The Stories of Serenade: Nonprofit History and George Balanchine’s “First Ballet in America”

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It would be hard to find a ballet audience member who isn’t entranced by George Balanchine’s Serenade. Set to Tchaikovsky’s Serenade for Strings Op. 48, the piece has become something of an icon for the Balanchine style. In the view of critic Edwin Denby, it is Serenade that earns Balanchine the distinction of heir of the Russian Imperial ballet tradition. “It is a completely beautiful ballet,” he says, and stands as emblematic of Balanchine’s technique:

His style is classical: grand without being impressive, clear without being strict. It is humane because it is based on the patterns the human body makes when it dances; it is not—like romantic choreography—based on patterns the human body cannot quite force itself into.¹

Denby ascribes an organicism to Serenade—it’s a ballet that is seemingly “just right.” This quality is echoed by dance critic and historian Nancy Goldner, who reports that as a child she thought that the ballets she saw on stage had not been created by any individual—that they had simply existed in nature for all time. She is convinced that it was Serenade that helped instill such a notion in her mind.²

This mythic allure of Serenade is easy to understand, for the ballet offers much in which both seasoned balletomane and dance neophyte can delight: the fluidity of the

steps, the iconic transformations of the corps, the energy underlying Balanchine’s classical technique. What makes Serenade an especially exemplary Balanchine ballet, however, is not just its style and latent musicality but its lack of an explicit narrative. The ballet “tells its story musically and choreographically, without any extraneous narrative,”³ as Balanchine maintained, and seems to foreclose any discrete dramatic, erotic, or narrative possibilities. This does not mean that there is no story to Serenade—just no characters or discrete plot. As Balanchine explained in his “Marginal Notes on the Dance,” music and dance supply their own story:

Music is often adjectived as being too abstract. This is a vague and dangerous use of words and as unclear to me as when my ballets are described this way. Neither a symphony nor a fugue nor a sonata ever strikes me as being abstract. It is very real to me, very concrete, though ‘storyless.’ But storyless is not abstract. Two dancers on stage are enough for a story; for me, they are already a story in themselves.⁴

There is, then, a story of sorts in Serenade, just no libretto with a specific hero and villain and setting.

Not surprisingly and somewhat ironically, however, this allegedly story-less ballet has in fact been the subject of a voluminous number of stories with heroes, villains, and very specific settings. In fact Serenade seems to have more stories to tell than any other by Balanchine, stories that both inhere in the ballet itself and are also implicitly

intertwined with its history and continued life in the repertory. Everyone has a story to
tell about Serenade, or sees some kind of story in the ballet.

Denby, like many other critics, can’t seem to help himself, calling the ballet a
“kind of graduation exercise” in which “the dancers seem to perform all the feats they
have learned.” He reaffirms that there is in fact no story, but nevertheless, “there seems
to be a girl who meets a boy; he comes on with another girl and for a while all three are
together; then, at the end, the first girl is left alone and given a sort of tragic little
apotheosis.”

Indeed, if the ballet doesn’t relate an explicit plot, there always “seems” to be
some story at work in Serenade, it’s just that no one can agree on what it is, even as they
must assiduously reassert its “storyless” status. Like Denby, Goldner manages to have it
both ways by maintaining that Serenade consists of a story, but a story stripped bare: “a
narrative of sorts is going on, but there is no motivation, depiction of character, or other
characteristics of traditional narrative to tell us where we are. The things that happen in
Serenade just happen.” In this sense, the storyless quality of Serenade reinforces its
organicist and “just-right” qualities, the feeling that it has existed for all time, much like
an ancient ritual or myth.

If Serenade conjures these mythic qualities in and of itself, the ballet also figures
prominently in a mythic institutional narrative in its capacity as the so-called first ballet
that Balanchine created after coming to America in 1933. This “first in America” status
has stuck to the ballet as insistently as any Homeric epithet and overshadows all other

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5 Denby, “Serenade.”
6 Ibid.
7 Goldner, “Serenade, 1934,” 23.
stories ascribed to or told about the work. Although it is technically true that *Serenade* was the first completely new ballet created by Balanchine in the United States, its special status in the repertory was not in evidence at the piece’s inception in 1934. In fact, the “first in America” discourse surrounding *Serenade* emerged only several decades after its first performances. In the pages that follow, a review of sources close to the creation of the ballet and comparisons with more recent dance history and scholarship will demonstrate how the “first in America” story of *Serenade* emerged retrospectively as a kind of myth of origins.

Why would such a story emerge? On the one hand, the special “first in America” status of *Serenade* confers outsized historical import to a now-central masterpiece in the Balanchine canon. *Serenade* is currently one of the most performed Balanchine ballets, and it is thus fitting and proper and indeed necessary to create a history of the work commensurate with its contemporary stature. But more important, the myth of origins surrounding *Serenade* serves a larger purpose, imposing historical coherence upon Balanchine’s tumultuous first decades in the United States and the rocky pre-history of the New York City Ballet. The insistent hailing of *Serenade* as “Balanchine’s first in America” helps elide the institutional and aesthetic promiscuity of the choreographer’s early years in America, during which he plied his trade for not just ballet and opera, but commercial ventures on Broadway and in Hollywood. By emphasizing the indisputably

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8 “According to Ellen Sorrin, director of the George Balanchine Trust, the organization that controls the licensing and staging of Balanchine’s works, *Serenade* is one of the Trust’s most requested ballets. It is performed several dozen times a year by professional companies, university programs, and ballet schools all over the world. It is almost continually part of NYCB’s repertory and approximately two-thirds of the Trust’s several dozen répétiteurs (former dancers authorized to set Balanchine’s works) have staged *Serenade.*” Lisa Rinehart, “Secrets of *Serenade*: Stagers Discuss the Ballet’s Challenges and Allure,” *Dance Magazine*, September 2010, 38.
classical *Serenade* at the beginning of Balanchine’s American career, ballet critics and historians have been able to tell an aesthetically purer story of one of the twentieth century’s greatest choreographers, a story which, like so many myths—and *Serenade* itself—nonetheless contains a good deal of beauty and truth.

Pierre Bourdieu has argued that the discourse around art objects is far from mere external commentary, but is in fact mutually constitutive of the those same objects. “[O]ne has to be blind,” he maintains, “not to see that discourse about a work is not a mere accompaniment, intended to assist its perception and appreciation, but a stage in the production of the work, of its meaning and value.” As the case of *Serenade* makes clear, this mutually constitutive discourse can and often does extend beyond works of art and their creators and audiences to encompass the institutions in which they are first presented and subsequently revived and preserved. By managing the discourses around *Serenade*, ballet historians, Balanchine critics and biographers, and the New York City Ballet and Balanchine Trust have been able to construct not just stories, but a unique nonprofit history.

**THE GENESIS OF SERENADE – PRACTICALITY AND SPONTANEITY**

So what is the story of *Serenade*? For the current canonical description of *Serenade* there is no better source than the Balanchine Trust, set up by the choreographer’s heirs to manage the preservation and licensing of his ballets.¹⁰

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According to the Trust, *Serenade* is a classic and quite historic, a watershed moment for not just Balanchine’s New York City Ballet but ballet as a whole:

The first performance of *Serenade* was on June 10, 1934, by students of the School of American Ballet, at Felix Warburg's estate, White Plains, New York. *Serenade* is a milestone in the history of dance. It is the first original ballet Balanchine created in America and is one of the signature works of New York City Ballet's repertory. The ballet is performed by 28 dancers in blue costumes in front of a blue background. Originating it as a lesson in stage technique, Balanchine worked unexpected rehearsal events into the choreography. When one student fell, he incorporated it. Another day, a student arrived late, and this too became part of the ballet.11

As the description elaborates further, *Serenade* underwent many revisions during Balanchine’s lifetime. These iterations are reflected for the historical record by three separate entries for the ballet in the definitive *Catalogue of Works* published in 1983. The 1934–35 version included only three parts of the Tchaikovsky piece, omitting the final “Tema Russo” movement.12 In 1941 Balanchine revived *Serenade* as *Serenata* for the South American tour of the American Ballet Caravan, this time including all four movements of the Tchaikovsky, albeit with the third and fourth movements reversed, a structure maintained to this day.13 The now definitive version of *Serenade* dates to 1948.

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13 Ibid. 148 (catalogue number 193).
according to the *Catalogue*, as it was performed by the newly-constituted New York City Ballet.\textsuperscript{14}

*Serenade* was thus present at every step of the way during the tumultuous two decades that led to the creation of the New York City Ballet, which had by the most generous account some five different predecessor organizations (Table 1). *Serenade* is thus something of a touchstone for an often-unstable institution, and it is perhaps not surprising that throughout all its incarnations, there has been a compulsion to retell the story of its genesis. Indeed, telling a certain creation story for *Serenade* has enabled City Ballet to tell a certain story about itself, one that gives the organization, like *Serenade*, a sense of teleological inevitability.

The somewhat abbreviated version of the creation story of *Serenade* put forth by the Trust receives a fuller elaboration in Bernard Taper’s biography of Balanchine. The Balanchine of Taper’s account is the eminently practical ballet-maker, a down-to-earth genius for whom art is always in the making, not the thinking—poetic in its etymological sense. As in the Trust’s summary of the ballet, by Taper’s account it was largely practicalities and not metaphysics that occasioned the original contours of the “first ballet that Balanchine created in the United States”:

\begin{table}[h]
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Producing Company of the School of American Ballet (1934) & \\
American Ballet (1935–39) & \\
Ballet Caravan (1936–40) & \\
American Ballet Caravan (1940–41) & \\
Ballet Society (1946–47) & \\
New York City [Center] Ballet (1948–) & \\
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\end{tabular}
\caption{Predecessor Organizations of the New York City Ballet}
\end{table}

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid. 187 (catalogue number 254).
The first evening he worked on it, seventeen young women were present, so he choreographed the opening scene for seventeen, demonstrating how that awkward number of dancers could be arranged on the stage in an interesting manner. The next evening, only nine were present, and the third evening six; at each session he simply choreographed to the music with whatever students he had. Male students began attending the classes, and he worked them in. At one point, where the women were supposed to rush out, one fell down and began to cry. He choreographed the incident right into the ballet. Another evening, someone showed up late. That went in, too.15

Evening came, and morning followed, the first day of ballet in America. Indeed, the biblical rhythms of the genesis story of Serenade are almost irresistible. One can only hope that Balanchine rested on the seventh day.

In an imaginative apostrophe on another “first,” that is, the “first known photograph showing Balanchine working with American dancers” (Fig. 1), Taper conjures a dire situation indeed at the moment of the first performance of Serenade, with the incipient scion of Petipa working assiduously to mold the rough clay of the new world into the glittering porcelain of the old. It does in fact seem a miracle of biblical stature that Serenade emerged in any form, almost miraculous as the creation of the world in six days:

It just does not seem possible that anything remotely like a ballet troupe could ever emerge from this hodgepodge of chubby, self-conscious young women in homely, one-piece bathing suits. A couple of them have their arms upraised in an ethereal attitude and appear to feel pretty foolish about it. Another has a hand clapped to her head, as if she were asking herself, “Now what was I supposed to do on count three?” Still another suggests a shopper in a department store; her feet hurt, but she won’t give up. A hefty woman with a bandana on her head, standing at one side of the group, half-crouched, with her legs apart and solidly planted, looks more like a prospective linebacker for the New York Giants than a future ballerina. Balanchine is to be seen in the midst of this forlorn, chaotic scene, tugging at one of the young women in an effort to haul her approximately into position. He is the only person in the picture who does not seem to be aware of the manifest hopelessness of the whole enterprise.16

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Biblical hyperbole aside, what matters it that by telling such stories of Balanchine’s eminent practicality—or perhaps especially in such stories—we ironically find ourselves back in the metaphysical, with the “founder of American ballet” always already beatified, if not completely canonized. The myth of Serenade thus becomes a vehicle for commemorating Balanchine’s triumphant genius.

If Taper’s account seems to ascribe an easy spontaneity and chaotic atmosphere to the creation of Serenade, it’s easy to understand where such sentiments arose, for this is how Balanchine told the ballet’s creation story himself, in at least one instance for a reporter at the opening of the New York State Theater, in a story that had likely been already retold hundreds of times prior to this on-the-record account. This particular account has been most notably circulated through a PBS documentary on his life and career.

GB: I started Serenade as evening classes to show how to be on the stage. I didn’t have any idea to produce anything.

Narrator: Attendance at rehearsals was irregular, but Balanchine made a virtue of necessity and choreographed each section for as many dancers as he had that evening.

GB: I happened to, I have seventeen dancers. And I placed them, almost looks like orange groves in California, you know? If I had only sixteen, even amount, there would be two lines. And now people ask me, why do you place them that way? Because I have seventeen.  

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These accounts by Taper and Balanchine seem to imply a spur-of-the-moment genesis for *Serenade*, that it was worked out in one furious outburst. These stories have invaded everyone’s unconscious, even scholars such as Tim Scholl, who glosses the creation of *Serenade* as a moment of genius unfettered and outpoured. “Without a boss, or even an opera theatre or impresario to commission new works,” Scholl maintains, “Balanchine found himself on the lawn of an estate north of New York City, creating one of the twentieth century’s most celebrated dances with an odd number of dancers, of varying levels of skill and experience, from his first North American school.”

In fact the creation of *Serenade* was much more methodical and deliberate than these accounts imply—the apparently chaotic scene upon which Bernard Taper mused was likely the result not of unrehearsed dancers but rather the inauspicious conditions in which the dancers were suddenly expected to perform, outdoors on a makeshift stage and with the continual threat of intermittent midsummer rainstorms. *Serenade* in fact underwent an extensive rehearsal process, according to some sources as long as six months before its first performance in June 1934. According to City Ballet stalwart and dance critic Robert Gottlieb, it was “in order to have something to teach the students with—something they could handle yet would stretch their abilities” that “[Balanchine] began, in March 1934, to choreograph a new ballet on them.”

In fact, *Serenade* may have begun even earlier. Arnold Haskell’s *Balletomania*, written almost literally as the paint was still drying on the new studios of the School for American Ballet in New York, makes a possible reference to *Serenade*, noting at the close of an interview, conducted in

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January 1934, that Balanchine “is already hard at work, creating a repertoire, the first work in which is to be an homage to his beloved classicism.”

Ruthanna Boris, one of Balanchine’s first students at the School of American Ballet and one of his first important American dancers, maintains in her recollections of the ballet’s creation that it had already begun to take shape in late 1933.

Regardless of when the ballet was first begun, from the very start Balanchine seems to have been quite deliberate in making the ballet. And as Ruthanna Boris’s account elaborates further, what was evident to the dancers as they were being placed in their initial positions was that the arrangement of *Serenade* was indeed something novel. Instead of placing the girls in a straight grid, with the military precision of the standard ballet corps, the dancers were positioned such that each dancer could be clearly seen. To their dismay, Boris and her friend Annabelle Lyon were the last of the seventeen dancers to be placed in formation, in the front two positions of the now iconic “orange grove” formation. They had initially feared that they might be left out due to their diminutive statures, but in the end found themselves at the very front of the ensemble (Fig. 2). The arrangement served to emphasize the corps as figure instead of ground, a hallmark of the Balanchine aesthetic, which disapproves of excessive focus on star dancers, always

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wanting the choreography—and as some cynically maintain, the choreographer—to be the main focus.

In these accounts we can see the same contradiction in evidence in Taper’s story of *Serenade*. Even as the stories insist on his carefree practicality, there is a need to feel the strong intentional hand of the genius at work. Of course, it’s not impossible to have it both ways—perhaps Balanchine’s idea to showcase the corps was itself inspired by the uneven number of dancers. But it’s worth pointing out that he very well could have choreographed with sixteen, or even fifteen dancers; having an understudy, or two, is itself eminently practical. Indeed, the fact that Boris and Lyon thought that the formation was complete with fifteen itself shows how it very well could have been done with fifteen. Nevertheless, the image of spontaneous creation in the face of adversity still seems to stick to *Serenade*, despite this countervailing evidence that it was created much
like any other ballet over a period of many months, with more than ample time for intentional revision, that is unless we take Balanchine at his word that he “didn’t have any idea to produce anything.”

**THE MANY “FIRSTS” OF SERENADE**

One could argue that it is fruitless, if not somewhat sacrilegious, to argue against such creation myths, especially with the godlike figure at the center of the story supplying much of their corroboration. The stories of *Serenade* will never fully submit to fact-checking, much less fade away completely, but it is certainly not blasphemous to inquire into how such a story became so compelling and inevitable. And in fact, the genesis stories of *Serenade*—full of fluid spontaneous creation and practical genius outpoured—are closely tied to the larger governing story of *Serenade*, its status as Balanchine’s “first in America.”

Given its outsized status in the Balanchine repertory today and seemingly indisputable “first in America” status,” what is notable about *Serenade* in accounts written in the decades after its first performances is not how large it looms, but how little attention it receives. *Serenade* is seldom if ever unequivocally hailed as “Balanchine’s first,” but is mentioned as one of many ballets undertaken by the various companies that he and Lincoln Kirstein were involved with leading up to the founding of the New York City Ballet in 1948.

Anatole Chujoy was the earliest definitive historian of the company that would become the New York City Ballet, and his monograph on the company appeared in 1953. If *Serenade* was such a watershed moment in dance history, Chujoy seems to have
missed it, listing the ballet unremarkably along with the others first given in 1934 by the awkwardly named and short-lived Producing Company of the School of American Ballet. In fact, Serenade was but one of many “firsts” on the program:

After five months the School of American Ballet was ready to present three ballets, all new to the United States: Serenade, to Tchaikowsky’s Serenade for Strings in C Major, an entirely new work; Mozartiana, to Tchaikowsky’s Suite No. 4, a revival from Les Ballets 1933; and Dreams (née Sognes), to a commissioned score by George Antheil (replacing the original music by Darius Milhaud, used in the Les Ballets 1933 production of this work).²²

To be sure, Serenade by Chujoy’s account does receive the unique distinction of being the only “entirely new work,” but it is nevertheless not singled out for specific historical import, with all three works instead noted as American premiers.²³

While we are speaking of firsts, it is important to point out that the “firstness” of Serenade is complicated by the fact that multiple performance occasions can lay claim to serving as its premiere, depending, it seems, on what one counts as a preview and what counts as a true performance. The premiere date for Serenade listed on the Balanchine Trust’s website—that accompanies the description we read above—is March 1, 1935, the start of the American Ballet’s performances in New York City at the Adelphi Theater. This occasion was in fact the fourth run of performances in which Serenade was

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²³ Cyril Beaumont’s Complete Book of Ballets, which appeared a few years before Chujoy’s book, for example, similarly mentions Serenade unremarkably along with the many “ballets which have aroused considerable interest, for instance: Alma Mater (1934), Serenade (1935), Transcendence (1935), Reminiscence (1935), The Bat (1936), Orpheus (1936), The Fairy’s Kiss (1937), and The Card Party (1937).” Cyril W. Beaumont, Complete Book of Ballets: A Guide to the Principal Ballets of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries, London: Putnam, 1937, reprinted with additions 1951, 968.
included.\textsuperscript{24} (Table 2 lists the four first performance occasions of \textit{Serenade}. ) By the March 1935 performances, however, the company that would become known as the American Ballet had already given three performances of \textit{Serenade} in the United States, albeit under a different name. Notably, many accounts that mention the ballet tellingly do not abide by the official March premiere date, as seen above with Bernard Taper and the PBS documentary, and the Balanchine Trust, which despite listing March 1, 1935 as the official premiere, opens its description of the ballet by mentioning the June performance.\textsuperscript{25}

Additionally complicating the stories told by Taper and the documentary, “Balanchine’s first ballet in America” was not performed the very first time that the fledgling Producing Company of the School of American Ballet took the stage on June 9, 1934, a small wrinkle in the fabric of the ballet’s myth. \textit{Serenade} had to wait a second

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June (9) 10, 1934, Estate of Felix Warburg, White Plains, NY  \\
December 6\textemdash 8, 1934, Avery Memorial Theater, Hartford, CT  \\
February 7, 1935, Godhart Hall, Bryn Mawr College  \\
March 1\textemdash 15, 1935, Adelphi Theater, New York, NY  \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Performance Chronology for \textit{Serenade}}
\end{table}

\textsuperscript{24} The \textit{Catalogue of Works} also gives the March date as the premiere, and is likely the source of the information given out by the Trust.\textsuperscript{25} A biographical chronology of Balanchine in the \textit{Catalogue of Works} takes into account these multiple performances, but, in contrast to earlier accounts, gives special prominence to \textit{Serenade}, mentioning it twice by name: “In March, Balanchine begins choreographing \textit{Serenade} (Tschaikovsky) for students, who first perform it with stagings of \textit{Mozartiana} and \textit{Dreams} (a revision of \textit{Les Songes}) at Woodland, the Warburg estate near White Plains. – In Hartford, Connecticut, non-professional Producing Company of the School of American Ballet, predecessor of American Ballet, presents programs that include \textit{Mozartiana} and three new ballets: \textit{Serenade}, \textit{Alma Mater} (Swift), and \textit{Transcendence} (Liszt)” \textit{Catalogue}, 26\textemdash 27. Despite the special hailing of \textit{Serenade}, it was in fact but one of several new ballets, as Chujoy explains above.
day to be performed, with the first performance canceled after the conclusion of the first piece—*Mozartiana*—due to a summer rainstorm (Figs. 3 and 4). The distinguished audience reconvened the following evening when *Serenade* did finally receive its world premiere, albeit in its shorter, three-movement form, but notably, alongside the apparent world premiere of another ballet, *Dreams*.”

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Figure. 3: John Martin, New York Times, June 10, 1934

Chujoy, *The New York City Ballet*, 30. Robert Gottlieb omits this detail from his account of the first performance of *Serenade*, which he says was danced along with the
other two ballets from Les Ballets 1933, giving implicit precedence to Serenade Gottlieb, George Balanchine, 80. Gottlieb’s introductory remarks to the memoirs of Ruthanna Boris about Serenade also give June 9 as the premiere, Boris, “Serenade”, 1063. In a different but comparable elision, Bernard Taper omits the false start of June 9 from his account entirely, noting merely that the performance took place on June 10. It apparently takes some of the wind out of the “first in America” sails to have had the premiere of this watershed work put off by a rain delay.
Rain delays aside, *Serenade* was decidedly not reported by *New York Times* reporter John Martin as not the sole novelty of the evening, but was billed instead—as with Chujoy’s account—as one of two world premieres.

After the somewhat haphazard June performances at the Warburg estate, *Serenade* was next presented in December at the Avery Memorial Theater in Hartford, when the Producing Company made its more official performance debut, alongside one other work from the June preview at the Warburg estate, and two others, as Chujoy reports:

The Hartford season was modest. It only lasted three days, December 6, 7, and 8.

The repertoire included four ballets: *Mozartiana* and *Serenade*, which had been given in Woodland in June; *Transcendence*, to music by Franz Liszt arranged by George Antheil; and *Alma Mater*, to music by Kay Swift, in costumes by the cartoonist John Held Jr. The last named was the only ballet on an American theme: in it Edward Warburg, a Harvard man, was poking fun at Yale and Princeton students.27

Here again, *Serenade* is remarkable for being basically unremarkable, and Chujoy reports that it was in fact *Alma Mater* that was the hit with the Hartford audience. “Here was something with a definite plot,” in Chujoy’s words, “familiar, and a merry romp to boot. It was almost like the Sunday comics.”28 The other ballets, by contrast, “were above their heads, especially *Mozartiana* and *Transcendence*” and the audience apparently “accepted the proceedings at their face value without worrying about the history-making aspects of

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28 Ibid. 32.
the occasion." That the other ballets, besides *Serenade*, are mentioned by name as being above the audience’s head could imply that *Serenade* was more of a hit. But the fact that this purportedly watershed ballet receives no specific mention means it was, presumably, unremarkable.

Like Chujoy’s account from the early 1950s, one notable source from the 1930s also doesn’t make much of *Serenade*. In Ruth Eleanor Howard’s *The Story of the American Ballet*, *Serenade* gets scant mention, nor is the private preview performance held at the Warburg estate given any coverage. It is the December performances in Hartford that are given as the world premiere of the company, and the only piece mentioned by name is *Alma Mater*, singled out because of patron Edward Warburg’s connection with the piece, as one for which he wrote the libretto, and which Howard alleges was the first ballet that Warburg ever saw.

It is only when discussing the American Ballet’s subsequent New York run at the Adelphi Theater in March 1935 that Howard mentions *Serenade*, but even then it is merely lumped together with the “other ballets” that played alongside *Alma Mater*. These “other ballets,” namely *Dreams, Reminiscence, Transcendence*, and *Errante*, “were of the type usually associated with the Russian ballet and some of them had been produced by Balanchine in Europe.” *Serenade* receives no special distinction as the first American

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29 Ibid.
ballet; it is merely lumped together with Balanchine’s post-Diaghilev “European” style, for which John Martin and others had criticized the maiden performances of the troupe, pejoratively deriding them as “les ballets américains.”32

George Amberg’s *Ballet in America: The Emergence of an American Art*—published in the late 1940s, after City Ballet had already been established—like Howard, makes no mention of the summer performance at the Warburg estate, also dating the first official performances of the company from Hartford. Notably, Amberg does not even acknowledge the fact that *Serenade* was created in America.33 As with Howard and Chujoy, *Serenade* is for all practical purposes grouped together with the ballets of Balanchine’s final years in Europe, and far from being hailed as an innovation, the ballet

32 As though implicitly responding to the critiques of Martin and others, Howard comes to the company’s defense, seeing the promise of these pieces not in their newness but rather in how they might be hybridized on American soil. “Some critics chose to appear saddened by the fact that an entire repertoire of distinctly native ballets had been accomplished in the first year,” she writes, alluding to Martin’s notorious swipe at the exclusively Russian artistic leadership of the company, “instead of taking the view that by transplanting the root of the Russian ballet to the United States and grafting American dancers and American ideas on it, in time it will become American in character.” Howard, *The Story of the American Ballet*, 11.

33 “The Producing Company of the School of American Ballet presented its first program at the Avery Memorial Theatre, Hartford, Connecticut, in December 1934. George Balanchine was ballet master, artistic director and choreographer; Edward M. M. Warburg was director. The program consisted of four ballets, all unknown in America: *Mozartiana, Transcendence, Serenade,* and *Alma Mater*; for the spring season in New York *Les Songes* and *Reminiscence* were added. At first glance this program seems an odd statement of faith in native creative capacities since only *Alma Mater* was, strictly speaking, an American creation; *Transcendence* avoided any specific definition and three of the ballets were revivals from Balanchine’s Ballets 1933 in Paris. Consequently the critics received the company with mixed feelings; while willing to concede its verve, vitality and fine accurate performing technique and to commend the superb choreography, they were grieved and disappointed that this promising American company was not literally more American.” George Amberg, *Ballet in America, the emergence of an American art*, New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1949, 75.
is again remembered for the somewhat lackluster reception it received from critics for not being American enough.34

Archival documents from the December 1934 Hartford performances provide corroboration for the lack of special attention given to Serenade in these accounts. For one, Serenade was only performed once in the course of the three performances, on the final Saturday night program. This could indicate that the one performance was special, but could also imply that the ballet was not a particularly desirable showpiece. The official program from the performances, moreover, does not confer any chronological or historical priority on Serenade, citing the collective newness of all of the works.35 The program announces the American premiere of Mozartiana and the world premieres of Alma Mater, Transcendence, and Serenade. If Serenade was technically the first ballet created by Balanchine it did not seem worth pointing out, and such special notice would have distracted from what the organizers regarded as the true centerpiece of the program, Alma Mater. The press release for the Hartford performances makes this agenda quite explicit, mentioning Serenade only in passing among the larger repertory but reserving a special paragraph and pride of place in the release to describe Alma Mater, the true novelty of the evening, being a ballet of American, and not Russian character, and, as we

35 Scrapbook from Wadsworth Atheneum from The Producing Company of the School of American Ballet New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, (S)*MGZRS – Res. 82-4201.
have seen, the work that went over best with the Hartford audience. If *Serenade* was so unremarkable, then where and when—and more important, why—did the “first in America” story of the ballet first begin to be told?

**SERENADE AND NONPROFIT HISTORY**

There is no reason for a myth of origins unless it is to alleviate some sort of anxiety. In the case of the prehistory of the New York City Ballet, the sources of anxiety are manifold. City Ballet has almost a half dozen points of organizational origin, and it is perhaps this institutional instability that can account for the insistent hailing of *Serenade* as an undisputed first, despite, as we have seen above, the problem of multiple “firsts” that *Serenade* itself presents. The American firstness of *Serenade* is a flag in the sand that can tie the whole Balanchine-Kirstein enterprise together, even though the position that the ballet holds within the repertory is, as we have seen above and will see more below, largely a product of retrospective elevation. City Ballet can’t officially claim a birthdate earlier than 1948, but through the miracle of *Serenade* it can lay claim to a longer, unbroken institutional pedigree, one that in fact reaches all the way back to Balanchine’s

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36 Ibid. Even into the 1950s, well after City Ballet had been officially established, *Serenade* is not always present in accounts of the origins of the company, as was evident above in Chujoy’s 1953 monograph. Walter Terry’s 1956 account of the founding of City Ballet ascribes no special status to *Serenade*. Terry posits the Hartford performance as the premiere of the company—like Howard, he declines to discuss the June Warburg estate performances—and makes explicit mention of none of Balanchine’s ballets, with only *Alma Mater* singled out, although not by name: “In the fall of the same year [1934], a performing unit of the school [of American Ballet] made its debut in Hartford in a repertory of four ballets, all of them by Balanchine, one a comedy on an American theme. In March of 1935 the American Ballet, with guest artists augmenting its semiprofessional students, made its New York debut at the Adelphi Theater in an engagement extended from one week to two.” Walter Terry, *The Dance in America*, New York: Harper and Row, 1956; 1971, 173.
first years in America, and indeed back to Imperial Russia, granting his topsy-turvy early American career a stability that it would otherwise lack.

A 1945 issue of the short-lived journal Dance Index might number among the earliest places in which Serenade receives its now standard “first in America” billing. It’s no accident that this account’s author is none other than Lincoln Kirstein. In the introductory note to the volume dedicated to Balanchine’s career, Serenade is the first piece mentioned in a paragraph that looks back on the choreographer’s first decade in the United States. Although Kirstein—also an editor of the journal—does admit that things were rocky at the start, he at the same time he lays the groundwork for the new story of Serenade:

Balanchine was not always a popular choreographer with the public. When Serenade was first performed eleven years ago, it seemed almost too simple from the hands of a man who was then supposedly capable of only the perverse and peculiar. Yet, how many ballets of that year retain their freshness and purity as it does? Or as Apollo, Mozartiana, and Ballet Imperial do?37

This particular issue of the Index appeared just before City Ballet would emerge officially as an organization in 1948, from which the Catalogue of Works dates the now definitive version of Serenade. Ironically, however, the photos included in this issue all derive from performances done under the auspices of the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo (Fig. 5), for which Balanchine had been working during this period of institutional instability—after his work in Hollywood began to fizzle and Kirstein had been called to the Army. At this

possible moment of canonization for *Serenade*, then, lies

*Figure 5:* Dance Index, Vol. 4, Nos. 2–3 (February–March) 1945, 30.

another wrinkle in the fabric of the myth: the ballet most intensely identified with the New York City Ballet was kept alive by one of the post-Diaghilev Ballets Russes companies that Balanchine and Kirstein had hoped to displace through their own organizational efforts. (It should now be noted that the remarks by Edwin Denby cited at
the start of this discussion were also occasioned by a Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo performance.) At the same time, however, the old story of *Serenade* still seems to be in operation, for in the catalog of Balanchine’s ballets at the close of the volume, *Serenade* is the fourth ballet listed for the year 1934—still subordinate to *Alma Mater*—with its premiere listed as having taken place in Hartford, not New York.38 (By contrast, the *Catalogue* of 1983 lists *Serenade* as the first ballet for the year 1935, ahead of *Alma Mater* and the other ballets first performed in White Plains and Hartford.39)

The recently published collection of Lincoln Kirstein’s program notes offers further evidence of the development of the institutional meta-narrative surrounding *Serenade*. First, to return to the December 1934 Hartford performances, we find the following description, which adheres to the storyless party line but does not assert any special historical priority for the ballet:

> Without an implicit subject, the music and its thematic development indicate the tragic form of this primarily feminine ballet. Its lyricism is the large, fluent sentiment of Tschaikovsky shifting from the fresh swiftness of the Sonatina, the buoyant accumulating passage of the Waltz, through the sustained adagio of the Elegy. The classic dance has been used here in conjunction with free gesture, developed logically for the whole body’s use. The corps de ballet, as such, scarcely exists. Each member is inseparable from the schematic design in personal

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39 *Catalogue of Works*, 45.
individual meaning. The soloists crown the action alone, their tragedy prepared by 
the frame of the previous dances.⁴⁰

All dance, no history. Of course, we shouldn’t fault Kirstein for not pointing out that this 
was Balanchine’s first ballet, for it was arguably out of deference to Warburg’s Alma 
Mater that Serenade took a historical back seat. And although the inside-the-studio 
narrative surrounding the ballet is compelling today, it was likely not something that 
Kirstein wished to draw attention to in 1934. One can imagine the reactions of the 
audience: so this is a rehearsal piece you’re showing us?

By 1951, the program notes for Serenade have acquired their now familiar 
contours, anticipated in the 1945 Dance Index account, and subsequently picked up 
elsewhere.⁴¹ It is this account that has come to define the piece more readily in the 
popular imagination and in the institutional history of City Ballet:

Set to Tschaikovsky’s Serenade for Strings, this was the first ballet created by 
Balanchine in America. It was originally presented June 10, 1934, by the Students 
of the School of American Ballet, at the estate of Felix M. Warburg, White Plains, 
New York. Subsequently the work was remounted for the American Ballet 
Caravan, 1941; the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo, 1943; for the Grand Opera, 
Paris, 1947; and for the New York City Ballet, 1948.⁴²

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Foundation and Alliance for the Arts, 2009, 17.

⁴¹ By the time of the publication of Walter Terry’s Ballet Guide in 1959, the story of 
Serenade seems more firmly in place, with the first sentence in his two-page write-up of 
the ballet leading the way for critics and audiences to follow: “Serenade, the first ballet 
Balanchine created in America, is without plot but threaded with emotional incidents.” 
(293).

⁴² Lincoln Kirstein, Program Notes, 17–18.
All history, no dance. This later note makes no mention of the substance of the ballet, instead foregrounding the relationship between *Serenade* and the pre-history of the newly rechristened New York City Ballet. The ballet has become something of a repository for the history of the company. Despite Kirstein and Edward Warburg’s ambitious dreams of establishing a native classical ballet company on American soil (albeit with a school staffed almost exclusively by Russian Silver Age émigrés) it took almost two decades for the company to be firmly established. Given this chaos, it seems logical that Kirstein would reach back to the earliest performance of *Serenade* to date the piece, leaving behind the Hartford and Adelphi Theater engagements and including the performances of the ballet by the Ballet Russe and Paris companies as evidence of Balanchine’s growing influence. (By another reckoning one could argue that it took three decades if one dates the true institutionalization of the company to the opening of the New York State Theater in 1964. It should also be noted, in a bit of bureaucratic arcana, that the New York City Ballet did not officially incorporate as such until 1977, having continuing to “do business as” Ballet Society for almost three full decades, yet another source of potential anxiety regarding institutional identity.43)

Moving ahead to 1971, we find that *Serenade* has acquired a more elaborate institutional meta-narrative, reaching back further into ballet history. Kirstein’s notes posit *Serenade* as at once the touchstone of Balanchine’s new American career and his abiding connection with the old world of Petersburg and Paris. It also, in a kind of Freudian slip, gives June 9, and not June 10, as the first performance date, again eliding the inauspicious rainout that delayed the ballet’s debut:

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Originally presented June 9, 1934, Serenade is the first ballet created by Balanchine in America. For many years it has been a signature piece for seasons of the New York City Ballet and its antecedent groups, as Les Sylphides had been for the Ballets Russes. While Fokine’s suite from Chopin reflected the aura of the romantic nineteenth-century cult of the ballerina, Balanchine, taking his inspiration from a new school in a new country, retained the lyrical atmosphere while projecting movement that was athletic—swiftly contemporary yet passionately youthful and idealistic. The ballet’s dramatic overtones, evolving from the music, evoke love, separation, loss, and rededication, but the imagery is rarely specific; there is no characterization of individual roles. If there is a star, perhaps it is the corps de ballet, which Balanchine, at the start of his American career, intended to strengthen past anonymity or any subordinate position.44

In this account we find the full constellation of the stories of Serenade, as we’ve come to know it today: its status as the first ballet in America, its signature role in the repertory of City Ballet, its storyless quality, its elevation of the corps. By invoking the comparison with Fokine, moreover, Kirstein adds a new element to the story, the piece’s kinship with the hitherto most iconic ballet blanc in the repertory, Les Sylphides. Thus the mantle of the Russian ballet tradition of Petipa and Fokine passes from the old world to the new, and it is Serenade that serves as the ritual locus for this transfer.

44 Lincoln Kirstein, Program Notes, 18.
THE OTHER STORY OF SERENADE

One of Balanchine’s last great ballerinas, Merrill Ashley, once paused in the midst of an interview about her relationship with “Mr. B,” to remark that, “I feel like I am talking about a religion.” One can’t fault her for feeling this way, given the cult-like following that Balanchine inspired among his dancers and audiences, a loyalty that persists to this today almost thirty years after his death in 1983. One might also say that Ashley was not talking about religion, but about myth, or perhaps something in between. Mircea Eliade, to my knowledge not a ballet critic, captures precisely this mytho-religious character of ballet culture, and Balanchine in particular, religious in the sense of its binding of people together outside the bounds of ordinary experience. These ritualized experiences, not surprisingly, always bring the participants back to some mystical point of origin, a place where a myth first was acted out:

To ‘live’ myths, thus implies a truly ‘religious’ experience, for it is distinct from the ordinary experience of daily life. This experience is ‘religious’ because it is a reenactment of fabulous, exalting, meaningful events; one is present once again at the creative works of Supernatural Beings. Mythical events are not commemorated, they are repeated, reiterated. The characters in myth are brought forth and made present; one becomes their contemporary. One no longer lives in chronological time but in primordial Time, the time when the event took place for

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the first time. [...] In sum, myths reveal that the world, man, and life have a supernatural origin and history, and that this history is meaningful, precious, and exemplary.\footnote{Mircea Eliade, “Toward a Definition of Myth” in \textit{Mythologies}, compiled by Yves Bonnefoy, a restructured translation of \textit{Dictionnaire des mythologies et des religions des sociétés traditionnelles et du monde antique} prepared under the direction of Wendy Doniger, Trans. Gerald Honigsblum et al., Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1991,Vol. 1, 5.}

If you substitute “ballet”—or more specifically, \textit{Serenade}—for the word “myth” in the above quote, it’s easy to understand exactly why Merrill Ashley thought she was talking about a religion, and why the stories of \textit{Serenade} have achieved such staying power.

But there’s one other story of \textit{Serenade}, one that has seemingly fallen by the historical wayside, and one grounded not in any myths of the imagination, but in history. In her reminiscences of the creation of \textit{Serenade}, Ruthanna Boris recalls how, just after he had placed the girls in their “orange grove” formation, Balanchine delivered a lengthy, rambling talk about his upbringing and early career. “Little by little,” Boris reports, “his talking became more and more like a report—less conversational, more charged with feelings of anger and distress: ‘In Germany there is an awful man—terrible, awful man! He looks like me only he has mustache—he is very bad man—.’”\footnote{Ruthanna Boris, \textit{“Serenade,”} in Robert Gottlieb, \textit{Reading Dance}, 1065.} To conjure up Hitler amid the ethereality of \textit{Serenade} might seem odd, but an incident reported by Solomon Volkov in liner notes for a \textit{Balanchine Album} issued by the New York City Ballet Orchestra in 1986 provides corroboration for this connection, and in fact suggests that the Nazi threat may have served as an explicit programmatic point of departure for the ballet. Even more notably, this message was rooted in one of the ballet’s most iconic aspects, the opening arm gesture assumed by the corps when the curtain first rises. According to
Volkov, Balanchine originally wanted the corps to have “outstretched arms” wanting the ballet to suggest “a hymn to ward off sin.” The gesture was apparently deemed too explosive to Kirstein and Warburg, and Balanchine altered it slightly in response.\footnote{According to Volkov, “This gesture reminded the young American art patron Edward Warburg of the Nazi salute; it was the first cultural clash concerning Serenade. Balanchine softened the line of the upraised arms, veiling its ritual meaning; thus began the Americanization of Serenade and of Balanchine.” Solomon Volkov, Liner notes for New York City Ballet Orchestra, \textit{A Balanchine Album}, New York: Nonesuch, 1986.}

It might seem strange that the Hitler salute should serve as an intertext for \textit{Serenade}, but it was December 1933—the start of its rehearsal according to Boris—that saw the release of Leni Riefenstahl’s first major propaganda film, \textit{Der Sieg des Glaubens}, which chronicled the annual Nazi party gathering at Nuremberg, the first such event to coalesce around a specific theme. We might thus regard this particular moment as a time when the habits of the National Socialists were coalescing into a ritualized code of practices, with incessant hailing of the Führer as one of its most visible physical manifestations. Just as one of the most destructive myths of the twentieth century was taking shape and beginning to have real effects on the world, Balanchine took one of its most salient metonyms and, with a mere softening of the wrist, emptied the salute of its harmful efficacy. Thus it seems that, myths of spontaneous genius or institutional stability set aside, the lack of story behind \textit{Serenade} is still, in the end, its most important story. Perhaps music and movement are, as Balanchine argued, enough in and of themselves; powerful enough, it seems, to counteract the “extremes of chaos and violence” witnessed in the twentieth century.\footnote{This phrase is taken from a prefatory note to the Balanchine \textit{Catalogue} by Lincoln Kirstein, which suggests that the larger troubles of the twentieth century were not} And that is certainly a story worth retelling.
completely foreign to the Balanchine-Kirstein enterprise, at least from Kirstein’s perspective. Kirstein remarks that, “Our century has licensed extremes of chaos and violence on the grandest scale known to man. The reflections in literature, music and the plastic arts of two world wars scarred the whole structure of the imaginative process. […] The essence of ballet, on the other hand, is order.” Lincoln Kirstein, Preface to *Catalogue of Works*, 13.