

THE MUSIC, AS USUAL, WRITTEN BY MINKUS

The composer of *La Bayadère*

by Nigel Bates

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Some years after Ekaterina Vazem had been the first to dance the role of Nikiya in *La Bayadère*, she recorded her self-evident exasperation at the composing monopoly that Ludwig Minkus seemed to enjoy with master choreographer Marius Petipa at the Imperial Russian Ballet: 'The music, as usual, written by Minkus.' The collaboration between Minkus and Petipa was one of the most productive in the history of ballet, with some twenty full-length works presented to an audience always hungry for more. Minkus could clearly and consistently deliver what Petipa required. Yet it has been his misfortune as a specialist to be judged harshly by critics, informed and uninformed, simply for doing his job. Had subsequent composers never existed or not written for ballet we would surely know a great deal more of his work over and above the triumphs of *Don Quixote* and *La Bayadère*. A betting man in 1877 would have probably lost his money over which of the two ballets given their premieres at the start of that year would eventually be the long term winner. *La Bayadère's* rapturous reception in St Petersburg in January was a starkly successful contrast to the relative failure of *Swan Lake* in Moscow a month or so later, with Tchaikovsky's music being considered undanceable and condemned as 'symphonic'.

Aloysius Bernhard Philipp Minkus – to give him his full name – was born in Vienna in 1826, and by the age of eight was considered to be a child prodigy at the violin. Absorbing early musical influences from the small orchestra that played in the restaurant owned by his parents, he went on to study composition and conducting. The sparkling development of the waltz must have entered his musical blood at this time: he was familiar with the eminent Strauss family both socially and as performing rivals. At age 26, Minkus took an opportunity presented to him by a Russian nobleman to lead and direct a serf orchestra in St Petersburg, and after three years he was appointed principal violinist of the Italian Opera Orchestra at the Bolshoi. Known from then on as 'Ludwig' in Russia and elsewhere, the theatre became his natural musical home. He undertook additional conducting and composing tasks as required and was involved in ballet studio rehearsals which were at the time accompanied by two violins rather than a piano. In 1862 Minkus wrote an entr'acte featuring a violin solo that was to be interpolated into Adolphe Adam's ballet *Orfa*, his initial collaboration with the First Ballet Master (or choreographer) of the day, Arthur Saint-Léon. With the good fortune of being in the right place just at the right time, so began an unbroken two-decade period of

work and promotion for Minkus, achieving by 1872 the uppermost position possible as the first ever Official Court Ballet Composer of the Imperial Theatres in St Petersburg and Moscow.

The success of Minkus in the world of ballet at this moment in history is easily explained: he followed the rules. What rules? The rules laid down by dancers and choreographers and enshrined – in writing – in the contract with the composer. Nineteenth-century dancers did not want concert hall music with all its complexity. They needed something with a clear pulse, regular counts and phrasing, easily adjustable material, not too long and (perhaps above all) with a tune that could be whistled or hummed. Minkus provided all of this at the highest level within these legal bounds, and with such a huge volume of output there invariably developed a pattern and a formula with which we are still familiar today. A listener often feels as if they already know the music even though they may not have heard it before. Minkus did not have luxuries as might be enjoyed by opera composers: music had to be provided that matched the storyline, the dancers' feet and sometimes even stage effects, and all to be supplied on demand. Contemporary accounts also reveal that rehearsal time could be limited, battling with sister opera companies for time onstage (and an audience). Never one for self-promotion, Minkus remained out of the limelight, quietly providing the musical structure for the choreographers to create their masterpieces. He had an invaluable ability to create transitions between dances without adversely affecting the composition, setting up the character of the next number and providing dancers with easily followable lead-ins. Creating the score for *La Bayadère* could perhaps have afforded an opportunity for music full of exotic eastern promise, but going down that route could or would have broken the rules. So, we hear extended use of minor keys to underscore the tragedy with just a hint of the Orient.

In 1979, the conductor and ballet music guru John Lanchbery was tasked by Natalia Makarova with the reworking of *La Bayadère* for her re-creation of the piece, and it is his version that is used at Royal Ballet performances. Unable to access original materials held in Russian archives due to Cold War tensions and working from a basic piano score, Lanchbery drew on his own experience and ability to give life to the music in the orchestra pit – just as Minkus had himself done with other composers to suit requirements. The score is a well-balanced construction with the instrumental strands retaining transparency, and we can be grateful to John Lanchbery that the spirit of the original work is fully retained. Royal Ballet Music Director Koen Kessels observes that the music of Minkus has never been properly edited or published, and that a full

rehabilitation of the composer is long overdue. Every note of his output remained the property of his employer, the Imperial State, and he had no benefit of commissions and performance royalties as enjoyed by such later ballet composers as Tchaikovsky and Glazunov who built on his foundations. It is a sadness to know that Minkus died in total poverty in Vienna in 1917 aged 91, his small pension and life circumstances decimated by world events.

Orchestral performers can, like the critics, be harsh on Minkus. But during or after a run of operatic heavies, the less profound fare that he offers is a refreshing sorbet, and it is often hard to leave the theatre after a performance without whistling or humming at least one of his catchy dance tunes. Minkus did not give up the performing element of his career; in 1871 he was the second violin in the premiere performance of Tchaikovsky's First String Quartet. Being such an accomplished violinist paid dividends as he had a full technical understanding of string instruments in particular. Concert masters certainly relish his violin solos, particularly those in *La Bayadère*, which are often given as audition pieces. As much care has to be taken by players as would be necessary in works by Mozart or Mendelssohn – possibly more so with the inevitable tempo shifts that ballet requires.

Concentration and stamina is certainly needed for Act II's Kingdom of the Shades – one of the great ballet grand adagios and several minutes longer than the *Sleeping Beauty* Rose Adage. Each note really does count, and it is a test of professionalism to ensure the score with all its beauty is delivered fresh each time. Musical clichés are inevitable when considering the context: the time pressure on Minkus to orchestrate and produce the orchestral parts as the first night approached must, just as now, have been very great, and players welcome familiar turns of phrasing when faced with new material on little rehearsal.

A book on ballet music written in 1958 by a British composer dismisses the works of Ludwig Minkus as 'not up to much musically'. But not everyone can do it well – the three ballets written by that particular composer have sunk without trace, and more than a few scores have been rejected by choreographers and directors over the years. Any 'top ten' list of ballets will include both *Don Quixote* and *La Bayadère* and the enduring legacy of Ludwig Minkus is surely that his most successful works have not only survived but have never been out of the repertory since they were written. Simply put, they are superb dance music and anyone studying the genre of ballet music should always have a Minkus score to hand.