

## **THE GIFT TO BE SIMPLE**

*Léo Delibes' ballet Coppélia*

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No ballet better exemplifies the use of music in explaining the actions onstage than *Coppélia*. It is unique in having come down to present-day audiences almost unscathed by subsequent reworking; what we hear are the composer's original intentions and orchestrations. Léo Delibes brought great musicianship to this, his first major stage work, which brims with good tunes, sparkling sounds and a lightness of touch not always found elsewhere.

Principal guest Barry Wordsworth, Conductor and a former Music Director with The Royal Ballet, has enjoyed an association with the piece for more than forty years. He is unstinting in his admiration:

*It is obvious that there was the most wonderful relationship between Delibes and his fellow creators of Coppélia. The music really is hand in glove with the story, and the mission is clearly not to educate but to delight. Even if you only have a vague idea of the tale, the music tells you exactly what is happening. It is so pictorial and so atmospheric, helped of course by its delicate French lyricism. There is no sense of anything being forced.*

*The variety and depth found in the score is something we take for granted these days. We don't always appreciate how amazing it was in 1870 that Delibes got inside so many styles, with several national dances being included in ballet for the first time. Despite not being especially well-travelled, he was able to write a bolero, a mazurka, a czárdás, a Scottish jig and others – and all with a delicate French touch.*

Wordsworth is not alone. In a letter some years later to his great friend Sergei Taneyev, Tchaikovsky revealed that had he known the music of Delibes earlier, he would not have written *Swan Lake*. The great choreographer George Balanchine described Delibes as 'one of the great musicians of the dance' and pointedly stated that 'bad music often inspires bad dancing. It is no accident that dance masterpieces also have scores that are masterpieces'.

Léo Delibes has never quite made it as a household name despite the popularity of his music both in and out of the theatre. Born in rural France in 1836, family circumstances dictated a move to Paris ten years later with the young Delibes becoming a choirboy at La Madeleine. An enrolment at the Paris Conservatoire followed, including studies under the renowned composer of *Giselle*, Adolphe Adam. An honours student, Delibes was soon working as an organist, an

accompanist at the Lyrique Theatre and later as a chorusmaster at the Paris Opéra. During this time he continued to compose, and a performance of his cantata *Algiers* attracted the favourable attention of the Emperor, Napoleon III. This led to the commission of a joint creation with the established Ludwig Minkus, composing the music for a new ballet *La Source* which opened in 1866. Critical reviews gave Delibes due credit for his part of the work, with one hoping that 'it would not be long before the younger man would soon be given his own piece'.

Within months, Jules Perrin, the Director of the Opéra commissioned a new work from the same creative team as for *La Source* with the exception of Minkus. The choreography would be created by ballet master Arthur Saint-Léon with the libretto by Charles Nutter. Saint-Léon gave the young composer clear instructions at the outset and the warmth of the surviving correspondence shows clearly that the three men did indeed get on very well. Barry Wordsworth explains:

*It would have been wonderful to have been a fly on the wall during the creation process and to hear the conversations between Saint-Léon, Nutter and Delibes and to know exactly who suggested what to whom. Moving the setting to Central Europe gave the opportunity to include the national and village dances which make up nearly one-third of the piece, and some delays in the rehearsal and development process gave Delibes every chance to polish and refine his work. His music sounds familiar even at first hearing and makes a basic use of leitmotif to describe the principal characters. It is eminently danceable and would have delighted Parisian audiences, being easily the most substantial composition they had heard since the creation of Giselle nearly thirty years previously. There are no ghosts or fairies in Coppélia – it is a story of real people. And with the happiest of endings, which one can tell from the very first notes of the overture. Not to be found are the doom-laden starts and finishes of other works, which seemed almost a requirement of ballet at the time.*

*Later in the overture, a brass fanfare and a wonderful swirl of strings takes us into the mazurka, then moving swiftly into the first scene and its famous waltz. In Act I, there is a Theme and Variations on a Slavic tune suggested to Delibes by Saint-Léon, a musical device never before used as far as I know in an original ballet composition. The solo string writing both here and for the viola in Act III is so accomplished and still a challenge to performers today. Another feature we are including for the first time is a keyboard glockenspiel which will be heard in Act II as the toys spring into action – one player needing here to use ten fingers instead of two players using two sticks each.*

*There is one wonderful tune after the other, but if I had to choose just a single instance of the genius of Delibes, it would have to be the centre-point of the ballet, the top of the arch if you will, the moment when the doll appears to come to life in Act II. Delibes gives us a gentle and emotional high oboe solo tune in F major over a bed of strings and then at the climax moves us (as the doll appears to breathe) to the remotest key possible, B major, a tritone away. It is a shame that Adam did not live long enough to see his composition student's brilliance and Delibes' score has ensured the ballet's survival.*

The role of Franz being originally danced by a female dancer, en travesti presents a musical problem in Act III where the closing section of the Festival of the Bell has no originally composed solo male variation. In this Royal Ballet production the number *Discord and War* (*La discorde et la guerre*) is reassigned to provide a male dancing opportunity after the beauty of *The Peace* (*La paix*) pas de deux with its sonorous viola solo, coming before the female variation and the rousing closing galop.

The huge success of *Coppélia's* first performance in 1870 cemented its place in ballet and music history despite the sudden ravages of war which affected France and Paris soon after. It was reported that even the Emperor managed to stay awake for the entire performance. Now financially successful and able to concentrate on composing larger works, Delibes also created an orchestral concert suite of *Coppélia* highlights, an action Tchaikovsky was to copy a few years later with all three of his ballets. It is surely not a fantasy to notice similarities between *Coppélia* and *The Nutcracker*, both featuring toys and many national dances. The two men finally met in Paris in 1888, three years before the death of Delibes at the age of 55, who by then had enjoyed further fame with his only other full-length ballet *Sylvia* and his best-known opera *Lakmé*.

Barry Wordsworth concludes:

*I first came to Coppélia in the 1970s, conducting Peter Wright's production for the then Sadlers Wells Royal Ballet. What you are required to do with the piece as a conductor is, thankfully, what comes naturally. There are no dull or awkward moments for the conductor so it is a real pleasure to be on the podium. Delibes' writing continues to work beautifully even with a smaller sized orchestra such as we had on SWRB tours, the mark of a master orchestrator.*

*The music of Delibes is so approachable and so pleasant to listen to that I feel there is a tendency for people to look down their noses at it. I would though be a happy man if I had written even one of his tunes!*

*But actually the gift to be simple (to quote the Quaker song), the gift to go straight to the point and make musical gestures which the whole world understands without it having to be explained is, to me, the greatest gift of all.*