

MUSIC NOTE

The late John Lanchbery was commissioned by Rudolf Nureyev to arrange the score for his production of Don Quixote. Here, Lanchbery explains his approach to the music.



Conductor John Lanchbery, 1997
Photography Jim McFarlane

In Russia in the second half of the 19th century, the growth and popularity of the arts resulted in the immigration of a number of non-Russian musicians who served a useful purpose until such time as the great Russian school of composers came into force.

In the ballet of the time the music had above all to be melodic, easily remembered, and simple in its form and rhythmic pattern. The more symphonic approach to ballet music had to wait for Tchaikovsky and Delibes to pioneer it and for Diaghilev's composers to develop it. The three official Russian ballet composers of the period (it was at this time a sort of government post!) were all non-Russian: Pugni, Minkus and Drigo (in chronological order).

Ludwig Minkus was born in Vienna in 1827 and went to Russia at the age of 25. He stayed there for 33 years, and then retired to his native land, where he died four years later. He wrote more than 20 ballets in Russia, of which *Don Quixote*, first produced in Moscow in 1869, was one of the best successes. His ballet music from first to last was uncomplicated,

unadventurous, and just occasionally uninteresting. His unending fund of melody was at its best in waltz-time, obviously because of his early life in Vienna; when in doubt he wrote in this rhythm, and it is fun to note that in his tragic ballet *La Bayadère*, a story of fatal snake-bite, unrequited love and a haunted temple in mythological India, the best musical moment is when a corps de ballet of beautiful Hindu lady-ghosts waltz around the stage to a Viennese 1-2-3.

"Don Quixote is one of Minkus' best scores, being cheerful, light-hearted and full of gay Spanish atmosphere"

Don Quixote is one of Minkus' best scores, being cheerful, light-hearted and full of gay Spanish atmosphere (in addition to the usual quota of waltzes). The original music is so simple in places it is impossible to believe it was written only five years before *Swan Lake*, which was criticised at its premiere for being too symphonic.

Like the scores for all 19th-century ballets that have stayed in the Russian repertoire, *Don Quixote* has long ago been tinkered with, added to and subtracted from without mercy. When Nureyev commissioned me to do a completely new version of it for (coincidentally) the Vienna Opera House in 1966, I therefore suffered no pangs of conscience in trying to improve the hotch-potch which has survived as Minkus' score. I adapted it to the lighter story line that Nureyev wanted, wrote a few numbers, brushed up all that we thought worth saving, but above all set out by completely reorchestrating the whole work to get away from the bread-and-butter scoring of Minkus. In particular, I tried to bring greater authenticity to the Spanish numbers, but in spite of this somewhat alarming catalogue of what I have done, I am sure that enough of Minkus' own special genius, that of sparkling instant melody, shines through.

John Lanchbery, 1986

