atmosphere of America can be interpreted as a defense of the broken economy of Europe, affirming that although Europe had poverty, at least it had culture.

Diaghilev also showed resistance to the wealth of Americans around him, even if they were fiscally contributing to the Ballets Russes. Bernays recognized this in Diaghilev during the impresario’s time abroad, stating “I couldn’t help noting his disdain for America and Americans, particularly those who had showered hundreds of thousands of dollars on him to bring the ballet

⁷³ Richard Taruskin, *Music in the Early Twentieth Century: The Oxford History of Western Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 568.

⁷⁴ Quoted in Scheijen, *Diaghilev*, 320.

here.”⁷⁵ Another anecdote that supports this is from 1925, when Porter hired members of the Ballets Russes to perform for a party at the Palazzo Papadopoli in Venice. When the American added a few “presents” in the dancer’s “usual envelopes,” dancer Serge Lifar recalls the impresario caused a scene by shouting, “How dare they give presents to my artists - my artists have no need of such paltry sops!”⁷⁶ This reaction shows Diaghilev’s vulnerability when his dancers received more money from an American than he could provide for them.

Diaghilev also saw many of his dancers leave the Ballets Russes to peruse a career in America or in the more lucrative and popular streams of dance. Pavlova, who danced in the Ballets Russes first season in 1909, left the Diaghilev’s company with another Ballets Russes dancer, Mikhail Mordkin (1880-1944), to tour America, which Lifar remembers “pained him greatly... especially as he was unable to compete with the fees she could obtain in America.”⁷⁷ Others followed suit. Adolph Bolm chose to stay in America after the Ballets Russes’ 1917 American tour to choreograph revues and run a small touring company, the Ballet Intime, and the Chicago Allied Arts. Tamara Geva left the Ballets Russes to participate in the American tour of the revue *Chauve Souris* (1922). Two of Diaghilev’s main choreographers also made their way to the New World: Michal Fokine (1880-1942) in 1919 to choreograph revues and open a “prestigious and successful school” in New York, and Massine in 1928 to choreograph vaudeville sequences for New York’s Roxy Cinema.⁷⁸

Diaghilev saw in moneyed America and its lucrative popular entertainment a threat and an injustice. While his high-art Ballets Russes and other European institutions were constantly hard pressed for funds, money was being poured into American popular entertainments, and in

⁷⁵ Bernays, *Biography of an Idea*, 110.

⁷⁶ Serge Lifar, *Serge Diaghilev, His Life, His Work, His Legend*, (New York: De Capo, 1940), 305.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 136.

⁷⁸ Reynolds and McCormick, *No Fixed Points*, 115, 117.

turn was tempting his dancers to step-down to cultural levels he considered too “low” for their training and technique, and more importantly their association with the Ballets Russes.

Parade

This chapter has thus far illustrated that Diaghilev viewed the “lowbrow” associations of American culture as being inappropriate for assimilation in his ballet, even as the Ballets Russes adapted a modernist aesthetic. An important exception, however, concerns the very ballet that marked the Ballets Russes’ shift to Modernism, *Parade*, for it featured idioms drawn from the popular vernacular of the music hall, the circus and most noteworthy to this discussion, American cinema. Whereas the content and treatment of the popular and American cultural materials in *Parade* has been discussed at length elsewhere, Diaghilev’s agreement to produce the ballet raises questions around the programming and patronage in the Ballets Russes. Was the impresario under the influence of Cocteau and perhaps less invested in the production than others? Was it that, as Buckle remarks, Diaghilev wanted to “show that the Russian Ballet was capable of taking new turnings” and that *Parade* represented the ultimate answer for Diaghilev’s request for Cocteau to “astonish” him?⁷⁹ Whatever the case may be, one of the reasons for the out-of-character production of *Parade* seems to have been for financial gain.

The conception of *Parade* began in Paris with French artist and poet Jean Cocteau (1889-1963) and composer Erik Satie (1866-1925), who from the outset endeavored to have their ballet produced by the Ballets Russes. When the concept of the ballet began to materialize in the first half of 1916, Diaghilev was abroad with the Ballets Russes American tour, so the pair perused their next best option, Misia Sert. To Diaghilev, Misia was a beneficiary, confidant, and some

⁷⁹ Buckle, *Diaghilev*, 330.

one whose judgment he often relied on.⁸⁰ Although getting Misia's support was initially difficult (she encouraged a ballet by Satie, but was less thrilled with Cocteau's contribution), upon securing Picasso as the designer for the ballet, she became supportive of the project. When Diaghilev returned to Paris later that year, he befriended Picasso, and with Misia's support (artistically, and even more importantly, financially), agreed to produce the ballet.⁸¹

The Parisian audience at the 1917 premiere of *Parade* was outraged by the assimilation of popular amusements in their ballet, and as Taruskin states, viewed it as “insulting ballet's proud aristocratic heritage.”⁸² *Parade* constituted the Ballets Russes' first brief fling with popular entertainments, one that paved the way for companies like the Ballets Suédois to produce such class-bending productions in the 1920s. Diaghilev, however, swore off the elision of the “lowbrow” with the high-art of ballet for the remainder of the Ballets Russes existence.

Conclusion

As this chapter has discussed, Diaghilev's opinion of America and its culture was multifaceted. Diaghilev found his skepticism of the American public's ability to appreciate the refinements of his ballet confirmed during the Ballets Russes American tours in 1916 and 1917, which he agreed to only as a last-resort to maintain his ballet financially through the war years. As for American culture, the impresario enjoyed popular entertainments from the New World, but found their “lowbrow” associations unacceptable for the high-art status he strove for in the Ballets Russes, especially as the ballet became more accessible to a middle-class audience and adapted a modernist aesthetic. Not all impresarios felt the same as Diaghilev, as illustrated in the Ballets Suédois popular culture inspired productions. Above all, this chapter has introduced

⁸⁰ Scheijen, *Diaghilev: A Life*, 245.

⁸¹ Billy Klüver, *A Day With Picasso: Twenty-four Photographs by Jean Cocteau* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), 77-80.

⁸² Taruskin, *Music in the Early Twentieth Century*, 562.

themes and issues that are discussed in regards to Diaghilev's commission for an American ballet score in Chapter 2 of this thesis.

CHAPTER 2

Diaghilev's American "Episode:" John Alden Carpenter and *Skyscrapers*

Edward L. Bernays, the publicist for the Ballets Russes' first American tour, wrote in his 1965 memoir that Diaghilev would have never considered producing an American ballet: "No one thought of commissioning an American ballet composed by an American. Diaghileff, I am sure, would have been cold to such a suggestion."⁸³ Bernays, who had described Diaghilev's opinion of Americans as "materialistic, insular, *savage* and gross," recapitulated the common assumption that Diaghilev felt nothing but disdain for the New World. However, and as discussed in Chapter 1, Diaghilev's aversion to American culture was in relation to its "lowbrow" associations which he deemed inappropriate for the high-art of the Ballets Russes.⁸⁴ And yet, unknown to Bernays and excluded from much of the Ballets Russes literature, is that in 1923, Diaghilev did commission a "typically American" ballet score from an American composer, Chicagoan John Alden Carpenter.

This uncharacteristic commission illustrates one instance of Diaghilev compromising his high artistic standards to keep his ballet financially secure and culturally relevant in vanguard Europe. The commission process, from the initial request to Carpenter through to the ultimate dismissal of his score, provides insight into the complex politics of patronage of the Ballets Russes. Furthermore, the commission to Carpenter can be perceived as the consequence of the composer's overriding ambition to work with the Ballets Russes, a strategic professional posing that dates back to Carpenter's first encounter with the Ballets Russes during their tours of America in 1916 and 1917.

⁸³ Edward L. Bernays, *Biography of an Idea: Memoirs of Public Relations Counsel* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1965), 122.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

John Alden Carpenter's Transatlantic Career

John Alden Carpenter's compositional career transcended national borders. Although a life-long resident of Chicago and a product of upper-class America (Harvard educated, manager of his father's wholesale business and financially well-off), Carpenter's compositional output was molded by contemporary European trends. His early works emulated the impressionism of Claude Debussy, followed by the adaptation of modernist trends inspired by the European avant-garde during the inter-war years, which later developed into a neoclassical aesthetic. Throughout this stylistic progression (especially in his more mature works), Carpenter did not merely imitate the music of Europe as many American composers were criticized for doing, but instead tailored European-inspired aesthetics to the culture of America. It is for this reason that American composer Henry Cowell (1897-1965) referred to Carpenter as a composer who does "not attempt to develop original ideas or materials but who takes those which they already find in America and adapt them to a European style," and Howard Pollack considers Carpenter's most notable characteristic to be "a unique melding of European high art and American popular traditions."⁸⁵ Carpenter's transatlantic career leading up to the commission from Diaghilev, particularly his first two ballets, illustrates the development of a compositional style in line with the aesthetic of the Ballets Russes.

Carpenter's music education began with piano lessons from his mother, Elizabeth Curtis Greene, who was an amateur organist and mezzo-soprano.⁸⁶ Between the ages of eleven and seventeen, Carpenter continued to study piano with Amy Fay (1844-1928) (the author of *Music*

⁸⁵ Henry Cowell, *American Composers on American Music: A Symposium* (California: Stanford University Press, 1933), 8; Howard Pollack, *John Alden Carpenter: A Chicago Composer* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 3.

⁸⁶ Pollack, *John Alden Carpenter*, 5.

Study in Germany) and Viennese pianist-composer William C.E. Seeboeck (1859-1907), who provided the young musician with a base of knowledge and appreciation of the great European composers of previous centuries, particularly Liszt, Mozart, Haydn, Brahms, Chopin and Beethoven.⁸⁷ During these formative years, Carpenter began improvising on the piano and was notating his compositions by age ten. From this point forward, Carpenter's interest was geared more towards composition than piano performance.⁸⁸ During his four years at Harvard (1893-1897) Carpenter studied music with John Knowles Paine (1839-1906), one of the first Americans to gain acceptance as a composer of large-scale concert music and to be appointed professor of music at an American university.⁸⁹ Under Paine, Carpenter composed his early works, mostly songs and piano pieces, in a sentimental American parlor tradition that Pollack characterizes as having modest technical demands, small vocal ranges, square phrases and tuneful melodies.⁹⁰ And yet, these works exhibited particularly sensitive treatment to text setting, voice leading and refinement of harmony through the use of non-chord tones, ninth and eleventh chords and polytonal touches.

After graduation from Harvard, Carpenter returned to Chicago and joined his father's wholesale business, George B. Carpenter and Company, where he held the position of vice-president until his retirement at the age of sixty. Carpenter, like Charles Ives, worked simultaneously as an entrepreneur and a composer, a dual activity which allowed him to travel often to New York and Europe to investigate compositional opportunities. The composer admitted, "It was a family business, and I was able to regulate my hours and vacations. If I

⁸⁷ Amy Fay, *Music Study in Germany* (Chicago: A.C. McClurg, 1887); Pollack, *John Alden Carpenter*, 9-11.

⁸⁸ Madeleine Goss, *Modern Music-Makers* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1952), 34.

⁸⁹ Carpenter also took classes in history, government and law, and economics, Pollack, *John Alden Carpenter*, 14.

⁹⁰ Pollack, *John Alden Carpenter*, 17-19.

needed a couple extra weeks for composition, I could take them.”⁹¹ In 1900, Carpenter married Rue Winterbotham (1879-1931), who would play an important role in the composer’s professional life.

From 1908 to 1912, Carpenter continued to develop his compositional techniques through studies with his most influential teacher, German-American theorist Bernhard Ziehn (1845-1912), after a brief and unsuccessful winter studying under Edward Elgar in Rome. According to Carpenter, Ziehn “did more” for him than anyone he had ever worked with.⁹² Through hundreds of harmonic and contrapuntal exercises and free composition with Ziehn, Carpenter fostered a mature style of orchestration, sophisticated use of chromatic harmony, and refined musical expression. It was during this time that the influence of ragtime became apparent in the composer’s music (such as his 1905 song “Treat Me Nice”), a trend that threaded through much of Carpenter’s oeuvre through to the 1920s.

In the early 1910s, Carpenter’s compositions began to take on an impressionist aesthetic similar to that of Debussy. Songs such as “Looking Glass River” and “The Green River,” both written in 1909, first suggest the influence of the French composer. Debussy’s impact on Carpenter’s music becomes most evident in his 1910 setting of five poems by Paul Verlaine (1844-1896), “Chanson d’automne,” “Le Ciel,” “Dansons la gigue!” “Il pleure dans mon coeur,” and “En sourdine,” that contain distinctively Debussian trademarks such as richly spaced ninth chords, open intervals in the high range of the piano, modal and tonal ambiguities and harmonies constructing of major and minor seconds.⁹³ Carpenter was praised for breaking away from the

⁹¹ Walter Monfried, “Carpenter, Businessman-Composer,” *The Milwaukee Journal*, 30 April 1947, 20.

⁹² Pollack, *John Alden Carpenter*, 50; Ziehn is most notably recognized for his contribution to completing J.S. Bach’s *Der Kunst der Fuge* with Ferruccio Busoni. Carpenter was the only composer to study with Ziehn for an extended period; Carpenter described Elgar as “a fine man but a poor teacher,” Thomas C. Pierson, “The Life and Times of John Alden Carpenter” (PhD diss., University of Rochester, 1952), 4; Goss, *Modern Music-Makers*, 35.

⁹³ Pollack, *John Alden Carpenter*, 76.

American song tradition, with one critic describing his songs as “beauty undisfigured by cheap tunefulness” and containing “harmonic subtlety” that “stuck a new note in native composition.”⁹⁴

Fig 1. John Alden Carpenter, undated.



⁹⁴ Felix Borowski, “John Alden Carpenter,” *The Musical Quarterly* 16/4 (1930): 451.

Carpenter's sensitivity and careful selection of texts also set him apart from contemporaneous American composers. The texts in his songs are reflective of Chicago's active literary community, which cultivated in the composer an appreciation for the poems of modern French writers (as evidenced by his setting of the Verlaine poems), English decadents, as well as Japanese, Chinese, and modern verse.⁹⁵ Carpenter's involvement in America's literary scene is evident in the 1913 song cycle *Gitanjali* (Song Offerings), a setting of six English translations of poems by Indian poet Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), composed at the cusp of the poet's popularity in England and recognition in America.⁹⁶

By 1914, Carpenter's interest in song composition began to "fade out," as he entered the field of orchestral programmatic music, the first step towards his compositions for ballet.⁹⁷ His orchestral suite, *Adventures in a Perambulator* (1914) featured "the frightfully exciting things that a child sees when he is out with his nurse."⁹⁸ Scored for full orchestra, the suite is divided into six movements: "En Voiture!" "The Policeman," "The Hurdy-Gurdy," "The Lake," "Dogs," and "Dreams," all of which feature leitmotifs representing the perambulator (a syncopated ostinato resembling the limping noise of a faulty wheel) and the nurse. In this work, Carpenter places American and contemporary French musical idioms side-by-side: In "The Hurdy-Gurdy," there are quotations of Irving Berlin's "Alexander's Ragtime Band" (1911), followed by a formless and free flowing "Lakes" with textures and colours akin to Debussy. *Adventures in a Perambulator* was premiered by Fredrick Stock (1872-1942) with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra 19 March 1915 and was an immediate success, applauded for its wit and humour, and

⁹⁵ Pollack, *John Alden Carpenter*, 82-83.

⁹⁶ For more information regarding Tagore's success in America, see Stephen N. Hay, "Tagore in America," *American Quarterly* 14/2 (1962): 439-463; *Gitanjali* was one of Carpenter's most successful works, performed internationally in Berlin and London, and included in the repertoire of songstresses Eva Gauthier and Conchita Supervia, Pollack, *John Alden Carpenter*, 100.

⁹⁷ Goss, *Modern Music-Makers*, 37.

⁹⁸ Letter from Carpenter to Ellen Borden, undated, C-DLC

praised by one critic as “the cleverest score by an American composer we have heard in the history of the resident symphony orchestra.”⁹⁹

Carpenter was active in the conversation surrounding the formation of an American school of music during a time when Americans were searching for their own voice in the arts. Carpenter encouraged American composers to use indigenous materials in their works, such as jazz (which the composer recognized as “the American folklore”), describing it as having “roots in the American soil,” and containing “certain elements that should be used by musicians.”¹⁰⁰ At the same time, Carpenter defended the criticisms surrounding the European influence in his music, stating in a 1915 interview with the *Christian Science Monitor* that “all our [American] art is bound to be polyglot, and that does not mitigate against individualism in the accomplishment of large and serious things.”¹⁰¹

The synthesis of European styles and American cultural idioms is explicitly represented in Carpenter's two piano works *Polonaise américaine* (1912) and *Tango américain* (1920), where, as the titles suggest, dance forms from other cultures are Americanized. *Polonaise américaine*, described by Carpenter as “queer raggy,” is written in the form of a polonaise (a traditional Polish dance in triple metre with accented first beat, ternary form and “grandeur”), made American by the use of ragtime-inspired syncopations.¹⁰² In the same manner, Carpenter's piano piece *Tango American* (1920) incorporated tango-like materials into a short work that resembles a Cole Porter-type popular song with tuneful eight-measure phrases and an improvisatory middle section.¹⁰³ Both of these works, along with other instrumental works in Carpenter's catalogue (such as *Berceuse de guerre*, “En Voiture!” from *Adventures in a*

⁹⁹ Quoted in Pollack, *John Alden Carpenter*, 117.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 199.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 143.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 89.

¹⁰³ For further analysis of *Tango américaine*, see Pollock, *John Alden Carpenter*, 262.

Perambulator), are given French titles. By this, Carpenter may have been trying to portray an air of French sophistication in his works to distinguish them from the average American popular tune.

Carpenter and Ballet: *The Birthday of the Infanta and Crazy Kat*

Carpenter's first venture into composing for dance began soon after the Ballets Russes' American tours in 1916 and 1917, performances of which he likely attended in Chicago. The Ballets Russes first appeared there on 14 February 1916 for a two-week engagement at the Chicago Auditorium Building, which is now infamous for being the first time the ballet company performed to half-empty theatres (as discussed in Chapter 1). Carpenter, however, had the cultural motivation and financial means to purchase the pricey tickets for these shows and therefore likely attended them. It is also probable that Carpenter would have been present for the Ballets Russes' second visit to Chicago on 28 January 1917, a single matinee performance at Cohan's Grand Opera House that was much more successful than the previous year due to Nijinsky's appearance.¹⁰⁴ Pollack suggests that Carpenter may have hosted members of the Ballets Russes entourage in their home during the company's Chicago engagements, particularly dancer Adolph Bolm, who would reside in America after the Ballets Russes 1917 tour, collaborate with Carpenter on multiple occasions, and sustain a life-long friendship with the composer.¹⁰⁵ The strongest evidence pointing towards Carpenter's attendance at the Ballets Russes' American tours may be found in the composer's own compositional output: in 1917, Carpenter began work on his first ballet score, *The Birthday of the Infanta*, followed by the "jazz

¹⁰⁴ The ballets produced during the Ballets Russes' visits to Chicago were *L'oiseau de feu*, *Le Carnaval*, *Scheherazade*, *l'Après midi du faune*, *Prince Igor*, *Pas de deux*, *Le Soleil de Nuit*, *Les Sylphides*, *Pétrouchka*, *Thamar*, *Le spectre de la rose*, *Cléopâtre*, *The Sleeping Princess* and *Till Eulenspiegel*, Jane Pritchard, "Serge Diaghilev's Ballets Russes-An Itinerary. Part I (1909-1921)," *Dance Research* 27/1 (2009): 140, 152.

¹⁰⁵ Pollack, *John Alden Carpenter*, 166. Pollack also suggests that Carpenter may have seen the Ballets Russes as early as 1910, during a visit to Paris.

pantomime" *Krazy Kat* in 1922. The collaborative nature, modernist leanings and representation of national exoticism in these productions show influence of the Ballets Russes model, and can be interpreted as "stepping stones" towards a commission from Diaghilev and the composition of *Skyscrapers*.

Carpenter's first venture into the ballet genre was with *The Birthday of the Infanta*, based on the 1889 Oscar Wilde short story of the same name.¹⁰⁶ Set in seventeenth-century Spain, Wilde's story centers on a Spanish Infanta and a "crooked" Dwarf named Pedro, who misunderstands mockery as a sign of love and ultimately dies of heartbreak upon realizing his mistake. Heather R. Lanctot found Carpenter's setting of Wilde's *Birthday of the Infanta* reflective of the story's prominence in America at the time (the story was adapted into plays, children's books, drawings in newspapers, etc.), however the story's tragic narrative and exotic locale is in line with the Ballets Russes prewar and wartime aesthetic.¹⁰⁷ Pollack has identified the resemblance of Pedro with the "pathetic anti-hero" Pétrouchka in Stravinsky's 1911 ballet, in that both characters suffer shattered idylls that lead to fatal consequences.¹⁰⁸ The Spanish setting of *The Birthday of the Infanta* paralleled the contemporaneous trend of Spanish culture-inspired ballets in the Ballets Russes, one that Sjeng Scheijen has coined the "Spanish Period," which includes the ballets *Las Meninas* (1916), *Le tricorne* (1919), and *Cuadro Flamenco* (1921).¹⁰⁹ In his score for *The Birthday of the Infanta*, Carpenter conveyed the Spanish locale by

¹⁰⁶ Oscar Wilde, *The Birthday of the Infanta* (New York, The Macmillian Company, 1929); Carpenter had previously set text by Wilde in two songs from 1912, "Les Silhouettes" and "Her Voice."

¹⁰⁷ Heather R. Lanctot, "The Birthday of the Infanta: An Early Twentieth-Century Chicago Ballet Contextualized" (Masters thesis, University of Oregon, 2012).

¹⁰⁸ Pollack, *John Alden Carpenter*, 169.

¹⁰⁹ Sjeng Scheijen, *Diaghilev: A Life*, trans. Jane Hedley-Prôle and S.J. Leinbach (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 335.

incorporating a reoccurring “exuberant Spanish waltz,” an “exotic gypsy dance,” castanets and a “quasi-guitarre effect” in the piano created by placing paper between the instrument’s strings.¹¹⁰ Carpenter’s collaborators for *The Birthday of the Infanta*, Bolm and Robert Edmond Jones, had previously worked with the Ballets Russes and helped contribute to the Ballets Russes-like collaboration and aesthetic (Figure 2). Bolm was engaged by the managers of the Chicago Grand Opera to choreograph the ballet and dance the role of the Dwarf in the production. As a graduate of the Russian Imperial Ballet School, Bolm was recruited by Diaghilev to dance the Chief Warrior in *Prince Igor* for the Ballets Russes inaugural season in 1909. The dancer remained with the Ballets Russes until 1917, playing important roles such as Pierrot in *Carnival*, the Moor in *Petrushka*, and King Dodon in *Le Coq d’or*. He maintained this success even though he was frequently overshadowed by Diaghilev’s favorites (Nijinsky followed by Léonide Massine) and thus allotted only small choreographic assignments in opera productions.¹¹¹ When a spinal injury during the Ballets Russes second American tour left him in a body cast, Bolm decided to stay permanently in America and establish the Ballet Intime in New York, a small ballet company dedicated to Fokine-inspired choreography that the dancer referred to as a “petit Ballets Russes.”¹¹²

Robert Edmond Jones’ invitation to work on *The Birthday of the Infanta* was likely through a recommendation from Carpenter and Bolm, who were both familiar with his work for Nijinsky’s production of *Till Eulenspiegel* in 1917.¹¹³ As discussed in Chapter 1, Jones’ “New Stagecraft” aesthetic was in line with Diaghilev’s artistic values. His designs for Carpenter’s

¹¹⁰ Pollack, *John Alden Carpenter*, 171; Although there is no authoritative copy extant of Carpenter’s completed 1918 score of *The Birthday of the Infanta* as it would have been heard at the ballet’s premiere in 1919, Pollack has analyzed the manuscript 45-page condensed piano score and a 182-page orchestral score housed at the Library of Congress.

¹¹¹ Suzanne Carbonneau, “Adolph Bolm and America,” in *The Ballets Russes and Its World*, ed. Lynn Garafola and Nancy Van Norman Baer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 222.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 225.

¹¹³ Pollack, *John Alden Carpenter*, 177.

ballet depicted Spanish Baroque architecture in his “abstract realist” aesthetic, with “larger than life” constructions and period costuming that is comparable to José Maria Sert’s (1974-1945) costume designs for the Ballets Russes *Las Meninas* (Figures 3-5)

Fig. 2 – Carpenter, Adolph Bolm, Robert Edmond Jones, undated.



Bolm's expressive pantomime and Jones' Spain-inspired setting, accompanied by Carpenter's Spanish-inflected score, was premiered at the Chicago Auditorium Theatre on 23 December 1919, and was produced again at the Lexington Theatre in New York two months later. The ballet was recognized by a critic of the *Chicago Daily Journal* as in line with the aesthetic of the Ballets Russes: "It is my sincere belief that this Chicago composer has turned out a score to which among the moderns the only ones comparable are those of Igor Stravinsky, as presented by the Diaghileff Ballets Russes on the same stage some four or five years ago."¹¹⁴

Fig. 3 - *The Birthday of the Infanta*



¹¹⁴ Edward Moore, "J.A. Carpenter 'Skyscrapers,' Put on Records," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 28 August 1932.

Fig. 4 - *The Birthday of the Infanta*



Fig. 5 - *The Birthday of the Infanta*



Carpenter's second ballet, *Krazy Kat: A Jazz Pantomime*, is often noted as the first authentically American ballet for its incorporation of two distinctive forms of American culture: George Herriman's (1880-1944) comic strip of the same name, and jazz. Herriman's *Krazy Kat* first appeared in New York newspapers in 1913 and featured a gender-bending love triangle between characters Krazy Kat (a cat whose ambiguous gender is never revealed), Ignatz Mouse and Offissa Pup, which always ended with Ignatz Mouse throwing a brick at Krazy Kat.¹¹⁵ The cultural nuances and surrealism within Herriman's comic catered to a niche audience of the artistic and intellectual elite (such as Carpenter), and prompted cultural critic Gilbert Seldes (1893-1970) in *The Seven Lively Arts* (1924) to refer to the comic as a "work of art" and a "masterpiece."¹¹⁶ The explicit use of jazz in *Krazy Kat: A Jazz Pantomime* (the first time the word "jazz" appeared in the title of a composition by a composer of concert music) was novel, premiering over two years before George Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* (1924).¹¹⁷ Pollack has identified features in Carpenter's score that gave it its jazz identification: syncopated rhythmic figures, blue notes, parallel harmonies, the use of jazz instrumentation (alto saxophone, drum set), jazz instrumental techniques (muted trumpets, trombone glissandi, fortissimo clarinet in its highest register), and performance markings like "jazzando" and "traps ad lib."¹¹⁸ Carpenter's use of these explicitly American forms in his ballet may be considered as a fitting into Diaghilev's advice to American composers to use their indigenous materials to forge a national identity in their art.

A concert version of *Krazy Kat* was premiered by the Chicago Symphony on 23 December 1921 under the baton of Frederick Stock (1872-1942) and the revelation of *Krazy Kat*

¹¹⁵ Craig Yoe, ed., *Krazy Kat and the Art of George Herriman: A Celebration* (New York: Abrams ComicArts, 2011), 17.

¹¹⁶ Gilbert Seldes, *The Seven Lively Arts* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1924), 231.

¹¹⁷ Pollack, *John Alden Carpenter*, 195.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 200.

in its ballet form occurred at New York's Town Hall on 20 January 1922 by Bolm's Ballet Intime conducted by French flutist and conductor Georges Barrère (1876-1944). Herriman devised the ballet's scenario, designed the full-bodied costumes and make-up, and created a comic book-like background by having the scene unfold as a panorama on a roller mechanism which made the comic strip come to life.¹¹⁹ Bolm choreographed the dance and played the role of Krazy Kat. A common sentiment expressed by critics was that Bolm, as a Russian, was an inappropriate choreographer and dancer for the lead role in an American-themed ballet; critic Henrietta Straus expressed this in *Nation* magazine by writing, "Their failure was due to no lack of artistry, but merely to the fact that one was Russian and the other [Barrère] was French."¹²⁰

Carpenter's use of jazz in *Krazy Kat* was attacked from several quarters, with critics reprimanding the score for "trying too hard;" complaining that it "did not elevate jazz;" and chastising it for being "too polished." One critic, Richard Aldrich, praised Carpenter's treatment of jazz in his score, but felt that Carpenter was composing in a style too "lowbrow" for his educational level,

...it behooves Mr. Carpenter to remember that art is long and life is short: that he was graduated in the Class of 1897, Harvard, already about to have its twenty-fifth anniversary, and that there is still a great deal for him to do in music besides the admirable things he has already done, and that jazz pantomime is not among it.¹²¹

In *Krazy Kat*, as Howard Pollack has identified, there is a parody of the Ballets Russes 1912 production *L'après-midi d'un faune*.¹²² As the curtain opens on Carpenter's ballet, Krazy is seen asleep on the stage similar to Nijinsky's Faun character in the Ballets Russes production. During this time, a chromatic theme similar to the "Faun's theme" from Debussy's score is

¹¹⁹ Carbonneau, "Adolph Bolm and America," 229.

¹²⁰ Henrietta Straus, "Marking the Miles," *Nation* 114, 1 March 1922.

¹²¹ Richard Aldrich, "Music: Modern Music and Ballet," *New York Times* 21 January 1922, 16.

¹²² Pollack, *John Alden Carpenter*, 193.

presented, except that in *Krazy Kat* the theme is written for a muted trumpet marked "Jazzando," compared to the breathy, lower register flute in Debussy's score (Examples 1.1 and 1.2).

Ex. 1.1 - John Alden Carpenter, *Krazy Kat*, mm. 23-28

Musical notation for Ex. 1.1: Stopped Trumpet part from *Krazy Kat*. The score is in 4/4 time with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#). The tempo markings are *Adagio* (♩ = 88), *molto rall.*, and *a tempo*. The piece features a triplet of eighth notes in the first measure, followed by a half note, and another triplet of eighth notes in the eighth measure. The dynamic marking is *f* (forte).

Ex. 1.2 - Claude Debussy, *L'après midi d'un faune*, mm. 1-4

Musical notation for Ex. 1.2: Solo Flute part from *L'après midi d'un faune*. The score is in 3/8 time with a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The tempo marking is *Très modéré* (♩ = 84). The piece features a triplet of eighth notes in the first measure, followed by a half note, and another triplet of eighth notes in the second measure. The dynamic marking is *p* (piano).

By this, Carpenter makes Debussy's theme "jazzy," and foreshadows the Americanizing of French themes in *Skyscrapers*. The parody also illustrates Carpenter's familiarity with the Ballets Russes production, and may be considered as homage to Debussy and the ballet company that inspired his venture into ballet, which he was actively seeking to work with.

The Pursuit of Diaghilev

After the success of *The Birthday of the Infanta*, Carpenter had his eyes set on composing a ballet for the Ballets Russes. The composer's distinguished friends and colleagues advocated for his introduction to Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes circles, including his wife Rue, Prokofiev, conductor Pierre Monteux, and Sara and Gerald Murphy. It would not be until the summer of 1923 (after the production of *Krazy Kat*) that Diaghilev would commission a score from Carpenter.

Rue Winterbotham Carpenter was a distinguished figure in her own right in Chicago cultural life. She worked as an interior designer and held the position of president with the Chicago Arts Club from 1918 until her death in 1931, and which under her direction blossomed

into one of the leading American organizations to exhibit modern art. Described as “avant-garde when the word was unknown to Chicago,” Rue’s objective was to present the highest in the fields of contemporary plastic-arts, literature, theatre, dance and music from around the world, which in turn included exhibitions and performances by many artists associated with the Ballets Russes, including Natalia Goncharova, Georges Braque, Henri Matisse, Picasso, Prokofiev, Stravinsky and Massine.¹²³ Through the Arts Club, Rue had established contacts with international artists. American journalist Arthur Meeker (1902-1971), who was a close friend of the Carpenter’s only daughter, Genevieve (born in 1904), recalls Rue’s social connections,

Mrs. Carpenter was a personal friend of painters and sculptures, in Paris and else where, who were leading the avant-garde movement; this happened to be because she had traveled widely abroad, frequenting precisely those circles; also because, an artist herself, she was greatly beloved by other artists, who naturally told her their plans, let her know when they were coming to America, and came to see her whenever they could.¹²⁴

Rue was instrumental to Carpenter’s professional career. Meeker recalls that “without the active co-operation of his wife, his artistic career would have been much less successful than it was. She knew how to push him as he couldn’t push himself.”¹²⁵ True to her reputation, Rue began to facilitate Carpenter’s entrance into the Ballets Russes during a trip to Paris in 1920, creating what may have been the composer’s first impression on Diaghilev.

While in Paris in the spring of 1920, Rue asked Prokofiev, with whom the Carpenters had become friends with during the Russian’s visits to Chicago, to arrange an introduction to Diaghilev with the hopes the impresario would be interested in producing *The Birthday of the Infanta*.¹²⁶ Prokofiev obliged, and as the pair drove to the meeting together, Rue remarked, “Oh,

¹²³ James M. Wells, *Portrait of an Era: Rue Winterbotham Carpenter and the Arts Club of Chicago 1916-1931* (Chicago: Arts Club of Chicago, 1986), 6.

¹²⁴ Arthur Meeker, *Chicago, With Love: A Polite and Personal History* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1955), 166-67.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 171.

¹²⁶ Sergei Prokofiev, *Sergey Prokofiev Diaries 1915-1923: Behind the Mask*, ed. trans. Anothony Phillips (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 516.

what would John not give to have Diaghilev accept his ballet!"¹²⁷ Rue brought to the meeting the score of *The Birthday of the Infanta*, photos of the production, and a letter of introduction written by Pierre Monteux (1875-1964).¹²⁸ The letter read:

Monsieur Carpenter est un des plus talentueuse [sic] parmi les compositeurs Américains; ses tendances sont modernes et je suis sûr que son ballet, que vous apporte Madame Carpenter, vous intéressera comme il m'a intéressé moi-même, musicalement et scéniquement. Il a été monté à Chicago, par Bolm et a obtenu un très grand succès.¹²⁹

Monteux's letter, meant as an icebreaker into the world of Diaghilev, was sincere. The conductor thought highly of Carpenter's compositions, for he conducted the Boston premiere of the composer's *Piano Concertino* with the Boston Symphony Orchestra on 13 February 1920, and continued to program works by Carpenter nearly every season after the war.¹³⁰

It is unknown how Diaghilev responded to this meeting with Rue, however her charming personality (she had been compared to Misia Sert and Coco Chanel, two of Diaghilev's closest female friends), worldliness, fluency in French and Italian (qualities obtained from her European travel and education) and knowledge of art make it promising that the two got along well.

A successful meeting with Rue may have reflected well on Carpenter, but nowhere is there evidence that the impresario considered producing the *The Birthday of the Infanta*, nor was it likely for the impresario agree to produce a modern ballet that had been premiered elsewhere, particularly America (Stravinsky's *Apollo musagète* [1928] an outstanding exception). Previous to the meeting, Prokofiev played though Carpenter's score and predicted in his diary, "I doubt whether Diaghilev will want to produce this ballet: a procession from the banal to the ephemeral,

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Monteux worked with the Ballets Russes for some of their most memorable performances in Europe and American tours before obtaining position as principle conductor with the Metropolitan Opera (1916 to 1919), and the Boston Symphony Orchestra (1920 to 1924).

¹²⁹ Quoted in Pollack, *John Alden Carpenter*, 459n2.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 139, 296.

often easy on the ear but always nugatory.”¹³¹ Nevertheless, the adaptation of the Wilde story may have reflected well on Carpenter's literary tastes, for as Annabel Rutherford has distinguished, Wilde was an important literary figure to Diaghilev.¹³² Perhaps what most deterred Diaghilev from producing *The Birthday of the Infanta* was Carpenter's adaptation of a Spanish theme and aesthetic, which was exactly what the impresario discouraged from Americans, and went against his suggestion that Americans should look to their *own* culture in their art instead of using materials from other countries.

Although Rue's meeting with Diaghilev was unsuccessful in ensuring a performance of *The Birthday of the Infanta* by the Ballets Russes, her introduction of Carpenter to the impresario surely contributed to the commission he received when he traveled to Europe in the summer of 1923. Along with Rue and their daughter, Carpenter spent several weeks in Paris, and some time in Venice visiting with Gerald Murphy and Cole Porter as they were working on their ballet for the Ballets Suédois, *Within the Quota*. During this time, Carpenter regularly wrote to his mistress Ellen Borden regarding his activities and thoughts on his experiences abroad. From these letters, we gain insight into the cultural events Carpenter attended, who he was spending time with, and his general impressions of the Parisian cultural environment.

The overarching theme in the letters is the sheer amount of cultural activity occurring in Paris; Carpenter wrote to Ellen, “Oh- oh – plenty to do – plenty to see – plenty to hear... It's been awfully interesting and exciting and stimulating and I'm sure that I am going to get a lot of new push and confidences out of it.”¹³³ During his time in the French capital, Carpenter

¹³¹ Prokofiev, *Sergey Prokofiev Diaries 1915-1923*, 516. The editor of this edition of Prokofiev's diaries mistakenly identifies this ballet as *Skyscrapers*, when in fact it was *The Birthday of the Infanta*, Carpenter's only ballet composed at the time of the letter.

¹³² Annabel Rutherford, “The Triumph of the Veiled Dance: The Influence of Oscar Wilde and Beardsley on Serge Diaghilev's Creation of the Ballets Russes,” *Dance Research* 27/1 (2009): 93-107.

¹³³ Letter from Carpenter to Ellen Borden, 5 June 1923, C-DLC.

socialized with the cultural elite (he wrote of Gerald and Sara Murphy, Cole and Linda Porter, Darius Milhaud, Leon Baskt and the Princesse Edmond de Polignac, and one can assume that he mingled with others), took in at least one opera (*Padmavati* by Albert Roussel, which the composer found "rather formidable and dull"), saw productions by the Ballets Suédois (who Carpenter considered "the next best after Diaghileff") and attended every performance of the Ballets Russes season.¹³⁴ The Ballets Russes had a particularly short season in Paris that summer, with only eight days of performances between 13 June to 21 June at the Théâtre de la Gâtité. The new ballets Carpenter saw that were not performed during the American tours were *Contes Russes*, *Pulcinella*, *Le sacre du printemps*, *Chout*, *Parade* and most notably the premiere of Stravinsky's new ballet, *Les noces*.¹³⁵

There was a lot of activity in Paris surrounding *Les noces*, which was to be premiered to the public on the first night of the Ballets Russes season. Before the premiere, the ballet was unveiled to a private audience at the home of the Princesse Edmond de Polignac (1865-1943), in which Carpenter was in attendance. Carpenter's invitation to this exclusive event illustrates his position with the inner circle of the Ballets Russes, likely the result of his and Rue's position in the international arts community. Carpenter's integration into the Ballets Russes social circle may have also been facilitated by expatriates Sara (1883-1975) and Gerald Murphy (the couple was known to support and promote the works of fellow Americans), who through studying painting with Natalia Goncharova (1881-1962) had the opportunity to assist in painting their teacher's set designs for *Les noces* and attend the rehearsals of the ballet.¹³⁶ Carpenter was

¹³⁴ The Ballets Suédois productions Carpenter attended were *Skating Rink*, *L'homme et son désir*, *Marchand d'Oiseaux*, and *Les Mariés de la Tour Eiffel*, letter from Carpenter to Ellen Borden, 5 June 1923, C-DLC.

¹³⁵ Jane Pritchard, "Serge Diaghilev's Ballets Russes-An Itinerary. Part II (1922-9)" *Dance Research* 27/2 (2009): 272. Ballets Carpenter saw in both America in Paris were *Pétrouchka* and *Prince Igor*.

¹³⁶ Deborah Rothschild, ed., *Marking it New: The Art and Style of Sara and Gerald Murphy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 41-42.

stimulated by the action around the private viewing of *Les noces* and expressed his awe in a letter to Ellen: "an extraordinary occasion,- such a wonderful house – and such a gathering of people that one had always heard about – musicians – painters, royalty – everything."¹³⁷ Carpenter and his family were also invited to the exclusive party hosted by the Murphys in celebration of Stravinsky's new ballet. The party took place on a péniche docked in the Seine in front of the Chambre des Députés on 1 July, and was intended "for everyone directly connected to the ballet... as well as for those friends of ours who were following its genesis," and yet the *corps de ballet* was not invited by specific request of Diaghilev.¹³⁸ This boat party has become infamous for the party-antics of the elite guest list that included Diaghilev, Stravinsky, Ansermet, Goncharova, Milhaud, Picasso, Porter, Mikhail Larionov, Blaise Cendrars, Jean Cocteau, Walter Damrosch, Marcelle Meyer, the Princesses de Polignac, Germaine Tailleferre, Tristan Tzara, Boris Kochno and of course the hosts, Gerald and Sara Murphy.¹³⁹ Carpenter's attendance at this party, once referred to as "a kind of summit meeting of the modernist movement in Paris," speaks again to his integration into the Parisian modern art community.¹⁴⁰

Carpenter regarded Stravinsky's *Les noces* as a "genuine creation," describing it as "Absolutely new and almost terrifying in its fundamental rigor and austerity;" it is no surprise that influence of this ballet should appear in the ballet Carpenter wrote for Diaghilev.¹⁴¹

¹³⁷ Letter from Carpenter to Ellen Borden, 14 June 1923, C-DLC.

¹³⁸ Quoted in Rothschild, *Marking it New*, 169; Charles Spencer, *The World of Serge Diaghilev* (London: Paul Elek, 1974), 109. Many sources claim the date of this infamous party was June 17, yet an invitation to Stravinsky from the Murphy's published in *Making It New* dates the party as July 1st at 8pm.

¹³⁹ Calvin Tomkins, *Living Well is the Best Revenge* (New York: The Viking Press, 1971), 32; Rothschild, *Making it New*, 169.

¹⁴⁰ Tomkins, *Living Well is the Best Revenge*, 32.

¹⁴¹ Letter from Carpenter to Ellen Borden, 14 June 1923, C-DLC.

The "Typically American" Commission

The day after the public premiere of *Les noces*, Carpenter wrote to Ellen, "Now some news! I think I am going to be commissioned to do something for the Russian Ballet. There is nothing definitive yet – but they seem to be very much interested. Wouldn't it be great sport!"¹⁴² What it was that gave Carpenter the impression of an oncoming commission is unknown, but seeing as the letter was written so soon after *Les noces* activities, one can speculate the composer and Diaghilev (or Diaghilev and his entourage, given the use of the "they" pronoun) partook in preliminary discussions surrounding an American ballet during one of these events. Regardless, three weeks after Carpenter wrote of this premonition, Diaghilev *did* officially commission Carpenter for a ballet score for the Ballets Russes; in a letter to Ellen dated 6 July, Carpenter wrote, "The grand climax came yesterday afternoon when Diaghileff definitely asked me to do something for the Russian Ballet."¹⁴³

Stephen D. Press, in his book *Prokofiev's Ballets for Diaghilev*, proposes that the "commission" was a misunderstanding on the part of Carpenter, in which the composer mistook a conversation with Diaghilev about American ballet as an official request for a score when the impresario was simply making discussion.¹⁴⁴ Although this is one way of dealing with the uncharacteristic commission of an American score by Diaghilev, one can also speculate cultural and financial motives that would cause the impresario to want an American production in his arsenal of ballets.

In the early to mid 1920s, Diaghilev was faced with competition from other modernist production companies that had sprung up due to the success of the Ballets Russes, particularly

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ Letter from Carpenter to Ellen Borden, 6 July 1923, C-DLC. This letter is evidence against many sources that cite the year of commission as 1924.

¹⁴⁴ Stephen D. Press, *Prokofiev's Ballets for Diaghilev* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006), 223.

the Ballets Suédois. As discussed in Chapter 1, the Ballets Suédois drew on popular American culture as a means of expressing modernity in their productions, and thus, as Garafola describes, "succeeded in edging Diaghilev to the sidelines of avant-garde Paris."¹⁴⁵

Garafola marks the influence of the Ballets Suédois on Ballets Russes programming as beginning in 1923 (the same year Diaghilev commissioned a score from Carpenter) in that the Russian impresario began request ballet scores from artists associated with the Ballets Suédois, particularly members of *Les six* (these commissions resulted in *Les Biches* (1924) from Poulenc, *Les fâcheux* (1924) from Auric, and *Le train bleu* (1924) from Milhaud).¹⁴⁶ Also at this time, the Ballets Suédois was in the midst of organizing two ballets influenced by American culture, the Harlem-infused *Le création du monde*, and the American-cinema-inspired *Within the Quota* by Porter and Gerald Murphy. Perhaps, then, Diaghilev's commission to Carpenter can be understood as the impresario wanting an American ballet in his repertoire to keep the Ballets Russes in line with their Swedish counterpart.

Diaghilev's consideration of staging an American ballet may have also been influenced by someone closer to him, namely dancer-turned choreographer, Massine, who had filled the void as Diaghilev's "pet" after the impresarios' break from Nijinsky in 1913. Massine conceived of two ballets based on the New World's cultural past and contemporary phenomena, which in turn may have encouraged Diaghilev to mount his own American ballet. After seeing a series of war dances performed by a group of Sioux Indians at the National Theatre in Washington D.C. during the Ballets Russes 1916 tour, Massine envisioned a ballet based on the story of Pocahontas. Along with Ballets Russes conductor Ernest Ansermet, the dancer visited the

¹⁴⁵ Garafola, "Rivals for the New: The Ballets Suédois and the Ballets Russes," in *Paris Modern: The Swedish Ballet 1920-1925*, edited by Nancy Van Norman Baer, 66-85 (San Francisco: Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco, 1995), 69.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 72.

Smithsonian Institutions to research tribal moon dances, nuptial ceremonies, funeral rights and Native American musical instruments as study for the projected ballet.¹⁴⁷ Massine's other American-motivated ballet idea was a polar-opposite to the folklore of Pocahontas; he wanted to create a ballet based on the New York City skyline. In his autobiography, Massine wrote of the idea for a ballet that was influenced by skyscrapers:

What particularly interested me was the fact that each unit of those monumental constructions represented a different aspect of life in New York. I thought it would be amusing to make a choreographic composition based on individual rooms, superimposed on one another, seen simultaneously, a sort of spiritual and visual counterpoint of various characters and their moods, typical of the daily happenings in this great city. As our ship entered the harbour, I visualized vast choreographic ensembles spiraling upwards to express the frenetic tempo of modern life.¹⁴⁸

Like many Europeans who sailed to the port of New York, Massine was impressed by the grandiose architecture of the uniquely American skyscraper. In his autobiography he expressed that skyscrapers, "are more beautiful than anything I have ever seen... their simplicity is so much better than all the decorative sculpture which ruins so much European architecture."¹⁴⁹ Although no evidence of these ballets materializing exists in the ballet literature, we can speculate that these ideas may have had an influence on Diaghilev's decision to commission an American ballet, or at least the content of the scenario that the impresario would propose to Carpenter eight years later in Paris.

It seems most likely that Diaghilev's primary reason for commissioning an American-themed ballet was to be able to use it in a future American tour. Previously, Diaghilev turned to America during periods of extreme financial crisis; the Ballets Russes' American tours in 1916 and 1917, as discussed in Chapter 1, were planned solely for the purpose of keeping the company afloat during the war years. Although 1923 found the Ballets Russes in good economic terms

¹⁴⁷ Vicente Garcia-Márquez, *Massine: A Biography* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995), 64.

¹⁴⁸ Léonide Massine, *My Life in Ballet* (Boston: Macmillan, 1968), 79.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

(the company had recently been appointed the resident ballet troupe in Monte Carlo), Diaghilev may have been preparing for any situation that would require another American tour. Having felt the pressure from American audiences to have an American artist featured in a production during the Ballets Russes 1917 American tour (resulting in Jones' contribution to Nijinsky's *Till Eulenspiegel*), Diaghilev may have anticipated that a subsequent tour would require a ballet by an American composer. This was indeed the case, for preliminary discussion around a third American tour in 1924 with the Metropolitan Opera Company required an American ballet on the program. Even as late 1928, accounts show the impresario looking for an American composer for his ballet during another time of financial uncertainty.¹⁵⁰

If Diaghilev did commission an American score as it seems likely he had, Carpenter would have had the best credentials for writing the Ballets Russes' first American score. The most obvious feature that set Carpenter apart from most contemporary American composers is that he had experience composing for ballet. Diaghilev knew of the success of Carpenter's *The Birthday of the Infanta* through Rue and was given a piano score of *Krazy Kat* by Gerald Murphy sometime around Carpenter's arrival in Paris.¹⁵¹ In *Krazy Kat*, the impresario may have found what he was looking for in an American ballet composer, especially with regard to Carpenter's use of American musical materials. Carpenter's pre-existing notoriety in America would also have been an asset for Diaghilev, for in the event of an American tour Carpenter's popularity and reputation as "America's first dramatic composer" could be used to attract American audiences

¹⁵⁰ Vernon Duke, "Gershwin, Schillinger, and Dukelsky: Some Reminiscences," *Newsweek* 24 23 October 1944, 14.

¹⁵¹ Pollack, *John Alden Carpenter*, 210; A piano score of *Krazy Kat* is included in the Serge Diaghilev/Serge Lifar Collection at the Library of Congress. This collection contains materials that were in Diaghilev's Venice apartment at the time of his death in 1929. The score contains two stamps of Gerald Murphy's name and Paris address. The address on the score, 23 quai des Grands-Augustins, helps to date when Diaghilev received the score. The Murphy's moved to the small apartment at 23 quai des Grands-Augustins in 1923, dating Diaghilev's acquisition of the score as no later than 1923; Amanda Vaill, *Everybody Was So Young: Gerald and Sara Murphy: A Lost Generation Love Story* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1998), 392n112. The score for *The Birthday of the Infanta* is not a part of this collection.

to the Ballets Russes.¹⁵² Additionally, Carpenter's wealth may have been attractive to Diaghilev, for the impresario may have wished to engage Carpenter as both collaborator and patron to form an artistic and business relationship similar to that which he enjoyed with Coco Chanel (1883-1971).

Prokofiev recalled that the commission occurred over a meal, with Diaghilev asking, "Why is it that you Americans have never written a genuinely American ballet?" followed by a discussion of possible scenarios to which the ballet could be set to.¹⁵³ In a letter to Ellen, Carpenter recounts a scenario Diaghilev suggested to him of a police strike in New York City:

It's simply the idea of a Policemen's strike. In the beginning there you see a row of far New York policemen against a background of N.Y. skyscrapers. Great formality for a few moments, until the chief of police comes in and pastes up an announcement that the police dept. has gone on strike. Then begins a gradual crescendo of lawlessness in which all the populace men women and children, and policemen join. Anything can happen and everything does happen – until at the end, the "strike" is called off and the Law and Order are restored. That's all.¹⁵⁴

Pollack makes a connection between Diaghilev's idea of a police strike as originating from the Boston police strike of 1919.¹⁵⁵ Perhaps the scenario proposed by Diaghilev can be interpreted as a reflection of a more personal concern. Diaghilev's scenario, as described by Carpenter, represents an artistic depiction of mass psychology couched within the narrative of working class concerns. Interestingly, these are all themes that had profound importance in the Soviet Union at this time, a subject of special anxiety for Diaghilev, who longed to revisit his homeland right up until his death in 1929.

¹⁵² Deems Taylor, "America's First Dramatic Composer," *McCalls Magazine* April 1922, 23.

¹⁵³ Sergei Prokofiev, *Sergey Prokofiev Diaries 1924-1933: Prodigal Son*, ed. trans. Anothony Phillips (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2013), 270-271.

¹⁵⁴ Letter from Carpenter to Ellen Borden, 6 July 1923, C-DLC.

¹⁵⁵ Pollack, *John Alden Carpenter*, 214.

Diaghilev did not hold Carpenter to this scenario, and encouraged the composer to write the music to which a narrative would be applied post-composition.¹⁵⁶ Evidence suggests that Diaghilev had Jean Cocteau lined up to create the scenario for the ballet, a natural choice for the impresario given the artist's fondness of American imports and popular culture.¹⁵⁷

In mid-July 1924, one year after the commission took place, Carpenter traveled to Venice to bring the piano score of his new ballet to Diaghilev at the Excelsior Hotel on the Lido, which coincided with the meeting of an entourage from the Metropolitan Opera gathered to discuss the forthcoming season, including directors Otto Kahn (1867-1934) and Giulio Gatti-Casazza (1869-1940). During this time, the Metropolitan directors and Diaghilev partook in preliminary discussions about a potential third American tour, and this time, the Metropolitan stipulated that the Ballets Russes would have to present an American ballet. Diaghilev found having Carpenter (and likely more so his ballet score) as beneficial to these negotiations, for in a letter to Kochno from this time the impresario wrote, "Carpenter's presence has been a great help in the present instance, for both Kahn and Gest find him a serious and important person."¹⁵⁸

During these preliminary discussions, Diaghilev included Carpenter's ballet on a list of repertoire for the proposed American tour, and tentatively scheduled the premiere of Carpenter's ballet for the 1925 Monte Carlo season.¹⁵⁹ Upon Carpenter's return to America this was announced in *Musical America*:

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 215.

¹⁵⁷ David Gullentops and Malou Haine, ed., *Jean Cocteau: Textes et Musique* (Sprimont: Mardaga, 2005), 265. In this survey of Cocteau's contribution to the music community, it is documented in regards to *Skyscrapers* that "Cocteau devait écrire le scénario sur la musique terminée du compositeur."

¹⁵⁸ Letter from Diaghilev to Kochno, 19 July 1924, quoted in Boris Kochno, *Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes*, trans. Adrienne Foulke (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 223.

¹⁵⁹ Garafola, *Diaghilev's Ballets Russes*, 457n26, among the Boris Kochno papers at the Bibliothèque de l'Opéra is a document on the letterhead of the Excelsior Palace where Diaghilev vacationed in 1924, listing ballets for an American tour in which Carpenter's ballet is listed under ballets "never performed in America." Garafola states that Diaghilev commissioned the ballet to Carpenter in the summer of 1924, whereas the actual commission occurred on 5 July 1923.

A ballet, as yet unnamed, the work of John Alden Carpenter, will be mounted at Monte Carlo about March 1 of next year, according to the composer, who returned to Chicago on Wednesday from a trip to Europe undertaken especially to confer with Serge Diaghileff.¹⁶⁰

The impresario's proposal to have the ballet unveiled in Monte Carlo is in accord with many of the Ballets Russes premieres during the mid-twenties. Dancer Alice Nikitina remembers, "Our Monte Carlo seasons, in spite of their importance, were considered by Diaghilev to be a kind of dress rehearsal, a first confrontation with the audience which enabled him to assess the value of the ballet according to reactions and judge as to what alterations were necessary."¹⁶¹

Diaghilev's valuation of Carpenter's score is illustrated in a letter he wrote to Kochno:

Happily, his ballet is not as bad as I expected. It's not a "false-note," but rather, I'd say, it is American de Falla, with appropriate folklore. Also, the famous 'policemen's strike' no longer takes place on the Strand but in an American factory, with alarm whistles and workers and such.¹⁶²

Diaghilev's inclusion of the statement "not as bad as I expected" hints of his skepticism of an American composing a score fit for his ballet, and reveals that Carpenter had to some extent risen to the occasion. His mention of "appropriate folklore" shows that the composer had succeeded in pleasing Diaghilev with his use of American cultural idioms that are discussed in Chapter 3 of this thesis. Lastly, the impresario's impression that the ballet now centered on a factory shows his own characterization of the score, or perhaps of a scenario that had been discussed with Carpenter.

During this same visit, Diaghilev requested that Carpenter make a few changes in his score (most notably the removal of a choral section) for "questions of expense and complications

¹⁶⁰ Eugene Stinson, "New Carpenter Ballet for Monte Carlo Delineates Industrial Activity in the U.S," *Musical America*, August 9, 1924.

¹⁶¹ Alice Nikitina, *Nikitina: By Herself*, trans. Baroness Budberg (London: Allan Wingate, 1959), 52.

¹⁶² Letter from Diaghilev to Kochno, 19 July 1924, quoted in Kochno, *Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes*, 223.

of production.” Diaghilev’s editing of Carpenter’s score is telling of his intentions, for according to Russian composer Nicholas Nabokov (who himself composed a score for the Ballets Russes in 1928, *Ode*), Diaghilev only made suggestions on a score if he was sincerely interested:

I remember the way he listened to a new work, always earnest and respectful. If he liked it, he would discuss it page by page and point by point, and make you play sections of it over and over again. If, on the contrary, he did not like the piece, his face would look bored and sleepy. As soon as the composer had finished playing Diaghilev would thank him with that icy, exaggerated politeness with which French courtiers brushed off inopportune commoners, and leave the room without saying another word.¹⁶³

Diaghilev’s approval of Carpenter’s score in the letter to Kochno is inconsistent with an anecdote Russian composer Vernon Duke (also known as Vladimir Duklesky, who composed the score for the Ballets Russes’ *Zéphyr et Flore* in 1925) published in his autobiography. Duke wrote: “[Diaghilev] asked John Alden Carpenter for a ballet score, had it read to him by myself and, although the work was entitled ‘*Skyscrapers*’ renamed it ‘*Massacre du Printemps*’ and rejected it after one unsatisfactory hearing.”¹⁶⁴ By this, Duke was surely referring to the score’s resemblance to Stravinsky’s early ballets (as discussed in Chapter 3), and implied that Carpenter’s score was a defamation of the aesthetic the Russian had created. Although amusing, this anecdote was likely an example of hyperbole on the part of Duke. Firstly, the piano score was un-named when given to Diaghilev, therefore it would be difficult to “rename” a score that already had no title.¹⁶⁵ Furthermore, the idea of the title *Massacre du printemps* may have been lifted by Duke from a 1913 caricature with same name by the artist known as Sem (born Georges

¹⁶³ Letter from Carpenter to Ellen Borden, 22 August 1924, C-DLC; Nicolas Nabokov, *Old Friends and New Music*, 80.

¹⁶⁴ Vernon Duke, *Passport to Paris* (Boston: Little, Brown & Company Limited, 1955), 143.

¹⁶⁵ In a letter to Ellen dated over a month after the piano score was given to Diaghilev, Carpenter debates possible name choices for his ballet; 28 August 1924, C-DLC.

Goursat, 1863-1934) which depicted Nijinsky in his *Le Spectre de la Rose* costume, dancing with theatre manager Gabriel Astruc (1864-1938) and his exaggeratedly enlarged nose.¹⁶⁶

Carpenter as an "Episode"

In early September of 1924, Carpenter wrote to Ellen that he sent another draft of his ballet to Diaghilev with the alterations suggested by the impresario less than two months prior, specifying "Antonin Barthélemy [French artist] is getting it into the official French Embassy mail for me so that it may not be lost or delayed."¹⁶⁷ By February of the following year, with no response heard from Diaghilev ("Still no word from the unspeakable Diaghileff. Isn't it rotten to not know anything!?"), Carpenter learned that his score had not successfully made its way into the impresario's hands:

I heard yesterday from the American Express Co. that they were all wrong last October when they called that they had delivered my piano score to Diaghileff in Monte Carlo. They now say that he was not there and that they have been sending the miserable thing to different forwarding addresses ever since. It has now come to rest in the Express office in Paris with \$1.81 storage charges draped around its neck. Isn't that pretty!¹⁶⁸

Carpenter recognized upon hearing this news that there was little chance of his ballet being produced by the Ballets Russes that spring, and remarked, "I'm glad now that I never allowed myself to set too much stars on it. It does make me a little mad though."¹⁶⁹ Still, Carpenter contacted Gerald Murphy to ask him to pick up the score and deliver it to Diaghilev himself with the hopes that it could be programmed for another time.

¹⁶⁶ This caricature was published in Sem's 1913 folio *Tangoville-sur Mer: Everybody is doing it now!*

¹⁶⁷ Letter from Carpenter to Ellen Borden, 1 September 1924, C-DLC.

¹⁶⁸ Letter from Carpenter to Ellen Borden, 20 January 1925, C-DLC.; Letter from Carpenter to Ellen Borden, 25 February 1925, C-DLC.

¹⁶⁹ Letter from Carpenter to Ellen Borden, 25 February 1925, C-DLC.

Less than two months later, Carpenter had made a deal with the Metropolitan Opera to produce his ballet, now entitled *Skyscrapers: A Ballet of Modern American Life*.¹⁷⁰ Carpenter wrote that, "I don't know if I am doing the best thing or not but I'm tired of waiting around for the silent Russian and all the second hand news I hear from."¹⁷¹ Still, Carpenter awaited a response from Diaghilev regarding his ballet, however Diaghilev would not have accepted a ballet that had been premiered elsewhere.

From Carpenter's letters, it seems that Diaghilev was stringing the composer along, by not returning his letters or messages regarding the status of his ballet. The composer was apparently warned by Diaghilev, "I do not write letters - not even telegrams," which of course was untrue.¹⁷² One can speculate the reasons the impresario did not get back to the composer, however it seems that Carpenter had fallen victim to the whim of the impresario, and was merely, in the words of Lifar, an "episode" in the history of the Ballets Russes:

Diaghilev loved friends and mankind, and was faithful to that love; but individuals were purely *episodes* in his creative activity, necessary at one moment, but nuisances when new horizons, incomprehensible or unacceptable to these friends, opened before him. From that moment, they ceased to exist for him, and though he in no wise denied his ancient friendships or repudiated them, they simply dropped from his mind.¹⁷³

Carpenter, then, was one of the many instances Diaghilev commissioned a score from a composer, and then abandoned it once the value of the project was no more. As Duke described, "With so many offered and so few chosen, becoming a Diaghilev composer in the twenties was quite a feat."¹⁷⁴

¹⁷⁰ Carpenter's contract with the Metropolitan Opera Company (with exclusive performance rights in New York and other cities east of Chicago, at Carpenter's request) granted him three hundred dollars for orchestra parts and seventy-five dollars for each of a minimum of three performances for the 1925-26 season and the right to renew the contract for the 1926-27 season; Pollack, *John Alden Carpenter*, 221.

¹⁷¹ Letter from Carpenter to Ellen Borden, 14 April 1925, C-DLC.

¹⁷² Goss, *Modern Music-Makers*, 39.

¹⁷³ Serge Lifar, *Serge Diaghilev, His Life, His Work, His Legend* (New York: De Capo, 1940), vii.

¹⁷⁴ Duke, *Passport to Paris*, 143.

Conclusion

Although Carpenter never successfully had one of his ballets produced by the Ballets Russes, he still held the honour as the only American composer to be commissioned a score by Diaghilev. Carpenter's compositional career up to the commission, particularly his ballets *The Birthday of the Infanta* and *Krazy Kat* illustrate how the composer shaped his musical aesthetics to the exotic and modernist interests of the ballet company. Carpenter pursued a commission from Diaghilev as early as 1920, with Rue introducing her husband's music to the impresario during a trip abroad. Three years later, through the help of distinguished colleagues, Carpenter entered the Ballets Russes social circle and was commissioned a score by Diaghilev, most likely for the use in future American tours. Carpenter in turn, composed a score for the Ballets Russes that the impresario found acceptable enough to consider producing it in Monte Carlo and on an American tour that was then in negotiation. After several months of not hearing from the impresario, Carpenter made arrangements for his ballet to be premiered by the Metropolitan Opera Company, thus putting to an end any possibility that it would be produced by the Ballets Russes.

The fact that Diaghilev commissioned a score to an American composer says a lot about the state of the Ballets Russes in the 1920s. To maintain his ballet company in post-war Europe, Diaghilev had to forgo some of his high-artistic standards, which included the consideration of producing an American ballet, something he never would have thought of when the Ballets Russes was sufficiently funded and had the monopoly on contemporary ballet. Although Diaghilev managed to go through the twenty-years of the Ballets Russes without staging an American ballet, the commission to Carpenter was all the same a noteworthy achievement not realized by any other American composer.

CHAPTER 3

America at Work and Play: Skyscrapers and Jazz

The 1926 published score of Carpenter's ballet *Skyscrapers: A Ballet of Modern American Life*, contains the following description, written by the composer himself:

“Skyscrapers” is a ballet which seeks to reflect some of the many rhythmic movements and sounds of modern American life. It has no story, in the usually accepted sense, but proceeds on the simple fact that American life reduces itself to violent alterations of WORK and PLAY, each with its own peculiar and distinctive rhythmic character.¹⁷⁵

Skyscrapers was not composed with this particular scenario in mind; as mentioned in the previous chapter, when Diaghilev commissioned a ballet score from Carpenter for the Ballets Russes he told the composer not to concern himself with writing around a specific narrative as one would be applied to the music post-composition. Diaghilev did urge, however, for the composer to write “something typically American.”¹⁷⁶ With this in mind, Carpenter composed a score for Diaghilev without a definite story, but with themes that represented America in his mind and in the cultural imagination of a transatlantic audience: the skyscraper via a machine aesthetic, jazz/ragtime, spirituals and American popular song. These symbols of American culture would find their place in the scenario of *Skyscrapers* that Carpenter devised with American set designer Robert Edmond Jones after the ballet had been signed on to be premiered by the Metropolitan Opera Company instead of the Ballets Russes.

From one perspective, Carpenter's assimilation of popular American cultural materials in his ballet can be attributed to his first-hand experiences while living in Chicago and frequent visits to New York City; certainly, the growing skyline of Chicago and the syncopations from Harlem jazz clubs would come to the composer's mind while writing a score to represent his

¹⁷⁵ John Alden Carpenter, *Skyscrapers: A Ballet of Modern American Life* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1926), program notes; for the full program notes of *Skyscrapers* as published in the score, refer to Appendix I.

¹⁷⁶ Carpenter to Ellen Borden, 6 July 1923, C-DLC.

homeland. This being said, and bearing in mind the ballet score was composed for a Monte Carlo premiere by one of the most influential cultural organizations in Europe, Carpenter crafted his score with consideration of a broader transatlantic perspective. Just as musicologist Annegret Fauser has described Aaron Copland's formation of a national identity as being "constructed in dialogue with French culture and its understanding of American cultural practice," so too was the American identity portrayed by Carpenter in his works, especially *Skyscrapers*.¹⁷⁷

By the 1920s, aspects of American culture had made their way to Europe through cultural transfer (be it through immigration, the arts or technologies) and had contributed to a sense of "Americanness" in Europe's cultural imagination. Americans associated themselves with these decidedly American characteristics to portray a national identity, and many of the European avant-garde (for example, *Les six* and artists tied to Futurism and Dada) assimilated idioms of American culture in their works for its perceived modernist associations. Therefore, by incorporating the skyscraper, jazz/ragtime, spirituals and American popular music in his ballet, Carpenter was representing an explicit American identity recognizable to an international audience, while simultaneously aligning himself with European modernist aesthetics and ultimately the trends associated with Ballets Russes.

America at Work: The Skyscraper Muse

Diaghilev may have sowed the initial seeds of a ballet inspired by the skyscraper. As discussed in Chapter 2, the impresario suggested a scenario to Carpenter of a policeman's strike "against a background of New York skyscrapers" that causes "a gradual crescendo of lawlessness" until the strike is called off and the city returns back to its original state.¹⁷⁸ Diaghilev, who encouraged Americans to find their own national identity (or more importantly

¹⁷⁷ Annegret Fauser, "Aaron Copland, Nadia Boulanger, and the Making of an 'American' Composer," *Musical Quarterly* 89/4 (2007): 526.

¹⁷⁸ Carpenter to Ellen Borden, 6 July 1923, C-DLC.

an identity separate from that of Europe) through the use of American indigenous materials, found the skyscraper a uniquely American entity and thus appropriate for an American ballet. This is illustrated in a 1928 interview in which Diaghilev supported the neo-classicist aesthetic adopted by the Ballets Russes in the mid-1920s by praising the skyscraper as a source of burgeoning classicism in America:

The creators of the marvelous American skyscrapers could easily have turned their hands to the Venus of Milo since they had received a complete classical education. But if anything does offend our eye in New York, it's the Greek porticos of the Carnegie Library and the Doric columns of the railway stations. The skyscrapers have their own kind of classicisms, i.e. our kind. Their lines, scale, proportions are the formula of our classical achievements, they are the true palaces of the modern age.¹⁷⁹

Although Carpenter decided to forgo Diaghilev's police strike idea, the composer extracted three elements from the impresario's recommendation for his ballet. Firstly, Carpenter maintained the implied ABA form of Diaghilev's narrative (order, disorder, order) by creating two distinct sections arranged in rough ternary form – work, play, work. Secondly, the ballet's production included a brief appearance (roughly four bars in length) of a police-person character who enters the scene to break up a brawl, perhaps as a tribute to Diaghilev's proposed scenario. Lastly, and most influential of all, Diaghilev's suggestion of a New York cityscape for the ballet's set was elevated to the main theme of "America at work," and ultimately the ballet's title.

Carpenter's skyscraper muse may also be attributed to his first-hand encounters with the architecture. As a Chicagoan, the skyscraper was a part of Carpenter's everyday consciousness; aside from New York City, Chicago had the most skyscrapers of any American metropolis at the turn of the twentieth century, the consequence of the 1870 Great Chicago Fire that allowed the

¹⁷⁹ Interview with Diaghilev in Parisian Russian language journal *Vozrozhdeniye*, from 18 December 1928, quoted in Sjong Scheijen, *Diaghilev: A Life*, trans. Jane Hedley-Prôle and S.J. Leinbach (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 429.

city to practically rebuild with the new steel and iron structures. Chicago was on its way to becoming the world's tallest city until concern regarding the future of the industrial metropolis and its unknown repercussions on quality of life caused the Chicago City Council to apply height restrictions to new buildings beginning in 1893.¹⁸⁰ Restrictions aside, many of Chicago's most recognizable skyscrapers were built in the 1920s, including the Wrigley Building, the Tribune Tower, and numerous buildings along the Magnificent Mile. Carpenter credited the active construction in Chicago as a motivation for the ballet's skyscraper theme in an article published in the *Chicago Daily Tribune*, remarking that the "rhythmic basis" of *Skyscrapers* came from "the rattle of riveting machines" heard from his studio window.¹⁸¹ Additionally, Carpenter shared with pianist and writer Verna Arvey (1910-1987) a conversation he had with Adolph Bolm in New York regarding the source of inspiration for his ballet stemming from the sounds of construction:

[Carpenter says] "I am composing a ballet which I want to be free, and to have scope and breadth." They both glanced briefly, in passing, at a huge building that was being erected near Bolm's hotel. Bolm replied, "then I hope you will put into it plenty of this modern sound!" Carpenter smiled whimsically and answered, "That's what I've already planned!"¹⁸²

As much as the growing skyline of American metropolises influenced Carpenter's use of the skyscraper in his ballet, he may have also considered the architecture's position as an international signifier of America as a means of representing the New World to a European audience; as English architect Alfred C. Bossom (1881-1965) wrote in 1934, "One can hardly think of America apart from skyscrapers and one cannot think at all of skyscrapers apart from

¹⁸⁰ Joanna Merwood-Salisbury, *Chicago 1890: The Skyscraper and the Modern City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 177.

¹⁸¹ Edward Moore, "J.A. Carpenter 'Skyscrapers,' Put on Records," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 28 August 1932, F7.

¹⁸² Verna Arvey, *Choreographic Music: Music for the Dance* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1941), 290.

America.”¹⁸³ As the rate of cultural transfer in the first decades of the twentieth century increased, so did the discussion surrounding the uniquely American architecture. On the one hand, skyscrapers were perceived as the “technological sublime,” and one of the first truly American creations during a time when the New World was striving for an identity separate from Europe.¹⁸⁴ To some, like Diaghilev, the skyscraper was the American equivalent to the romantic buildings of Europe. American photographer Alfred Stieglitz (1864-1964), in defense of his now famous photograph of the Flat Iron building in New York (entitled *The Flatiron*, 1903), remarked that the building represents “the new America. The Flat Iron is to the United States what the Parthenon was to Greece.”¹⁸⁵ Swiss-French architect and influential figure in the field of urban planning Charles-Édouard Jeanneret-Gris (1887-1965), better known as Le Corbusier, positioned the skyscraper as form of architecture more modern than contemporary Parisian buildings, admitting that “in the last twenty years, facing the old continent, [America] has set up the Jacob’s ladder of the new times.”¹⁸⁶ Henry James (1843-1916) an expatriate who supported European tradition, upon his return to America after twenty-five years in Europe described the skyscraper as a “fifty-floored conspiracy against the very idea of ancient graces.”¹⁸⁷ Skyscrapers were also perceived as reflections of larger social issues, such as the Americanization of Europe, American consumerism (“the perfect business machine”), capitalist culture, mass production (“the citadel of functionalism”), and the perceived dehumanization of society.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸³ Alfred C. Bossom, *Building to the Skies: The Romance of the Skyscraper* (London: The Studio, 1934), 9.

¹⁸⁴ David E. Ney, “The Sublime and the Skyline: The New York Skyscraper,” in *The American Skyscraper: Cultural Histories*, ed. Roberta Moudry (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 256.

¹⁸⁵ Quoted in Thomas Bender and William R. Taylor, “Culture and Architecture: Some Aesthetic Tensions in the Shaping of Modern New York City,” in *Visions of the Modern City: Essays in History, Art, and Literature*, ed. William Sharp and Leonard Wallock (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1983), 206.

¹⁸⁶ Le Corbusier, *When the Cathedrals Were White*, trans. Francis E. Hyslop, Jr. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1947), 42.

¹⁸⁷ Henry James, *The American Scene* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1907), 89.

¹⁸⁸ Sheldon Cheney, *The New World Architecture* (New York: AMS Press, 1930), 10; Fiske Kimball, “What is Modern Architecture?” *Nation* 199 (30 July 1924): 128.

Ultimately, whether praised or condemned, the skyscraper was inarguably symbolic of the modern America that drew the attention of a transatlantic audience; Harold A. Loeb (1891-1974), the founding editor of American little magazine *Broom*, wrote that his French peers often remarked such statement as, “Your intellectual America, yes, it bores me, but that other America of the skyscraper, of the movies, of the streets, that is admirable.”¹⁸⁹ It is for this reason that so many Americans, like Carpenter, utilized the skyscraper’s association with America as a tool for creating a national identity. For example, artists associated with the American modernist movement in the visual arts (a cross-fertilization of European avant-garde aesthetics with the “practical art” of America) often depicted the skyscraper in their works, such as Georgia O’Keeffe’s *City Night* (1926), and John Storrs’ *Forms In Space* (1927), among others.¹⁹⁰ Carpenter, given his ties with the Chicago Arts Club, may have observed this trend in the works of American modernists as a means of creating an American identity within European aesthetic styles.

Carpenter’s use of the skyscraper in his ballet can also be understood as stemming from previous modernist ballet productions by the Ballets Russes and the Ballets Suédois. During the Ballets Russes 1923 season in Paris, Carpenter would have seen a production of *Parade*, in which an “American Manager” character is costumed in Picasso’s cubist design that incorporates a three-dimensional skyscraper-figure protruding from the character’s back. Additionally, Gerald Murphy’s set design for the Ballets Suédois’ *Within the Quota* utilized the skyscraper to complement the American theme of the ballet by incorporating a picture of the Woolworth building, then the largest skyscraper in America, beside a vertically oriented picture of a transatlantic steamer, the SS. Leviathan, in his reconstruction of an American newspaper front

¹⁸⁹ Harold A. Loeb, “Foreign Exchange,” *Broom* 2/2 (May 1922), 178.

¹⁹⁰ See Merrill Schleier, *The Skyscraper In American Art, 1890-1931* (New York: Da Capo, 1986).

page. Carpenter did not see *Within the Quota* during its first run in Paris in October of 1923, however the composer did visit Murphy and Cole Porter in Venice when the pair was working on the ballet and may have seen Murphy's designs at that time. It is also probable that Carpenter attended the production during the Ballets Suédois 1923-24 American tour in which *Within the Quota* received critical acclaim.¹⁹¹ Whether Carpenter saw Murphy's designs or not, the artist encouraged Carpenter to use the skyscraper as inspiration for his ballet. Carpenter received a letter from Murphy late in 1923, advising the composer to "think in terms of what is real and most American:"

The principles behind the sounds of machinery and life are the same as those behind musical instruments, aren't they? Build your hearers a towering big structure of riveted steel and stone and then play all the color and ornament on it you want, it means so much to all of us.¹⁹²

Murphy's suggestion of using the mechanical and colossal is unsurprising, for the artist himself incorporated these themes in his works.¹⁹³

Skyscrapers Translated Through a Machine Aesthetic

Carpenter translated the skyscraper into the musical language of *Skyscrapers* through the formation of a machine aesthetic. The skyscraper and the machine were often mentioned in the same breath. For example, in his essay *The Composer in the Machine Age* (1930), George Gershwin wrote, "a skyscraper is at the same time a triumph of the machine and a tremendous emotional experience, almost breathtaking."¹⁹⁴ Like the skyscraper, the growing dominance of the machine in early-twentieth century society was met with ambivalence, described by

¹⁹¹ Robert M. Murdock, "Gerald Murphy, Cole Porter, and the Ballets Suédois Production of *Within the Quota*," in *Paris Modern: The Swedish Ballet 1920-1925*, ed. Nancy Van Norman Baer (San Francisco: Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco, 1995), 116.

¹⁹² Quoted in Deborah Rothschild, ed. *Making it New: The Art and Style of Sara and Gerald Murphy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 174.

¹⁹³ Murphy's 18-foot high canvas *Boatdeck* (1922) exhibits the towering smokestacks of an ocean liner, and his painting *Watch* (1925) is a close-up of the inner screws and gears of a Mark Cross wrist watch.

¹⁹⁴ George Gershwin, "The Composer in the Machine Age," in *The George Gershwin Reader*, ed. Robert O. Wyatt and John Andrew Johnson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 120.

musicologist Christine Fena as “sometimes configur(ing) an iconic representation of the creative power of human invention, and sometimes present in opposition of the personalized labour of human hands.”¹⁹⁵ The machine’s opposition of Romantic notions of the metaphysical and the sublime resulted in its celebration by the Futurists and Dadaists, which lead to machines becoming a common image in the visual arts in the 1910s and 1920s. American composers also found inspiration in the machine, such as Leo Ornstein (1893-2002) (his piano piece *Suicide on an Airplane* of 1915 uses tone-clusters to simulate an engine) and George Antheil (1900-1959) (whose 1924 *Ballet Mécanique* for pianolas and percussion makes use of extensive repetition to mimic the monotony of machines). Additionally, European composers such as Milhaud, Arthur Honegger (1892-1955) and most notable for his influence on Carpenter, Stravinsky, incorporated the machine aesthetic in their music (described below).

According to musicologist Deborah Mawer’s examination of the influence of machines on the music of Maurice Ravel, there are five techniques that a composer may utilize to “relate to machines:”

He could simply be an illustrator; a celebrator of invention as a modern act of homage (Darius Milhaud, *Machines agricoles*); a promoter of new musical definitions that include noise (Varèse, *Ionisation*); an advocate of machines as performers (Stravinsky, *Etude for Pianola*; Ravel, *Frontispice*); or an exponent of musical mechanics to convey properties of machines, especially movement (Honegger, *Pacific 231*; Ravel, *Boléro*).¹⁹⁶

Carpenter assimilated all of Mawer’s identified techniques of mechanism in *Skyscrapers*. Machines were illustrated in Jones’ backdrops through the representation of a skyscraper and an amusement park (as discussed later on in this chapter), and like Milhaud’s chamber work with lyrics taken from a farm machine catalogue, *Skyscrapers* “celebrated” American architecture

¹⁹⁵ Christine Fena, “Composing in the ‘Land of Sewing Machines and Type Writers:’ American Modernist Music and the Piano the Machine Age 1918-1933” (PhD diss., State University of New York at Stony Brook, 2011), 43.

¹⁹⁶ Deborah Mawer, “Musical Objects in Machines,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Ravel*, ed. Deborah Mawer (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 64.

through the production's scenario, backdrop and musical language. *Skyscrapers* promoted the use of "noise" by incorporating an anvil in the instrumentation of the score, similar to Varèse's use of a siren in *Ionisation* (1931). Carpenter did not employ an automatic piano in his compositions, however he featured the machine as an "instrument" by including flashing red lights in the instrumentation of *Skyscrapers* that were "played" as a part of the musical score, and like Honegger's imitation of the train in *Pacific 231* (1923) and the repetitiveness in Ravel's *Boléro* (1928), Carpenter conveyed the properties of the machine (the skyscraper) in *Skyscrapers* through the score's instrumentation, the "ostinato machine," and bitonality, as discussed below.

The methods Carpenter uses to create a machine aesthetic in the score for *Skyscrapers* can be attributed to the work of Stravinsky. The Russian's early "primitive" ballets (mainly *Pétrouchka*, *Le sacre du printemps* and *Les noces*) have been interpreted by several critics and scholars as mechanical; French critic and composer Émile Vuillermoz (1876-1960) remarked "[Stravinsky's] genius resides in the organization of the rhythmic gasping of his sound factory," and Albert Jeanneret (1886-1973, Le Corbusier's brother) claimed that Stravinsky's aesthetic was "lit by the light of the choice of this singular sonorous material, whose properties are dryness, force, and mechanical cleanness."¹⁹⁷ Critics also made the connection between Carpenter's score and Stravinsky's music, describing it as having "modern Russian influences," being a "fatal invitation to imitate *Pétrouchka*," and containing rhythmical ideas that "savor strongly of Stravinsky."¹⁹⁸ Pollock recognizes *Skyscrapers*' affinity with *Les noces*, a work Carpenter praised as a "genuine creation," citing that "the basic impulse behind the work – that

¹⁹⁷ Quoted in Berman, "From *Le sacre* to *Les noces*," 17-18; Carpenter to Ellen Borden, 14 June 1923, C-DLC; Howard Pollack, *John Alden Carpenter: A Chicago Composer* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 224.

¹⁹⁸ Winthrop P. Tryon, "Carpenter's New Ballet," *The Christian Science Monitor*, 20 February 1926, 8.; Pitts Sanborn, "The 1925-1926 Season," *Modern Music* 3/4 (1926): 4; Olin Downes, "'Skyscrapers' Here With 'Jazz' Score," *New York Times*, 20 February 1926, 15.

blend of cool irony and inexhaustible energy – derives in large part from *Le noces*.”¹⁹⁹ By modeling the “America at work” section of *Skyscrapers* after Stravinsky’s instrumentation, prevalent use of ostinato and bitonality, Carpenter was able to create a machine aesthetic in his ballet.

The instrumentation of *Skyscrapers* is indicative to the influence of *Les noces*; an extended percussion section, the inclusion of two pianos, and a chorus (discussed later in this chapter) in Carpenter’s score can easily be accredited to the four-piano, percussion and chorus instrumentation featured in the Russian’s ballet. The percussion section in *Skyscrapers* (consisting of xylophone, timpani, cymbals, bass drum, oriental drum, snare drum, tambourine, glockenspiel, cylinder bells, gong, tam-tam, wood block, tenor drum, and anvil) imitates the sounds one hears around a skyscraper construction site. For instance, the sharp attack of the glockenspiel, the cymbal (played with stick) and cylinder bells mimic the metallic hammering sounds of iron and steel. The anvil in the instrumentation is especially relevant given that its conventional use is as a tool used by blacksmiths for metalworking. The employment of the anvil as a musical instrument dates back to the mid-nineteenth century, appearing in music related to work and labour such as “Coro di zingari” (the “Anvil Chorus”) from Giuseppe Verdi’s opera *Il trovatore* (1853) and Gustav Holst’s “Song of the Blacksmith” from his *Second Suite in F for Military Band* (1922).²⁰⁰ Carpenter’s use of the anvil in *Skyscrapers* likely stemmed from *Il trovatore*, given that he quoted the opera’s “Misire” in *Adventures in a Perambulator*, and was involved with the Harvard and Radcliffe’s production of Gilbert and Sullivan’s operetta *The Pirates of Penzance* (1879), which makes a “spoof” of the “Anvil Chorus.”²⁰¹

¹⁹⁹ Pollack, *John Alden Carpenter*, 224.

²⁰⁰ In Verdi’s *Il trovatore*, the chorus sings the refrain, “All’opra! all’opra! Dàgli, martella!” (“So, to work now! Lift up your hammers!”).

²⁰¹ Pollack, *John Alden Carpenter*, 114, 24.

Fig. 6 – Carpenter, *Skyscrapers*, manuscript.

Instrument List:

- 2 Flute (French)
- 2 Oboe (English Horn)
- 2 Clarinet (B-flat)
- 2 Bassoon (English Horn)
- 2 Saxophone (Alto)
- 4 Trumpet (B-flat)
- 2 Trombone (B-flat)
- 2 Piano
- 2 Drums

Performers:

- 1. *John Brown*
- 2. *John Brown*
- 3. *John Brown*
- 4. *John Brown*
- 5. *John Brown*
- 6. *John Brown*
- 7. *John Brown*
- 8. *John Brown*
- 9. *John Brown*
- 10. *John Brown*
- 11. *John Brown*
- 12. *John Brown*
- 13. *John Brown*
- 14. *John Brown*
- 15. *John Brown*
- 16. *John Brown*
- 17. *John Brown*
- 18. *John Brown*
- 19. *John Brown*
- 20. *John Brown*

Notes:

The following is a list of the names of the performers in the orchestra. The names are given in the order in which they appear in the program. The names are given in the order in which they appear in the program. The names are given in the order in which they appear in the program.

Musical Notation:

The bottom page of the manuscript contains musical notation for various instruments. The notation includes notes, rests, and other musical symbols. The instruments listed are Clarinet, Saxophone, Trumpet, Trombone, Piano, and Drums. The notation is written in a standard musical notation style.

This heavy use of percussion in *Skyscrapers* is indicative to the trend Fena has identified in music of the 1910s and 1920s of a shift in dominance from the string section in an orchestral ensemble to an enlarged brass and percussion section, the result of increased sensitivity to “noise” in concert music (for example *Ballet Mécanique* and *Ionization*).²⁰² This trend is also reflected in *Skyscrapers* by giving the main themes to the trumpet, French horn and wind section while the strings take on a colouring role.

A reoccurring ostinato in the work section of *Skyscrapers*, named the “hammer motive” by Pollack, can also be attributed to the machine and Stravinsky.²⁰³ The hammer motive consists of alternating octave ostinato in 5/4 time, and is often featured in the piano parts and sometimes doubled by other instruments (Example 2). The regular repetition of a motive, such as the hammer motive, has been equated to the machine by theorist Derrick Puffett, who has discussed the idea of the “ostinato machine:” “The machine metaphor is apt because such structures tend to assume a kind of autonomy, unfolding alongside, or even in opposition to, whatever mode of organization prevail for the piece as a whole.”²⁰⁴

The use of ostinato motives is a defining characteristic of Stravinsky’s early works, and in *Skyscrapers* the hammer motive plays a similar function as the ostinato in *Les noces*. Theorist Pieter C. van den Toorn finds the fragmentary motives and ostinato in *Les noces* as “assuming a mosaics-like appearance,” similar to how the hammer motive in *Skyscrapers* does not serve a developmental function, but rather appears and re-appears between other motives in the work

²⁰² Fena, “Composing in the ‘Land of Sewing Machines and Type Writers,’” 46.

²⁰³ Pollack, *John Alden Carpenter*, 224. The names of themes in *Skyscrapers* referred to in this chapter stem from Pollack’s work.

²⁰⁴ Derrick Puffett, “Debussy’s Ostinato Machine,” *Papers in Musicology* 4 (Nottingham: University of Nottingham Press, 1996): 5.

section.²⁰⁵ For this reason, Pollack states that the motives in *Skyscrapers* “form a collage much like the brittle, mosaicked forms of Stravinsky and the cubist painters.”²⁰⁶

Ex. 2 - John Alden Carpenter, *Skyscrapers*. mm. 1-4

Allegro molto ♩ = 144

The score consists of the following parts:

- Cymbals:** Bass clef, 3/4 time. Measures 1-4 are mostly rests.
- Bass Drum:** Bass clef, 3/4 time. Features a steady eighth-note pattern on the downbeats, marked *mf*.
- Cylinder Bells:** Treble clef, 3/4 time. Features a melodic line with slurs, marked *ppp* and *ff*.
- Glockenspiel:** Treble clef, 3/4 time. Features a melodic line with slurs, marked *f*.
- Piano I:** Treble and Bass clefs, 3/4 time. Features a hammer motive (repeated E) on the right hand, marked *ff*. The left hand has a melodic line with slurs. Performance instructions include "R.H. R.H. R.H. simile" and "allow to vibrate".
- Piano II:** Treble and Bass clefs, 3/4 time. Features a hammer motive (repeated E) on the right hand, marked *ff*. The left hand has a melodic line with slurs. Performance instructions include "R.H. R.H. R.H. simile" and "allow to vibrate".
- Red Lights:** Treble clef, 3/4 time. Split into Right and Left channels. Features a melodic line with slurs, marked "allow to vibrate".

The hammer motive, accompanied by the bass drum on the down beats (which Pollack deems “particularly effective in suggesting hard, manual labour”) begins on the first measure of the score as repeated E ostinato.²⁰⁷ The motive continues for ten measures as a common tone for the F#M7/CM bitonality represented in the rest of the orchestration, grounding the otherwise

²⁰⁵ Pieter van den Toorn and John McGinness, *Stravinsky and the Russian Period: Sound and Legacy of a Musical Idiom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 114.

²⁰⁶ Pollack, *John Alden Carpenter*, 224.

²⁰⁷ Pollack, *John Alden Carpenter*, 224.

dissonant harmonies (more on this below). The ostinato and the bass drum also help maintain a consistent meter during an otherwise quickening pace and increasing urgency that takes place until the abrupt stop of the hammer motive for the statement of the first theme: the “trumpet fanfare.” The hammer motive returns after the introduction of the “work motive,” three highly dissonant accented eighth notes that occur during shifting bars of 3/4. This time, the hammer motive is transposed from a repeated E to B as the surrounding bitonality resolves into EM, changing the function of the hammer motive to a dominant pedal. The hammer motive continues for another ten measures, however it is interrupted again by appearances of the work motive and the introduction of the “Song of the Skyscrapers.” The hammer motive returns for a brief four measures before texture thickens as the music leads up to the transition from work to play. By the end of the first work section, the hammer motive is established as an aural signifier for the “America at work,” and immediately signals the return to work when it reappears later in the ballet.

Another Stravinskian aspect of Carpenter’s score is in the bitonality of the work section, specifically the use of a C major-F sharp major triad, the so-called “*Pétrouchka*-chord” (Examples 3.1, 3.2). The *Pétrouchka*-chord’s most dominant appearance in Stravinsky’s ballet, where it seems most likely Carpenter would have drawn inspiration from, appears in the second tableau, “Malédiction de *Pétrouchka*,” where the two triads are heard in the piano at a *fortissimo possibile* dynamic. *Skyscrapers*, too, presents the *Pétrouchka*-chord in the piano voice in a *fortissimo* dynamic, however, when placed into the context of the rest of the orchestration, Carpenter’s *Pétrouchka*-chord plays a different function than Stravinsky’s. Taruskin has analyzed the function of the *Pétrouchka*-chord in the Russian’s ballet, stating that Stravinsky “regarded the two triadic subsets of the *Pétrouchka*-chord as independent functional agents,

potentially (and at times actually) in conflict,” creating an “active polarity” between the two chords.²⁰⁸ Conversely, in *Skyscrapers*, Carpenter creates what Taruskin would call a “passive blend,” for the sustaining E ostinato “hammer motive” in the piano, supported by the bass drum, changes the quality of the F-sharp major chord to an F-sharp major-minor seventh chord, resulting in the E ostinato acting as a common tone between both chords (Pollack too, identifies the harmony in this section as a bitonal C-major and F-sharp dominant seven with the common E pedal).²⁰⁹ Furthermore, the texture of the *Pétrouchka*-chord in the piano parts of *Skyscrapers* illustrates a particular affinity to the use of the chord in Stravinsky’s ballet.

Ex. 3.1 - Carpenter, *Skyscrapers*, mm. 5-8

Allegro molto ♩ = 144
swa

Piano I

Piano II

²⁰⁸ Richard Taruskin, *Music in the Early Twentieth Century: The Oxford History of Western Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 167.

²⁰⁹ Pollack, *John Alden Carpenter*, 224.

Ex 3.2 - Igor Stravinsky, *Pétrouchka*, "Malédiction de Pétrouchka"

51 **Furioso** ♩ = 108

Musicologist Eric Walter White has examined the bitonality in *Pétrouchka* as a representation of the two sides of the ballet's Pétrouchka character – the puppet and the human.²¹⁰ It is tempting to consider that the bitonality in *Skyscrapers* portrays the binary of American life, work and play. The bitonality may also be understood, as Nancy Perloff recognizes the bitonality in Milhaud's *La création du monde*, as an imitation of “the simultaneity of urban sounds.”²¹¹

In February of 1925, the Carpenter family hosted Stravinsky in their Chicago home during the Russian composer's first visit to America, where he conducted two concerts with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, and was given a dinner in his honour by the Chicago Arts Club. Along with catering to “the wild and wonderful little Stravinsky,” Carpenter took the Russian on a tour of Chicago's famous stockyards, and played for him his score for *Skyscrapers*.²¹² Carpenter wrote to Ellen about the experience,

I played my music yesterday afternoon for little Igor – and had a lot of fun. It was at his request and I think he liked it – anyways he studied the score with great concentration and made a few very interesting suggestions designed to giving certain places more kick – and of course he is the original professor of Le Kick.²¹³

²¹⁰ Eric Walter White, *Stravinsky: The Composer and His Works* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 199.

²¹¹ Nancy Perloff, *Art and the Everyday: Popular Entertainment and the Circle of Erik Satie* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 6.

²¹² Letter to Ellen Borden, undated, C-DLC; Stephen Walsh, *Stravinsky: A Creative Spring: Russia and France, 1882-1934* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 401-406.

²¹³ Carpenter to Ellen Borden, undated, C-DLC.

By this time, Carpenter's score was fully composed and he was awaiting word from Diaghilev on the production of the ballet. As such, it seems unlikely that any of the Stravinskian elements discussed above stemmed from these suggestions made by Stravinsky, but instead through the imitation of his music. Still, one has to wonder what recommendations Stravinsky offered to Carpenter for *Skyscrapers*, and how (or if) the score changed because of them.

Modernist Primitive: America at Play

The middle section of *Skyscrapers* that came to represent "America at play" was conceived with idioms of the popular American vernacular - jazz, ragtime, popular music, and spirituals - all of which were perceived under the edifying umbrella of "lowbrow" African-American culture that was in vogue on both sides of the Atlantic. At the turn of the twentieth century, African-American presence in northern metropolises, particularly Chicago and New York City, had increased as many African-Americans migrated from rural southern states to where industrial jobs were plenty. Along with the growth in population was the increasing interest in the "Negro music" of jazz and spirituals. The music heard in seedy Harlem clubs performed by African-American musicians caught the attention of the country, and was raised up as the herald of American music and considered the ultimate expression of national identity. As early as 1895, Antonín Dvořák suggested in his essay "Music in America" that "inspiration for a truly national music might be derived from negro melodies or Indian chants."²¹⁴ Meanwhile, the trend of *l'art nègre*, a fascination with the art and culture of Africans (and African-Americans, the same) was at the forefront of the European avant-garde's aesthetic, celebrated by figures such as Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Georges Braque and Guillaume Apollinaire, who affirmed that

²¹⁴ Antonín Dvořák, "Music in America," *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, Vol. 90, February 1895, 438.

“Negro art is the fructifying seed of the spiritual twentieth century.”²¹⁵ Therefore, by including African-American cultural materials in *Skyscrapers*, Carpenter was adhering to trends in America as well as abroad – the composer himself admitted that some of the “negroisms” in his music “travel by way of Paris.”²¹⁶

Jazz, the “American Folklore”

In America, jazz is often thought of as America’s first original contribution to music. As Otto Kahn explained, “out of this jazz wave, developed in America, there will come a medium of artistic expression in music which will be characteristically American.”²¹⁷ Carpenter recognized jazz as “the American folklore,” and saw the music as having “roots in the American soil” and containing “certain elements that should be used by musicians.”²¹⁸ As discussed in the previous chapter, Carpenter had used jazz idioms in his compositions as early as 1905 (for example, in his song “Treat Me Nice,” which Pollack identifies as containing “hints of ragtime”) and had previously brought jazz to the ballet stage in his jazz pantomime *Krazy Kat*.²¹⁹ As a Chicagoan, Carpenter had many opportunities to hear all varieties of jazz in the 1910s and 1920s, due to the city’s large black population, the multitude of nightclubs in the city, and the enthusiastic response to jazz by Chicago’s white population that provided an outlet for jazz in posh hotels, private clubs and grand ballrooms.²²⁰ As much as Carpenter was exposed to jazz music at home, his use of the genre in his works, especially *Skyscrapers*, may perhaps best be seen as a reflection of the genre’s interest for French musical modernists.

²¹⁵ Quoted in Bernard Gendron, “Fetishes and Motorcars: Negrophilia in French Modernism,” *Cultural Studies* 4/2 (1990): 143.

²¹⁶ Goddard Lieberman, “Modern American Music,” *The Listener*, February 1939, 23.

²¹⁷ Mary Jane Matz, *The Many Lives of Otto Kahn* (New York: Pendragon Press, 1984), 226.

²¹⁸ Quoted in Pollack, *John Alden Carpenter*, 199.

²¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 89.

²²⁰ *Ibid.*, 196-197.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, many of the French avant-garde incorporated jazz influences in their scores in order to articulate a revitalization of French music, particularly members of *Les six*. Jean Cocteau proclaimed, “Impressionism music is outdone... by a certain American dance which I saw in the Casino de Paris.”²²¹ Milhaud, for one, praised the primal quality in jazz, which he viewed as stemming from Black America’s African origins:

There can be no doubt that the origins of jazz music is to be sought among the Negro Primitive African qualities have kept their place deep in the nature of the American negro and it is here that we find the origin of the tremendous rhythmic forces as well as the expressive melodies that this oppressed race alone can produce.²²²

Even Stravinsky, the composer who most influenced Carpenter’s music, experimented with jazz in his *Piano-rag* (1919), *Ragtime for Eleven Instruments* (1918) and the “Ragtime” from *L’Histoire du soldat* (1918), and claimed that the latter was an indication “of the passion I felt at the time for jazz... enchanting me by its freshness and the novel rhythm which so distinctly revealed its Negro origin.”²²³

While jazz was perceived as originating from “negro” identity, both American and African, it was also perceived by some musicians as a form of urban music, as when George Gershwin described it as “the folk music of the cosmopolitan.”²²⁴ Thus, jazz and the machine became closely related topics throughout the 1920s, and lead to the interchangeable names that have come to designate the decade: the “Jazz Age,” and the “Machine Age.” French author George Duhamel (1884-1966) attributed jazz to the sounds he heard in the stockyards of Chicago and French poet Paul Claudel (1868-1955) compared jazz to the noise of a train. The link of jazz

²²¹ Quoted in Jed Rasula, “Jazz as a Decal for the European Avant-Garde,” in *Blackening Europe: The African American Presence*, ed. Heike Raphael-Hernandez (New York: Routledge, 2004), 16.

²²² Darius Milhaud, “The Jazz Band and Negro Music,” *Living Age*, 18 October 1924, 172.

²²³ Barbara B. Heyman, “Stravinsky and Ragtime,” *The Musical Quarterly* 68/4 (1982): 543-562; Igor Stravinsky, *An Autobiography* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1962), 78.

²²⁴ Quoted in Anthony Clyne, “Jazz,” *The Sackbut*, August 1925.

with the machine is best illustrated in a comment by American novelist and social critic Waldo Frank (1889-1967):

Jazz syncopates the lathe-lunge, jazz shatters the piston-thrust, jazz shreds the hum of wheels, jazz is the spark and sudden lilt centrifugal to their incessant pulse... The song is not an escape from the Machine to limpid depths of the soul. It is the machine itself!²²⁵

Jazz was even linked to skyscrapers by Le Corbusier who once described them as “hot jazz in stone or steel,” a description reasserted by American author Matthew Josephson (1899-1978) who felt that “skyscrapers rise lyrically to the exotic rhythm of jazz bands.”²²⁶

Carpenter, however, believed that jazz was unable to be directly translated into a symphonic score, and explained the use of the idiom in his ballet was an exaggerated and distorted “reflection” of jazz rather than a representation of authentic jazz:

It must be understood that the music is not jazz, as jazz is generally heard and understood. It would be impossible to give jazz through the medium of a symphony orchestra. Therefore, *Skyscrapers* may be called jazz filtered through an orchestra of that sort. It is jazz once removed. Jazz itself depends of the sonority of the jazz band. To get something of this sonorous jazz effect we have used the saxophone and a banjo.²²⁷

By this, Carpenter was shielding himself from the inevitable criticism of the assimilation of jazz in symphonic score as he experienced with this previous “jazz-pantomime,” *Krazy Kat*.

Choir of Spirituals and Ragtime

The short choral section near the end of “America at play” illustrates Carpenter’s appropriation of African-American culture in his ballet. Scored for sopranos and tenors, this choral section has described by musicologist Carol Oja as “loosely built of four-bar segments

²²⁵ David Savran, *Highbrow/Lowdown: Theatre, Jazz, and the Making of the New Middle Class* (Ann Arbor: Michigan University Press, 2009), 183; George Duhamel, *America the Menace: Scenes from the Life of the Future*, trans. Charles Miner Thompson (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1931), 104; Quoted in Jeffery H. Jackson, *Making Jazz French: Music and Modern Life in Interwar Paris* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 79; Waldo Frank, *In the American Jungle* (New York: Frank and Rinehart, 1937), 118-119.

²²⁶ Quoted in Gail Levin, “The Ballets Suédois and American Culture,” in *Paris Modern: The Swedish Ballet 1920-1925*, ed. Nancy Van Norman Baer (San Francisco: Fine Arts Museum of San Francisco, 1995), 120.

²²⁷ Philip Hale, “Program,” concert program for the Boston Symphony Orchestra’s performance of the *Skyscraper* suite, 9/10 December 1927, 594, C-DLC.

suggestive of the blues, with ‘blue notes’ and the call-and-response form in the chorus’s melody and in the orchestral accompaniment.”²²⁸ While these characteristics are certainly present in the chorus, further analysis reveals that the choral segment is divided into two distinct sections, the first featuring musical materials of the spiritual (that theatre historian David Savran has described as a “pseudo-spiritual”) and the second that emulates a ragtime song.²²⁹ Carpenter’s decision to have the text of these sections consist of nonsense syllables invites a discussion of Carpenter’s treatment of the spiritual as both a modernist gesture and as a perpetuation of African-American stereotypes, particularly when examined in the context of the Metropolitan Opera production of the work, one that featured an African-American choir and a dancer in blackface.

A spiritual is an African-American slave song that originated in the southern plantations of America and is commonly recognized as contributing to the origins of the blues, ragtime and jazz. During his trip to the United States, Dvořák suggested that American composers should harness the spiritual in the creation of a national music aesthetic, writing that “so-called plantation songs are indeed the most striking and appealing melodies that have yet been found on this side of the water.”²³⁰ By the 1920s, spirituals had been adapted for concert performance and were internationally disseminated via performances by groups such as the Fisk Jubilee Singers as well as through written anthologies such as James Weldon Johnson’s (1871-1938) *The Book of American Negro Spirituals* from 1925.²³¹ Carpenter’s incorporation of spiritual-like music in a symphonic score was a further step towards assimilating this song-type to the high-art world, one

²²⁸ Carol Oja, *Making Music Modern: New York in the 1920s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 338.

²²⁹ Savran, *Highbrow/Lowdown*, 195.

²³⁰ Dvořák, “Music in America,” 438.

²³¹ James Weldon Johnson, *Book of American Negro Spirituals* (New York: The Viking Press, 1925).

which had been predicted by the “father of the Harlem Renaissance” and author of 1925’s *The New Negro*, Alain Locke (1885-1854):

[Spirituals’] next development will undoubtedly be, like that of the modern Russian folkmusic, their use in the larger choral forms of the symphonic choir, through which they will re-achieve their folk atmosphere and epic spirituality.²³²

The music of the spiritual section, marked *lento cantabile*, aligns with the distinctive characteristics of spiritual songs, including a repetitive call-and-response form between the sopranos and tenors, unison ensemble singing, limited vocal range and “blue notes” (Example 4). The voices are supported in the orchestra by doubling voice parts with the violins, in addition to the oboe accompanying the soprano part and the saxophones playing with the tenors.

Ex. 4 – Carpenter, *Skyscrapers*, Scene IV, No. 40, mm. 1-16.

The musical score for Example 4 consists of three systems of vocal parts for Soprano (S) and Tenor (T). The first system begins with a tempo change from *rall.* (♩ = 112) to *lento cantabile* (♩ = 100). The lyrics are: S: Ma - no - la Bo - la, ma no la ma na - bo - la. T: Fi - a - ma lo, fi - a - ma. The second system continues the lyrics: S: Ma - no - la Bo - la ma - no la mo na bo - la. T: lo Fi - a - ma lo, fi - a - ma lo Ma - no - la Bo - la, ma no la. The third system concludes the lyrics: S: mo na bo la ma - lo fla - ma lo Mo na bo - la, ma - no - la, ma - no - la. T: mo na bo la ma - lo fla - ma lo Mo na bo - la, ma - no - la, ma - no - la. The score includes dynamic markings (*p*, *f*) and performance instructions like *Ma - no - la* and *Bo - la*.

Carpenter avoided integrating some characteristics of the spiritual, most notably the 4/4 metre typical of the genre, choosing rather to write the chorus in 3/2 time while nonetheless

²³² Alain Locke, *The New Negro*, 1925 (New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1968), 199.

integrating an anacrusis and syncopations which destabilize the metrical regularity. The ensuing measures (not included in Example 4) repeat the soprano and tenor call-and-response themes, however the soprano's second call is not answered by the tenors as it was before, thus differentiating it from most spirituals which normally contain no form of variation. After a six-measure instrumental section, a new melody appears in the soprano voice that is immediately repeated by the tenors transposed up by a third. The two voices join again for a melody based firmly in G major. To many critics, this choral section was effectively understood as a spiritual. In the *New York Times*, the subtitle to the review of the ballet was "Negro Spirituals are Sung," and the *Chicago Daily Tribune* wrote: "The chorus sang a plaintive melody not so recognizable, except as a suggestion of the old time 'spirituals.'"²³³

The second choral section, reminiscent of ragtime, is distinctive from the spiritual section stated thirty-six bars earlier (Example 5). Historian Vera Lee has described the difference in the spiritual and ragtime genres by pointing out that "in contrast with most of the old slave spirituals and the blues that would follow, ragtime inherited the march's unremitting cheerfulness."²³⁴ The choir sings the ragtime in a regular 4/4 time in the key of C-major with blue notes (flattened third and seventh), marking a clear contrast to the minor-modal harmonies and blurred rhythm of the previous section. The inclusion of a piano reinforces the section's ties to ragtime with its typical alternation between on-beat accentuations and off-beat chordal accompaniments. The chorus sings a mildly syncopated melody in unison (against the regular accompaniment), one that contains vocal slides reminiscent of both the vocal and instrumental styles of jazz.

²³³ H. I. Brock, "Jazz is to do a Turn in Grand Opera," *New York Times*, 14 February 1926, SM5; "Carpenter Jazz Ballet Gives New York Kick," *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 20 February 1926, 15.

²³⁴ Vera Lee, *The Black and White of American Popular Music: From Slavery to World War II* (Rochester: Schenkman Books, 2007), 46.

Ex. 5 – Carpenter, *Skyscrapers*, Scene IV, No. 46, mm. 9-17.

The musical score is for a 4/4 piece in G major, marked with a tempo of quarter note = 112. The instrumentation includes Banjo, Piano I, Piano II, Soprano, Tenor, Bjo., Pno. I, Pno. II, Soprano (S), and Tenor (T). The vocal parts have the following lyrics:

Soprano: *Ma no - la Bo - la, ma - no - la Bo - la - ma - no, o ma - Bo - la ma - no - la*

Tenor: *Ma no - la Bo - la, ma - no - la Bo - la - ma - no, o ma - Bo - la ma - no - la*

Soprano (S): *Bo la - ma no - ma no la Bo la, ma no la lo la ma no - ma no la a ma no la a ma lo*

Tenor (T): *Bo la - ma no - ma no la Bo la, ma no la lo la ma no - ma no la a ma no la a ma lo*

When Carpenter brought his score for *Skyscrapers* to Diaghilev in July of 1924, the composer had yet to set the text to the choral section. Upon reviewing the ballet, the impresario asked Carpenter to remove the voices, claiming that such choral writing effects had been “over done” in recent Ballets Russes productions, presumably referring to *Le Noces* and Francis

Poulenc's *Les biches* (1924).²³⁵ In a letter to Ellen, one can sense Carpenter's resistance to the injunction of removing the voices ("I hate to give them up"), however the composer acknowledged the value of Diaghilev's suggestion, admitting that the impresario was also likely considering the expense and complications that would inevitably arise from including a choir in the score: "Leaving out the voices will make the music much more practical for possible performances by other orchestras." Only when the premiere of the ballet was secured by the Metropolitan Opera Company instead of the Ballets Russes did Carpenter decide to reinsert the choral section into his ballet.

The scenario formulated for this section of the ballet is particularly interesting given the scenic treatment applied to the two separate choral sections. The spiritual section begins as the character "White Wings," a "negro street cleaner," (played by white vaudeville and jazz dancer, Roger Dodge [1898-1974] in blackface) finishes his work and takes a nap on the stage. Carpenter's program notes best describes what happens next:

The ensuing scene... represent[s] the dream fantasy of the sleeping negro. Through the gauze curtain just beyond him, we see gradually taking shape in the dim light a group of negros, men and women, half-forgotten types of the poor south. We hear their actual voices, in a song, first slow and soothing, then more animated and rising at last to a fierce religious fervor...

This is when the spiritual section starts – hinted in Carpenter's notes by characterizing the choir as "half-forgotten types of the poor south," and "fierce religious fervor." At the end of the spiritual, the "tension breaks" and the chorus begins to dance, waking White Wings from his dream– "his legs begin to twitch, he turns he tosses and at last he springs to his feet ... and throws himself into the dance." At this point, the ragtime-chorus section begins during which White Wings performs a cakewalk.

²³⁵ Carpenter to Ellen Borden, 22 August 1924, C-DLC.

The Metropolitan hired African-American Frank Wilson (1886-1956) to direct and “furnish twelve colored singers to sing the music allotted to them in John Alden Carpenter’s ballet *Skyscrapers*.”²³⁶ Wilson was a member of the famed Lafayette Players and an experienced Broadway performer, having appeared in the 1924 production of Eugene O’Neill’s *All God’s Chillun Got Wings* (with designs by Jones), and who would go on to play the role of Porgy in the 1927 play *Porgy and Bess*, the same work Gershwin would appropriate for his 1935 opera.²³⁷

What is perhaps most interesting about the chorus section of *Skyscrapers* is that Carpenter chose to have the choir sing a nonsense text. The lyrics of spirituals regularly drew on retold stories from the Old and New Testaments, and often contained themes of liberation, divine justice, living in exile, faith in adversity, antislavery sentiment among other significant subject matters.²³⁸ Some spirituals are even thought to have contained hidden messages, such as references to the Underground Railroad, or instructions to help fugitive slaves avoid capture. Carpenter, however, chose to ignore the significance of the text in spirituals, by writing his own nonsense lyrics: “Manola Bola, manola manabola/ Fiamalo, fiamalo.” This text was likely meant to imitate the African-American dialect, described in the *Oxford Book of Spirituals* as “the result of the effort of the slave to establish a medium of communication between himself and his master.”²³⁹ This the slave did by dropping his original language, and formulating a phonologically and grammatically simplified English in which the harsh and difficult sounds were elided, and the secondary moods and tenses were eliminated. In the 1920s there were two schools of thought regarding African-American dialect. On the one hand, as proposed by

²³⁶ Dorel J. Soria, “Treasures and Trifles: A Glimpse into the Metropolitan Opera Archives,” *Opera News* 52/3 (September 1987), 26.

²³⁷ Oja, *Making Music Modern*, 336-337.

²³⁸ William C. Banfield, *Cultural Codes: Makings of a Black Music Philosophy: An Interpretive History from Spirituals to Hip Hop* (Lanham: Scarecrow Press, 2010), 100.

²³⁹ Moses Hogan, ed., *The Oxford Book of Spirituals* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), xvii.

African-American songwriter James Weldon Johnson (1871-1938), the use of dialect should be purposely avoided. Given that such dialects reinforced “the minstrel tradition of Negro life,” they tended to perpetuate the stereotype of African-Americans as “happy-go-lucky, singing, shuffling, banjo-picking beings.”²⁴⁰ Conversely, Locke advocated for the maintenance of dialect, stating, “In this broken dialect and grammar there is almost invariably an uttering sense of euphony.”²⁴¹

In the score of *Skyscrapers*, Carpenter included a statement at the beginning of the choral section reading, “The “words” sung by the singers have of course no meaning, and are used merely for sonority,” thus aligning his use of nonsense syllables to Locke’s notion of euphony.²⁴² However, Carpenter’s use of nonsense syllables can be interpreted in two other ways.²⁴³ Firstly, Carpenter may have been using these technique as a super-modernist gesture, as in Poulenc’s seven-movement work for piano, small ensemble and voice, *Rapsodie Nègre* (1917), which features a baritone part with the text “Honoloulou, poti lama!/ Honoloulou, Honoloulou/ Kati moko, mosi bolou, Ratakou sira, polama!”²⁴⁴ In hindsight, Poulenc remarked that *Rapsodie nègre* was “a reflection of the taste for negro art which had flourished since 1912 under the impetus of Apollinaire.”²⁴⁵ The Dadaists, too, often incorporated “pseudo-African” languages in their Dadaist poems. For example Richard Huelsenback’s (1892-1974) “Chorus Sanctus” of 1916 had the text “n aao e ei iii oii/ou ou o ou ou e ou ie a ai” etc.²⁴⁶

²⁴⁰ Michael North. *The Dialect of Modernism: Race, Language, and Twentieth Century Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 19.

²⁴¹ Locke, *The New Negro*, 204.

²⁴² Carpenter, *Skyscrapers*, 99.

²⁴³ Carpenter, *Skyscrapers*, program notes.

²⁴⁴ Poulenc claimed that the text was drawn from a collection of poems entitled *Les Poésies de Makoko Kangourou* he had found in a bookstall along the banks of the Seine. Kangourou is not a recognized poet, but has been suggested as a possible pseudonym for Parisian poet Marcel Ormoy. Carl B. Schmidt, *Entrancing Muse: A Documented Biography of Francis Poulenc* (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2001), 43.

²⁴⁵ Quoted in Schmidt, *Entrancing Muse*, 43.

²⁴⁶ North, *The Dialect of Modernism*, 30.

On the other hand, and as Oja has discussed, the use of nonsense words sketched the stereotype of African-Americans as untutored, barbaric and inchoate.²⁴⁷ These negative stereotypes stem from the minstrelsy tradition, which characterized African-Americans as “watermelon addicts, chicken thieves, irresponsible, stupid, lazy (especially the men), and dishonest.”²⁴⁸ Some antebellum Blackface Minstrel songs used nonsense syllables in the filler text function (later be filled in by banjos and like the banjo interludes) such as “Ole Tar River:” “Oh, way down in old Tare riber/ Hu hu lu a hu ahoo/ On de banks of Alama/Lum tum tum tum Todday um de da.”²⁴⁹

Skyscrapers notably marks the first time that African-Americans were professionally hired by the Metropolitan Opera to perform on their stage, with each performer earning 120 dollars for each performance.²⁵⁰ The hiring of an African-American choir may have been seen as a means of creating an image of authenticity around the depiction of African-Americans in Carpenter’s ballet. For some artists in the interwar years, African-American singers were regarded as having an innate talent for interpreting music. Such an idea is reflected in Carl Van Vechten’s (1880-1964) introduction to the Virgil Thomson (1896-1989) and Gertrude Stein (1874-1946) opera of 1934, *Four Saints in Three Acts*, which featured a sizable cast of African-American singers and dancers: “[Negro Singers] alone possess the dignity and the poise, the lack of self-consciousness that proper interpretation of the opera demands. They have the rich, resonant voices essential to the singing of my music and their clear enunciation required to

²⁴⁷ Oja, *Making Music Modern*, 340.

²⁴⁸ J. Stanley Lemons, “Black Stereotypes as Reflected in Popular Culture, 1880-1920,” *American Quarterly* 29/1 (1977): 111.

²⁴⁹ William J. Mahar, *Behind The Burnt Cork Mask: Early Blackface Minstrelsy and Antebellum American Popular Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 232-233.

²⁵⁰ This wage was inclusive of all fees for performances, rehearsals and preliminary work; Pollack, *John Alden Carpenter*, 223.

deliver Gertrude's text."²⁵¹ In the case of *Four Saints in Three Acts*, Lisa Barg argues that the performance of the opera represented "African-American singers not so much as people or actors performing roles, but as symbolic objects. The cast acted, in effect, as ciphers for the opera's avant-garde 'nonsense.'"²⁵²

The use of an African-American chorus in *Skyscrapers* may be viewed as participating in a similar aesthetic project, one that somewhat uncomfortably incorporates the ambitions of the New Negro Movement with the perpetuation of stereotypes derived from the traditions of minstrelsy. Minstrelsy is represented, as well, with the casting of a white dancer in blackface to play the role of White-Wings, whose cakewalk (a dance recognized as stemming from African-American slave origins) may be understood by some as "a degrading reminder of slavery."²⁵³ Carpenter further allies his work to such minstrelsy traditions by quoting various "coon songs" during "America at play." Pollack has identified Carpenter's inclusion of themes from "When You Ain't Got No Money Well You Needn't Come Round" (1898), written by prolific Broadway composer Alfred Baldwin Sloane (1872-1926) with lyrics by Clarence S. Brewster, and "Massa's in de Cold Cold Ground" (1852) by the "troubadour of American music," Stephen Foster (1826-1864).²⁵⁴ The "coon song" is a genre of American comic song with words in a dialect purporting to be typical of African-American's speech, a form of minstrelsy tradition whose popularity extended into the 1920s. "When You Ain't Got No Money" portrays a black man who loses his money through gambling, resulting in his love interest to refuse him ("de only

²⁵¹ Carl Van Vechten in Virgil Thomson, *Four Saints in Three Acts: An Opera to be Sung* (New York: Random House, 1934), 7-8.

²⁵² Lisa Barg, "Black Voices/White Sounds: Race and Representation in Virgil Thomson's *Four Saints in Three Acts*," *American Music* 18/2 (2000): 151.

²⁵³ Eroll G. Hill and James V. Hatch, *A History of African American Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 152.

²⁵⁴ Pollack, *John Alden Carpenter*, 298-230; Clarence S. Brewster and Alfred Baldwin Sloane, *When You Ain't Got No Money Well You Needn't Come Round* (New York: M. Witmark & Sons, 1898); Stephen Foster, *Massa's in de Cold Cold Ground* (New York: Firth, Pond & Co., 1852).

coon dat I see/ Is de one dat blows his dough on me”) and “Massa’s in de Cold Cold Ground,” was a popular minstrel song that tells of slaves mourning the death of their master. By incorporating these songs in *Skyscrapers*, Carpenter was recalling and participating in the traditions of minstrelsy. Although appearing in the score without their slanderous words, the songs were popular enough that the association between the tune and the lyrics may be made.

Although it is not my intention to pass judgment on Carpenter’s racial leanings or intentions, the treatment of the choral section in *Skyscrapers* certainly does seem to perpetuate African-American stereotypes stemming from the minstrelsy tradition. The setting of spiritual-like music to nonsense words sung by an African-American choir, whether conceived as a modernist gesture or not, signified not only the degradation of the spiritual song type (whose lyrics were of a highly personal nature) but also upheld typecasts of African-Americans represented in minstrel shows as “stupid,” “lazy” and “inchoate.” This, paired with the choir singing (and dancing) alongside a blackface cakewalking White-Wings and the quotations of popular coon songs, renders “America at play” as a representation of the stereotypes stemming from the nineteenth-century, that by the 1920s cultural movements such as the New Negro and Harlem Renaissance were actively trying to suppress. Yet in *Skyscrapers*, this popular way of thinking was appropriated for the stage of the Metropolitan Opera House, as entertainment for the Metropolitan’s mostly white, high-society audience. The audience found this representation of African Americans appropriate, for nowhere is there mention of an uprising in regards the degrading treatment of African Americans culture or people contained in *Skyscrapers*.

The Collaboration: Robert Edmond Jones, Sammy Lee

When it came to Carpenter devising a scenario for the Metropolitan Opera Company production of his ballet, he enlisted the assistant of his past collaborator, Robert Edmond Jones.

Jones recalls that “At the outset, Carpenter expressed the intention to indicate moods of work and play, but beyond that he had not committed himself, not even to a literal locale.”²⁵⁵ Carpenter and Jones’ collaboration yielded a six-scene ballet illustrating the binary of America at work and play: I: Introduction, II: America at work, III: Transition from America at work to America at play, IV: America at play (throwback to work), V: Transition from America at play to America at work, VI: America at work.²⁵⁶

While “America at work” was represented through the construction of skyscrapers, “America at play” was ultimately set in a “Coney Island style of Amusement park.”²⁵⁷ With its roots in the World’s Columbian Exhibition of 1893 (Chicago), the Coney Island type amusement park was a product of America. These parks functioned as an “escape” from the daily grind for many middle class workers, a place where they could forget about their daily lives and enter the alternate reality created in the park. The popular amusements offered at these parks (the merry-go-round, the roller coaster and the Ferris wheel) were powered by machinery, creating what cultural historian Judith A. Adams has described as a “juxtaposition of mechanical amusement devices with an atmosphere of illusion and chaos.”²⁵⁸ The amusement park in *Skyscrapers*, then, is another manifestation of the machine in the lives of Americans, now not only taking over their work, but also their play.

By representing America at play at an amusement park, Carpenter was entering the conversation surrounding the mechanization of American life. As Savran has discussed, *Skyscrapers* testifies to “the ubiquity of mass production and consumption, to the fact that even

²⁵⁵ Minna Lederman, “Skyscrapers: An Experiment in Design An Interview with Robert Edmond Jones,” *Modern Music* 3/2 (1926): 22.

²⁵⁶ Carpenter, *Skyscrapers*, program notes.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁸ Judith A. Adams, *The American Amusement Park Industry: A History of Technology and Thrills* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1991), 41.

leisure pursuits by the 1920s had become mechanized and standardized.”²⁵⁹ Along with Carpenter’s jazz inflected score (jazz, as discussed above, has connotations to the machine), Jones’ backdrop and the choreography of this section of the ballet supports this notion.

Fig. 7 - *Wolkencratzer* in Munich, 1928, “America at Play.”



Jones’ design for “America at play” emphasizes the steel frames and structures of amusement; the backdrop features rollercoaster tracks framing the sides of the stage and depicts the silhouette of a Ferris wheel in the distance. American music critic Deems Taylor’s description of this “nightmare version of any American amusement park” is worth noting for his attention to the machine-like qualities of the setting: “In the background writhed a convulsed scenic railway, while overhead strange baskets rose and fell dangling from the steel arms of various bone breaking engines of amusement.”²⁶⁰ A section of the choreography in which the

²⁵⁹ Savran, *Highbrow/Lowdown*, 195.

²⁶⁰ Deems Taylor, “America’s First Dramatic Composer,” *McCalls Magazine*, April 1922, 23.

dancers “become” a merry-go-round can be interpreted as a representation of the dehumanization of Americans by machines, or conversely, the humanization of machines. Brought on the stage is a mirror-covered cylinder, in which pairs of dancers circle around, “giving the effect, with their prancing step and the nodding plums on their heads, of the day maneuvers of the wooden horses of a Merry-Go-Round.”²⁶¹ Olin Downes with the *New York Times* further illustrates the dancer’s embodiment of the horse with his description: “The carousel comes slowly to a halt: the horses slow up, droop their heads or remain as if stopped in mid-air.”²⁶² By stringing mechanistic elements though the “work” and “play” of America, *Skyscrapers* came to represent the tensions felt by many upon the growing reliance on machines.

Musicologist Scott D. Paulin suggests that elements of *Skyscrapers*’ scenario may have stemmed from fellow American writer and critic Edmund Wilson (1895-1972). In 1924, Jones was designing sets for Wilson’s play, *The Crime in the Whistler Room* while the writer was in the midst of brainstorming an American-themed ballet production for the Ballets Suédois (for whom he was the press agent for one of their American tours).²⁶³ This ballet, entitled *Cronkhite’s Clocks* and designed to feature Charlie Chaplin with a score by Ornstein, did not come into fruition, however the themes of the ballet overlap with what became the thematic basis underlying *Skyscrapers*: a representation of the modern American city, the contrast of jazz and cacophonous music, and a dancer in blackface. Another work that Richard Hammond in *Modern Music* mentions as a possible forerunner of *Skyscrapers*’ scenario is American composer Emerson Whithorne’s (1884-1958) “dance satire” *Sooner or Later* (1925), which was based on “the work and play of mankind, from the tribal days of primitive man through the Jazz-Age to

²⁶¹ Carpenter, *Skyscrapers*, program notes.

²⁶² Downes, “‘Skyscrapers’ Here with ‘Jazz’ Score,” 15.

²⁶³ Scott D. Paulin, “Chaplin and the Sandblaster: Edmund Wilson’s Avant-Garde Noise Abatement,” *American Music* 28/3 (Fall 2010): 295-6n83.

those crystalline cities of the future.”²⁶⁴ These proposed origins of *Skyscrapers* scenario may have some validity, seeing that Carpenter and Jones did not begin to collaborate on a scenario until mid-1925. Nevertheless, as discussed above, Carpenter at least had the idea of skyscrapers in his mind for the ballet during composition in 1923 and 1924. Additionally, the scenario created for *Skyscrapers* may have been created to fit in with the lifestyle modernism trend forged by the Ballets Russes, for it contained no particular narrative but instead depicted the “everyday” of American life. Carpenter explained the lack of narrative in his ballet: “I have not tried to tell a story in *Skyscrapers*. In fact, there is no story to it. It is simply based on the idea that in this country we work hard and play hard.”²⁶⁵ One critic recognized the depiction of the “everyday” in the production of *Skyscrapers*, describing the ballet as follows:

The different scenes bring before us the familiar sights and sounds of our *everyday American life*, but transformed through a powerful artistic imagination into something intensely suggestive of all the vital forces that lie beneath external things and that are forming our distinctive national life.²⁶⁶

Upon completion of the “scenario” for *Skyscrapers*, Carpenter and Jones began searching for an appropriate choreographer to work on their ballet. According to Jones, the pair was looking for an “American Adolph Bolm to create the ballet as choreographers do for Diaghilev.”²⁶⁷ The team wanted a choreographer *like* Bolm (who had worked with Carpenter and Jones in *The Birthday of the Infanta* and Carpenter in *Krazy Kat*), but felt that an American would be best suited for staging *Skyscrapers*, particularly after Bolm had been chastised by critics for being unable to interpret the “peculiarly native flavor” of *Krazy Kat*.²⁶⁸ “It seemed a little devious to say the least,” Carpenter stated, “that we should take one of the Europeans who

²⁶⁴ R. Hammond, “Emerson Whithorne,” *Modern Music* 8/2 (1930–31): 25–26.

²⁶⁵ Philip Hale, “Program,” 594, C-DLC.

²⁶⁶ Quoted in Pollack, *John Alden Carpenter*, 236, emphasis mine.

²⁶⁷ Lederman, “Skyscrapers: An Experiment in Design,” 25.

²⁶⁸ Quoted in Pollack, *John Alden Carpenter*, 204.

after six months spent watching Florence Mills and other cabaret stars, go home and skillfully apply the borrowed devices of our jazz.”²⁶⁹

Fig. 8 – Carpenter and Jones, undated.



²⁶⁹ Lederman, “Skyscrapers: An Experiment in Design,” 24-25.

An interview with Jones published in *Modern Music* details the challenges the pair faced in finding a choreographer for their ballet and unveils the state of American dance at the time:

After weary search in pursuit of every possibility from the famous revue choruses and their trainers to the hodge podge of ideas that emanated from the intelligentsia, it became perfectly clear that there was as yet no discoverable American Bolm, no choreography and no way to bring either of these suddenly into existence.²⁷⁰

Without a suitable American choreographer for their ballet, Carpenter and Jones chose to contrive the choreography themselves. The team spent six months creating a “choreographic manuscript” that contained popular dance figures such as “strut,” “Charleston,” “trot” and pantomime directions “with indications of pattern changes definitely tied to the numbered bars of music.”²⁷¹ Given that neither Carpenter nor Jones could translate their choreographic manuscript into actual choreography, Broadway dance director Sammy Lee was invited to work on *Skyscrapers* upon the suggestion of Broadway theatre producer Arthur Hopkins (1878-1950).²⁷²

Sammy Lee, born Samuel Levy, was born in New York City to Russian immigrant parents. Lee was a regular performer in the vaudeville circuit by 1909, in which he achieved enough success to make a career in Broadway. Between the years 1920 and 1929, Lee choreographed twenty-six Broadway musicals, many of notable stature such as Gershwin’s *Lady, Be Good* (1924) and *Oh, Kay!* (1926), and the Ziegfeld Follies *Show Boat* (1927).²⁷³ In these productions, Lee would choreograph various popular styles of dance typically found in Broadway productions (such as precision, tap, ballroom, adagio, acrobatic, and eccentric) except classical ballet dancing, for when featured in Broadway shows was often performed by a troupe hired externally with set routines. Consequently, the dancing performed in *Skyscrapers* was in

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

²⁷¹ Ibid., 26.

²⁷² H.I. Brock, “Jazz is to do a Turn in Grand Opera,” SM5.

²⁷³ Frank W. D. Ries, “Sammy Lee: The Broadway Career,” *Dance Chronicle* 9/1 (1986): 1.

the popular-style adapted from the Broadway stage and complemented the descriptors in the choreographic manuscript designed for *Skyscrapers*.

The popular-style of dance was unfamiliar to the Metropolitan's ballet troupe, nevertheless Lee found the dancers well equipped for this sort of dancing:

It's remarkable how the members of the ballet have picked up these steps. I have been used to dealing with dancers who are trained in American stage dancing. I thought there might be some difficulty in teaching these steps to dancers who had been trained in an entirely different school. But there was not. There is a great difference in these two type of dancers – something which I can hardly explain- but I have had no difficulty in getting these Metropolitan dancers into the intricacies of jazz dancing. As a matter of fact, dancing of that sort can be done by anybody who had a real sense of rhythm.²⁷⁴

With Carpenter's score, along with Jones' set designs, Lee's choreography and a well prepared dance troupe, *Skyscrapers* was premiered on 19 February 1926 under the baton of Louis Hasselmans (1878-1957) at the sold-out Metropolitan Opera House.

***Skyscrapers* at the Metropolitan**

The first scene of *Skyscrapers* is only twenty-one measures in length, and although technically the "Introduction" of the ballet, it contains the same musical materials as the "America at work" scenes. Jones' opening drop curtain for this scene is a simple pattern of alternating black and white diagonal stripes, which Carpenter referred to as a "symbol of danger."²⁷⁵ Critics concurred about its menacing character, with one viewing it in relationship to the caution signs found at railroad crossings, whereas art historian Merrill Schleier has read it as an "inescapable prison" that "foreshadowed the activity to follow."²⁷⁶ In spite of how the abstract scenery was perceived, *New York Times* critic H.I. Brock recognized the aesthetic break from what had been traditionally exhibited at the Metropolitan Opera House: "The golden yellow curtain that has been wont to open and reveal the Wagnerian heroics of the Ring and Isolde will

²⁷⁴ Philip Hale, "Program," 500, C-DLC,

²⁷⁵ Carpenter, *Skyscrapers*, program notes.

²⁷⁶ Ibid.; Merrill Schleier, *The Skyscraper In American Art, 1890-1931* (New York: De Capo, 1986), 105.

rise shivering upon a drop that cried danger in staring diagonals of white and black and two winking red signal lights.”²⁷⁷

The “winking red signal lights” mentioned by Brock were one of the many ways Jones worked with light for the scenery of *Skyscrapers*. On each side of the stage stood two hexagon-shaped red lights that blinked on and off along with the music of the ballet. Carpenter included the lights in his instrumentation of *Skyscrapers*, and notated their blinking in the score like a percussion instrument with both the right and left lights notated on the same staff. The lights were flashed on during the accented beats of the music, and were operated by a keyboard located in the wings of the stage, presumably for the musician to be out of sight but still able to “play” along with the conductor and the rest of the orchestra. Although the red lights were on the stage for the entirety of the ballet, they were only active during the work sections, adding another layer of the machine aesthetic in the stage production. Reacting to their presence, one critic wrote: “What better symbols of the speed of American life could there be?”²⁷⁸

Further descriptions of the unique use of lighting in *Skyscrapers* are noted in Carpenter’s program notes. These include the use of shadows (“the brightening floodlight, cast its black-looming labour shadows on the back-stop as the curtain falls”), blackouts (“there is a sudden ‘black out’ of the lights”), coloured tints (“dim greenish obscurity”), dimming (“The lights are gradually dimmed”), and the use of a spotlight (“the sharp ray of a spotlight from above picks out the whiteness of his costume from the surrounding gloom”).²⁷⁹ According to Jones, “the play of light” was planned along side the initial sketches of the production’s choreography, “and the line of their changes was paralleled with the score.”²⁸⁰ The overarching pattern in the ballet’s

²⁷⁷ Brock, “Jazz is to do a Turn in Grand Opera,” SM5.

²⁷⁸ “Skyscrapers,” *The Outlook*, 3 March 1926, 215.

²⁷⁹ Carpenter, *Skyscrapers*, program notes.

²⁸⁰ Lederman, “Skyscrapers: An Experiment in Design,” 26.

lighting is that the work sections are dark and employ shadow effects, whereas the play section contrasts with brighter lights. This attention to the light is characteristic of Jones' visual aesthetic, and the use of shadow in particular shows the influence of the New Stagecraft movement of which Jones was an adherent.

The representation of "America at work" begins at the outset of Scene II. Jones' backdrop for this section was described by Carpenter as "a huge and sinister skyscraper in the course of construction, a tangled mass of red and black shapes."²⁸¹

Fig. 9 – *Wolkenkratzer* in Munich, 1928, "America at Work."



²⁸¹ Carpenter, *Skyscrapers*, program notes.

In 1916, a zoning regulation in New York required that buildings above a certain height had to be set back from the street, therefore revolutionizing the skyscraper design to a pyramid like shape, creating a new “dynamic, variegated silhouette.”²⁸² Jones’ symmetrical background features the black outline of triangularly-oriented steel frames and shapes suggesting the shape of this new style of skyscraper – a skyscraper so tall that it does not fit the backdrop curtain and demands of the audience to imagine its ultimate height and form. To each side of the skyscraper are silhouettes of people representing the “dreary and endless shadow-procession of the indifferent city crowd.”²⁸³ In the foreground, in addition to the blinking red lights, scaffolding was erected in which the dancers would “swing from girder to girder, as in a trapeze act,” and mimic the movements of hammering and construction to the rhythm of Carpenter’s music.²⁸⁴ One has to wonder if the multi-level concept and shadows of the city crowd come from Audrey Parr’s design for the Ballets Suédois production of Milhaud’s *L’Homme et son désir* (1921), which also features three platforms and silhouettes of jazz musicians on the sides of each level. Indeed, Jones’ geometrically abstract, “suggestive” duochromatic representation of the skyscraper is characteristic of the New Stagecraft movement, but also, as Savran has acknowledged, of German expressionism and Russian constructivist design that anticipates the urban stagecraft of Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927).²⁸⁵ Jones’ constructivist designs may have been encouraged by Carpenter, who had suggested to Diaghilev to hire “a Russian Bolshevik painter” to design the sets for the Ballets Russes production that never materialized.²⁸⁶

²⁸² Schleier, *The Skyscraper In American Art*, 111-112.

²⁸³ Carpenter, *Skyscrapers*, program notes.

²⁸⁴ Ibid; Savran, *Highbrow/Lowdown*, 192.

²⁸⁵ David Savran, *Highbrow/Lowdown*, 193.

²⁸⁶ Boris Kochno, *Diaghilev and the Ballets Russes*, trans. Adrienne Foulke (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 223.

The transition scenes in *Skyscrapers* represent the changeover between work and play in both the music and the staging of the scene. Scene III (work to play) contrasts with the preceding work section by being in a slower tempo and employing a softer dynamic, yet a march-like passage contributes to the maintenance of a “slight air of the mechanical,” a style that Pollack attributed to the scene in *Modern Times* when Charlie Chaplin leaves work.²⁸⁷ Instruments of work slowly begin to dropout of leading orchestral roles as the instruments of play (banjo, saxophone and high-hat) emerge. The bitonality representing “work” dissipates into a secure C-major tonality and the motives of work are subdued until they are replaced by motives of play (in the case of the work motive, the three “punched” eight notes appear less dissonant, unaccented and in a softer dynamic). The backdrop for both transition scenes are the same: two white arched doorways upon an otherwise black backdrop (reminiscent of Jones’ design for *The Birthday of the Infanta*) which, according to Jones, suggested “the atmosphere of factory egress, of the subway, of the crowded vehicle tearing away from the centers of labor.”²⁸⁸

During the transition from work to play, the workmen enter from the wings of the stage, “right-pass with stiff and mechanical step through the first doorway, and reappear almost at once through the other door, now with movement gay and relaxed, and each with his girl on his arm.”²⁸⁹ The door on stage right (the symbolic exit from work) is garnished with a clock which represents the time past at work. The opposing transition scene, from play to work (Scene V) is much shorter in length, and it begins with a “shrill blast of a factory whistle” (played on a compressed air whistle) that reintroduces the hammer motive while the workers now enter the door leading to work.²⁹⁰

²⁸⁷ Pollack, *John Alden Carpenter*, 226.

²⁸⁸ Lederman, “Skyscrapers: An Experiment in Design,” 25.

²⁸⁹ Carpenter, *Skyscrapers*, program notes.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

Fig. 10 - *Wolkenkratzer* in Munich, 1928, “Transition.”



“America at play” is the longest scene in the ballet and features a series of isolated events (reminiscent of the Shrovetide Fair scene of *Pétrouchka*) typical of what one would see in an amusement park. These include the appearance of a German street band, three mechanical dolls, two side-show booths each with a “barker in front” (also recalling *Parade*), a snake-charmer, a “Wild Man of Borneo,” and a fight between two woman that turns into a brawl broken up by police.²⁹¹ The ballet’s three “characters” are also introduced in this scene, the Strutter, Herself, and White Wings. Although not situated with each other or with any sort of narrative, these characters can be perceived as Americanized versions of the characters in *Pétrouchka*: the Ballerina, the Moor, and Pétrouchka. *Skyscrapers*’ Strutter, like *Pétrouchka*’s Moor, was successful in courting female companionship (in the case of *Pétrouchka*, the Moor seduces the Ballerina, while the Strutter is joined by a group of female dancers partway through his solo dance). The unique characteristic of *Pétrouchka*’s Ballerina is that she stayed *en pointe* for the

²⁹¹ Ibid.

entirety of the ballet; her American equivalent in *Skyscrapers*, “Herself,” wears pointe shoes, but almost as a spoof of *Pétrouchka*’s Ballerina, is quickly defeated by the pointe tradition and settles for a more American style of dancing in the Charleston (this described by one critic as “[Herself] manages to get up on her toes for a few steps, but is quickly brought to earth by a lively Charleston tune.”)²⁹² Finally, the tragic “underdog” character *Pétrouchka* can be seen in the character of White Wings, with his white janitorial costume a distortion of the characteristically white Pierrot costume. This illustrates yet other instance Carpenter drew from a Stravinsky ballet in *Skyscrapers*

The two distinctive sections of *Skyscrapers*, work and play, are representational of the two perceived sides of mythical America Musicologist Nancy Berman describes as “a strange but alluring amalgam of the primitive and the modern, where the rhythms of tribal music melded with the incessant rhythms of daily life and work.”²⁹³ By incorporating both parameters of America in his ballet score, Carpenter was able to capitalize on the two sides of American culture Otto Kahn once noted: “America has only produced two great national inspirations. One of these jazz music, and the other the skyscraper.”²⁹⁴

Conclusion

During the composition of his ballet for Diaghilev, Carpenter looked to the skyscraper, a uniquely American architectural construction, as his muse. As a Chicagoan, Carpenter had firsthand exposure to the towering structures, however also understood the skyscraper’s position as an international symbol of America and which had been utilized in literature, the visual arts, and even ballet, as a signifier of the New World. Carpenter translated the skyscraper into musical

²⁹² Frank Getty, “Moderns Replace Ballet at ‘Met,’” *Palm Beach Daily News*, 19 February 1926, 1.

²⁹³ Nancy Berman, “From *Le sacre* to *Les noces*: Primitivism and the Changing Face of Modernity,” *Canadian University Music Review* 20/1 (1999): 13.

²⁹⁴ Quoted in Nesta MacDonald, *Diaghilev Observed by Critics in England and the United States 1911-1929* (London: Dance Books, 1975), 309.

language by adapting a machine aesthetic influenced by Stravinsky's instrumentation in *Les noces*, the Russian's regular use of ostinato, and the bitonality of the Pétrouchka-chord. Carpenter also represented the popular American vernacular in his ballet score, by incorporating what he considered the "folklore" of America that was in vogue on both sides of the Atlantic: jazz. Carpenter's appropriation of the "negro" spiritual in a short choral section lends itself to being interpreted as a perpetuation of racial stereotypes of the minstrelsy tradition when considered in the context of the ballet's production.

The production of *Skyscrapers: A Ballet of Modern American Life* by the Metropolitan Opera Company in New York gathered the talents of Robert Edmond Jones and Broadway dancer Sammy Lee to create a ballet that depicted "America at work," through the construction of skyscrapers, and "America at play" by depicting a Coney Island-type amusement park. By representing both America's work and play through the machine, the production can be viewed as a representation of the mechanization of American Life.

Given that the bases of the ballet was completely grounded in contemporary trends of the 1920s, it was destined to become what we know now as a "period piece," indicative of the time it was conceived but somewhat less interesting to present-day audiences. Taruskin finds this of many productions conceived for the Ballets Russes after the war: "Today's *actualité* is tomorrow's period piece, and that has been the fate of the vast preponderance of the postwar Diaghilev repertory."²⁹⁵ In 1940, Carpenter had come to realize this about his ballet, writing to Bolm that he considered "*Skyscrapers* as a ballet, somewhat 'dated,' – that it reflected an era of American life which we are all trying our best to forget."²⁹⁶ Nevertheless, *Skyscrapers* allows us

²⁹⁵ Taruskin, *On Russian Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 211.

²⁹⁶ Letter from Carpenter to Adolph Bolm, 30 November 1940, B-DLC.

to return back to the 1920s and examine how an American composer represented his country during a period of intense cultural exchange between the Old and New Worlds.

Conclusion

In the preceding chapters I explored some of the questions raised by the one known instance the impresario of the Ballets Russes, Serge Diaghilev, commissioned a score by an American composer, Chicagoan John Alden Carpenter. My work began by surveying Diaghilev's complex opinion of America and its culture, finding that the impresario viewed America as a country more attuned to popular entertainment than to the high-art aesthetics of his ballet. This was demonstrated by Diaghilev's negotiations with the Metropolitan Opera Company for the Ballets Russes American tours in 1916 and 1917 (that he partook in only as a last-resort option during times of financial crises), and the controversy surrounding the American productions of *L'après-midi d'un faune* and *Scheherazade*. Diaghilev's apprehension towards America was also viewed as stemming from its threat to European art, both financially and artistically, for the impresario found that wealthy America and its lucrative entertainments tempted his collaborators to pursue alternative employ (the music hall, Broadway, popular music) or abandon the Ballets Russes completely to embark on careers in the New World. Above all, I found that the "lowbrow" associations of American culture dissuaded the impresario from assimilating American cultural idioms in his ballet in order to maintain a high-art status while his ballet transitioned into a modernist aesthetic and became accessible to a middle-class audience. A notable exception of this is the very ballet that marked the Ballets Russes entrance into modernity, *Parade*, which marks the only time the Ballets Russes represented "low" forms of entertainment of the music hall, circus and American cinema.

The second chapter, stemming from discussions in Chapter 1, serves to further construct the historical narrative surrounding the commission, composition and ultimate dismissal of Carpenter's ballet score for the Ballets Russes. I began by examining Carpenter's transatlantic

music career, particularly his first two ballets *The Birthday of the Infanta* and *Krazy Kat: A Jazz Pantomime*, and situated them as the composer's attempts to match the Ballets Russes' exotic and modernist aesthetics in the hopes of receiving a commission by Diaghilev. Relying on Carpenter's correspondence to his mistress, Ellen Borden, as well as on written accounts from figures in the Ballets Russes entourage, I found that with the help of his wife and distinguished colleagues, Carpenter managed to infiltrate the Ballets Russes social circles by 1923. Consequently, Carpenter was at last asked by Diaghilev to compose a "typically American" ballet score for the Ballets Russes in the summer of 1923. I discussed the complex politics of patronage within the post-war Ballets Russes, and determined that Diaghilev compromised his high-artistic standards for the sake of upholding the Ballets Russes' position in European culture among competing modernist ballet companies, and to meet the requirements for another American tour. Diaghilev's ultimate rejection of Carpenter's score has been attributed to Carpenter being, in the words of dancer Serge Lifar, an "episode" in Diaghilev's plans for the Ballets Russes, meaning that as soon as the composer's score was no longer of use to the impresario, Carpenter, too, became irrelevant to the impresario and his ballet.

In the third chapter, Carpenter's ballet for Diaghilev, *Skyscrapers: A Ballet of Modern American Life*, was examined in terms of its indebtedness to both American and European aesthetics and musical idioms, and thus viewed as product and example of cyclic transatlantic connections and cultural transfer. The ballet, consisting of two distinct sections that came to represent "America at Work" and "America at Play," incorporated elements of American culture that were internationally recognized as or representative of the New World. In "America at work," Carpenter's inspiration came from skyscrapers, which I argued stems from his home town of Chicago, as well as their status as transatlantic symbols of America recognized

throughout the world. I proposed that the skyscraper is translated into the music of Carpenter's score through a machine aesthetic derived from Stravinsky, one created by the use of an enlarged percussion section, the "ostinato machine" and *Pétrouchka* chord-like bitonality. For "America at Play," Carpenter incorporated elements of American popular entertainment that were fashionable on both sides of the Atlantic, including jazz (a musical style internationally understood as American) and a choral section reminiscent of spirituals and ragtime songs. Finally, I discussed the Metropolitan production of *Skyscrapers*, encompassing the scenario (by Carpenter and Robert Edmond Jones), the set and costume designs (by Jones) and the choreography (by Sammy Lee). In the production of *Skyscrapers*, I suggested the employment of an African American choir to interpret the a spiritual-like choral section set to nonsense text, in combination with the quotations of "coon" songs and a dancer in black face, perpetuated degrading racial stereotypes that originated in the minstrelsy tradition. Furthermore, I argued that in the setting of "America at Work" in a skyscraper-construction cite and "America at Play" at an amusement park, *Skyscrapers* participated in the debate around the mechanization of America life during the 1920s.

The Chicago Allied Arts and Onwards

The influence of the Ballets Russes and the commission from Diaghilev resulted in more than Carpenter's initial venture into composing for ballet and the score of *Skyscrapers*, for it also had concrete repercussions in the fledgling American ballet community. In 1924, one year after Diaghilev requested a score from Carpenter, the composer founded with Adolph Bolm the Chicago Allied Arts, an organization that came to be considered the "first progressive field of ballet in America."²⁹⁷ The company was modeled after the ideology and values of the Ballets

²⁹⁷ George Amberg, *Ballet in America: The Emergence of an American Art* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1949), 23.

Russes by encouraging new ballets from international artists in a collaborative environment. The company's *première danseuse*, Ruth Page (1899-1991), recalls that the principle of the Chicago Allied Arts was "to give Chicago a permanent and growing ballet commensurate with the expense and limitations of a small orchestra and devoted almost entirely to the production of work of living composers of every country."²⁹⁸

Like the Ballets Russes, the Chicago Allied Arts was a collaborative effort between the arts. Bolm acted as the company's artistic director, choreographer and *premier danseur*, therefore holding a type of artistic authority that he was never permitted with the Ballets Russes. American dancer Ruth Page, who studied under Bolm and played the role of the Infanta in Carpenter's first ballet, *The Birthday of the Infanta*, danced the main female roles. The role of music director for the organization was filled by Eric DeLamarter (1880-1953), an American who also held the position of assistant conductor with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, and the chief designer was Russian artist Nicolai Remisoff, (1887-1975) who designed in the "colourful Russian peasant style of Larionov and Goncharova."²⁹⁹ Carpenter's main responsibility was to attract donors to fund the operation given his ties to the wealthy families of Chicago, however one can also expect the composer would have contributed to the programming and artistic decisions of the company.

The Chicago Allied Arts presented music and ballet productions from numerous contemporary international composers. The programming contained music by many composers who had previously been featured in the Ballets Russes repertoire, including de Falla, Milhaud, Poulenc, Prokofiev, Satie and Stravinsky. Previous to Remisoff's appointment as designer, Carpenter and Bolm planned to feature rotating designers including many of Diaghilev's artists

²⁹⁸ Ruth Page, *Page by Page*, ed. Andrew Mark Wentink (New York: Dance Horizons, 1978), 29.

²⁹⁹ Suzanne Carbonneau, "Adolph Bolm and America," in *The Ballets Russes and Its World*, ed. Lynn Garafola and Nancy Van Norman Baer (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 232-233.

such as Leon Bakst, and Nicholas Roerich.³⁰⁰ The company also arranged for the American debut of the Ballets Russes' principle ballerina Tamara Karsavina (1885-1978), whose appearance in the Ballets Russes' American tours had been highly anticipated but never actualized, as the dancer was pregnant.

As Suzanne Carbonneau has noted, many of The Chicago Allied Arts' ballets were parallel to previous productions by the Ballets Russes: The Chicago Allied Arts production of *The Rivals* (1925), based on an ancient Chinese legend with score by American composer Henry Eichhein (1870-1942), was based on themes similar to Stravinsky's opera *Le Rossignol* (1914); A ballet with a score by Polish composer Karol Szymanowski (1882-1937) entitled *Mandragora* (1925) shared the commedia dell'arte characters of *Carnival* (1910) and *Pulcinella* (1920) (and inspired a critic from the Chicago newspaper *Chicago American* to established Bolm's "right to the surname of our idol Diaghileff"); and the "grotesque" *Bals des Marionettes* (1925) that borrowed seven dances from Satie's "La Piège de Méduse" was comparable with the Ballets Russes' *La Boutique Fantastique* (1919).³⁰¹ Ironically (and in line with Diaghilev's skepticism of America), the Chicago Allied Arts, a company established as a means of bringing a higher standard of art to Chicago, was dismissed as "too arty" and disbanded in 1926.³⁰²

Although *Skyscrapers* was Carpenter's last ballet score and the Chicago Allied Arts disseminated in the mid-1920s, the composer maintained an interest in the genre for the rest of his career. This is illustrated in the many letters written by Carpenter to Bolm from the 1930s and 1940s regarding contemporary ballet companies that are housed in the Adolph Bolm Collection

³⁰⁰ Ibid.

³⁰¹ Ibid., 236-237.

³⁰² Nancy Reynolds and Malcolm McCormick, *No Fixed Points: Dance in the Twentieth Century* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 117.

at the Library of Congress.³⁰³ The composer kept tabs on the workings of the Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo, a company established in 1932 as a successor to Diaghilev's ballet by impresarios René Blum (1878-1942) and Wassily de Basil (1888-1951). Carpenter found the company "one of the few dependable ballet producing groups," and expressed interest in a possible collaboration ("I would, of course, be interested in any bona fide idea which they might have concerning any of my works").³⁰⁴ The composer wrote to Bolm about potential new ballet ideas ("it may turn out in the end to be ballet material"), possible re-stagings of their ballet *The Birthday of the Infanta*, and choregraphical opportunities for the dancer.³⁰⁵ Carpenter also critiqued contemporary productions by Fokine (his *L'Épreuve d'Amour* was "dull and conventional"), Massine (praising his *Nobilissima Visione* with a score by Paul Hindemith as a "masterpiece" and "the most important work in my opinion since *Les Noces*"), and Lincoln Kirsten's company the Ballet Caravan (Carpenter thought some of their works were "good," especially Aaron Copland's *Billy the Kid*, which is "excellent.")³⁰⁶

Final Words

The influence of the Ballets Russes impacted Carpenter's compositional career far more than his instance as one of Diaghilev's "episodes." From his first encounter with the ballet company, his compositional focus changed towards ballet and his aesthetic paralleled the contemporary trends in the Ballets Russes. While he was composing this ballet for the Ballets Russes, Carpenter kept in mind his European audience and created a work that illustrates transnational influences reflective of the time it was composed. Finally, even after *Skyscrapers* was dropped by the Ballets Russes (but successfully premiered in America), ballet continued to

³⁰³ Adolph Bolm Collection, Music Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.

³⁰⁴ Letter from Carpenter to Bolm, 2 March 1936, B-DLC.

³⁰⁵ Ibid; Letter from Carpenter to Bolm, 20 May 1940, B-DLC.

³⁰⁶ Letter from Carpenter to Bolm, 21 October 1938, B-DLC; Letter from Carpenter to Bolm, 21 October 1938, B-DLC; Letter from Carpenter to Bolm, 21 September 1939, B-DLC.

play a role in Carpenter's compositional career through the Chicago Allied Arts, and he remained interested in the genre for the rest of his life. This shows yet another instance of the powerful cultural role the Ballets Russes played in arts and culture around the world in the 1910s and 1920s.

Appendix A

Skyscrapers Program Notes, by John Alden Carpenter

“Skyscrapers” is a ballet which seeks to reflect some of the many rhythmic movements and sounds of modern American life. It has no story, in the usually accepted sense, but proceeds on the simple fact that American life reduces itself to violent alterations of WORK and PLAY, each with its own peculiar and distinctive rhythmic character. The action of the ballet is merely a series of moving decorations reflected some of the obvious external features of this life, as follows:

SCENE I: The curtain rises with the beginning of the music, disclosing a drop painted with wide converging black and white stripes, symbol of danger, and two red traffic-lights at front of stage, which flash intermittently until No. 2 (in score) is reached.

SCENE II (No. 2 to No.7): The first drop is lifted at this point, revealing a huge and sinister skyscraper in course of construction, a tangled mass of red and black shapes. A group of workmen are engaged on a scaffold in the foreground, and beneath them is another group, working over an opening in the stage, out of which come occasional jets of smoke and fire. In the background is seen in silhouette, the dreary and endless shadow-procession of the indifferent city crowd.

SCENE III (No. 7 to No. 11): This scene represent the transition from WORK to PLAY. This accompanying drop is a plain black curtain with two low, arches doorways outlined in white. The workmen enter from the wings, right-pass with stiff and mechanical step though the first doorway, and reappear almost at once through the other door, now with movement gay and relaxed, and each with his girl on his arm.

SCENE IV (No. 11 to six bars before No. 53): The background of this scene represents an exaggeration of the Coney Island type of American amusement park, complete with all its gay and tawdry trappings and a preposterous moon. As the scene is revealed (No. 10), a little German street-band is discovered surrounded by a crowd of excited pleasure seekers. A boisterous dance movement fills the stage, until -

At No. 13 every dancer is suddenly “frozen” in the posture of the moment, by a vivid flash of lightening, followed by a roll of thunder and a darkening stage. The effect intended is that of a sudden “throw-back” in the minds of the revelers, to the thought of WORK. Out of the obscurity of the now darkened stage (No. 14), emerges the group of workmen, grouped again over the smoking aperture at their feet, and performing again their stern and mechanical pantomime of labour, as in Scene II.

At No. 16 the lights are up again, the workmen have disappeared and PLAY had been resumed. The eager throng is crowding about a little platform up-stage on which three mechanical dolls are stiffly performing. From No. 17 to two measures before No. 20, there is further diversion in two side-show booths on either side of the stage near the footlights, each with a fabulous “barker” in front, the only offering a snake-charmer, the other a “Wild Man of Borneo.”

From No. 20 to No. 23 there follows a general dance movement.

From No, 24 to No. 27 there is a solo-dance of “Herself,” supported by her followers.

At No. 28 a group of red-coated attendants wheel in from the wings a fantastic cylinder covered with mirrors, which they place in the center of the stage, where it slowly revolves, catching and

throwing back a thousand lights and colours. In a wide circle around the revolving mirror moves a double file of dancers, giving the effect, with their prancing step and the nodding plums on their heads, of the day maneuvers of the wooden horses of a Merry-Go-Round. Mirror and horses begin at No. 32 to move more and more slowly until, then measures later, they come to a complete stop.

There follows, at once, the quick exit of the horses, the wheeling off of the revolving mirror by the guards, all of which is covered, from No. 33 on, with a short interlude by another small group of dancers.

At the first note of No. 34 "The Strutter" makes his sudden entrance on an empty stage, through a trap in the floor. He begins his dance alone, - at the thirteenth measure after No. 35 he is joined by four girl dancers, and one measure before No. 37 he makes his exit in a headlong dive over their bended backs into the wings.

From No. 37 to No. 39 there follows a sudden *crescendo* of excitement growing out of an encounter between two street women, in which their followers quickly join, until at No. 39 the brawling crowd is driven from the stage by the police.

Remaining alone on the stage is a negro street-cleaner, in the white suit of his profession. The lights are gradually dimmed, "White-Wings" finished his work, and at last throws himself down to sleep, reclining against the base of the traffic-light at from of stage. The sharp ray of a spotlight from above picks out the whiteness of his costume from the surrounding gloom.

The ensuing scene, from No. 40 to No. 44, represents the dream fantasy of the sleeping negro. Through the gauze curtain just beyond him, we see gradually taking shape in the dim light a group of negroes, men and women, half-forgotten types of the poor South. We hear their actual voices, in a song, first slow and soothing, then more animated and rising at last to a fierce religious fervor toward the end of No. 43.

Suddenly, without warning, the tension breaks and at No. 44 the singing stops and they dance. The strong rhythm begins slowly to penetrate the sleeping "White-Wings"- his legs begin to twitch, he turns and tosses and at last he springs to his feet at No. 45 and throws himself into the dance which ends in a wild *accelerando* at No.47.

At this point there is a sudden "black-out" of the lights, followed by a dim greenish obscurity, in which is seen a slow-moving procession of white-masked sandwich-men - a macabre symbol of poverty. At the seventh measure after No. 48 the last of the sandwich-men has disappeared and the lights flash suddenly up again, revealing the gay "Coney Island" crowd in the climax of their PLAY, which continues with increasing frenzy up to the sudden pause in the twelfth measure after No. 52, when the scene is blacked out.

SCENE V (The return from PLAY to WORK): At the fourth measure before No. 53 the lights go up again on the black and white two-door drop which was used in Scene III, and the symbolism of the movement on the stage is the same as in the earlier scene; but this time, of course, reversed. The gay crowd of men and girls from the wings through one door, and from the other, almost at once, files a stiff and relentless procession of workmen, lock-stepping to their JOB.

SCENE VI: At No. 54, with the shrill blast of a factory whistle, we are confronted again with our Skyscraper, stripped now of all non-essentials, a stark and ominous skeleton of black and red. Again we see a group of workmen on an up-flung scaffold, while below, another group moving slowly, inch by inch toward the brightening footlights, cast its black-looming labour shadows on the back-stop as the curtain falls.

Appendix B

10 September 2014.

Dear Pauline Hubert,

I am requesting to reprint materials from the John Alden Carpenter Collection at the Library of Congress, Music Division, Washington D.C, as a part of my Master of Arts thesis through the University of Ottawa. These include:

Photographs of Carpenter, 3/33, 10/3

Photographs of Carpenter with Adolph Bolm, Robert Edmond Jones, 3/34, 10/3a

Birthday of the Infanta production stills, set designs, 1919, 10/4

Krazy Kat production stills, 1921, 3/36, 10/4a

Skyscrapers Munich production stills, 1928, 3/37

Photos contained in the scrapbooks, 11-2

Skyscrapers (Manuscript), 1923-24, 6/28

I believe that you, Pauline Hubert, are currently the holder of the Carpenter Estate, given that you are the great-granddaughter of John Alden Carpenter. Your permission confirms that you hold the right to grant this permission.

I would greatly appreciate your permission. If you require any additional information, do not hesitate to contact me at

Thank you,

Carolyn Watts

Permission is hereby granted:

Signature

Ms. Pauline Hubert

Date: 9/22/14

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