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Geraldine Morris

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## ***Persephone: Ashton's Rite of Spring***

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GERALDINE MORRIS

When Frederick Ashton began choreographing *Persephone* in 1961, he was regarded as the dominant British choreographer.<sup>1</sup> He could, at this stage of his career, afford to take risks and choosing *Persephone* was undoubtedly risky. The ballet requires not only dancers but also a singer and chorus, and a leading dancer who can speak French verse. And, as Clive Barnes noted, it was unlikely ever to become a repertory work or achieve wide popularity.<sup>2</sup> Ashton's *Persephone* was last performed in 1968, since when it has been ignored,<sup>3</sup> the choreography has never been analysed in print before and the following exploration of the dances will, I hope, allow us to re-evaluate the work. By focusing on the inventive movement of these intriguing dances, I hope to show the vibrancy of his dance style and, despite the work having some uncharacteristic features, its relationship to other Ashton works.

Ashton's ballet is an ensemble dance work for five soloists, or named characters, and a large corps de ballet of male and female dancers. The sixth character, Eumolpus, is a singer. *Persephone* comprises three scenes:

- (i) The Abduction of Persephone
- (ii) Persephone in the Underworld
- (iii) Persephone Reborn.

Svetlana Beriosova danced the title role and the designs were by the Greek painter Nico Ghika. The score was commissioned by Ida Rubinstein from Igor Stravinsky, using a text by André Gide. Choreographed by Kurt Jooss, the ballet was premiered in Paris in 1934 by Rubinstein's company. Because of the large cast and set, this production had only three performances<sup>4</sup> but, since then, there have been other versions, and choreographers are still attracted to the score.<sup>5</sup>

Ashton loved the score too, but was more interested in the challenge posed by the complex work.

In a way, I do not mind what anyone thinks ... for this is something I have long wanted to work out. I firmly believe in the occasional marriage of the elements of movement, music and the spoken word.<sup>6</sup>

This kind of hybrid, mixing genres, was not unusual for Ashton; throughout his career he had tackled composite works,<sup>7</sup> beginning in 1928 with Purcell's *The Fairy Queen* (re-choreographed for a new production in 1946) and ending in 1981

with Stravinsky's opera *Le Rossignol*,<sup>8</sup> for which he provided the dance. Apart from *Persephone*, however, only *The Fairy Queen* uses the spoken word and it also links with *Persephone* in its use of a singing chorus. In *The Fairy Queen* (1946), the chorus was arranged on stage in boxes as a kind of 'vocal proscenium'<sup>9</sup> leaving the centre free, and Ashton used the dancers to underscore both the music and the words.<sup>10</sup> In the same way, in *Persephone*, the dancing chorus is also read as the singing chorus, in other words, as being the same people. Throughout the work the movement interacts with the words serving to reinforce the meaning, a point I develop later. In contrast to the Rubinstein production, however, the singing chorus, in Ashton's version, was not on stage but in the orchestra pit.

Its subject matter, Greek mythology, was also attractive to Ashton. Between the late 1920s and 1970, he made twelve ballets<sup>11</sup> that draw on Greek myths. *Persephone* has most in common with the two dimensional, angular style of his later 'Greek' ballets: *Daphnis and Chloe* (1951) *Tiresias* (1951) and the dances in *Orpheus* (1953). There is little remaining of the dances from his earlier 'Greek' ballets, but, from photographic evidence and snippets of film, it appears that he made use only of the plots.<sup>12</sup> These pre-war (1939–45) works used a neo-classical manner,<sup>13</sup> possibly because Ashton had neither been to Greece nor known much of its iconography at this stage in his career.

Following a visit to Greece in the early 1950s, his later ballets manifested more two-dimensional movement but this may also be due to a meticulous study of *The Antique Greek Dance* (1916) by Maurice Emmanuel.<sup>14</sup> Ashton discovered the book in Cyril Beaumont's bookshop in 1936 but only began using it when choreographing *Daphnis and Chloe*. Emmanuel's book was highly detailed and compared depictions of dance on vases and reliefs with modern ballet movement. His research was praised by André Levinson who, writing in 1917, considered him to have created a reliable picture of ancient Greek dance.<sup>15</sup> We know that Ashton adapted his ideas from Emmanuel for the 1950s work. Despite his claim that he did not do so for *Persephone*, there appear to be many stylistic similarities between it and the other three works: *Daphnis and Chloe*, *Tiresias* and *Orpheus*.

We can establish links between *Persephone* and *Daphnis and Chloë* by examining the video evidence, and photographs of groups and soloists in *Tiresias* and the opera *Orpheus* provide intriguing details from those works, now lost. Ashton reused the right-angled attitude of the female Tiresias<sup>16</sup> in the duet for Persephone and Pluto but in a softer way. In the earlier work, Tiresias holds the ankle of the raised leg, creating a right angle with the body. Her glance is downwards and she stands parallel, making a shape that looks fixed and sculpted. In *Persephone*, Beriova has both arms raised above shoulder level and her head is thrown back, so the shape is less angular. The leg slices the air to form a bent arabesque and the arms imitate the raised leg. A flattened look to the body is common to all four works. In *Orpheus* several of the groups display two-dimensionality. At one point, the Blessed Spirits form a linear group upstage next to a raised platform: the dancers in front kneel with torsos twisted to face the front, one leg bent beneath them, whilst the other leg, also bent at the knee, has the foot flat resting



**Fig. 1.** Svetlana Beriosova as Persephone and Keith Rosson as Pluto in the duet, *Persephone*, Scene II. Photograph by Houston Rogers, reproduced by kind permission of the Victoria and Albert Museum (Theatre Museum). *Dance Research* is grateful to *The Dancing Times* for providing the images used to illustrate this article.

on the floor. The standing Spirits are also in parallel alignment with flattened torsos, facing front, and this two-dimensional appearance of the body gives a frieze-like form to the group.

By the 1950s Ashton had also become extremely interested in ancient mythology. He not only 'immers[ed] himself fully in the myth of Persephone ... but [also] in the whole mythical atmosphere'.<sup>17</sup> He studied his sources scrupu-

lously, referencing anything that appeared useful and several of the books in his library are annotated.<sup>18</sup> For *Persephone*, he was generally guided by André Gide's version of the myth, though he also consulted his own copy of Eric Walter White's book *Stravinsky: a Critical Survey* (1947). The section on *Persephone* in this book is highlighted in places and gives clues to the activities of some of the characters, in particular that of Mercury. Mercury is the first to dance in the work, though there is no mention of him in Gide's text until scene II of the ballet. It is probable that Ashton introduced Mercury here because he is referred to as part of scene I in White's discussion on *Persephone*. White must have had access to the libretto drafts, because in one of these Gide has written, in the stage directions, that Demeter is called away by Mercury.<sup>19</sup> The score, however, only allows for two characters, Persephone and Eumolpus, and a chorus, though others are named in the libretto and could appear as dancers.

Not all productions of *Persephone* include the full *dramatis personae* and when asked about the Rubinstein staging, Stravinsky only had memories of Ida Rubinstein as Persephone, though the production did in fact include all the characters with the exception of Pluto.<sup>20</sup> Stravinsky did, on the other hand, suggest that a full dance cast of characters was desirable to bring the work to life.<sup>21</sup> Ashton is unlikely to have seen the first production but may well have had first hand reports; it was briefly reviewed in *The Dancing Times*, June 1934. What is more probable is that Ashton was led by his copy of White, since all these characters are mentioned in White's description of the work.

Despite using these five characters, Ashton restricted the dancing of the soloists, giving only short dances to Mercury and Pluto and mainly gesture and mime to Demeter and Demaphoön. Speaking in an interview before the first night, he mentioned that 'the ballet centres on the character of Persephone herself and the corps de ballet'.<sup>22</sup> Consequently, the style of the work can be discerned mainly through the movement of those characters. In earlier analysis, I suggested that style in Ashton<sup>23</sup> depends on a number of elements, amongst others: his choice of movement, choreographic structure, dancers and his dance heritage, particularly the choreography of Bronislava Nijinska. He first saw her work in the mid 1920s and *Les Noces* (1923) and *Les Biches* (1924) both played a seminal role in his conception of choreography. But it was only in 1928, when he began working with Nijinska, as a young member of the Ballets Ida Rubinstein, that he really began to understand her approach. She was, perhaps, the most important influence on his work. From her, he not only learnt about dance movement but also about choreographic patterning. I have discussed the relationship between Ashton's dance movement and that of Nijinska elsewhere<sup>24</sup> but not the wider choreographic relationships between them. Most noticeable is Nijinska's use of architectural, sometimes wedge shaped, groups echoed on several occasions in *Persephone*, but perhaps more significantly, Ashton learnt from her the concept of economy in terms of material. In both *Les Noces* and *Les Biches*, Nijinska structures her choreography around a small range of movements which she then develops and varies in different ways throughout the ballets.<sup>25</sup> Ashton adopted a similar approach in many of his works, including *Persephone*.

My earlier analysis also revealed that Ashton used a small core of ballet steps which he changed and manipulated to suit the particular quality he was trying to achieve. Three of these steps recur frequently in *Persephone*: the *pas de chat*, *pas de bourrée* and *rond de jambe à terre*. They are altered in characteristic ways: presented in parallel to suit the ballet's style, decelerated to give the appearance of simplicity, clipped to create variations in dynamics, and amplified to raise them to the status of major steps. His phrases, or step groupings, are also distinctive and characteristically varied. Some give priority to complex upper body movement or emphasise body design, while others focus more on dynamic contrast. In *Persephone*, phrases which emphasise body design are a feature of scene I, particularly for the movement of the corps, while other phrases and steps show the influence of social dancing.

Ashton's dancers also left their mark. Their particular qualities are rooted in his style,<sup>26</sup> which provided him with a random element, enabling him to move beyond his aesthetic boundaries. In *Persephone*, as we shall see, this is certainly the case, most noticeably in his work with Beriosova.

As a character, in Gide's libretto, Persephone has little individuality and is depicted more as a symbol of hope. She is Spring, flawless and fresh, a goddess who stands for abundance and fecundity. In the Underworld, she brings light and warmth to the dark habitation of the Shades, causing flowers to appear wherever she rests her gaze.<sup>27</sup> But her absence from earth causes nature to die and it is only because of her resurrection that the seed can 'reappear as a golden harvest in years to come'.<sup>28</sup> Despite the hints in the libretto that she freely chooses to re-enact this yearly ritual, she cannot escape her destiny, and yet, Ashton and Beriosova manage to breathe life into the character, making her seem warm and earthly.

Because Persephone is also a speaking part, Ashton had to limit her dancing to allow her enough breath for speaking: she has twenty speeches, varying in length from two lines to the final speech which has thirty-three. But the written script gives the dancer another chance to develop the character, even though her dances are fragmentary, woven throughout the piece. She does not have a major solo or *pas de deux*, as might be expected in a ballet where she has the title role, but she has several shorter, very striking duets and solos.

Not every version of *Persephone* combines speaking and dancing. This may be because few dancers can deal with speaking as well as dancing or because, as Stravinsky points out, hearing Persephone speak can be a shock.<sup>29</sup> But because Ashton treats Persephone as both a dancing and acting role, the audience is prompted to see her as being more human. By using words to address, and answer, the other characters on stage she crosses the boundary into another medium.

Gide relates the narrative through Eumolpus and the chorus, so the words cannot be ignored. Ashton responds to the general sense of the words, yet is not tied to representing them literally. Responding to a question about his use of the words he commented that he had 'tried to express their inner sense – rebirth, regeneration and death'.<sup>30</sup> Sometimes the dancers enact the comments of the

chorus and sometimes they respond to moods highlighted in the text.<sup>31</sup> In scene I when the chorus sings of heady spring flowers, ‘Jacinthe, anémone, saffran’, Ashton shows Persephone and her Friends stooping to pick the flowers. At another point, the chorus call on Persephone to play with them: ‘Viens! Joue avec nous ...’ and the Nymphs’ movement is characteristically playful with quick, jazzy steps. Later, when Persephone is warned not to pluck the narcissus, the Nymphs again respond with sharp negative half turns of the upper body. This interaction between words and movement continues throughout the work.

The sumptuous music, with its choruses and tenor soloist, and the large opera house stage, led Ashton to respond with a big cast, and the group, as Ashton indicated, is a dominating force in the work. Not that the soloists are unimportant, but the significance of ritual can often be more effectively expressed by groups of dancers performing the same movements together, as in *Les Noces*. And in *Persephone*, the choruses, the words and impact of the group are strong reminders of that ballet. The dancing is less forceful, less percussive than in *Les Noces*, but the occasional pyramid grouping, of Persephone’s Friends and the Nymphs in scene I, and the lines of Shades in scene II, recall both the Bride’s Friends at the end of scene I and the serried lines of female wedding guests in scene IV of *Les Noces*. Even the frozen tableau which opens *Persephone* is reminiscent of that ballet (though, in contrast to *Noces*, the main group is more centred and the poses have a less carved appearance) and the characters remain in place for the first couple of minutes of the ballet. This static opening group is unusual in Ashton choreography. Yet, Ashton cannot have seen Nijinska’s ballet for over thirty years, The Royal Ballet did not revive it until 1966, but its impact on *Persephone* appears considerable.

The following analysis uses old film from 1961<sup>32</sup> and material from the 2005 reconstruction for *Ashton to Stravinsky*.<sup>33</sup> The designer Ghiko created a brightly coloured, craggy, mosaic-like background for scene I. It gives the impression of a mountainous Greek landscape,<sup>34</sup> particularly as the back section of the stage is elevated throughout. The curtain rises on a petrified group: Demeter sits at the back, slightly off-centre, cradling Persephone, Pièta-like, and surrounded by five kneeling women. To left and right are two low, flattened groups of nymphs, forming circles, and high on the raised section stand six Oceanides. Mercury is stage right, poised on the steps that will eventually take Persephone to the underworld.

Ashton brings the characters gradually to life. Persephone’s Friends rise and slowly move their heads and arms in supplication to Demeter, reinforcing Eumolpus’ words: ‘Déesse aux mille noms, puissante Déméter’. And the Nymphs only begin moving when Eumolpus calls on them to protect Persephone – ‘C’est aux Nymphes que tu confies Perséphone’. Demeter, meanwhile, remains seated, rocking back and forth. Initially there is no travelling: this is the first morning of the world and the characters seem to be waking from a deep sleep. The first motif comprises gentle actions in which the dancers use a variety of circular upper body movements: the turning heads of Persephone’s friends, rotating from one side to the other, then tilting forward and backwards; the



**Fig. 2.** Alexander Grant in foreground with Gerd Larsen (seated), Svetlana Beriosova on floor surrounded by the Friends in *Persephone*, the opening of Scene I. Photograph by Anthony Crickmay, reproduced by kind permission of the Victoria and Albert Museum (Theatre Museum).

circular, swaying movement of the upper bodies of the nymphs and the wave-like movement of the Oceanides on the raised platform. But deep backbends and sideways twisting of the torso into a semi-circular shape are also, according to Emmanuel, features of ancient Greek dance.<sup>35</sup> Both the crescent shaped bodies and emphasis on the upper body are also typical Ashton traits. They call to mind the movements of the Moon in *Horoscope* (1937) and the extended, sickle shapes formed by the women in *Symphonic Variations* (1946).

Walking, another significant motif in the ballet, is a boldly simple choice for a major motif, but Ashton uses it strikingly in a range of different ways. All the characters have walking motifs: Adolescents, Friends, Hours, Nymphs, Oceanides and Shades. Demeter and Demaphoön have little movement other than gesture and a range of different walks. Even Persephone has a few eye-catching steps on pointe and Mercury, despite his wings, has a variety of percussive strides.

It was daring of Ashton to rely on such a simple motif to structure the ballet but it is possible, despite Ashton's denial, that the use of such basic steps was also prompted by a section on travelling movement in *The Antique Greek Dance*.<sup>36</sup> Emmanuel writes that many Greek dances were based on 'modifications of the walk and run' and it may be because of this emphasis on simple movement that the ballet was regarded by many as more of a curiosity than a significant addition to the repertory. Clive Barnes,<sup>37</sup> while admiring the work, objected to the 'gamine strut [of the Nymphs] with [their] bouncing hips and flouncing thighs'<sup>38</sup> and Noel Goodwin found the movements for the corps out of keeping with the



**Fig. 3.** Gerd Larsen, Svetlana Beriosova and friends in *Persephone*, Scene III. Photograph by Anthony Crickmay, reproduced by kind permission of the Victoria and Albert Museum (Theatre Museum).

grandeur of the whole.<sup>39</sup> But Ashton was not drawing on classroom movement here. The syncopated rhythms of the music may have transported him back to the Jazz era.<sup>40</sup> When the Nymphs in scene I jazzily point the foot forward and back, we are reminded of the 1920s Charleston, and the bouncy strides with hands on head could be a reference to the Novelty dances of the teens. None of the walks in the ballet is commonplace and they are never used simply to transport a group from one side of the stage to the other. Instead, they are the danced movement of the work, a response, perhaps, to Stravinsky's motoric beat.

In 1961, the introduction of bubbly, jazzy steps surprised some critics, and Andrew Porter was alone in praising the 'deliberate bizarre element' in the choreography. Despite the proliferation of walking, he even recognised the choreographic density in *Persephone*, finding it 'more intricate, more fully developed, than in any of [Ashton's] earlier ballets'.<sup>41</sup>

Each participant in the myth is given a distinctive gait. Demeter's is sometimes stately, though we also see her anguished, staggering movement after Persephone's abduction. At other times, she makes a flattened half turn from step to step, coupled with exaggerated, dramatic gestures. The Nymphs, however, have lively, flat-footed, bouncing struts with an abrupt accent created by a quick *plié* at the end of each step. These are not the characteristic turned-out ballet walks but are flat-footed with parallel legs and flexed feet. They require the

dancers to place the foot flat on the ground and simultaneously bend the knee raising the free leg to knee height. Woven throughout the first scene, these steps are only performed by the Nymphs. The jazzy walk is constant but the motif is developed by varying the arms: one arm raised, with flattened, downwards facing palm, and one resting on the shoulder. Another version has both hands placed on the head, palms flat and elbows bent, and in yet another, the torso is twisted in opposition to the legs, with the arms placed in front and behind, in the line of direction, the elbows bent at right angles. In the latter version, the torso swings from side to side making the Nymphs look like animated clockwork toys. Here they are cautioning Persephone, pleading with her not to pluck the narcissus: 'Ne cueille pas cette fleur Perséphone'. On Pluto's entrance their lively walks abate and they form a kneeling corridor to lead Persephone to Hades. Ashton had fun with these basic steps but he never loses the sense of the text. What is particularly striking about this motif, however, is the sheer variety of torso and arm movement with which it is accompanied.

In scene III the Nymphs return and, together with the Friends and Adolescents, bring offerings to Demeter and Demaphoön to celebrate the return of Persephone; so the ensemble creates a festive atmosphere highlighted by the bright setting, the now light-hearted walks, and the throngs of participants filling the stage. Later in the scene, the walks change level with the dancers progressing backwards on their knees, almost predatory, with their long arabesque extensions between each move.

Pedestrian motifs are again at the heart of scene II: Persephone in the Underworld. But this time they are more understated, there are neither lively bounces nor jaunty Nymphs. Instead the Shades move in lilting and shuffling patterns, though their walks are also developed into groups of gently accented, steps, extensions and developments of the *pas de bourrée*. These patterns form the basis of the Shades movement and the emphasis on repetition makes the point that time does not exist in the Underworld: the Shades are destined everlastingly to re-enact the same actions:

Elles n'ont pas d'autre destin  
Que de recommencer sans fin  
Le geste inachevé de la vie.

Their presence pervades the scene and they are absent only during Persephone's duet with Pluto. Persephone's role is to bring light to their dark winter existence and Ashton makes the point by having them cluster tightly around her, kneel at her feet or encircle her when she asks for their help – 'Entourez-moi, protégez-moi, ombres fidèles' or when they implore her to speak – 'Parle nous, parle nous, parle nous Perséphone'. They move in groups of five, often with one arm resting on each other's shoulders, as if chained together. Their dance phrases are long, even verging on the monotonous, to reflect their plight. But Ashton avoids dreariness by interspersing their repetitive steps with moments of jerkiness or a rhythmic bounce. By comparison with Scene I, the shapes in this scene are more curved and the angularity and staccato qualities of the earlier passage have given

way to a milder more legato movement. The two-dimensionality is still present, though less pronounced, softened by the cloaks of the Shades.

There are brief allusions to the staccato qualities of the earlier scene when, for example, the Shades re-enter in two long lines from stage left and right. Occurring just after Persephone's duet with Pluto, it is referred to in the piano rehearsal score as 'The Train'. The sequence is jerky, and both the line of dancers and the movement have the appearance of a train chugging along. The women's actions are tempered by their shroud-like cloaks but the men's bare arms, bent at the elbow, appear sharper. This sudden change in the Shades' movement comes as a surprise. Now they seem to be more buoyant, more animated, encouraged perhaps by Persephone's union with Pluto. There is no text here but the music is slightly brighter, livelier. Stephanie Jordan<sup>42</sup> argues that Ashton is responding to the musical texture, highlighting the ostinato in the bass, stopping and starting with it, but he could too be alluding to his earlier work. Introducing a similar arm movement to that performed by the men in *Persephone*, there is another 'Train' – again referred to as such – in the Foxtrot (1940) from *Façade* (1931) but this has more regular movement back and forth and a less percussive quality. According to Leslie Edwards,<sup>43</sup> the *Façade* train imitates the social dancing of the 1920s and *Persephone* too, as I have already noted, has hints of social dance. Ashton liked to make connections between his works and re-using material, both within a work and in different works, is a feature of his dance style. He shows us a movement again but because both the context and dynamic are different, it seems new and almost unrecognisable from the earlier dance.

Despite the dominance of large groups in *Persephone*, the soloists also have short, intriguing and unusual dances. Of the male soloists, Mercury and Pluto are given the main choreography. Pluto, danced by Keith Rosson, had stereotypical male dancing: strong, macho and spatially expansive. In a ballet where each character has strikingly individual movement, giving Pluto this kind of conventional movement diminishes his personality. He seems a shadowy character, cold and lacking charm, which may have been what Ashton wanted. Mercury, on the other hand, has a more idiosyncratic style of movement. It suits his volatile character and, since Mercury was patron of both travellers and rogues, his ambiguity. His steps are less balletically 'perfect' and so he seems more fallible and paradoxically, since he has divine attributes, more mortal. Danced by Alexander Grant, the performance exhibits traits of his own strong personality: exuberance, fearlessness and frenzied passion.<sup>44</sup> Apart from holding the Caduceus, a serpent-entwined wand traditionally carried by Mercury, he is rarely, in Ashton's ballet, mercurial. His short dances are weighted, involving hops, jumps and turns in attitude, elongated strides, strange sideways kicks and a short section which looks like a cha-cha.<sup>45</sup> These movements are forceful and staccato with clearly stressed shapes, though in scene III he has one brief moment of flight.

He has the first travelling movements in scene I, which also introduces the ballet's dominant walking motif. This comprises long, low, elongated strides across the back of the stage which return in the front-cloth interlude before scene

III. Mercury's dances are in some ways a brief summary of the dominant style of *Persephone*: two dimensional movement, strong body designs and short, non-lyrical strands of movement that end abruptly. Forceful energy is at the heart of Grant's movement and although he does have moments of stillness, in a Mercury-like attitude (Giambologna 1580),<sup>46</sup> the dominating sense is of strong, uninhibited dances without pauses.

This kind of pause-less dance phrase, in which the end of one movement has to provide the momentum for the next, is evident elsewhere in Ashton's dances. More often, though, this kind of on-going phrase is used to give the appearance of seamlessness as in the *pirouette* phrase for Troyte in the 1968 *Enigma Variations*<sup>47</sup> or in the movement for the Fisherman in *Le Rossignol*.<sup>48</sup> There are aspects of the movement which are specific to *Persephone*, but Ashton still retains distinctive elements of the style of his other choreography.

The dances for Persephone owe more than a little to Beriosova's talents. Ashton drew on her sensuousness, her sumptuous arabesque and her ability to increase the breadth of movement beyond the confines of her own body. That he chose to focus on these elements makes her movement, in this work, distinctive from that of the rest of the ballet. Persephone, the goddess, is also associated with fertility and it may be this, together with Beriosova's own sensuality, that led Ashton to make such opulent movement for her. Her first solo introduces the curved, crescent shape that becomes a hallmark of her dances throughout, and it is worth examining this solo in some detail since it bears many features of Ashton style while retaining much of the two dimensionality evident in both *Persephone* and his late Greek ballets.

Central to Ashton's movement is his use of contrast – phrases and longer threads of movement in which there are subtle changes in quality, moments of vigour followed immediately by a softened, less focused, action. Persephone's first solo, framed by the Friends' dance, has short phrases, seven in all, and each ends in a momentarily held, clear, crescent shape. In the opening phrase, a *sissonne* jump forward, with both arms raised above the head, is followed by a step into a parallel, semi *retiré*<sup>49</sup> with curved spine. Hence there is a swift, sharp jump which pierces the space, followed by the lingering, curved pose, the lines of which flow into the space beyond the dancer's body. The second phrase duplicates the first, but asymmetrically with an added *attitude*. In solo dances, Ashton rarely repeats himself identically, and here, he responds to the structure of the musical phrase. But the following phrase has a crisp circle of hops in *attitude* which come as quite a shock after the languid pose of the previous phrase. The hops introduce a slightly jarring note to the sensuality of the solo but prevent it from becoming too indulgent, too visually close to the music, which sounds lush despite its syncopation; and Ashton is equally careful not to allow the curved motif to become too fluent. In the later versions of the pose, he develops it into a sharper, quicker, more clear-cut shape.

By focusing on Beriosova's rich sumptuous movement, Ashton manages to suggest Persephone's human nature and, paradoxically, in conjunction with the flattened appearance of the movement, her other worldliness. It is an eloquent

solo, which, although different from the other dance movement, does not conflict with it, partly because it is slipped into the centre of the Friends' dance and also because it retains the two-dimensionality of the rest of the ballet and some unmistakable features of Ashton's style.

The patterns made by the body are emphasised because the intricate movements in between are given less importance. Not that Ashton always stressed shape, since, he sometimes emphasised the smaller movements at the expense of the bigger pose. As Pamela May and others point out, 'Ashton liked to surprise the audience' by putting a sudden, sharp turn beside a slower more flowing movement.<sup>50</sup> These contrasting dynamics also draw attention to the dancer's own qualities and her capacity for creating light and shade. Despite Beriosova's long limbs and sense of flow, she could move at speed with quick sharp movement and it is of these qualities that future interpreters need to be conscious. According to Merle Park,<sup>51</sup> Ashton did not always mind if you changed the step as long as the quality remained the same, and it is qualities, as opposed to classroom steps, which are at the heart of Ashton's style.

Persephone's crescent shapes reappear transformed in the duet with Pluto in Scene II. This time they are more angular, more two-dimensional and with less penetration of the space. Ashton is probably responding to the more plangent tones of the music here, though Clive Barnes found it 'a shade too lush for the music'.<sup>52</sup> The first three curved *arabesques* are each separated by a sudden drop to the floor which creates a sharp accent and diminishes, slightly, the sumptuousness of the *arabesques*. Here, Ashton manages to convey Persephone's reserve. She makes no eye contact with Pluto until the end of the duet and appears reluctant to communicate with him. He gives the impression of being the controller, dominating her and manipulating her movement. The rapid flow of the movement, too, communicates her anxiety and the sudden drops, which punctuate the *arabesques*, reinforce the perception that she is not at ease with Pluto. Again, Ashton's choreography is tightly knit and the two-dimensional references to the earlier solo remind the audience of the Grecian origins of the myth.

The richness of Beriosova's movement is absent from that of the other characters and the difference between her dances and theirs is more noticeable when contrasted with the movement given to the Friends. Immediately prior to Persephone's solo, the Friends' dance to the lively, syncopated rhythms of 'Ivresse matinale', is performed by five women. It is a substantial dance, starting before the solo and ending after it, with short punchy phrases. As with Mercury, almost all the movement in this dance is sharp and clear cut, with strongly visible body designs: movement ends abruptly and has the effect of drawing the viewer's eye to the complex body formation. The opening is a parallel walk on pointe which echoes the strutting actions of the *Garçonne* in Nijinska's *Les Biches* (1924). The dancers stride boldly forward on pointe in a diagonal line starting upstage left. These walks, with shoulder and hip in opposition, are driven from the pelvis and, like the *Garçonne*, have the hands placed at the top of the thighs. The torso has to generate the action because the arms are either static or held in angular

positions. It may also have similarities with the work Nijinska made for the Ballets Ida Rubinstein, which Ashton experienced directly as a dancer, since he seems very secure in his use of dance material generated from the torso.<sup>53</sup>

In common with the rest of the ballet, the dominating motif in the Friends' dance is walking. Unlike the other characters, however, they are almost all on pointe. There are strutting strides, as in the opening, walks which jump between two parallel fourths, and two-dimensional steps which progress across the stage from side to side. After Persephone's dance, the Friends return and Ashton slips in a version of the 'Fred step': a *posé* into arabesque and *tombé* into a *plié* in fourth, is followed by three jumps on pointe and the usual concluding *pas de chat* is exchanged for a *pas de bourrée*. Later Ashton adds a signature step, the *rond de jambe à terre*, amplified and given the status of a major step. As with the opening walks on pointe, this is generated from the whole torso with the dancers' arms pinned to their sides. Persephone's arched attitudes from her solo resonate in the Friends' attitudes, but now they are followed by hops on pointe making them appear sharper.<sup>54</sup>

The Friends' dance conforms to the style of the rest of the ballet. And while the style of *Persephone* is certainly recognisably that of Ashton, there is more hard-edged movement here and less spatial patterning around the upper body than in other Ashton works. The virtual lines made by complex movements of the arms are generally absent, and this makes the dancers appear distant. Ashton believed that it was with the arms and upper body that performers communicate,<sup>55</sup> so the restriction of arm and shoulder actions can make the characters seem remote.

From this analysis, it is apparent that Ashton's choreography is tightly knit, dependent on a small group of motifs which he then manipulates, develops and slightly alters. And despite the proliferation of two-dimensional movement, his style is clearly identifiable with features found in many of his other works. But, just as in those works, recurring stylistic patterns are constrained not only by his dancers but also by his heritage and aesthetic. So there are references to Nijinska's ballets, particularly *Les Biches* and *Les Noces* and to the social dances of the early twentieth century. But there are fewer Pavlova-like moments or Duncan-style runs in this work. Classroom steps are also present though metamorphosed into a two-dimensional style, hard to recognise as part of the classroom without careful observation.

What has also emerged is the larger relationship between *Persephone* and Ashton's other works. It is not an isolated phenomenon but links in its choice of subject matter, composite nature, choice of music and heritage with a significant range of Ashton choreography. It also shows the eclecticism of Ashton's taste and his engagement with the twentieth century.

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## NOTES

1. Haskell, A. (1962), 'Thoughts on January 1st', *The Dancing Times*, no. 616, 212–13.
2. Barnes, C. (1962), 'Persephone', *Dance and Dancers*, 9.
3. Some extracts were revived for the recently made DVD/video. Jordan, Stephanie and Geraldine Morris (2005), *Ashton to Stravinsky: A Study of Four Ballets*, Alton: Dance Books. This is available for educational institutions, archives and libraries only.
4. Severn, M. (1988), 'Dancing with Bronislava Nijinska and Ida Rubinstein', *Dance Chronicle*, 11, no. 3, 333–64.
5. See the Stravinsky data base for the other choreographers. Jordan, S. and L. Nicholas (2003), [www.roehampton.ac.uk/stravinsky](http://www.roehampton.ac.uk/stravinsky)
6. Ashton in Franks, A. H. (1961), 'Ashton, Stravinsky, Gide – and some thoughts on the new work to be presented by the Royal Ballet this month', *The Dancing Times*, L11, no. 615, December, 140–2, 153.
7. *The Fairy Queen* in 1928 and again in 1946 and the ballets *Façade* (1931) (not performed to the words until 1972), *A Day in a Southern Port (Rio Grande)* (1931), *A Wedding Bouquet* (1937), *Illuminations* (1950) and *Persephone* (1961). He also directed and choreographed for six operas: the following had strong dance elements: *Four Saints in Three Acts* (Thomson, V. 1934), *Orpheus* (Gluck, C. W. 1762/1953), *Death in Venice* (Britten, B. 1973) and *Le Rossignol* (1914/1981). The two remaining operas, *Manon* (Massenet, J. 1884/1947) and *Albert Herring* (Britten, B. 1947), directed by Ashton, were also highly choreographed.
8. This is in John Dexter's production for the Metropolitan Opera House, New York in 1981. The solo for the Fisherman can be seen on the video/DVD Jordan, S. and G. Morris (2005), *Ashton to Stravinsky: A Study of Four Ballets with Choreography by Frederick Ashton*, Alton: Dance Books.
9. Lambert, C. (1948), 'The Music of *The Fairy Queen*', in Mandinian, E., *The Fairy Queen: a Photographic Record*, London: John Lehmann, 22.
10. Lambert, C. (1948).
11. *Leda* (1928), *Mars and Venus* (1928), *Pomona* (1930), *Mercury* (1931), *The Judgement of Paris* (1938), *Cupid and Psyche* (1939), *Daphnis and Chloë* (1951), *Tiresias* (1951), *Sylvia* (1952). I am including this, though it is not, strictly speaking, from a specific myth, *Orpheus* (1953), *Persephone* (1961) and *The Creatures of Prometheus* (1970).
12. Vaughan, D. (1977), 22–6, 30–2, 59–60.
13. Vaughan, D. (1977), 246.
14. Vaughan, D. (1977), 246–8.
15. Levinson, A. (1982), *Ballet Old and New*, New York: Dance Horizons, 66.
16. See photo of Margot Fonteyn in Vaughan, D. (1977), 254.
17. Franks, A. H. (1961).
18. Ashton's Library is housed in The Royal Ballet at White Lodge, Richmond Park, Surrey.
19. Craft, R. (ed.) (1985), Appendix B, 490.
20. Programme from Rubinstein production, 30 April 1934.
21. Stravinsky, I. and R. Craft (1963), *Dialogues and a Diary*, New York: Doubleday, 36–8.
22. Ashton in Franks, A. H. (1961), 142.
23. For an analysis of style as it pertains to Ashton, see Morris, G. (2000), *A Network of Styles: Discovering the Choreographed Movement of Frederick Ashton (1904–1988)*, Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Surrey at Roehampton.
24. Morris, G. (2000).
25. The use of the parallel *pas de bourrée* for the women in *Les Noces* is one example which recurs in modified forms throughout that ballet. The *chassé temps levé* for the corps de ballet in *Les Biches* is another and it is picked up by both the Hostess and the Blue Garçonne.
26. See Morris, G. (2001), 'Dance Partnerships: Ashton and his Dancers', in *Dance Research*, 19, no. 1, Summer, 11–59.
27. This has been slightly altered from the original text to fit the sense. Original text: *Naître de pâles fleurs, où mon regard se pose*. Gide, A. (1934), *Persephone*, London: Boosey & Hawkes (1950), libretto attached to Tilson Thomas, M (1999), *Persephone*, San Francisco Symphony Orchestra, 31, translator of French text not named.

28. *Ibid.*, page 46.
29. Stravinsky, I. and R. Craft (1963), 37.
30. Anon. (1960), 'Dying a Little to Live a Little', *Topic*, 9/12/61, no page numbers available.
31. This is referred to in Stephanie Jordan's forthcoming book *Stravinsky Dances*.
32. Wood, E. (1961), *Persephone Dress Rehearsal*, London: Archive of The Royal Ballet.
33. I danced in the ballet as one of the Nymphs when the ballet returned in 1967 and saw the 1968 performances but did not dance as I was injured.
34. Williams, P. (1962), 'Persephone', *The Dancing Times*, 616, January, 206–10.
35. Emmanuel, M. (1916), fig. 193, 86.
36. Pages 35–43.
37. Barnes, C. (1962), 9.
38. Barnes, C. (1962), 9.
39. Goodwin, N. (1962), quoted in 'Persephone', *The Dancing Times*, January, no. 616, 210.
40. Ashton later claimed to have been influenced by jazz rhythms. See Ashton in Wohlfahrt, H. T. (1996), 'Ashton's Last Interview', *Dance Now*, 5, no. 1, Spring, 28.
41. Porter, A. (1962), quoted in 'Persephone', *The Dancing Times*, January, no. 616, 210.
42. Jordan, S. and G. Morris (2005).
43. Morris, G. and J. Chapman (1997), *Foxtrot from Façade*, Surrey: National Resource Centre for Dance.
44. De Valois, N. (1979), 'Alexander Grant', *Dance Gazette*, February, 9.
45. This occurs just before he hands Persephone a pomegranate in scene II.
46. This is the bronze sculpture by Giambologna in the Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence, Italy.
47. This pirouette phrase appears in Jordan, S. and G. Morris (2005).
48. The full dance is performed in Jordan, S. and G. Morris (2005).
49. When Beriosova performs the phrase the attitude ends in a *retiré* but when Galeazzi performs it in Jordan, S. and G. Morris (2005) the leg remains in a low attitude.
50. May, P. (1996), 'The Solo Seal Variation', in Jordan, S. and A. Grau (eds), *Following Sir Fred's Steps: Ashton's Legacy*, London: Dance Books, 158–9.
51. Park, M. (1996), 'Ashton Dancers Across the Generations', in Jordan, S. and A. Grau (eds), *Following Sir Fred's Steps: Ashton's Legacy*, London: Dance Books, 178–9.
52. Barnes, C. (1962), 9.
53. See, too, May, P. (1996), 159.
54. The whole of the Friends' Dance can be seen on the video/DVD, Jordan, S. and G. Morris (2005).
55. Ashton comment in Lockyer, R. and J. S. Gilbert (1978), *Les Noces*, London: BBC Production.

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