

MUSIC NOTE

Léo Delibes moved ballet music forward with his fluent, elegant and character-filled score. And he had never written for the ballet stage before. Mark Carroll investigates how Delibes breathed life into ballet.

In a world where we have grown accustomed to thinking that Piotr Tchaikovsky virtually single-handedly legitimised and invigorated ballet music, it's all too easy to overlook the trail blazed by his illustrious predecessor, the Frenchman Léo Delibes (1836 - 1891). Delibes' introduction of the symphony orchestra into the ballet medium earned him the reputation as the "father" of modern ballet. One of the more successful and enduring 19th century light comedy ballets, Delibes' *Coppélia*, ou *La Fille Yeux d'Émail* (to give it its full title) was the composer's first full-length work.

Delibes served his apprenticeship under Adolphe Adam - of *Giselle* fame - at the Paris Conservatoire. In 1866 he attracted critical attention when, in a collaboration with León Minkus (who was to become the last Official Composer to the Imperial Russian Ballet), he outshone his more credentialed partner. The two men shared the compositional duties for *La Source* and it was Minkus who suffered by direct comparison. A critic in *La France Musicale* was direct to the point of being brutal: "Minkus' music has a vague, indolent and melancholic character ... that of Delibes' is fresher, more rhythmic and more complicated in orchestration." Another critic wrote: "The whole of the score could have been entrusted to the young composer, and this will doubtless be done on another occasion". And so it was.

Coppélia was lauded as a quantum leap forward for French ballet music, eclipsing even Adam's score for *Giselle*. Until Adam, ballet music was more often than not a potpourri of popular tunes and blatant borrowings from the concert music repertoire. It was the dance that audiences came to see, and the music was regarded as secondary - at best a kind of sonic wallpaper, at worst a distraction. While *Giselle* hinted at other possibilities, *Coppélia* made them a reality. Writing soon after the May 1870 Paris premiere, a critic in *Le Figaro* captured perfectly the music's defining qualities: "M. Léo Delibes has composed for the three scenes of *Coppélia* a distinguished, piquant, and colourful score, excellently orchestrated ... It is very difficult to write for dancing with a little artistry, taste and style ... M. Delibes has succeeded in avoiding the commonplace". Given that the composer was still working on the score when rehearsals began, he would doubtless have agreed that it was very difficult to write with "artistry, taste and style".

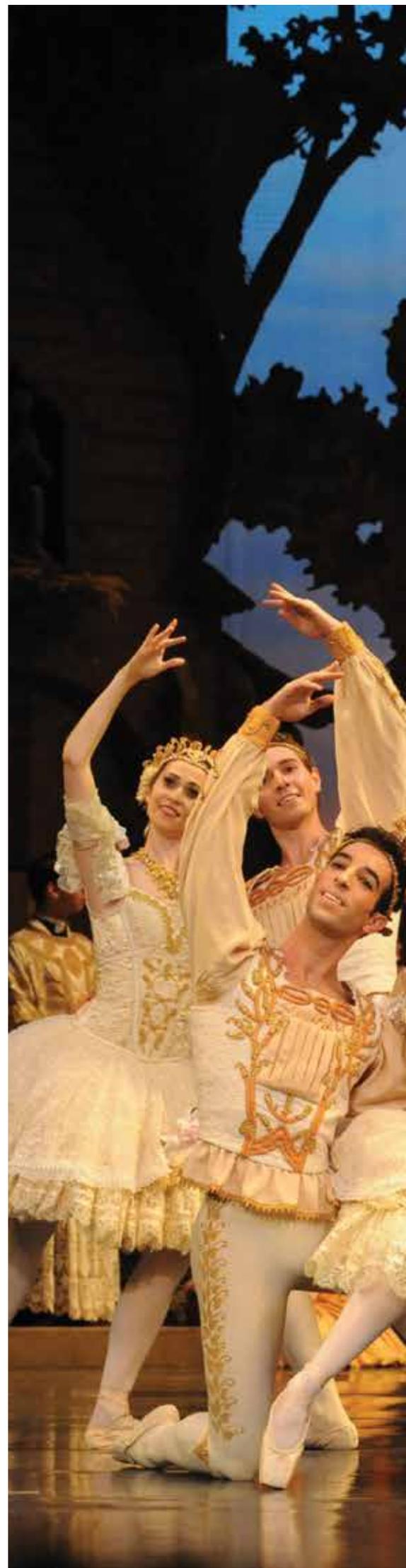
The music moves easily and tunefully between passages for dance and narrative asides, and does so in a way that is witty without being flippant. As Tchaikovsky was to do so effectively, Delibes in *Coppélia* makes the music integral to the story unfolding. Like Tchaikovsky, Delibes was also a master orchestrator. The prelude with which the first tableau opens gives the first indication of the composer's sublime instrumental colourings as the spotlight moves freely and effortlessly from horns to strings, and finally to short woodwind cadenzas. The tableau proper begins with an elegant waltz as Swanilda

tries to attract the attention of a doll sitting in the window of Dr Coppélius' house. The doll's response to Franz's furtive kiss is mirrored in a rhythmic, deliberately ungainly passage for woodwinds. The sheer elegance of Delibes' melodies comes to the fore in a Hungarian-inflected ballade for solo violin as Swanilda tests Franz's fidelity with a whispering wheat stalk, only to be unconvinced. Following a series of Slavonic-styled set pieces as Swanilda and her friends make merry, the tableau ends with rhythms that recall the doll's music, recast in a darker, minor key as if to hint at the mysteries that lie in wait at Dr Coppélius' house.

The dramatic second tableau is preceded by an entr'acte that literally sets the scene - a paraphrase of the foreboding doll's music tells us that we have arrived at the doctor's house, while a repeat of Swanilda's waltz makes it clear that she is there, too. The curtain rises to muted, staccato violins that reflect the girls' trepidation as they enter the room where Dr Coppélius keeps his puppets. As Swanilda and the girls explore the room and set the puppets in motion the score springs to life with the tinkling "Musique des Automates". The intrigue that follows is mirrored in the music: the scene where Dr Coppélius drugs Franz with tainted wine is set to a number reminiscent of a German drinking song; Swanilda's emergence as Coppélia ushers forth the exquisite interplay between flute and strings in the "Valse de la Poupée". Dr Coppélius' attempt to pacify Coppélia by placing a fan in her hand is accompanied by a bolero and then, in a moment of creative whimsy, a Scottish jig. The music reaches fever pitch as Swanilda makes good her escape and into the arms of Franz. As was to be the case in Tchaikovsky's *The Nutcracker* (which, like *Coppélia*, was based on a story by E.T.A Hoffmann) the final tableau carries little dramatic action and is instead a series of divertissements celebrating the nuptials of Swanilda and Franz. These short set pieces confirm Delibes' easy traverse of a range of musical stylings, the culmination of which is the pas de deux for the betrothed couple, with its elegantly crafted viola melody.

The success of *Coppélia* encouraged Delibes - who was described by a friend as "restless, fidgety, slightly befuddled, correcting and excusing himself, lavishing praise, careful not to hurt anyone's feelings, shrewd, adroit, very lively, a sharp critic" - to concentrate on large-scale works. These included another ballet, *Sylvia* (1876), and the opera which is generally regarded as the culmination of his life's work, *Lakmé* (1883). All of these works are blessed with Delibes' musical gifts of charm, wit, elegance, taste and, possibly above all, a craftsmanship that is rarely laboured and has seldom been bettered.

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Artists of The Australian Ballet. Photography Branco Gaica