

INTERPRETATIONS OF THE “SWAN LAKE” BALLET IN MODERN FOREIGN STAGINGS

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Abstract: The article is devoted to interpretations of the “Swan Lake” ballet choreography in modern stagings of foreign theaters. The purpose of the study is to identify the features of modern choreography, in which author’s methods and innovative techniques are actively used. The research objectives are to interpret specific choreographic techniques in the “Swan Lake” ballet staging by foreign choreographers. The analyzed period of ballet stagings included three theatrical seasons in 2020 – 2022. The research methodology is based on the art history approach and includes the general scientific methods (analysis, synthesis, classification, comparison), as well as a number of special methods: historiographic analysis of scientific literature on the research topic; qualitative and comparative analysis; as well as the statistical method. The results obtained were analyzed using a software for advanced statistical analytics and translated into a graphical format for perception clarity. Each ballet staging sample was evaluated by the average score for selected analysis criteria, which made it possible to bring all calculations to a 10-point scale. Based on the research results, the author concluded the following: in modern stagings of the “Swan Lake” ballet plastic symbolism dominates. Compared to classical stagings, musical information content and scenography are minimized, and stage design is practically absent. Choreographic solutions are completely subordinated to the postmodern concept, which is expressed in fantasy and farcical styles of dance.

Keywords: plastic symbolism, foreign ballet, scenography, postmodernism, musical art, classical choreography.

INTRODUCTION

The research topic relevance lies in the fact that ballet art has always been a platform for innovative approaches, in fact, since its inception in proto-art dance, long before the beginning of the Christian era. The Hellenistic classical heritage was most strongly reflected in the formation of what is commonly called “choreography” in modern art criticism. The name of this methodical dance concept goes back to the traditions of Ancient Greece, when in theatrical stagings a choir was used, which not only sang, but also danced. Such a proto-ballet became the basis for a whole direction in the development of the dance art [2, p. 67]. Some researchers believe that ballet as an art form is «an ennobled version of folk dance, a kind of academic, civilized version of dance» [15, p. 1003]. Both viewpoints are united by ancient Greece tradition in folk dance creativity, in which all movements had a certain system and meaning, so cold plastic symbolism. Ancient ceremonies, including dance, can also called by some researchers as “proto-ballet” [17, p. 123], since they have a system of images transmitted through plastic body movements. Based on this thesis, it is possible to define the central concept of this article – choreography, as “a system of meanings in which information is transmitted to the viewer with the help of plastic movements of the artist’s body” [16, p. 124]. Over time, the system has evolved into a number of separate choreographic methods such body plastics. The main difference between choreography and, for example, rhythmic gymnastics, is the “plot semantic content of the dance” [10, p. 42]. In addition to the system of plastic techniques that convey images (choreography), the ballet necessarily has musical accompaniment (libretto), which also carries a semantic and emotional meanings. Without music, ballet ceases to meet its genre characteristics and “is no longer recognizable on stage” [10, p. 89].

In combination with musical accompaniment, the art of ballet becomes a synthesis of visual-auditory perception of the action unfolding on stage. According to the researchers, “individual dance movements, as well as musical intonations, are so expressive that they can convey a whole gamut of human emotions” [9, p. 54]. At the same time, the music value in ballet lies not only in the rhythmic and sound accompaniment of body movements. Moreover, the musical libretto for the ballet is an independent part that «can successfully exists separately from the dance” [8, p. 109].

That is, dance in ballet is still subordinated to music, and not vice versa. Therefore, the experimental methods in modern choreography are still limited to the classical framework of the musical libretto when it comes to postmodern stagings of classical ballets. In particular, the complexity of modern interpretations for choreography in Tchaikovsky’s ballets lies precisely in the fact that music is the main component in them.

Following the traditions of the ballet genre, P.I. Tchaikovsky created a very mobile scenography framework for choreographic experiments, since he used a new, so-called “open” dramaturgy [7, p. 19], when the choreographer becomes almost a co-author of the composer in the staging process of the ballet.

As T.V. Portnova rightly notes in her study, “The composer gave the dynamics of movement to the previously static forms of the ballet Adagio, made dance suites a mass dance, and pantomime in his ballets began to perform a dramatic function” [15, p. 1007]. Thanks to the bright, embossed imagery, the music in Tchaikovsky’s ballets gained the ability to outline the characters and stage situations. And, by the author, “the main element of the ballet was symphonic dance, the origins of which go back to symphony, opera and chamber music” [15, p. 1008].

Analyzing the particular choreographic solutions for the “Swan Lake”, it is necessary to say a few words about the plot of this performance. Firstly, it is a legendary ballet about love, which for almost two centuries has won the hearts of viewers around the world. The lyrical music by P.I. Tchaikovsky, the poetic love story of an enchanted beauty and a young prince became the basis for the grandiose success of this performance, giving it a name, perhaps, the most famous in Europe.

The premiere of the “Swan Lake” ballet took place on February 20, 1877 on the stage of the Bolshoi Theater in Moscow [3, p. 638].



Figure 1: Premiere of the ballet "Swan Lake" Bolshoi Theater. Moscow. March 4, -1877.

<https://kulturamgo.ru/kalendar-sobytij/den-v-istorii/4102-4-marta-1877-goda-v-bolshom-teatre-sostoyalas-premera-baleta-chajkovskogo-lebedinoe-ozero>



Figure 2: Scenery for the second act of the first production of the ballet "Swan Lake". 1877 Engraving by Y. Baranovsky from a drawing by F. Gaanen.

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After this performance, for many years, choreographers continued to stage the traditional ballet version, remaining faithful to the classical Russian interpretation.

However, contemporary art dictates new standards, changing the conservative approach to a creative view. In particular, an analysis of the stagings of the ballet “Swan Lake” showed that over the past ten years, 20 new ballet interpretations, with varying degrees of success with the public, have been undertaken on the world ballet stage.

At the same time, every year the stagings became more and more extravagant in the symbolic properties of choreography and more and more minimalistic in scenography, which is also proven in some modern empirical studies [15, p. 1012].

During the COVID-19 pandemic quarantine period in 2020-2022, viewers were able to get acquainted with the brightest and most extraordinary «Swan Lake» stagings in online format, which were staged by such famous innovative choreographers as Matthew Bourne, Frederick Readman, Graham Murphy, Alexander Ekman and others.

In latest years, European choreographers are increasingly and completely changing the famous work by the Russian composer in their own way. Only the musical libretto, the music by P.I. Tchaikovsky, remains recognizable. An interesting fact is that P.I. Tchaikovsky was an honorary figure in Europe and, in particular, in Great Britain. It was in the United Kingdom that he gave his first concert abroad, and in 1893 he was awarded an honorary doctorate from the University of Cambridge [13, p. 11]. Being a man of unprecedented talent and broad thought, the composer left behind a creative legacy, rich in various interpretations, which is used by directors of non-standard stagings.

With regard to the history of the ballet, there are many versions of the appearance of the most fabulous plot, which became the basis for the creation of the «Swan Lake» ballet. Most likely, Tchaikovsky took as the basis of the plot the German myth about the water nymph Ondine, who, due to the betrayal of a loved one, lost immortality [13, p. 13].

The theme of forbidden love, infidelity and witchcraft runs like a red thread through “Swan Lake” plot. By the will of the evil sorcerer Rothbart, the beautiful Odette turns into a graceful swan. Together with other enchanted girls, she is forced to live on the lake and only at night takes on a human form.

Meeting with the young prince Siegfried and his love promise Odette deliverance from the curse, but the sorcerer does not sleep and, together with the Black Swan Odile, intrigues the lovers [13, p.13]. Only now, in the reading of modern choreographers, the storyline of the ballet is interpreted in a completely different way, which is associated with such a direction in choreography as plastic symbolism.

As some researchers note, “Symbolism, which originated in France in the 1870s and 1880s and then spread to all European countries, radically changed not only the content and forms in various forms of art, but also the very attitude to the meaning of artistic creativity, and the main field for this kind of innovation on Western European scenes is the classics in new interpretations” [15, p. 1003].

Using the example of the “Swan Lake” ballet, one can see the following main innovative techniques that are used in all the stagings analyzed in the empirical study:

- 1) plastic symbolism as a choreographic device;
- 2) informativeness of musical accompaniment;
- 3) plastic techniques expression;
- 4) the quality of scenography.

The selected features were considered as a basis for criteria selection in qualitative analysis, which was carried out in the course of an empirical study when comparing modern stagings of the “Swan Lake” ballet in foreign theaters.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The materials of the study were stagings of the ballet "Swan Lake" in theaters in Germany, Sweden, Belgium, Norway and the UK for the period 2020-2022. Out of a total of 60 stagings over the past 5 years, 6 ballets "Swan Lake" (every 10th sample) have been selected by mechanical methods, thereby forming a representative sample over the past three years.

The peculiarity of the material lies in the fact that all ballet performances are presented in an online format, they can be watched and analyzed without visiting theaters in different countries.

Table 1: Distribution of research materials within the study period.

Theatre	Choreographer's name	Staging date
Sadler's Wells Theater (Great Britain)	Matthew Bourne	2020
Cullberg Ballet (Sweden)	Mats Ek	2021
The Royal Swedish Opera (Sweden)	Frederick Readman	2022
The Norwegian Opera Ballet (Norway)	Alexander Ekman	2020
Opera Ballet Flanders (Belgium)	Graeme Murphy	2021
Hamburg Ballet (Germany)	John Neumeier	2020

The answers to the test questions, which were filled in by the author of this article, were also used as research materials. Testing was carried out on the basis of a verified methodology proposed in the work by T.V. Portnova [15]. The text consists of 12 questions, each of which defines a criterion for analysis.

Test 1. Rate on a 10-point scale:

- the presence of plastic symbolism in the production of the ballet;
- Using scenography as a symbol;
- the use of innovative choreographic techniques instead of classical elements;
- adequacy of choreography techniques for the embodiment of the director's idea;
- recognizability of the plot of the ballet after the use of author's choreographic techniques;

- aesthetic quality of stagings in comparison with classical versions;
- the contribution of this production to the development of ballet as a form of dance art;
- synthesis of classical and postmodern elements;
- aesthetics of symbolic dance to classical musical accompaniment;
- the quality of modern stage design;
- musical expression level;
- body plastic expression level.

The test was carried out after watching each of the analyzed stagings of the “Swan Lake” ballet. The material was collected in several stages, due to the logic and objectives of the study.

The research methodology is based on the art history approach and includes the methods from general scientific group (analysis, synthesis, deduction, induction), as well as special methods: historiographic analysis of scientific literature on the research topic; method of qualitative analysis; comparative analysis and statistical method.

Table 2: Methods and objectives of the research.

Method group	Research objectives
General scientific methods	Scientific synthesis of the information received Analysis of scientific literature on the research topic
Special methods	Qualitative analysis Comparative analysis Test survey Statistical generalization method

The results of Portnova’s test were analyzed using the Neural Designer program (a tool for advanced statistical analytics) and translated into a graphical diagram format for clarity of perception.

The test results were evaluated by the average score for each production of the ballet «Swan Lake» according to the selected analysis criteria:

1. Plastic symbolism.
2. Scenography quality.
3. Frequency of innovative techniques.
4. Frequency of classical elements.
5. Recognizability of the plot.
6. synthesis of classical and postmodern elements.
7. The Aesthetics of Symbolic Dance.
8. Level of musical expression.
9. Level of plastic expression.

All calculations were displayed on a 10-point scale for clear perception of the research results.

Table 3: Methodology for evaluating testing criteria for analyzing modern stagings “Swan Lake” ballet in foreign theaters.

Criterion	Rating scale
Symbolism	1-3 low level
The body language	4-6 average level
Postmodern influence	7-10 high level
Stage design	
Expressive dance	
Expressive music	

Each criterion was evaluated on the basis of qualitative data into quantitative ones: 1-3 points low level, 4-6 medium level, 7-10 high level of particular criterion in each of the stagings of the “Swan Lake” ballet.

The presented methodology for analyzing the stagings made it possible to summarize the data obtained during the analysis of the techniques and methods of modern foreign choreography on the example of the stagings of the “Swan Lake” ballet.

The empirical study was conducted between April 1 and April 22, 2023 and included three phases (Table 4).

Table 4: Stages of empirical research.

Empirical research stages	Survey schedule
Collecting material	1-9. 04. 2023
Sampling	10-13. 04. 2023
Analysis of obtained results	16-22. 04. 2023

RESULTS

Based on the results of the analysis of the Tchaikovsky's ballet staging at Sadler's Wells Theater (Great Britain) by Matthew Bourne, the following results were obtained (Figure 3).

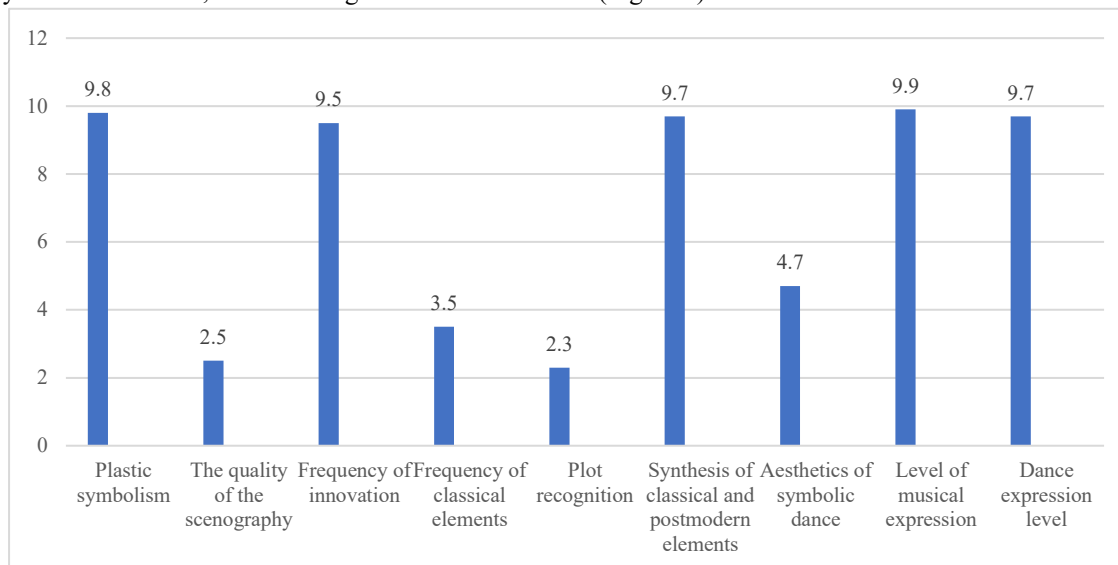


Figure 3: Analysis of staging elements of the ballet “Swan Lake” at Sadler’s Wells Theater (Great Britain) (compiled from testing using Neural Designer)

In the staging by Matthew Bourne plastic symbolism is dominated, and all plot is given with a strong gender accent. At the same time, postmodern choreography is hardly combined with the classical libretto, but in general the performance makes a strong impression due to spectacular crowd scenes.

At the same time, the following trend can be noted: the higher the level of use of innovation in dance, the lower the aesthetic perception degree of the overall picture. That is, for the gender theme, the use of male roles instead of female ones, men in feather pantaloons instead of classical female ballet tutus, leads to memorization of this production, but does not reflect the original plot of the ballet.

As a result, the viewer is not very clearly aware of what exactly he saw: the “Swan Lake” ballet about love or some new ballet to the music by P.I. Tchaikovsky. The unrecognizability of the plot leads to two consequences: the substitution of the plot “Swan Lake” in the mind of the viewer with the interpretation by the choreographer Matthew Bourne; the introduction of gender issues in ballet, which should not reflect contemporary social themes, since its libretto was written by P.I. Tchaikovsky for a specific fairy-tale plot.

Almost similar results were obtained by setting in the Royal Swedish Opera (Sweden) by Frederick Readman (Figure 4).

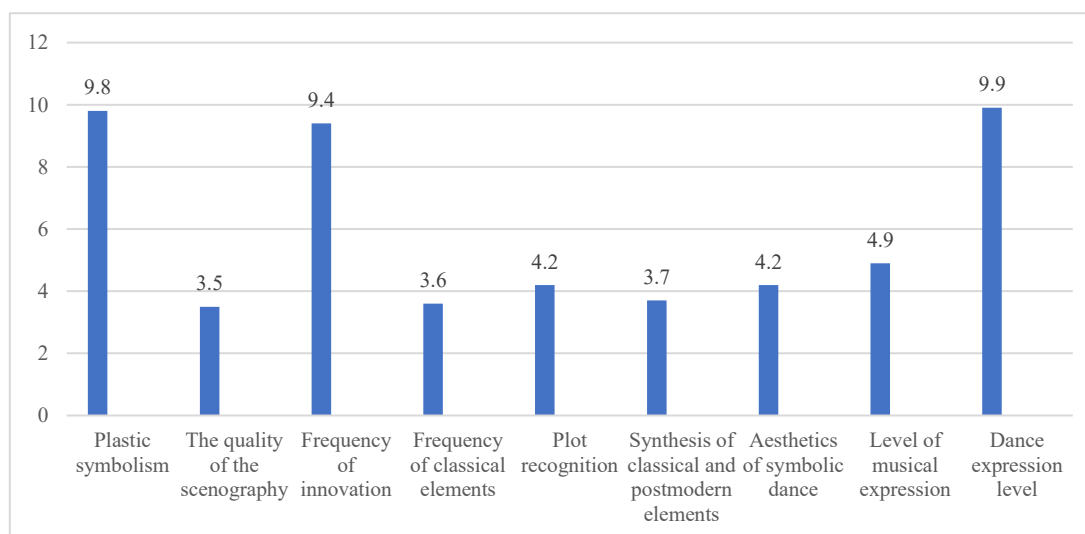


Figure 4: Analysis of staging elements of the “Swan Lake” ballet at the Royal Swedish Opera (Sweden) (compiled based on the results of testing using Neural Designer)

As can be seen from the data given in Figure 4, in this production at a very high level, the use of author's choreography, the general staging style can be assessed as grotesque. At the same time, the design of the scene is

also minimal, and the action itself is more transferred to the genre of parody: swans are depicted as clumsy bald ladies, and the prince is depicted as a loser and a dreamer). The plot recognizability is at an average level, and only thanks to the music by P.I. Tchaikovsky. It should be noted that this production was performed only seven times, received a huge wave of criticism and was discontinued in 2022.

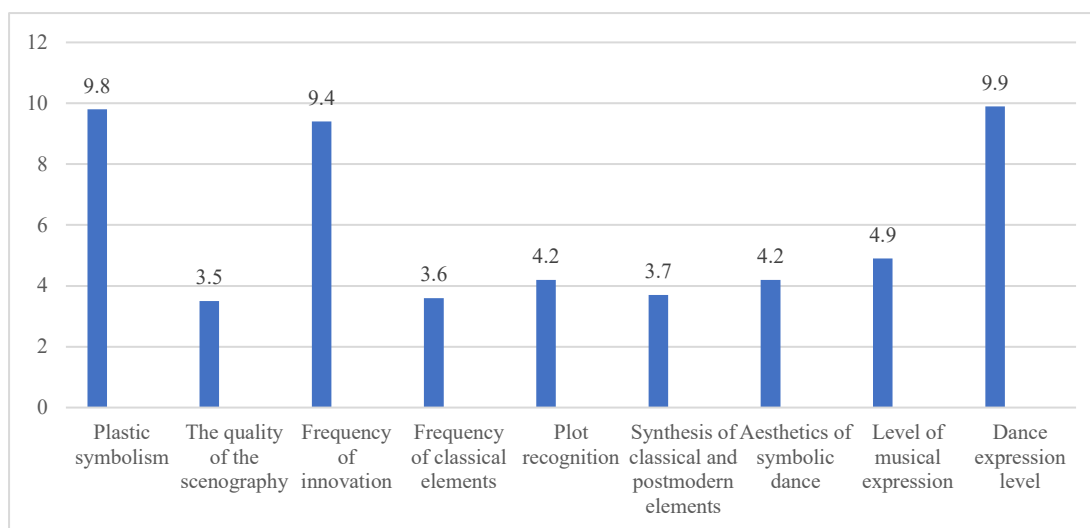


Figure 5: Analysis of the staging elements of the “Swan Lake” ballet at the Royal Swedish Opera (Sweden) (compiled based on the results of testing using Neural Designer)

In the staging at another Swedish theater, the Royal Swedish Opera (Sweden) by Frederick Readman (Figure 5), such authorial elements as a jazz arrangement of a musical libretto were revealed, which in principle would seem impossible, but led to a complete transformation of the performance.

In the complete absence of scenery (except for the dummy window and light and shadow), the performers of the ballet parts danced in modern office suits, without make-up and in the style of jazz. The very high complexity of the choreography in terms of plasticity, however, does not allow us to evaluate this production at a high level of recognizability of the plot. The jazz arrangement of the led music was required, obviously, to demonstrate the dynamics of the action. However, sharp passages, lunges with legs and the speed of rotation in half a turn of the body distract from the plot and the main idea of the play.

The swans were dressed in black boots, which greatly complicates the smoothness of movements, and the crowd scenes look like a chaotic throwing of actors on the stage. The excessive dynamics of the choreography brings an undoubted disadvantage in this production of the ballet, and too much emphasis on modernity leads to a loss of meaning for the sake of entertainment. Ballet is still different from a show concert in its genre essence. Again, there is a trend: the stronger the expression of body plasticity, the lower the recognition of the plot.

Analogic results were obtained after watching staging at the Norwegian Opera Ballet (Norway) by Alexander Ekman (Figure 6).

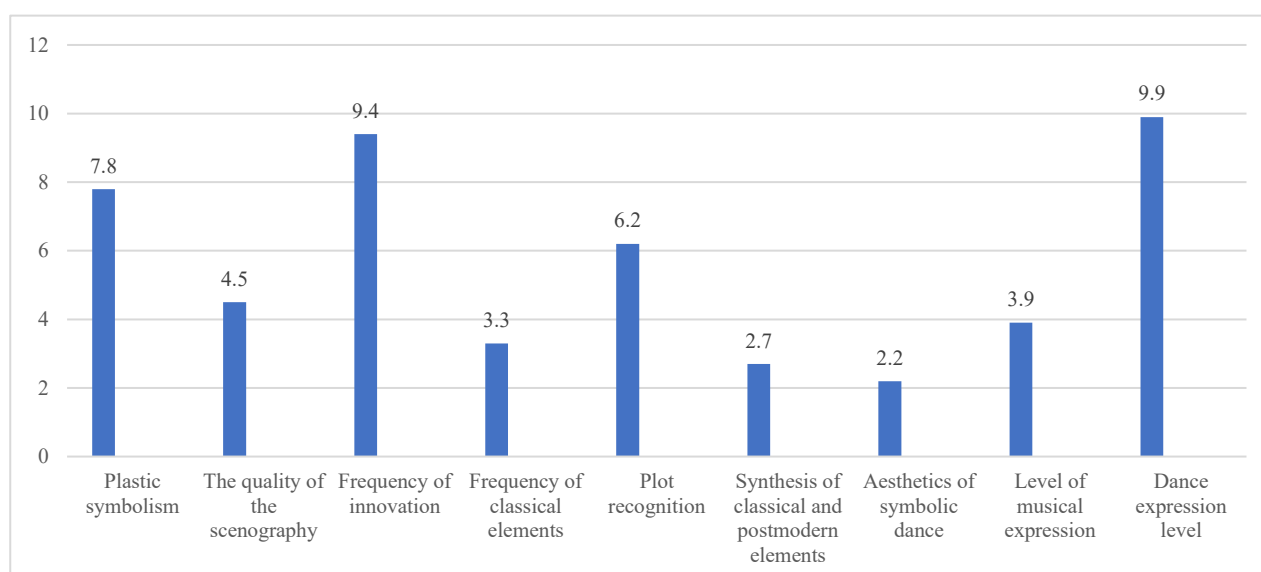


Figure 6. Analysis of the staging elements of the production of the “Swan Lake” ballet at the Norwegian Opera Ballet (Norway) (compiled based on the results of testing using Neural Designer)

As can be seen at Figure 6, in this production at a very high level, the criteria for the author's means of expression and dance expression were identified. The play is staged as a satire and has a social idea of gender equality.

In the ballet scenography, natural water is used to depict the lake. Artists perform their parts in the water, which is an innovation for the theatrical stage. But in the end, with a high level of plastic expression, the overall aesthetic level of the production can only be assessed at a low level, as well as the recognizability of the plot.

At the same time, the production is devoid of a high level of musical expressiveness, since part of the original libretto has been replaced by hard rock.

In contrast to all above mentioned versions, staged at Opera Ballet Vlaanderen (Belgium) by Graeme Murphy in retro style was performed with the idea of the unhappy love of Princess Diana, as an interpretation of the ballet by P.I. Tchaikovsky (Figure 7).

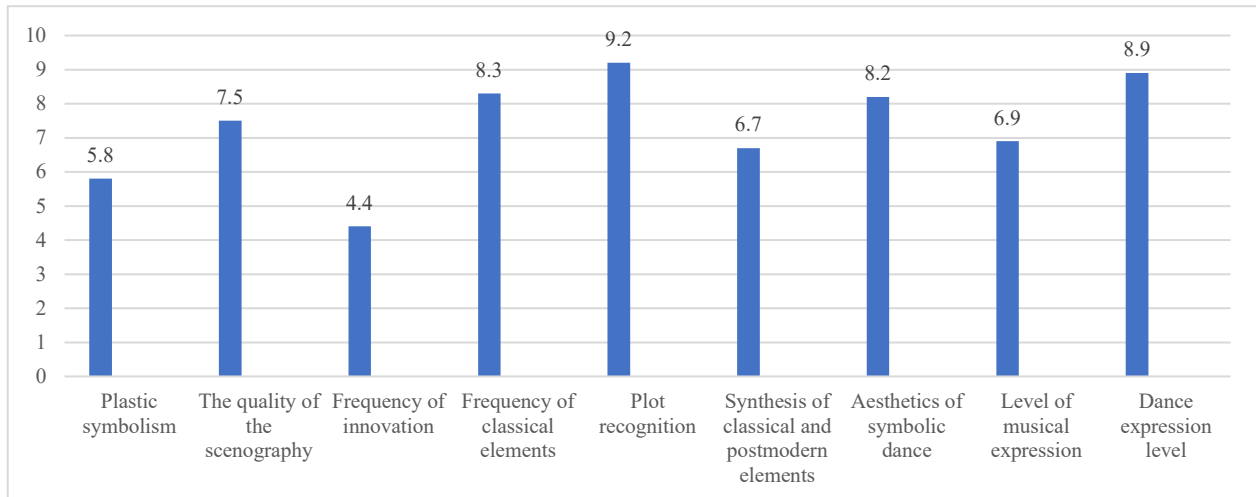


Figure 7: Analysis of the elements of the production of the “Swan Lake” at Opera Ballet Vlaanderen (Belgium) (compiled based on the results of testing using Neural Designer)

As far as can be judged from the data presented in Figure 5, this staging of the “Swan Lake” ballet is the closest to classical choreography, despite the metaphorical plot interpretation under the story of the unhappy love of the British Princess Diana. The synthesis of classical elements and innovative techniques, a high degree of recognizability of the plot and an overall high degree of aesthetics in this production can be called successful.

At the same time, the scenography remains at an average level, there are practically no decorations, which creates a negative impression of the performance.

The staging as a whole stands out precisely for its similarity with the classical version of the play, and the higher the level of use of classical elements, the higher the degree of plot recognizability and the memorability of the production as a whole. The undoubted advantage of this production is the preservation of the classical musical libretto created by P.I. Tchaikovsky.

In the staging at Hamburg Ballet (Germany) by John Neumeier, there are significant differences from all the stagings analyzed above. The results are shown in Figure 8.

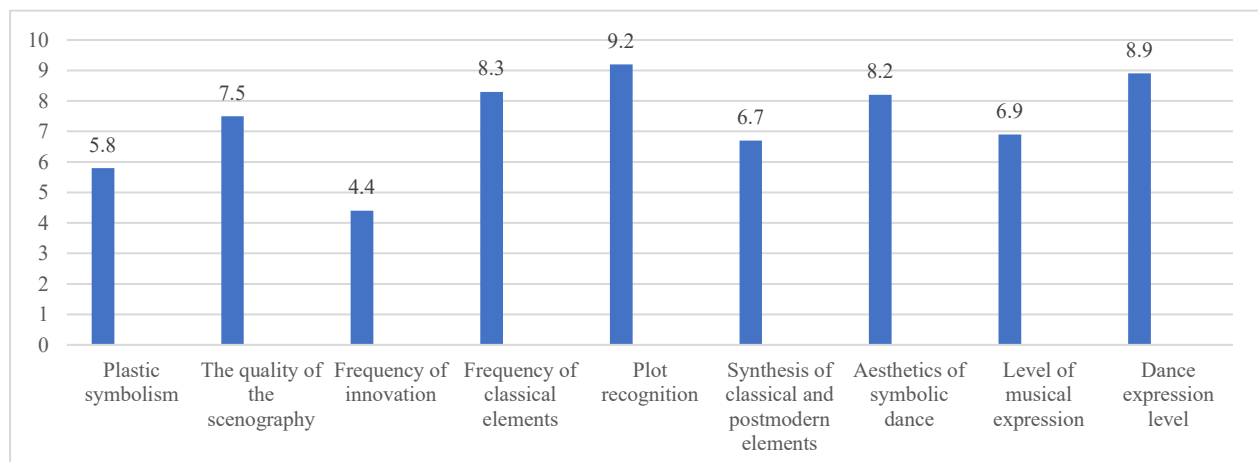


Figure 8. Analysis of the elements of the production of the “Swan Lake” ballet at Hamburg Ballet (Germany) (compiled based on the results of testing using Neural Designer)

As shown in Figure 6, despite the high level of innovative methods, all other criteria were also evaluated at a high level. In particular, it should be noted that the original libretto is preserved in the production, the classical elements of choreography are very skillfully combined with innovation.

Even despite the lack of classic costumes and the interpretation of the plot as a split personality in the mad prince, there is a high degree of recognition of the original plot. The choreographer also managed to build mass dances on an almost empty stage in such a way as to make the absence of scenery invisible due to original choreographic solutions: falls and ups in crowd scenes occur in waves, depicting the deep waters of the lake.

In general, it can be concluded that most modern stagings of the ballet «Swan Lake» are characterized by a high level of plastic symbolism, innovative techniques, and plastic expressiveness. At the same time, the scenography and the synthesis of classical and postmodern elements, the aesthetics of symbolic dance, and the level of musical expression remain at a high level.

In general, it can be concluded that the development of modern innovative ballet in foreign countries follows the path of modernization and alteration of the classical libretto for symbolic modern choreography.

DISCUSSION

The results obtained partially confirm the theses formulated in the studies by L.I. Abyzova [1], C. Acet [2], V. Boer, J. Jansen, A. Tjon-A-Pauw, F. Nack [3]. These researchers consider modern ballet from the point of view of the development of postmodern choreography. Also, our results are partially reflected in papers by S. Bruhm [4], G. Chaffee [5]. The dominance of entertainment over meaning in modern choreography is shown in the works by K. Darda, E. Cross [6], S.Z. Djeparoska [7], and C.T. Dunagan [8].

In particular, the bias towards entertainment to the detriment of the plot is confirmed in the work by T.M. Portnova: “The innovation of dance requires its own musical accompaniment, and not the alteration of classical ballet into some kind of action without a plot and understandable meaning to the famous music by P.I. Tchaikovsky” [15, p. 1003]. In the studies of foreign authors, the analysis of those techniques used by modern choreographers is mainly carried out. This kind of research includes the work by such authors as C. Farmer, J. Brouner [9], D.N. Khisamov [10], A.G. Kolesnikov [11], and Long Xiaoya [12].

The results obtained on the average quality of the aesthetics of innovative stagings are confirmed in the works of such researchers as E.V. Malikov [13], E. Moghaddam, J. Sadeghi, F. Samavati [14], T.V. Portnova [15], T.A. Ryzhovoy [16], U.D. Sauer [17], Shuang Wu, Zhenguang Liu, Shijian Lu, Li Cheng [18], G.L. Taranda [19].

At the same time, V. Boer, J. Jansen, A. Tjon-A-Pauw, F. Nack [3] note that within the framework of the concept of postmodern art, it is necessary to more carefully approach the choice of artistic means of expression for the dynamic development of modern choreography.

Alteration of classical ballet is permissible only if the result has a decent aesthetic level, and is not an “unsuccessful parody” of the classical version of the famous ballet. Otherwise, as W. Wang believes, instead of a new interpretation, it turns out to be “speculation on the name of the great composer P.I. Tchaikovsky, to whom the work of a modern choreographer has nothing to do” [21, p. 57].

The obtained results also partially confirm the hypothesis put forward by S. Temel and T. Temel that the desire for a new form contradicts common sense, spoils the perception of the plot and does not allow an adequate assessment of the performance precisely because «the action on stage often has nothing to do with Swan Lake, but is performed to the music of this ballet» [20, p. 122].

The data obtained also confirm the thesis by K. Darda, E. Cross [6] L. Watson [22], and H.L. Wesseling [23] that gender themes, so unusual for the classical version of “Swan Lake”, are very strongly developed in all spheres of foreign art, including choreography. In works by Wu Liyang [24] and Xinyu Dou, Hanjin Li, Lin Jia [25] confirms the result obtained in the study on the inverse correlation between choreographic new forms and the aesthetic value of the staging the “Swan Lake” ballet at modern western theaters. The authors also note that the essence of the “Swan Lake” lies in the synthesis of the love story and the music by the Great Russian composer, and if the plot changes randomly, depending on the fantasies of the choreographers, then this is no longer Swan Lake, but just dances based on this work.

CONCLUSION

As a research result, the following conclusions were made:

1. In modern foreign stagings of the “Swan Lake” ballet, the main emphasis is on plastic dance, plastic expression, with a fantasy attitude to the plot, its complete alteration, author’s metaphors and even parody. However, the overall aesthetic level of such stagings remains at an average level, the plot ceases to be recognizable, and the form prevails over the content. All these innovations do not lead to the formation of a new ballet school, on the contrary: classical ballet is going through a period of crisis precisely because of this kind of creative choreographic solutions.
2. An empirical study has shown that the quality of modern choreography remains at an average level precisely because of attempts to give dance outside the musical context, substituting the plot and reshaping gender roles.

Thus, in the end, it can be stated that in modern stagings, plastic symbolism is more of an independent goal for choreographers than a means of achieving an aesthetic perception of the performance. The development of the action is chaotic, female roles are replaced by male performers, which complicates the choreography, but does not improve the quality of the ballet.

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