

THE FOUR TEMPERAMENTS

By Sheryl Flatow

Following the 1946 premiere of George Balanchine's *The Four Temperaments*, the eminent dance critic Edwin Denby wrote, "No choreography was ever more serious, more vigorous, more wide in scope or penetrating in imagination." The passage of time simply confirms that view. This groundbreaking work remains as fresh and contemporary as any ballet choreographed in the ensuing 60 years.

Balanchine used the traditional ballet vocabulary as a springboard for steps and gestures and phrases that had never been seen in classical dance. The only one of his existing ballets that might be considered a precursor to *The Four Temperaments* is *Apollo* (1928), which Lincoln Kirstein, who co-founded New York City Ballet with Balanchine in 1948, called "an inversion of classroom classicism."

But in *The Four Temperaments*, the fusion of traditional and contemporary is so complete that Balanchine seemed to be inventing a new language. And so he was. The movement is sharp and crisp and angular to the point of exaggeration. There are odd turns and steps at odd angles, broken jumps and phrases, unfamiliar shapes and irregular rhythms, strange lifts and turns made in plié, hip thrusts and turned-in legs, sudden shifts in direction and all kinds of distortions. Balanchine would continue to explore this language in later works including *Agon*, *Episodes*, *Stravinsky Violin Concerto*, *Symphony in Three Movements*, and *Kammermusik No. 2*.

Choreographed for Ballet Society, the forerunner to NYCB, *The Four Temperaments* is danced to a score by Paul Hindemith that Balanchine had commissioned in 1940 for a ballet to be called *The Cave of Sleep*. Paul Tchelitchew designed fanciful costumes, and Balanchine planned to take the work on tour to South America in 1941. In the end, he did not move forward with the idea. When he



Larissa Ponomarenko rehearsing *The Four Temperaments*. Choreography by George Balanchine © The George Balanchine Trust. Photo by Jo Cardin.

finally choreographed *The Four Temperaments*, he invited the Surrealist artist Kurt Seligmann to design the scenery and costumes. The costumes were bizarre—capped by strange headpieces—and obscured the body: a writer for *Time* magazine once said that the dancers looked like "a macabre masquerade of Martians." When the ballet entered the repertory of NYCB in 1951, Balanchine discarded the costumes and replaced them with simple leotards and tights. His inventions became more transparent, and appreciation for the ballet grew. That same year, Balanchine also replaced Eugene Berman's original costumes for another of his seminal works, *Concerto Barocco*, with practice clothes. Thereafter, practice clothes were Balanchine's choice for a number of his most complex ballets, ensuring that the choreography could be seen unencumbered.

The Four Temperaments is divided into a three-part theme, each danced by a different couple, and four variations: Melancholic, Sanguinic, Phlegmatic, and Choleric (pensive, confident, impassive and angry). Balanchine wrote in the book *Complete Stories of the Great Ballets*, "Greek medicine associated the four humors and temperaments with the four elements—earth, water, fire, and air—which to them composed the human body as well as the world. Although the score is based on the idea of the four temperaments, neither the music nor the bal-

let itself make specific or literal interpretation of the idea. An understanding of the Greek and medieval notion of the temperaments was merely the point of departure for both composer and choreographer.”

Several of the motifs developed throughout the ballet are initially stated in the first theme. The flexed foot, the stabbing pointe work, the angularity of the arms, the wrapping of the woman’s leg around her partner’s waist, are just some of the steps and movements that Balanchine introduces at the outset. “It’s true that the motifs continue and develop in the second and third themes and throughout the ballet,” says Francia Russell, a répétiteur for The George Balanchine Trust. “But I don’t really think that way. Each part of the ballet seems so complete in and of itself that I don’t see

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always influenced by the dancers for whom he was choreographing,” says Russell. “Bill Dollar created *Melancholic*, and he had an extraordinarily flexible body and a kind of poignancy. Todd Bolender was *Phlegmatic*, and Mr. B used his expressive reserve.”

the threads very clearly. But of course they’re there from the beginning with the pointing and flexing of the foot, which announces that this is not going to be a traditional ballet. The partnering is off-balance, and that’s a portent of what’s coming later, which is more extreme.”

Although the ballet is plotless, the title of each variation suggests the particular mood created in the choreography. *Melancholic* and *Phlegmatic* are both led by male dancers, and Balanchine choreographed remarkable, highly individual solos for both. “Mr. B was

Melancholic is characterized by falling steps, heartbreaking backbends, repeated wrapping of the arms around the torso, and crumbling, broken movements that have a Petrouchka-like quality. (Bart Cook, who danced the role in the 1970s and '80s at NYCB and is regarded by many as the definitive interpreter of the role, is staging *The Four Temperaments* at Boston Ballet. He was out of the country and unavailable to be interviewed for this article.) Phlegmatic has an air of detachment and bemusement as he isolates every body part, grasps his right ankle and holds his leg out in front of him, and moves in a more contained space. "There's a kind of elegance about Phlegmatic that is incomparable and unlike any other work of Balanchine's," says Russell.

Sanguinic exudes strength and confidence, while Choleric, who has the briefest solo, bursts onto the stage like a meteor. "Sanguinic is very fiery and uses lots of attack," says Russell. "It's difficult to do it well, to do it expressively, to do it with the right musical feeling that Balanchine expected. But in many ways the hardest part is Choleric, because it's so short and she really has to blast out of the wings. There's no preparation; she just has to come roaring out. That's the only way that it's really effective and distinguished from the rest of the ballet, which it needs to be."

Russell describes the extraordinary finale as "a choreographic culmination." Balanchine made changes to the finale in the 1970s, in part to accommodate a curved cyclorama on a sound stage when the ballet was filmed for *Dance in America*, and also because, according to Russell, he felt he hadn't served the music well enough. Russell is partial to the original finale and Balanchine gave her permission to continue to stage it. Cook stages the finale with Balanchine's modifications. "The finale is one of the great sequences in ballet," says Russell. "It's a restatement of everything—everything comes back. Someone described it as a Boeing aircraft taking off. There's a wonderful feeling during the finale of everybody working together and being part of a great mythic and primitive ceremony."

"The synchronization of music and movement was always so important to Balanchine, and of course it's very important in *The Four Temperaments*," she continues. "Rhythmically everything has to be exact, but there's a lot of freedom in the ballet as well: each change of cast makes it look like a completely different work."