

# Dancing Scores: *Concerto Barocco* by George Balanchine

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In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, experiments in dance without music proliferated, as did manifestos for the autonomy of the art of choreography from the sphere of sound. It was in opposition to this trend that George Balanchine composed *Concerto Barocco* in 1941, based on the score of Johann Sebastian Bach's *Concerto in D Minor for Two Violins*, BWV 1043.<sup>1</sup> In this work, the music is not just a source of inspiration or an accompaniment, but the very backbone of the kinetic action. Bach's concerto is the foundation of the ballet's concept, composition, and structure.

Before analyzing *Concerto Barocco*, it is important to consider two aesthetic elements that are useful in defining the choreographer's poetics. First, Balanchine demands a hyper-specialized technique and a very high level of virtuosity from his performers. There is a precise motivation behind these stylistic choices: Balanchine's ideal is a trained body, not natural at all, but completely artificial, shaped by practice and training.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, there is a complete lack of naturalism in both the form and the content of his ballets, which all operate on the level of abstraction or, at most, fantasy.<sup>3</sup> Second, a central point in Balanchine's choreographic research – not coincidentally defined as “neoclassical” – is the study of the past. Based on the conviction that tradition nourishes the present, the choreographer believes that there is no discovery that is not in some way rooted in

<sup>1</sup> Classical ballet in three movements. Music by Johann Sebastian Bach. Choreography by George Balanchine. Scenic design and costumes by Eugene Berman. First performed by the American Ballet at the Theatre of Hunter College, New York (May 29, 1940), with Marie-Jeanne, Mary Jane Shea and William Dollar in the leading roles.

<sup>2</sup> For a contextualization of Balanchine's distinctive choreographic style, see the biographies: Taper 1987; Buckle and Taras 1988. For an analysis of his ultra-classical technique (learned at a prestigious school, the Mariinsky in St. Petersburg) and the resulting ‘artificial’ body, see Randi 2020.

<sup>3</sup> When discussing the meaning of the fantastic in Balanchine, it is impossible not to refer to his connection to Tchaikovsky, cf. Solomon 1985.

tradition.<sup>4</sup> Therefore, knowledge of history must be cultivated in order to stimulate creativity and innovation.

Thus, in his approach to Bach's *Concerto in D Minor for Two Violins*, Balanchine strictly adheres to technical hyper-specialization and knowledge of history as his guiding ideals. In a volume devoted to his own choreography, Balanchine introduces the ballet as follows:

The only preparation possible for this ballet is a knowledge of its music, for *Concerto Barocco* has no "subject matter" beyond the score to which it is danced and the particular dancers who execute it. Set to Bach's *Concerto in D Minor for Two Violins*, the ballet tries to interest the audience only by its dancing, its treatment of the music, just as Baroque art and architecture interested people not because of their subjects but because of the decorative treatment that embellished those subjects (Balanchine 1977, 124-25).

In light of the view expressed in the above quotation, it can be said that the choreographic concept of *Concerto Barocco* is one in which form coincides with content, and dance is nothing but dance, in its pure state, and should be considered only in its relation to the musical score. The choice of a composer of the stature of Bach is objectively very daring: the choreographer clearly states that the *Concerto for Two Violins* does not need any complement in order to "stand" (Balanchine 1977, 125), nor does it need to be "filled out" (Balanchine 1977, 125) by the dance. Balanchine draws on Bach because he believes that only great music can be the source and support of great dance:<sup>5</sup>

Choosing pieces of music for dancing is a matter for the individual choreographer. A choreographer disinterested in classical dancing will not care to use scores by Bach and Mozart except for theatrical sensational reasons; he will select music more to his immediate purpose. But if the dance designer sees in the development of classical dancing a counterpart in the development of music and has studied them both, he will derive continual inspiration from great scores. He will also be careful, as he acts on this inspiration, not to interpret the music beyond its proper limits, not to stretch the music to accommodate a

<sup>4</sup> Paradigmatic for his relationship to tradition is the fact that Balanchine acknowledges the great artistic teaching of Marius Petipa, whom he considers his master and spiritual father, cf. Balanchine 1971 (already cited in Randi 2020, 22).

<sup>5</sup> Balanchine cites *Coppélia*, *The Sleeping Beauty* and *Petrushka* as examples, emphasizing that these ballets owe their greatness not only to the choreographers Arthur Saint-Léon, Marius Petipa and Michel Fokine, but also to the music of Léo Delibes, Pyotr Ilych Tchaikovsky and Igor Stravinsky.

## Dancing Scores: Concerto Barocco by George Balanchine

literary idea, for instance. If the score is a truly great one, suitable for dancing, he will not have need of such devices and can present his impression in terms of pure dance (Balanchine 1977, 125).

“Pure dance”, a characteristic feature of Balanchine’s overall choreographic conception,<sup>6</sup> takes on a special form in *Concerto Barocco*, for here the purity of the dance is closely linked to the music in its construction and meaning. The dancers’ bodies are conceived as musical instruments, and their movement is constructed in such a way as to make the score visible.<sup>7</sup> It is worth noting that the above quote contains an eloquent lexical choice: the choreographer is referred to as a “dance designer” – literally, the one who designs the dance. This expression emphasizes the importance of the visual aspect in the choreographic composition of this ballet, which emerges in a very powerful way when we look at it analytically. The choreographic work consists precisely in creating figures and outlining poses and movements in the image and likeness of the musical score. To see in detail how this process takes place, let us look at the following series of still images, in which the ballet and the score are juxtaposed.<sup>8</sup> The analysis will be limited to the first movement, *Vivace*. Here is a passage from the incipit of the ballet:

<sup>6</sup> Among the various terms used to describe Balanchine’s style are “abstract dance”, “dance for dance’s sake” and “art dance”. For a comparative study, see Guzzo Vaccarino 2015.

<sup>7</sup> As a side note, Bach’s music, with its rigorous formal and architectural composition, has fascinated many 20th century choreographers, such as Trisha Brown, who in her own way sought to incorporate Bach’s score into *M. O.* (1995). On this subject, see Piccione 2025.

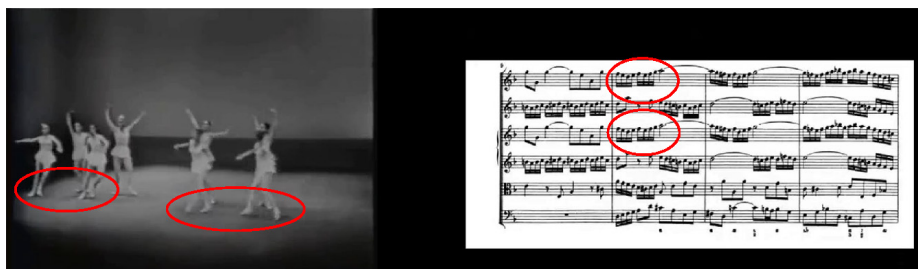
<sup>8</sup> To produce the stills, two pre-existing videos were juxtaposed and synchronized (in a very low-tech way): on the left is a video of a 1966 performance of the ballet (George Balanchine, “Concerto Barocco,” uploaded on March 22, 2016, YouTube video, 19:39, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fwYwIOer3sc>). The choreography dates back to 1941, with some revisions introduced in 1948. The leading roles are performed by Susan Farrell, Marnee Morris and Conrad Ludlow. On the right is a video of the music from the concert, with the orchestral score playing simultaneously (Johann Sebastian Bach, “Concerto for 2 violins in D minor, BWV 1043 – Sheet Music,” uploaded on July 3, 2022, YouTube video, 14:40, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=humdWBqYniE>). The time stamps in this essay refer to the first video, that of the ballet, from which the second was synchronized.

(Fig. 1) [00:37]

On the sixteenth notes of the fourth bar, in the second violin solo and second violins parts, the dancers perform a running step *en demi-pointe* (see Fig. 1). There is a significant, immediate, and direct tonal correspondence between the fast sixteenth notes and the fast steps of the run. The same coincidence between sixteenths and running occurs several times throughout the choreography. In fact, this is not an entirely new or particularly original choreographic solution, so there is no need to dwell on it. However, let us at least look at a few other examples where the sixteenth notes/run correspondence is found in the first few minutes of the ballet (see Figs. 2, 3, 4, and 5).

(Fig. 2) [00:40]

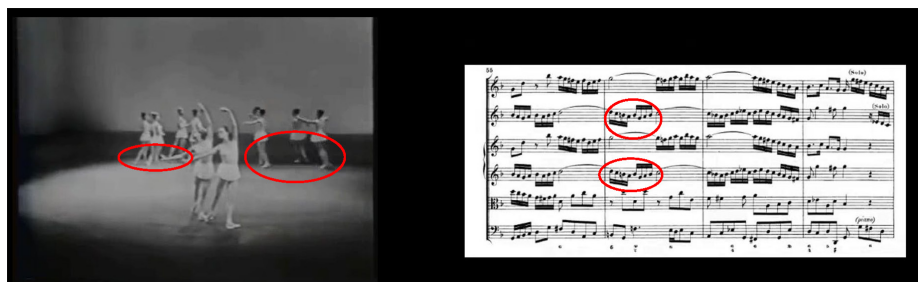
# Dancing Scores: Concerto Barocco by George Balanchine



(Fig. 3) [00:53]



(Fig. 4) [01:26]



(Fig. 5) [03:10]

A much more suggestive parallel can be traced at the very beginning of the ballet, when the dancers perform two small backward jumps in *arabesque* with the supporting leg *en demi-plié*, corresponding to the groups of notes found in the third bar of the second violin solo and second violins parts ( $D\#_3$ - $A_3$ - $D_3$ - $G_3$ ; see Fig. 6).



(Fig. 6) [00:34]

The pulsating, almost bouncing, sound effect of these note intervals finds an effective kinetic translation in the dance steps, which resemble small rebounds. The same correspondence returns after about a minute, when the musical phrase is repeated an octave higher ( $C\#_4-A_4 - D_4-G_4$ ; see Fig. 7), and later, when it is transposed to another key ( $G\#_3-E_4 - A_3-D_4$ ; see Fig. 8).



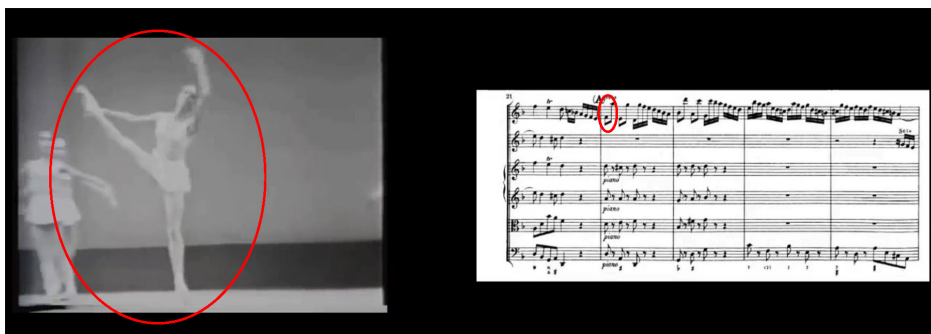
(Fig. 7) [01:23]



(Fig. 8) [02:47]

## Dancing Scores: Concerto Barocco by George Balanchine

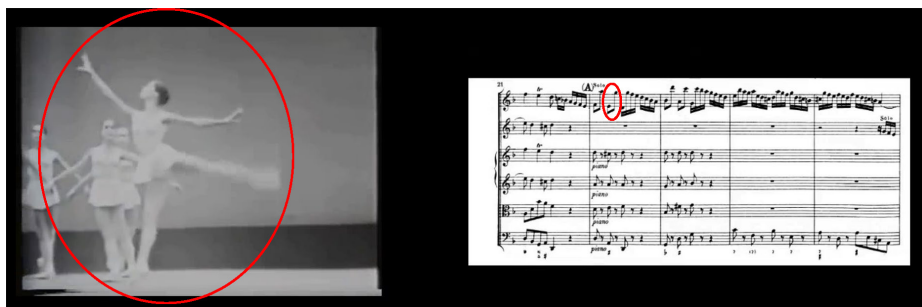
However, it is the entrance of the first solo dancer, i.e., the moment when the theme (A) of the first violin solo is played, that is the key passage in the correspondence between dance and music. There is a very intuitive correspondence between the first solo violinist and the first solo dancer: the ballerina moves as if she were actually embodying the musical instrument, giving form and movement to the theme played by the violin. In addition to this overall correspondence, we find an important, repeated parallel within the sequence of the first soloist's entrance, captured in the following still:



(Fig. 9) [01:25]

While in the staff of the first violin solo part we find notes that form intervals of an ascending tenth (in the second bar,  $F_3$ - $A_4$ ; see Fig. 9), the visual image of this interval is the raising of the soloist's leg from the bottom up (technically, the dancer performs a *battement développé en avant* on the point, starting from a *plié relevé*). The sense of elevation is enhanced by the fact that the dancer rises *en pointe* at the moment of greatest expansion in the *développé*: this is a perfect visual reflection of the acoustic effect created by the tenth interval.

After this *développé*, the dancer performs a *tombé* and an *arabesque* with the supporting leg *en relevé* on the point. Again, we find an ascending interval, another ascending leap of a tenth (second bar,  $E_3$ - $G_4$ ; see Fig. 10) and a leg rising from the bottom up, this time in an *arabesque*.



(Fig. 10) [01:28]

The same correspondences can be found in the following bar, where the ascending leap of a tenth corresponds to another *développé en pointe* (the *développé* is performed while the violin plays the  $B_3$ - $D_5$  interval: see Fig. 11), followed by a *tombé* and an *arabesque* with the supporting leg *en relevé* on the point (the *arabesque* is performed while the violin plays the  $A_3$ - $C_5$  interval: see Fig. 12).



(Fig. 11) [01:31]



(Fig. 12) [01:32]

## Dancing Scores: Concerto Barocco by George Balanchine

Moreover, in the same theme (A) of the first violin solo, the lifting of the leg from the bottom up occurs not only with intervals of a tenth, but also with other ascending intervals. This is the case, for example, in the following groups of sixteenthths ( $E_4$ - $B_4$ ,  $D_4$ - $A_4$ ,  $C\#_4$ - $G_4$ : see Figs. 13, 14, and 15). The dancer performs three *développés* at a height of 90 degrees. These three *développés* (with the heel of the supporting leg on the floor), as well as the one just before (performed *en relevé* on the point of the supporting leg), all go very quickly through a *passé*.



(Fig. 13) [01:33]



(Fig. 14) [01:35]



(Fig. 15) [01:37]

It is interesting to note that when the second violin solo repeats the theme of the first violin, the second solo dancer enters, and the steps are not repeated identically. However, in the subsequent interaction between the two dancers,<sup>9</sup> the correspondence between rising notes and the lifting of the leg is maintained.



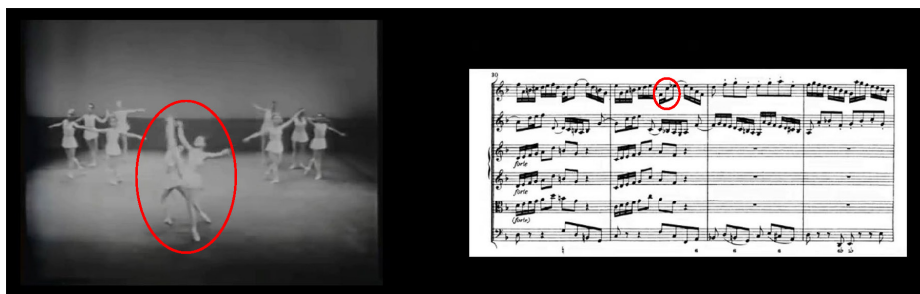
(Fig. 16) [01:50]

In this section, the first solo dancer performs a *développé* and, at the moment of greatest expansion, rises *en pointe*.<sup>10</sup> These steps are performed in correspondence with the ascending groups of notes found in the first bar of the first violin solo staff ( $G_3$ - $D_4$ - $F_4$ ; see Fig. 16). The other solo dancer repeats the same step shortly thereafter, on the notes  $F_3$ - $C_4$ - $E_4$ ; see Fig. 17.

<sup>9</sup> Balanchine describes the moment when the two soloists interact with the themes of the two solo violins as follows: “As the two violins take up their parts in the music, two soloists enter. Singly, together, and with the corps de ballet, they become a part of the dance orchestration. They support each other as the music of one violin entwines the other; they depict and develop dance themes that recur with the repetition and development of themes in the orchestra” (Balanchine 1977, 125).

<sup>10</sup> The first *développé* is performed from a *soutenu en demi-pointe*, ending with the supporting leg *en plié* and the other leg in *cou-de-pied* in front, then the leg shifts into a *développé*, rising into *relevé*; the direction is half-way between second position and *écarté devant*. The second soloist performs *plié* with the leg in front in *cou-de-pied*, then extends the leg into *développé devant*, rising into *relevé*; the direction is *effacé*, but very open.

## Dancing Scores: Concerto Barocco by George Balanchine

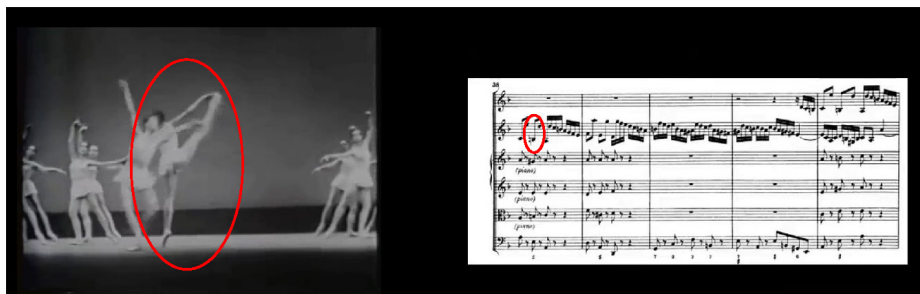


(Fig. 17) [01:56]

Later in the ballet, when the theme is taken up by the two solo violins, the two solo dancers again perform *développés* with the supporting leg *relevé en pointe* on tenth intervals ( $C_3$ - $E_4$ ,  $Bb_2$ - $D_4$ ,  $F_3$ - $A_4$ ,  $E_3$ - $G_4$ ; see Figs 18, 19, 20, and 21). This time, however, the dancers do not perform an *arabesque*, but alternate in their *développés*, changing places on the stage. Despite a slight variation in the steps, the idea of a close correspondence between ascending notes and rising legs remains.



(Fig. 18) [02:16]



(Fig. 19) [02:17]



(Fig. 20) [02:19]



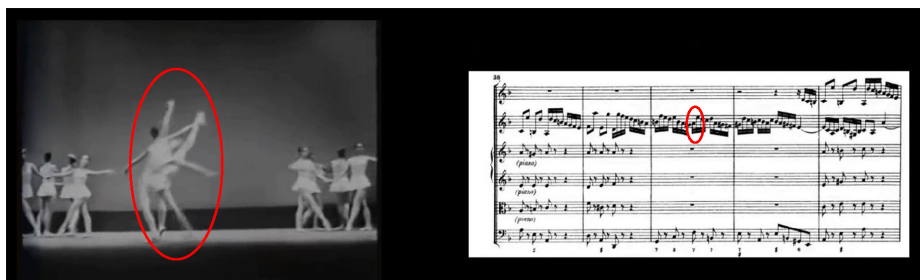
(Fig. 21) [02:20]

Even in the following groups of sixteenth notes (especially in correspondence with the ascending intervals  $B\flat_3-F_4$ ,  $A_3-E_4$ ,  $G\sharp_3-D_4$ ; see Figs. 22, 23, and 24), the solo dancers alternate with three *développés*.

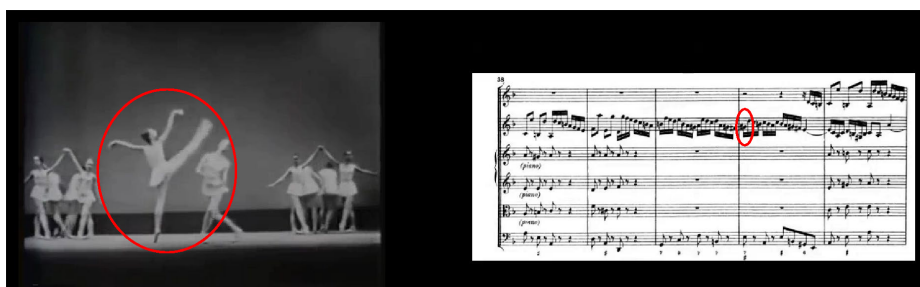


(Fig. 22) [02:22]

# Dancing Scores: Concerto Barocco by George Balanchine



(Fig. 23) [02:23]



(Fig. 24) [02:25]

There are many other occurrences of this parallel, but here I will briefly mention just one significant moment: the only time in the first movement of the ballet when all the dancers simultaneously perform a *développé* with their supporting leg *en relevé en pointe* (more specifically, the eight dancers at the back of the stage perform the *développé* in second position at a height of 90°, while the soloists perform it *en écarté devant* with the leg much higher than 90°). This step is performed towards the end of the first movement and, not coincidentally, it occurs exactly in correspondence with an ascending octave leap ( $G_3$ - $G_4$ ; see Fig. 25).



(Fig. 25) [04:10]

We can conclude, then, that a truly constant element throughout the ballet is the fact that the legs are lifted from the bottom up in conjunction with groups of ascending notes, in a very effective sound correspondence.

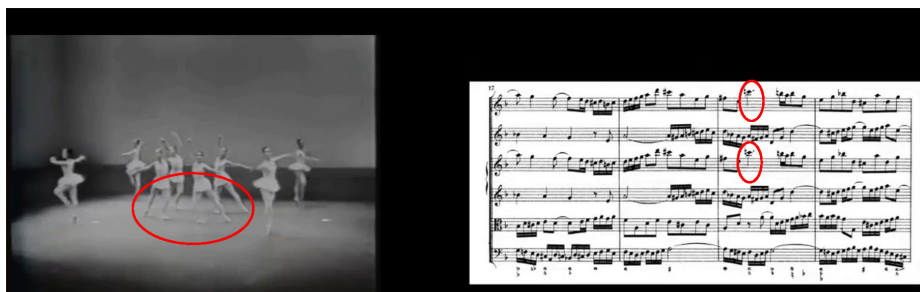
So far, we have considered purely sonic correspondences. But it is also important to note the references between the graphic forms of certain groups of notes (which are visually apparent when reading the score) and the figures drawn by the poses and movements of the dancers. This means that there are not only acoustic correspondences, but also visual parallels. In the latter case, the dancers seem to become the musical notes. Moreover, Balanchine's dancers "look like" musical notes in that they are tall, slender, and typically have very long arms and legs that almost resemble the stems of notes.

To understand how the dancers in *Concerto Barocco* graphically embody the kinetic transposition of certain forms in the score, consider the following still images.

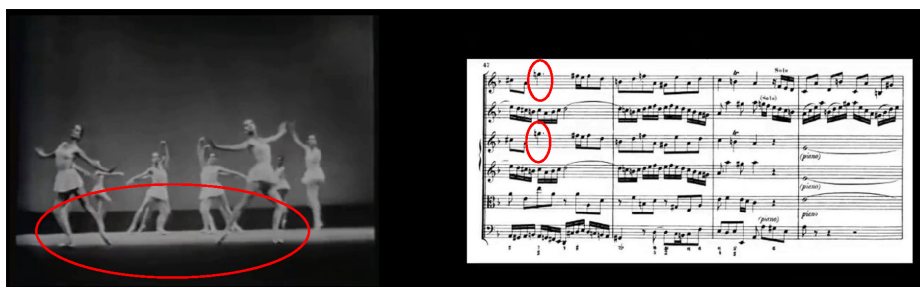
(Fig. 26) [00:30]

In the score, in the second bar of the second violin solo and the second violins, there is a  $C\flat_4$ , a dotted quarter note, i.e. a note of a quarter and a half (see Fig. 26). In the ballet, this note corresponds to a pose in *batterie tendu en arrière* with the supporting leg *en plié*. This creates a perfect coincidence between the dotted note and the leg with the point on the floor (which could also be described as "pointed"). Every time the same musical phrase is repeated, even if it is transposed an octave higher or in a different key, the same correspondence reappears, as can be seen in the following stills (see Figs. 27, 28, and 29).

## Dancing Scores: Concerto Barocco by George Balanchine



(Fig. 27) [01:20]



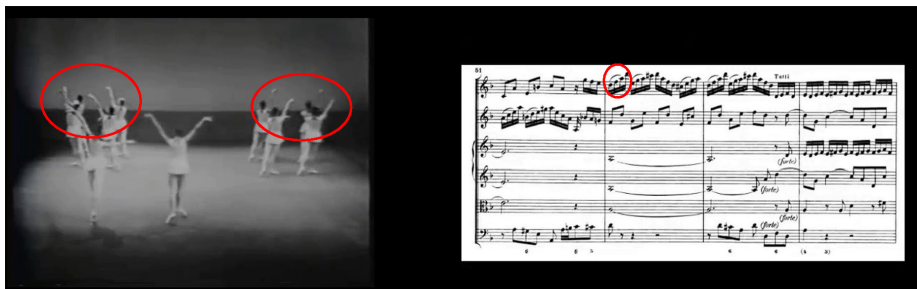
(Fig. 28) [02:43]



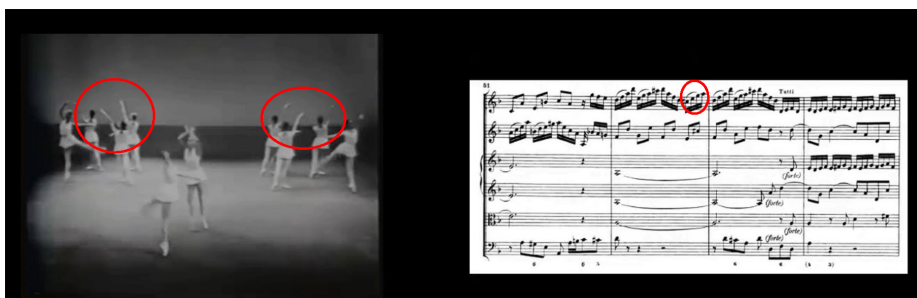
(Fig. 29) [04:41]

Continuing, we find another striking visual recurrence. There is a passage in which the first violin soloist plays some ascending groups of sixteenths connected by a slur. These slurred notes seem to be perfectly reflected in the raised arms *en allongé*<sup>11</sup> of the dancers in the background (see Figs. 30, 31, and 32).

<sup>11</sup> The eight dancers positioned at the back of the stage are divided into two groups of four. Each group assumes the same pose, mirroring the other. In both cases, the dancers face



(Fig. 30) [02:58]



(Fig. 31) [03:00]



(Fig. 32) [03:02]

In the same sequence, however, if we focus on the soloists in the foreground rather than the dancers in the background, we see that a pose is maintained

diagonally towards a corner of the stage backdrop; the supporting leg of each dancer is extended, while the other leg is *en tendu* behind; the arms of each performer are raised *en allongé*, forward, one at a height of  $90^\circ$ , the other at  $135^\circ$ .

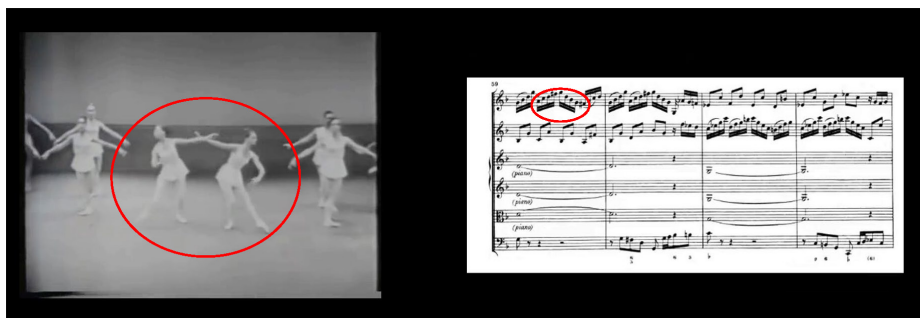
## Dancing Scores: Concerto Barocco by George Balanchine

for the entire duration of a half note with a tie to the following sixteenth note (see Fig. 33). The two ballerinas assume the same pose: their bodies are turned diagonally in *effacé*, except for the head, which is turned *en face* towards the audience; the supporting leg of each dancer is extended, while the other leg is *en tendu* behind; the arms of each performer are in the third position, with the arm in the second position facing the audience. The fact that this pose is maintained for the entire duration of a note that is quite long compared to the other notes in the score, and especially a note whose value is amplified by a tie, suggests (and even reinforces) a sense of suspension and tension.



(Fig. 33) [03:09]

Another subtle isomorphism involves a passage in which the dancers move towards the front of the stage, alternating small *jetés* with short steps performed with the pointed foot on the diagonals. We see them move closer together and further apart. In the moments when they are close together, they form a kind of triangle, a shape that, although fleeting and transient, catches the eye. At this point in the score, there are groups of ascending and descending notes that visually draw a triangular shape, as can be seen in the following stills (see Figs. 34, 35, and 36):



(Fig. 34) [03:19]



(Fig. 35) [03:23]

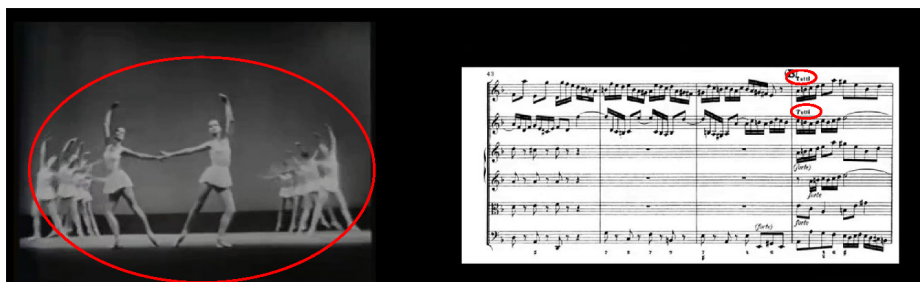


(Fig. 36) [03:25]

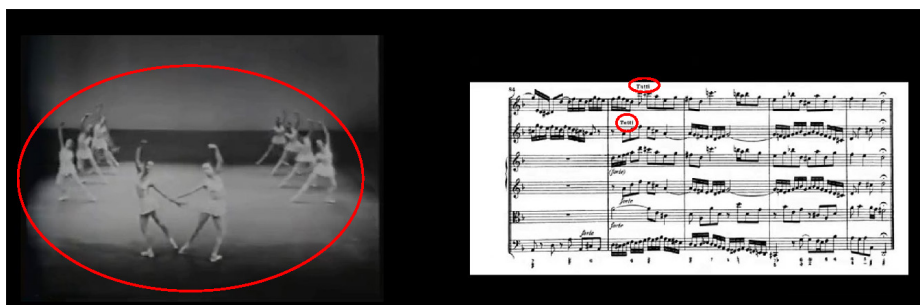
In this case, the correspondence is perceived mainly by looking at the score, not just by listening to the music. The parallel is registered primarily visually.

Similarly, in the only two instances (in the first movement) where the score calls for “Tutti”, the two solo dancers assume the same pose, mirroring each other (see Figs. 37 and 38). In both cases, their bodies are turned diagonally in *effacé*, except for their heads, which are turned *en face* towards the audience. The supporting leg of each dancer is in *demi-plié*, while the other leg is in *tendu* back. The arms of each dancer are in the third position, with the arm in the second position facing the center of the forestage, so that the right hand of one dancer almost touches the left hand of the other. This pose, with its solid and sculptural effect, seems to serve as a kind of signal to the whole (“Tutti”) corps de ballet and the violins, who begin the reprise of the musical themes and the corresponding dance steps in unison.

## Dancing Scores: Concerto Barocco by George Balanchine



(Fig. 37) [02:40]



(Fig. 38) [04:37]

In the first movement (*Vivace*) of *Concerto Barocco*, the high degree of integration between dance and music can be understood from the examples given so far. Balanchine's ballet is effectively built upon the musical score in its underlying structure, both in terms of sound and image. This is not to say that variations on the themes are not introduced throughout the work, especially in the following two movements (*Largo ma non tanto* and *Allegro*), as if they were *divertissements* or out-of-sync counts. This suggests that the correspondence between music and dance steps in *Concerto Barocco* is not merely slavish, didactic, or mechanical.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Sometimes the variations on the theme seem to follow an almost jazz-like pattern, as in a passage from the third movement (*Allegro*) in which the dancers, divided into two groups, perform a series of jumps with accents that are out of sync with each other (this is the sequence beginning at minute 18:31 in the ballet video referenced above). As Kara Yoo Leaman has shown, at this point in the ballet, some dancers are counting to three beats, and others are counting to four, while the music is in 3/4 time (cf. Leaman 2021; Kara Yoo Leaman, "Dance as Music in George Balanchine's Concerto Barocco," Society for Music Theory: Videocast Journal, vol. 7.2, uploaded on December 28, 2020, Vimeo video, 12:26,

The aim is not simply to superimpose the dance steps on the notes, but more generally to create a dynamic and composite texture of correspondences and variations, repetitions and differences. In Balanchine's words, the dancers

correspond to the music the orchestra plays, but not in any strict or literal sense; they do not mirror the music, rather they move in accordance with its length, the space between its beginning and end being filled by a dance picture of the music. Just as the portrait is different from the news photograph, so the dance picture tries to tell something independent of an exact, bar-by-bar, rhythm-by-rhythm, mirror image of the music (Balanchine 1977, 125).

*Concerto Barocco* as a whole can be seen as a danced image of the score. For this reason, what Massimo Mila wrote in his *Breve storia della musica* to describe Bach's instrumental music is particularly fitting:

A world of art, extraordinary and solemn, opens to the spirit in that calculated harmony which appears spontaneous, like a divine gift, in which the elaboration of the matter vanishes invisibly in the prodigious technique, and in that immaterial transparency, in that play of exact mechanisms, in that miraculous device of movements and gears (Mila 2014, 162).<sup>13</sup>

The invisible matter and immaterial transparency of Bach's music are perfectly reflected in Balanchine's choreographic concept. In *Concerto Barocco*, this process becomes paradigmatic. In the absence of any natural, emotional or narrative connotation, the dance chooses the score as its sole partner and counterpoint. The dancers thus become abstract and a-signifying forms, almost transparent bodies, earthly reflections of another world, a utopian cosmos of order and proportion, abstract perfection, the absolute poetry of harmony and purity.

<https://vimeo.com/495091183>). The ballet's performers, Marie-Jeanne and John Taras, also discuss the relationship between dance and music in an interview conducted by the Balanchine Foundation dedicated to *Concerto Barocco* (Balanchine Foundation, "Interview: Marie-Jeanne and John Taras CONCERTO BAROCCO," uploaded on April 7, 2016, YouTube video, 8:23, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c5k9p\\_2f9kc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c5k9p_2f9kc)).

<sup>13</sup> Translation by the author of this essay.

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