

*The Four Temperaments*  
Kim Taylor Knight  
July 8, 2012  
Professor Douglas Risner

George Balanchine, was born Giorgi Balanchivadze in St. Petersburg, Russia, on January 22, 1904. Balanchine trained at the Imperial Theatre School in ballet while continuing his studies in music at the Petrograd Conservatory of Music in piano, music theory and composition. By his death on April 30, 1982, Balanchine had choreographed over 425 works.

*The Four Temperaments* premiered November 10, 1946 at the Central High School of Needle Trades 225 West 24<sup>th</sup> Street in Manhattan, a building, which has been a high school for garment trades since the early 1920's, and formerly the site of a tragic fire in 1911. On The Ballet Society's program were two dances: *The Spellbound Child* and *The Four Temperaments* to a crowd of Balanchine devotees. Ballet Society was renamed The New York City Ballet in 1948. Ballet Society dancers in that original production included Mary Ellen Moylan, Elise Reiman, Tanaquil LeClercq, Todd Bolender, William Dollar and Lew Christensen.

Paul Hindemith, the German composer of *The Four Temperaments*, is considered a neo-classical composer though his approach was different than Igor Stravinsky, also a neo-classicist. During his lifetime Hindemith composed first in a romantic style, switched to expressionism (influenced by Kurt Weill) and developed his well known contrapuntal style that was to be emblematic of the neo-classical era. Hindemith's tonal, non-diatonic music was controversial in Germany during the Nazi regime, and so he fled first to Switzerland and eventually to America.

*The Four Temperaments* is not only the clearest representative of the Neo-Classical style Balanchine developed over the years, but also marked the beginning of his company Ballet Society. *The Four Temperaments* was his earliest experimental work, which would eventually be part of the body of choreographies now known as his black and white Ballets. This series of work including *Agon*, *Concerto Barocco*, *Stravinsky Violin Concerto* and *Apollo* are dances in which the elements of are pared down to an essential movement canon. At the same time, Balanchine retained a well-defined sense of Classicism by firmly teaching and refining Classical Ballet technique learned at the Russian Imperial School in St. Petersburg. Even though Balanchine turned choreography on its ear by inventing movements that appeared at

once both, effortless and physically unattainable, nothing (including costuming, set design or storyline) obscured that choreography. In addition to ridding his ballets of superfluous design, ballet stories now were more subtext, much like the theatre work of Harold Clurman, Lee Strasberg and Ute Hagen at the Actor's Studio in New York City in the late 1950's. The elements that had been central to the idiom of Romantic and Classical Ballet (ethereal creatures, stories based on folktales and the idealized image of love) were now transparent in Balanchine's new work. The clean long lines of his dancers' bodies, a new prototype of dancer, became the self-selecting canvas upon which Balanchine would create during the next three decades and which even now evoke the burgeoning American identity which he was just forming at the time of *The Four Temperaments*. Just as Loïe Fuller and Isadora Duncan had rebelled against the rigidity of Ballet over a quarter of a century before him, Balanchine rebelled against what he considered the limiting factors of Classical Ballet.

By the end of World War II in 1945, ballet in America was in the throes of a Russian ballet mania. A wide acceptance of Russian ballet masters, teachers and the choreography of the Romantic and Classical period probably was endemic due in part to the crisscrossing tours of Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo in the 1930's and 1940's. Modern Dance took the lead in its use of realism in their compositions. In 1946 Martha Graham staged *Dark Meadow* and *Cave of the Heart* and Doris Humphrey's *The Story of Mankind* was on view at Jacob's Pillow with Jose Limon dancing the lead. Jerome Robbins had a major hit and a flop within the span of a year as well (*Fancy Free*, *Billion Dollar Baby*) so there was always the sense an artist's life was precariously balanced between acclaim and failure.

The basis for *Four Temperaments* was a theory accredited originally to Hippocrates in 450 BC that humanity could be divided into four kinds of nature based on bodily humors<sup>1</sup>, which were blood, bile from the liver, phlegm and bile from the kidneys. In

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<sup>1</sup> In early Western physiological theory, one of the four body fluids thought to determine a person's temperament and features. As hypothesized by GALEN, the four cardinal humours were blood, phlegm, cholera (yellow bile), and melancholy (black bile). The variant mixture of these humours in each person determined his "complexion" or temperament and his mental and physical qualities. The ideal person had the perfectly proportioned mixture of the four fluids; a disproportionate amount of one humour created a personality dominated by one set of related emotions (e.g., a choleric man was easily angered, proud, ambitious, and vengeful). Merriam-Webster online dictionary

terms of human beings these four natures were translated into the melancholic, sanguinic, phlegmatic and choleric. The extant version of this ballet is very different from the original production in which Russian surrealist painter Pavel Tchelitchew designed the costumes and Kurt Seligmann designed sets.

In viewing *The Four Temperaments*, it is clear to see the influence of underlying Medieval philosophy. Knowing in advance the ballet was based around these characteristics of human nature, upon first viewing several years ago I was very aware how dynamics of movement showcased each variation. In watching it with new eyes, a real sense of other worldliness emerged from the choreography and the great “simplicity” of its steps transcended the theme of human nature. It was as if these dancers, fully human in their presentation of the technique, reached the standards set forth by Romantic era ballerinas. Since we can’t watch Marie Taglioni on film, we have to rely on written accounts of her performances. As one anonymous critic from Paris noted sometime in the 1840’s, “The art of other dancers is learned like a trade, that of Mlle. Taglioni springs from nature.” Balanchine’s legacy included facile displays of increasingly challenging enchainment all the while codifying his interpretation of Classical Ballet through ballet technique. Arlene Croce summed up the overarching reason for Balanchine’s transitional work by saying, “a masterpiece doesn’t so much transcend its time as perpetuate it.”

Bernard Taper in his Balanchine biography also noted that even though an abstract ballet doesn’t have a plot, it does have content, and which was what I noticed foremost as I watched the ballet. It has content, like any visual abstract art, and its intrinsic meaning is elucidated by the feelings that they stir inside us, when we bring ourselves to the work.

The ballet is divided into seven sections, three as the “themes” and four the “variations”. Each of the “Variations” is named after one of the Temperaments in this order: Melancholic, Sanguinic, Phlegmatic, and Choleric.

In *The Four Temperaments*, space seems at times infinite, as when Bart Cook's soaring leap from the upstage left cuts the diagonal, landing center stage. And even as his arms extend skyward and he hangs deliciously in a suspended arabesque position, I feel Balanchine's use of the whole stage as general space, mirrors what he must have felt as a newly minted American. The choreography serves to represent the empty vessel of endless potential. If "Variation 1" represents the open spaces of America, (both geographically and intellectually) then "Theme 1" shows us a metaphoric view of the Manhattan skyline; dense, tightly wound, interconnected and claustrophobic without any trace of judgment or false sentiment. "Theme 1" begins the Ballet in a slow and measured way, almost as if it is the beginning of a ritual into which we are granted access.

In "Variation 1-Melancholic", Cook initiates one of the motifs of the variation. It is the curve of his spine, danced with successive flow from his coccyx upwards to the cervical region of his spine, as supple as a snake. This movement into low cambré is one example of Balanchine's genius in communicating emotion without resorting to the trickery of previous Ballet styles. This movement, repeated throughout the variation, sometimes echoed by the chorus of dancers who join Cook later in the section, show more of a sense of isolation and doom for "Melancholic" than any other choreography I can remember. The twitching syncopated movements and chorus of women boxing Cook in as they advance downstage toward him, with their goose-stepping battements always make me shiver while conjuring up the latest atrocities in the world. The tempo of the dance shifts from slow and percussive to a slower allegro, still punctuated by his use of syncopated and staccato rhythms. Cook's flow also transforms throughout the piece from much more bound and successive flow, to a freer flow toward the second half of the section. The bound flow returns and successive movement is never more evident than when Cook, surrounded by the corps, initiates the signature cambré which is repeated in canon-like successive flow, appearing on stage like time lapse photography; a Morning Glory, opening its blossom during the daylight and receding into itself when night appears.

“Theme 2” begins its pas de deux in playful canon with the man leading the woman onstage, as if two children playing tag. When Renee Estopinal walks en Pointe around her partner, David Richardson, it reminds me of all the flirtatious gestures an adolescent might affect. In the next phrase, as she is being turned by Richardson it is he that seems kittenish with his flicking prances around Estopinal, who has become the rock hard center of the composition. The finger turns en dedans undertaken by the couple look at once both light and vulnerable (due in part to Estopinal’s bent supporting knee and razor sharp spotting during these turns) while simultaneously creating an illusion of cement, heavy and immovable. One of the tenants of Balanchine composition seems to be this economy of steps while exploring the vast interpersonal space that is shared by one or more of dancers onstage. The manipulation of Estopinal’s supported arabesque is emblematic of the way Balanchine’s style deconstructed the Classical Ballet, even in this early work. As we watch Richardson flop Estopinal around, her hips move in ways that others have compared to African Dance, but her lightning straight legs stay stretched as if they were made of ice. “Theme 3” ends with Estopinal leading the Canon off stage right as they exit, using what appears to me as Egyptian arms.

Merrill Ashley and Daniel Duell begin upstage opposite each other in “Variation 2- Sanguinic” in silence establishing space and distance. As the music begins, Duell first advances toward Ashley followed by her echoing this using steps en Pointe. With each successive advance, they reach the point where the couple is finally in close enough proximity to touch and their pas de deux begins. During the opening phrase the couple mirrors their actions in canon, for a few short phrases and then in the transition of coming downstage together, always in close proximity, her steps become sharper as she battements backward and forward six times left and right as Duell echoes her movements all the while keeping his leg firmly planted on the ground, only turning to face her during the battements she executes to the front. The next phrases have them in unison pirouetting en dedans followed by a languid stretch in third arabesque four times before running back to something close to their opening positions.

After several tombés performed in unison, the couple finally arrives in a traditional pas de deux position, Duell supporting Ashley as she performs finger turns with a continuing switch of legs. Something in the way Duell held her finger during those turns, strong and yet delicate was the point in the dance where the dancers, the choreography, the execution of the steps as well as the source material all came together for me. Suddenly Balanchine’s choreographic and technical intention transported my imagination and Taper’s theory about plot versus content was not mere academic theory. The way that Balanchine displayed his dancers’ strengths further clarified the intention of his work. Though the dancers display complementary strengths, Balanchine was never afraid to showcase what made each dancer special. In this variation, it is clear that Ashley, groomed for her speed, was engaged in extending her adagio capabilities with a partner, Duell, equally strong and outgoing onstage. That I saw in this moment his outgoing nature, in the mere act of counterbalancing Ashley underscored Balanchine legacy. “Sanguinic” is my favorite variation because of the way Balanchine incorporates oppositional forces in the pas de deux, as brilliantly performed by Duell and Ashley.

“Theme 3” with Heather Watts and Kipling Houston seems the most traditional in structure. It resembles the Classical pas de deux between Odette/Odile and Siegfried in *Swan Lake*. Their rippling arms and close embrace are a motif of movement that continues throughout the variation. We see Watts endlessly scooped up and carried around by Houston as if she were a foldable chair being transported to the beach. The fish, a classic pose in Ballet, becomes something that looks more like a figurehead of a ship, looking out over the horizon of the sea, not to the floor of the stage, as in Classical Ballet.

The solo that comprises “Variation 3-Phlegmatic” starts with Adam Lüders performing pedestrian walks onstage. Some of his movement during this opening phrase shows traces of Martha Graham’s influence of contract and release. As the corps of dancers join him, the patterns on stage resemble a human kaleidoscope; a myriad of symmetrical shapes and patterns smoothly morphing.

Colleen Neary's solo at the beginning of "Variation 4-Choleric" shouts at us to wake up and pay attention. Her long limbs and allegro attack illustrate to audiences that Balanchine's "coda" has a much different intent than that of Classical forms. In many ways this ending piece serves as a safeguard, warning us not to become too complacent about our art forms, in the event that they will turn around and bite us.

*The Four Temperaments* was originally titled "Theme with Four Variations". Ballet based on the musical form of theme and variation style was unheard of in ballet, making it a radical concept to critics of the time. Another reason *The Four Temperaments* was groundbreaking was how Balanchine used musical composition. Balanchine not only made the story subtext, but he elevated the status of music. Balanchine clearly stated his reverence for music through his actions but also in statements such as, "dance is music made visible." His training in musical composition and performance guided him for his entire career.

*The Four Temperaments*, utilized Classical Ballet structure, even though not precisely in the way originally intended. The first three themes were all performed as pas de deux (not four in number as in Classical Ballet) even though a different couple performs each. The variations don't follow the Classical Ballet model even though they utilize parts of the structure; even in 1946 Balanchine was working on his model of Ballet to be known hereafter as Neo-Classical Ballet.

Occurring first is the male solo, which in the Classical model would be represented by an adagio between male and female. The next variation in *The Four Temperaments* is a pas de deux, which is also a direct contrast to Classical Ballet structure in which we expect to see a solo. Then *The Four Temperaments* showcases another male solo, which is comparable to the Classical model. Finally in Balanchine's choreography we see a female solo with the corps de ballet supporting her which contrasts greatly from the Classical coda. Each variation added to the preceding one by using thematic concepts laid out in the three themes.

A unifying force for the entire choreography is the feeling that human nature, in all its forms is unique to each individual being. Balanchine choreographed with

attention to person's strengths and talents, which is considered one element of Balanchine that makes his work unique. It is shown clearly in this dance. Another example of Balanchine's choreographic strengths is how he incorporated the personalities of his dancers into each composition. Though Balanchine didn't believe in the star system, his was an intuitive grasp of how to market each personality to surpass their perceived talents. Each part of the choreography contributes to the prior section and the intensity builds and becomes like a cohesive force.

Contrast is mainly used in the variations themselves. For example, during "Variation 1-Melancholic" Cook, as stated earlier, begins in a slow solo that creates a sense of isolation and the contrasting feature of the variation occurs when the corps enters and engulfs him. I also find the use of similar movements in the different variations very engaging. It feels as though there is a common thread throughout. As stated before, the repetition in various movements (as in Cook in Variation 1) creates a motif base for each dance. It also seems as though there are times when the dancers in each variation are in fact interchangeable. Therefore, it reinforces the theory that we all embody all types of temperaments, even if we have a preference for one or the other.

Hindemith was an accomplished musician first. Balanchine originally commissioned Hindemith's composition in 1940, for \$250 or \$500 depending on your source primarily as a patron of the arts. Balanchine hosted musicales at his home for the entertainment of friends and this commission, based on paintings by Brueghel, was a composition originally intended for the choreographer Leonide Massine. In 1946 he began the arduous work of creating choreography for this commission. The score was composed for piano and strings and Hindemith himself was an accomplished string player and pianist. Its "Theme" section is in three parts, beginning with a moderato tempo as written into the score. Theme 2 begins in "Allegro assaz" played by piano followed by another moderato section. The music builds and swells during each of the themes but at the beginning of "Melancholisch" it slows drastically while the dynamics are louder than expected for such a slow tempi.

The “Sanguinic” variation being in waltz time (showcases dance movements between couples in a very stylistic manner. By the time we are in the “Phlegmatisch” the moderator tempo has returned and the piano is the primary voice of the movement. In Choleric the tempo is vivace, and with the pizzicato strings, we see the movement come alive in allegro movements executed with brilliance by the soloist, Colleen Neary as the violins’ arpeggios trip in delighted response.

The mood and tone of the music, communicates a deep sensitivity for each of the temperaments. The mournful sound of the violins, violas, cellos and basses are matched in their partnership with the piano. I found myself imagining that the strings were having a conversation with the piano in each of the variations, just as Balanchine has showcased the brilliance of each dancer’s ability to relate to another dancer on stage.

From the dramatic interpretation of “Melancholic” to the sharp and brilliant allegro work of both Merrill Ashley and Colleen Neary, what we most remember Balanchine for is his intrinsic understanding of dancers as humans first and technicians secondly. The ability of the dancers is also based upon daily barre, which like the ritual you see voiced in his choreographic works, was daily laid bare in the classroom. It is stated time and again how Balanchine changed the way a person danced because of the way he trained each person as a technician, in the classroom. And never is that more evident, than in *The Four Temperaments*.

When *Temperaments* was first staged it was choked with a tangle of overblown set pieces and incomprehensible costumes, which obscured the body. There are accounts that up until moments before the curtain went up, Balanchine was frantically trying to amend the costumes himself. It took Balanchine half a decade to remove the trappings of the designers from his original production. But in 1951, when the ballet was revived, the choreography stood against the newly stark “black and white ballet” look that was to become his signature of the decade. To me the hallmark of a masterpiece is how it stands the test of time. With each passing decade, *The Four Temperaments* is gifted to newly trained dancers always with a sense that the work, like life, is never finished.

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("New York City Ballet")

### **The Four Temperaments**

Performed at New York State Theatre at Lincoln Center, New York City

Video: 1977 Public Broadcasting System (PBS): New York, *Dance in America*



Theme with Four Variations (according to the Four Temperaments) Thema mit vier Variationen. Alternative. Title. Die vier Temperamente für Orchester oder Ballett. Composer. Hindemith, Paul. I-Catalogue NumberI-Cat.