

Diaghilev's Creation of The Ballets Russes

In 1908 Russian ballet choreographer and impresario Sergei Diaghilev (1872-1929) began to produce a series of spectacular and lavish presentations on the stages of Paris and London which was to bring international fame to then little known Russian ballet dancers such as Anna Pavlova, Tamara Karsavina and Vaslav Nijinsky. This sensational series billed as The Russian Seasons ran until the outbreak of the First World War in 1914 and included much specially commissioned music by European composers including Russian Igor Stravinsky and also led to the formation of The Ballets Russes. Major personalities involved in that company appear in the Culture souvenir sheet produced by Russia to mark the Millennium.



In the left margin we see the masked figure of dancer and choreographer Mikhail Fokine and above the stamp ballerinas Tamara Karsavina and Lydia Sokolova, dancing respectively in Weber's *The Spectre of the Rose* (1911) and Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* (1913)

At the centre of stamp is the graceful figure of Anna Pavlova taken from a poster advertising the 1909 season. Her virtuoso partner Vaslav Nijinsky appears twice, on the right as a slave in Rimsky-Korsakov's *Shéhérazade* (first produced in 1888) and left beside composer Stravinsky dressed in his *Petrushka* costume, which role he created at the Théâtre du Chatelet in Paris in June 1911. The shadowy figure extreme left in the design is "puppet master" Diaghilev.

Diaghilev who had studied music under Rimsky-Korsakov but who had not much impressed the venerable composer, first came to Paris in 1906 promoting Russian art and artefacts and two years later mounted a production of Mussorgsky's opera *Boris Godunov* at The Paris Opera starring Russian bass Fyodor Chaliapin.

(Nicaragua 1975).

The following year Diaghilev launched his Ballets Russes which in turn spawned many other dance companies.

In the years before war broke out in Europe Diaghilev commissioned and premiered work by Debussy, Ravel, Satie and Richard Strauss but his most successful collaborations were with Stravinsky on the controversial ballets *The Firebird* in 1910, *Petrushka* (1911) and *The Rite of Spring* (1913).



Following the Russian Revolution in 1917 Diaghilev was effectively exiled, pilloried by the new Communist authorities on account of exhibiting in Paris his extravagance, decadence and homosexuality.

One of Diaghilev's greatest protégés was the Polish-Russian dancer **Vaslav Nijinsky** with whom he had a long sexual relationship and whom he sacked from the Ballets Russes when Nijinsky married in 1913. Arguably the greatest male ballet dancer ever, Nijinsky appears on a 1966 Monaco issue in the role of *Petrushka*, the puppet youth

who comes to life. The design of this stamp shows the dancer *en pointe*, a very exacting skill which he excelled in

and which is demanded routinely of ballerinas but is quite exceptional in male dancers. Another of his abilities was his amazing leaping, apparently hanging in the air. Also in the stamp is René Blum, choreographer of the Diaghilev's Ballets Russes company of Monte Carlo who was murdered by the Nazis at Auschwitz in 1943.



The prima ballerina of the time was **Anna Pavlova** (1881 —1931) who appears on this 1982 Monaco issue. She had entered the Russian Imperial Ballet School aged ten to be trained by Marius



Petipa as a petite schoolgirl and throughout her professional career captivated audiences with her sylph-like figure. Pavlova struck out on her own from Diaghilev's company in 1909 much to his anger, also taking several other starlets with her to international fame and becoming a particular favourite of the New York Met. Pavlova's *tours de force* were performing as *The Dying Swan* choreographed by Fokine to Saint-Saëns music from *The Carnival of the Animals* and in the title role of Adolph Adam's 1841 ballet *Giselle*.



with four stamps for Tchaikovsky's ballet *The Nutcracker* and followed by issues for choreographer Marius Petipa (Jan 1993), for Rimsky-Korsakov in Jan 1994, for choreographer Alexander Gorsky (Aug 1996) and for composer Paul Glinka (2004).

The most popular subject on ballet stamps is unquestionably Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake* (1877) for which there are currently over a dozen stamps, many of which either show the lovers Siegfried and Odette or *The Dance of the Cygnets*.

Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971) owed much to



Diaghilev for promoting his style of music which even today is regarded by some as harsh and grotesque : the 1913 premiere of his third ballet *The Rite of Spring* in Paris caused uproar. A 1995 issue by Russia celebrating the achievements of choreographer Fokine includes two references to Diaghilev-Stravinsky productions. Bottom

right in the block we see the four principal characters in *Petrushka*, from left The Moor and Petrushka, his rival in love for The Ballerina and hovering over all The Old Wizard who eventually "kills" the puppet boy. To the left is an equally detailed stamp depicting *The Firebird*, created by ballerina Tamara Karsavina in June 1910, whose character is pursued by Prince Ivan.

Mikhail Fokine (1880-1942) was himself a celebrated choreographer and dancer associated with the two Stravinsky ballets and *Shéhérazade* by Rimsky-Korsakov, a stamp for which completes the 1995 Russian block. Fokine joined Diaghilev's company in Paris in 1909 but never really settled, concerned about and envious of the influence that Nijinsky appeared to have over the impresario. They parted company three years later and Fokine moved to Scandinavia and then the United States, taking full American citizenship ten years before his death.

The Russian Fokine issue of 1995 is but one of a handful of particularly beautiful issues from Russia, all designed by Yuri Artsymenev, (who was also responsible for the 2000 Millennium issues) which celebrate the nation's achievements in staged musical productions, beginning in November 1992

Captions for Russian quartets:
Clockwise from top left

Tchaikovsky (1992)

The Prince and Clara, Russian *Nutcracker* toys, *The Dance of the Toys* and German *Nutcracker* puppets.

Marius Petipa (1993)

Petipa and *Paquita* (Deldevez), *Sleeping Beauty* (Tchaikovsky), *Raymonda* (Glazunov) and *Swan Lake* (Tchaikovsky)

Rimsky-Korsakov (1994)

Rimsky-Korsakov and *Sadko*, *The Golden Cockerel*, *The Snow Maiden* and *The Tsar's Bride*

Mikhail Fokine (1995)

Fokine, *Sheherazade*, *Petrushka*, *The Fire Bird*

Alexander Gorsky (1996)

Gorsky and scenes from *Gudula's Daughter* and *Salambo*, *Don Quixote* (Minkus) *La Bayadere* (Minkus) and *Giselle* (Adam)

Glinka (2004)

Glinka's music (label), Glinka, *Ruslan and Lyudmila*, *A Life for the Tsar*