

An Analysis of Various Texts in Balanchine's *Agon*: Continuity and Change Across Time

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This research analyzed various texts in Balanchine's Agon for changes and continuity within the choreography and its performance over time. For purposes of this study, texts referred to multiple modalities, as defined in performance and coaching videos, reviews and criticism of the work, and Labanotation scores. Parameters for defining "Agon-ness" emerged through comparison and close analysis of these texts, which included tension, contest, extreme feats of technique, and complexity of rhythm and musical relationships. Further, the woman's "Bransle Gay" solo from the "Second Pas de Trois" section provided a case study for deeper analysis through personal communication with New York City Ballet principal dancer Wendy Whelan, and close readings of multiple performance videos and notation scores of the solo.

Textual analysis of choreography over time reveals how repertory is stable and fluid. Varied modalities, such as transcripts of specific performances, collections of patterns and themes, or training traditions affect how written and oral literature are passed on over time (Finnegan, 1988). Similar texts exist around any particular piece of choreography including libretto, the danced steps of the choreography, written notes or notated scores, criticism and reviews, original and subsequent performances, videos of performances or rehearsals, and even training practices within a dance style or tradition.

The relative stability and fluidity of a dance depends on the means of handling choreographic and performance information over time (Anderson, 1975/1976; Finnegan, 1988; Rubidge, 2002). This includes not just quantifiable content or dance steps, but evolving physical technique and reception of the dance. Dance critic Jack Anderson (1980) asserts that it is not necessarily always the dance steps that change in a ballet, but the audience's perception of the dance in performance. According to Anderson (1980), "We, the balletgoers, have changed. We've grown used to 'Episodes.' Therefore its choreographic density no longer intimidates us, we can see more than terror in it" (p. C6). In this review, Anderson questioned not only whether this once "terrifying" ballet now holds the same

feeling for the audience, but also how any ballet changes across time. Had the 'essence' of "Episodes" changed, or just this audience's perception of the dance due to its context among other dances they may have seen?

Likewise, while viewing a 1993 restaging of Balanchine's *Agon* with the Pacific Northwest Ballet, critic Arlene Croce (1993) wondered what her fellow audience members saw, "A ballet of the fifties? A masterpiece? New York? Why couldn't I believe that we shared one experience, the audience and I—that there were other people there who remembered the last time 'Agon' was great..." (p. 84). Croce viewed this performance, staged by respected Balanchine *répétiteur* Francia Russell, with her experiential knowledge from viewing multiple previous performances acting as a yardstick for comparison. Croce found it difficult to believe that her viewing experience mirrored that of her fellow audience members.

Evolving expectations of technique, composition, and aesthetics affect how a dance changes (in its performance and reception) over time. It is questionable whether we can ever actually recapture that lost original, through notation or body-to-body transmission (Duerden, 2008):

It may be argued that the dance, in its first incarnation, is forever lost once the original dancers no longer perform it....But that first incarnation can *never* be recreated, and this applies equally to every dance performance...even the first performance of a choreography is not the definitive dance, but only the first of—potentially—many 'versions' of it. As a performing art, however, dance has the potential for a dynamic existence: ever changing, but capable of living through those changes. (p. 130)

Indeed, there are many versions of a dance, particularly when we conceive of dances as "texts" rather than as "works." Works are fixed and final, whereas texts are open to reading and interpretation and are intertextual, understood within the context of other texts (Barthes, 1977; Rubidge, 2002). The dance work is lost forever after its first performance, but the dance text engages our active participation in its reproduction through numerous versions. The dance text is polysemous, between the choreographer's original movement plan, performances, scores, and even the "afterimage" in the minds of the audience (Van Zile, 1985/1986). The dance text only exists in versions, in its relationships with documentary texts and meaning-making activities (See Figure 1).

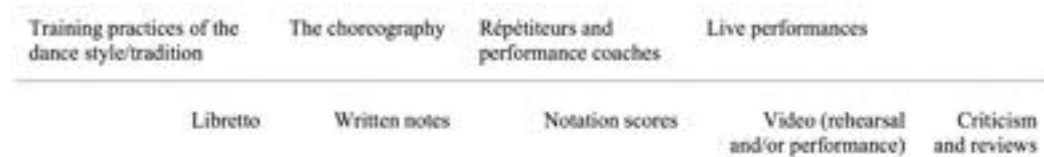


Figure 1. Modalities of texts for analyzing a dance.

As the living multimodality of body-to-body transmission exists beside fixed transmissions of notation and video, each provides different information about *Agon* and contributes to changes and continuity of the dance across time. Croce (1993) recounted the arbitration process of respected Balanchine *répétiteur* and co-director of Pacific Northwest Ballet Francia Russell for restaging *Agon* on the PNB with many versions to consult from notes, video and her own memory. When encountering multiple versions, "Russell would select the version that seemed to her the most musical and 'Agon'-like" (Croce, 1993, p. 92). But what counts as "Agon"-like? Is there a stable content to the ballet that constitutes its "Agon-ness"? Is it a performance attitude, a quality of movement? A particular meaning conveyed or implied by the steps and the movement quality? What has changed across time for *Agon* as repertory, and how? Analysis of Balanchine's *Agon* at different moments revealed its continuity and evolution such as revisions by performers, *répétiteurs*/performances coaches, or the choreographer, changes in technique, and aesthetic tastes of the genre. This study analyzed how various texts surrounding Balanchine's *Agon*, such as performance and coaching videos, reviews and criticism, and Labanotation scores, negotiated and cultivated a stable and evolving "Agon-ness" across time.

Stability and Change in Audience Perception of "Agon-ness"

Early interpretations and reviews of *Agon*, circa 1957-1959, pointed toward its peripheral inspirations. The work *agon* means "contest" or "struggle" in Greek, particularly in reference to physical and athletic feats of ancient Greece. Several sections of *Agon* take a seventeenth-century manual of French court dances as their "point of departure" (Balanchine, 1975, p. 10). However, *Agon* was not meant to be a direct translation or representation of either.

Many critics and scholars consider *Agon* to be the pinnacle of the Balanchine-Stravinsky collaboration, and the height of modernism in ballet (Jordan, 1993; Macaulay, 2007; Witchel, 1997). Igor Stravinsky, Balanchine's long-time musical collaborator, composed the music using both diatonic and 12-tone harmonics, and structured the ballet's music with allusion to French court dances. The global structure of *Agon* is organized by a series of single, double, and triple *pas de quatre* groupings; a *pas de trois* of two women and 1 man (court dances); another *pas de trois* of 2 men and 1 woman (*bransles*); the *pas de deux*, and finally, four duos, and three trios (see Figure 2). Stravinsky played loosely with the musical features of the court dance sections, composing through serial cells of melody and rhythm, and altering traditional meters (Jacobi, 2000; Jordan, 1993).

An Analysis of Various Texts in Balanchine’s *Agon*:

Part I.	<i>Pas de Quatre</i> (4 men)	<i>Double Pas de Quatre</i> (8 women)	<i>Triple Pas de Quatre</i> (8 women, 4 men)
Part II.	First Pas de Trois: <i>Sarabande</i> (1 man); <i>Gailliard</i> (2 women); <i>Coda</i> (1 man, 2 women)	Second Pas de Trois: <i>Bransle Simple</i> (2 men); <i>Bransle Gay</i> (1 woman); <i>Bransle Double (de Poitou)</i> (1 woman, 2 men)	<i>Pas de Deux</i> (1 woman, 1 man)
Part III.	<i>Danse de Quatre Duos</i> (4 duos)	<i>Danse de Quatre Trios</i> (4 trios)	<i>Coda</i> (4 men)

Figure 2: Sections of *Agon* with casting in parentheses (New York City Ballet, 2003).

The third of the Balanchine-Stravinsky “Greek” ballets—following *Apollo* and *Orpheus*—*Agon* has been regarded as the climax of modernism in ballet. The content of *Agon* lacks a narrative structure or characters, and expresses tension and conflict abstractly through movement and gestures and experimentation with form. Balanchine responded choreographically to the structure and rhythms of Stravinsky’s music, choreographing cells movement and complex canons (Jordan, 1993, p. 1). The dancers were costumed in black and white practice clothes—black leotards and pink tights for women, white t-shirts and black tights for men—giving maximum attention to line and action. The movement of the choreography extends classical ballet vocabulary including flexed feet, parallel and external leg rotation, off-center balances, moments of relaxed posture, *grand battements* with hips pressed forward, and “angular motions that are as spatially widespread and unanticipated as the music’s pointillistic style” (Joseph, 2002, pp. 268). Even the groupings of *Agon* subvert the traditional hierarchy of principals and *corps*.

The famous *Pas de Deux* between Arthur Mitchell and Diane Adams was the first section Balanchine choreographed, and it inspired the creation of the rest of the ballet (Mitchell, 2007). The movement in the *Pas de Deux* is particularly known for its risky and precariousness, technical difficulty, tension, and suspense. According to Heather Watts, a New York City Ballet *répétiteur* and former *Agon* principal dancer during Balanchine’s lifetime, Balanchine wanted the dancers to make certain moments appear dangerous (W. Whelan, personal communication, August 12, 2016).

In the “*Pas de Deux*,” the dancers contact through awkwardly entwined limbs, grasping hands through legs and contortionist extensions. In one moment, both dancers stand in 2nd position arms taut and wide as the woman slides down his body into 2nd position splits and rolls between his legs. Later, she places her foot on his shoulder as he kneels and then raises her leg as he stands. In another moment the woman snakes head down into a 180-degree *penchée*, supported by holding

hands with man who dives onto the floor. Balanchine potentially enjoyed the excitement of to seeing the dancers' hands waver during this daring *penchée* as the woman struggled to keep her balance (W. Whelan, personal communication, August 12, 2016).

A 1957 review by Edwin Denby (1965) particularly drew on the contest and risk aspects, casting the dancers as the protagonist, and the risk of the movement as the antagonist. Denby (1965) also noted the Greek and French influence are referenced in the dance only, "as much as a cubist still life recalls a pipe or guitar" (p. 121). John Martin's 1958 *New York Times* review called the movement "unprecedented and solemnly grotesque." The technical demands of the choreography stretched the dancers to the extreme of their abilities, so much so that the tension between performers in partnering moments and dazzling feats were crucial to the excitement and draw for early audiences.

Reviewers of the early *Agon* also hailed it as a turning point in ballet choreography. Like other Balanchine ballets, classical conventions of movement vocabulary, musical relationship, ensemble grouping, and compositional ordering were stretched to their edges. Doris Hering (1958, p. 24) called *Agon* the season's most important premiere in a 1958 *Dance Magazine* review. Christina Brundage (1958) most explicitly stated the ballet's importance, "*Agon* could initiate a new era in ballet if the challenge which it offers is accepted. The result would be that the concept we now know, love and define as ballet would have to be radically revised" (p. 32). The contest or challenge of *Agon* was within the choreography as a kind of libretto, and was a challenge to the art of choreography to push its artistic boundaries.

Some perceptions of the essence of *Agon* have remained consistent over time, namely the presence of struggle/tension and the historical importance of the ballet as the epitome of modernism in ballet. Lincoln Kirstein's (Balanchine & Mason, 1977) interpretation of the ballet's content cemented the struggle aspect of its essence, "Behind its active physical presence there was inherent a philosophy; *Agon* was by no means 'pure' ballet 'about' dancing only. It was an existential metaphor for tension and anxiety..." (p. 12). Kirstein's thoughts on *Agon*, absent in Balanchine's 1968 and 1975 editions of his collections of ballet librettos (Balanchine, 1968, 1975), were added for the 1977 edition. By this time *Agon* was twenty years old.

Even in 2007, the historical importance of *Agon* as a symbol of modernism continued to be recognized by Alastair Macaulay (2007) in *The New York Times*, "a work in which everyone could see that modernism had never gone so far before" (p. 29). The *Agon* of 1957 would retain its status in the canon of dance history.

However, as early as the 1960's *Agon* began to change in the eyes of dance critics.

The risk and contest elements of the style frequently noted in the early

reviews seemed to be lacking only a few years later. In 1960, critic John Martin (1960) noted that *Agon* now seemed more comfortable for City Ballet dancers, and “no longer [held] terrors for anybody” (p. 12). David Vaughn (1974) wrote of 1970's-era performances by City Ballet and The Royal Ballet, “New York City Ballet's [*Agon*] has become very limp and jaded...The Royal Ballet's is sabotaged by the soggy playing of the score...” (p. 689). Were perceptions of tension and risk disappearing as a consequence of the familiarity the dancers gained through repetition of performance?

Two decades in, the dancers' performance quality had evolved. What was limp and jaded about their dancing, and in what way was the music “soggy”? Leigh Witchel (1997, p. 74) described irregular musical timing and precise rhythms as a driving factor for the dance even more than the extreme shapes achieved by the dancers, corroborating Vaughn's distaste for a “soggy” musical or rhythmic interpretation. Rhythmic clarity and precision are important factors in determining what is “Agon”-like. Nearly twenty years later in 1993, Croce (1993) noted, “The cold wit of ‘Agon,’ [conveyed by the original cast] has disappeared over the years into sober efficiency” (p. 90). The performance energy and dynamics, and perhaps the characterizations or role interpretations of subsequent performers, underwent enough revision to change perceptions of how “Agon”-like those performances were to Croce.

Initially, the risk of movement that rode the edge of technical difficulty and precariousness most defined *Agon* for audiences. Certain extreme feats such as off-center and intertwined partnering, 180° *penchées*, or unexpectedly complex rhythmic timing and musical counterpoint were un-common and unexpected by audiences, and therefore exciting to see. However, training practices evolve, technique expectations change, and dancers generally grow in their facility. Over time, how might the evolution of training and technique affect performance and perception of the movement? As Martin (1960) noted in his 1960 review, the dancers no longer seemed ill at-ease or threatened on stage by the physical feats of the choreography; they were comfortable. Martin is not alone in noticing how *Agon* changed with evolving technical training.

Arguably, dancers' technical training increased in difficulty to meet the demands of choreography. As extreme physical feats become more common in repertory, training to execute them becomes expected and in turn normalized. The original excitement of *Agon* was in the dancers' struggle with executing the movement, in the sense of physical risk of trying to meet those technical demands on stage. Anderson (1980) wrote of a taming effect as the physical demands of the choreography became easier for the dancers to perform,

[*Agon*] was also a contest between dancers and technical demands that were then highly unusual. Watching the dancers contend with their roles was part

of the ballet's excitement. Some of that excitement can still be felt when a young company attempts 'Agon' for the first time. The early Dance Theater [sic] of Harlem performances had it, for instance. (p. C6)

Without the visible performance of this sensibility, the dance began to look easy, and the element of contest faded.

Is there a way to recreate that sense of struggle with the movement, to exhibit risk and tension? In contrast to City Ballet and the Royal Ballet, David Vaughn (1974) praised performances of *Agon* by Dance Theatre of Harlem as exemplary models of "Agon-ness." One could assume that Dance Theatre of Harlem's performances exhibited a sharp, alertness, or even a measure of non-polished, risk and tension-infused quality, due to the influence of director Arthur Mitchell who originated the male role in the "*Pas de Deux*." Having collaborated with Balanchine on the section which inspired the rest of the ballet, placed Mitchell in an excellent position to act as progenitor of the style of the ballet.

In a coaching video with Dance Theatre of Harlem, Mitchell (2007) remarked repeatedly that the ballerina who was rehearsing the *Pas de Deux* was too strong, too independent from her partner, that her technique was in the way of helping her create the tension between herself and her partner. In a post-rehearsal interview with Anna Kisselgoff, Mitchell (2007) recounted,

Today technique has gotten so advanced, it becomes an acrobatic [stretches his torso and arms backward]¹, rather than my making something about it [pulling Kisselgoff's arms slowly toward him, leaning in to create dramatic tension]. Like, what's going to happen? But actually when Diana [Adams] did it, she was nervous. That was part of the tension itself. Is she gonna make it? Isn't she gonna make it? Is she gonna make it?

Throughout the coaching, Mitchell continually corrected the ballerina to be more off-center, to fall, to have less control. Over and over he returned to images of dramatic tension and contest between the two dancers. The final run-through of the *Pas de Deux* from the coaching session was quite different from the performances at the beginning of the video, exhibiting more attack, more suspense in the movement.

Critical reception and description of *Agon* pointed toward essential elements of the dance. Tension, struggle, and contest, extreme feats of technique, and complexity of rhythm and musical relationship featured prominently in early reviews. As time went on, however, the presence of these elements in performance seemed to change, at least in the eyes of critics. Evolving technical training and aesthetic expectations changed the ways in dancers could perform the choreography. Surely, the choreography—the quantifiable steps—had not changed

to a drastic degree, particularly in iconic moments such as the Mitchell-Adams "*Pas de Deux*." As Mitchell discussed with Kisselgoff and the dancers, capturing a sense of risk and tension is still possible, even with technically stunning dancers. To achieve this, however, required attuning to subtlety within technique and striving toward the physical realization of particular performance qualities and dynamics.

The "*Bransle Gay*" Solo: A Case Study in Continuity and Change

To further analyze continuity and change in *Agon*, this study focused closely on the "*Bransle Gay*" solo. This solo is for the woman of the "Second Pas de Trois," and is the second of the dances in this section of *Agon*. The textual analysis included changes in the choreographic content or steps, and changes in how those steps are performed in phrasing, energy, Effort, dynamics, attitude, etc. These two categories were not always easy to separate because they affected each other, particularly in terms of perceptions of meaning.

Sources for this analysis included three Labanotation scores and three videos. Two scores were notated during 1957-1959 and 1960 by Muriel Topaz, a respected notator in the field, and one of several notators, led by Ann Hutchinson Guest, who notated the full choreography of *Agon* at Balanchine's request (Hutchinson Guest, 2016). The 1960 score included an addition/revision to the ending of the solo, that was created for Violette Verdy (Balanchine, ca. 1960). The third score was notated much later in 1985-1987 by Virginia Doris when *Agon* was staged by Sara Leland, former New York City Ballet principal and respected Balanchine *répétiteur*, for Les Grands Ballet Canadiens. The two early scores were notated after *Agon* had been choreographed, when Balanchine called in Ann Hutchinson Guest and the team of notators to document the dance (Hutchinson Guest, 2016).

Three of the videos document performances by Violette Verdy in 1960 (Jordan, 2002), Maria Calegari in 1983 (Balanchine, 1983), and Wendy Whelan in 1993 (Balanchine, 1996). The fourth is a rehearsal video of the 1985 Leland staging with Nicole LaMontagne performing the solo. Unfortunately, no video is available of Melissa Hayden, the original "*Bransle Gay*" soloist (Witchel, 1997, p. 62). The 1957-1959 and 1960 scores roughly correspond with the Verdy performance, and the 1987 score roughly corresponds with the Calegari and Whelan performances.

The "*Bransle Gay*" solo is the second dance in the "Second Pas de Trois." New York City Ballet dancer Wendy Whelan (personal communication, August 12, 2016) describes this solo as powerful and feminine, and sensual and "snake-y" yet architectural and precise. Castanets tap an ostinato rhythm in 3/8 time—1&, 2, 3—throughout the dance while the meter of the orchestra frequently changes between 5/8, 7/16, and 3/8. The triple meter castanets and multi-metered orchestra

are at odds with the traditional duple meter of a *bransle* (Jacobi, 2000). The movement of the "*Bransle Gay*" is quick with frequent changes of facing. The choreography is broken down into sections that correspond with the musical sections, both of which seem to take a breath and cleanse the palate with a single measure interlude of the castanets.

Each section is a flurry of movement punctuated by the castanet break: the first time with slow steps backward, the second with a rippling arm gesture into a "Spanish" position overhead. The first and second sections of the solo are dominated by footwork: little *échappés*, *passes*, and *pas de bourees*, and steps tilting between *en pointe* and flat-footed support. The third section of the solo builds into a furious series of turns traveling downstage and halting with a repeat of the rippling arm to the castanets' rhythm. Denby (1965) wrote of this solo, "As she dances, she keeps calmly 'on top of' two conflicting rhythms (or beats) that coincide once or twice and join on the last note" (p. 122). Musical phrasing and movement phrasing momentarily match-up throughout the solo, most noticeably with the castanet breaks, but often fight in counterpoint.

Choreographic changes in the "*Bransle Gay*" range from minor rhythmic or gestural details to entire phrases of completely different steps. Further differences encompass music-movement phrasing relationships, and qualitative characterization and dynamics. One alteration, for example, was in the presence or absence of the two male dancers from the "Second Pas de Trois" during the solo. In the 1959/1960 scores and Verdy video (Balanchine, ca. 1959, ca. 1960; Jordan, 2002), the female soloist was alone on stage during the solo. However, in the 1987 score and Whelan and Calegari videos (Balanchine, 1983, 1985-1987, 1996), the two men joined the soloist on stage, clapping the rhythm of the castanets throughout her solo. Although they visually enhanced the rhythm of the castanets, supporting visual-aural understanding of complex meter changes and rhythms of this solo, their relatively deadpan stares contributed a mechanical quality to the dance.

The differences in the "*Bransle Gay*" solo were subtle and prolific. Summarily, they revealed a shift toward strengths of the dancers performing the solo, and documented evolutions in technique and aesthetic preferences such as uses of weight, *épaulement*, and *port de bras*. This analysis focused on three specific moments: the final section turning phrase; the arm ripple motif; and performance quality and dynamics.

Altered musical relationships were found in the final section of turns traveling downstage, measures 332-335. All three scores showed a similar, nearly identical sequence of actions, but the dance phrase's relationship to the musical bar line and musical phrasing differed in each score. In this section a five-count phrase is repeated 3 or 4 times (depending on the version), followed by a coda of the arm ripple motif. The movement phrase consisted of a *piqué* turn/*plié-relevé* turn, *battement fouetté* turn, *coupé* to transition into repetition. In the 1959 and 1960

scores and Verdy's performance, the first turn was a *piqué* turn with the gesturing leg in *retiré*. In the 1987 score, and Whelan and Calegari performances, this turn was a *plié-relevé* turn with the gesturing leg in *retiré*. The overall effect of both turns was visually similar amidst the density of action in this section.

The musical meters of this final turning section were one measure of 7/16 time, followed by 2 measures of 5/16, and ending with the final measure 6/16. With the 7-beat measure to start, the movement of this section took on a complex and changing relationship with the musical meter. Figure 3 compares the dance phrasing of each version with the musical phrasing. The Labanotation is simplified as motif description to highlight the pattern and rhythm of the supports, and omits arm and leg gestures and torso actions. The motif description in Figure 3 shows from left to right: the 1960 "Violette" revision (Balanchine, ca. 1960), the 1959 original notated version (Balanchine, ca. 1959), the 1987 notated version (Balanchine, 1985-1987).

An Analysis of Various Texts in Balanchine's *Agon*:

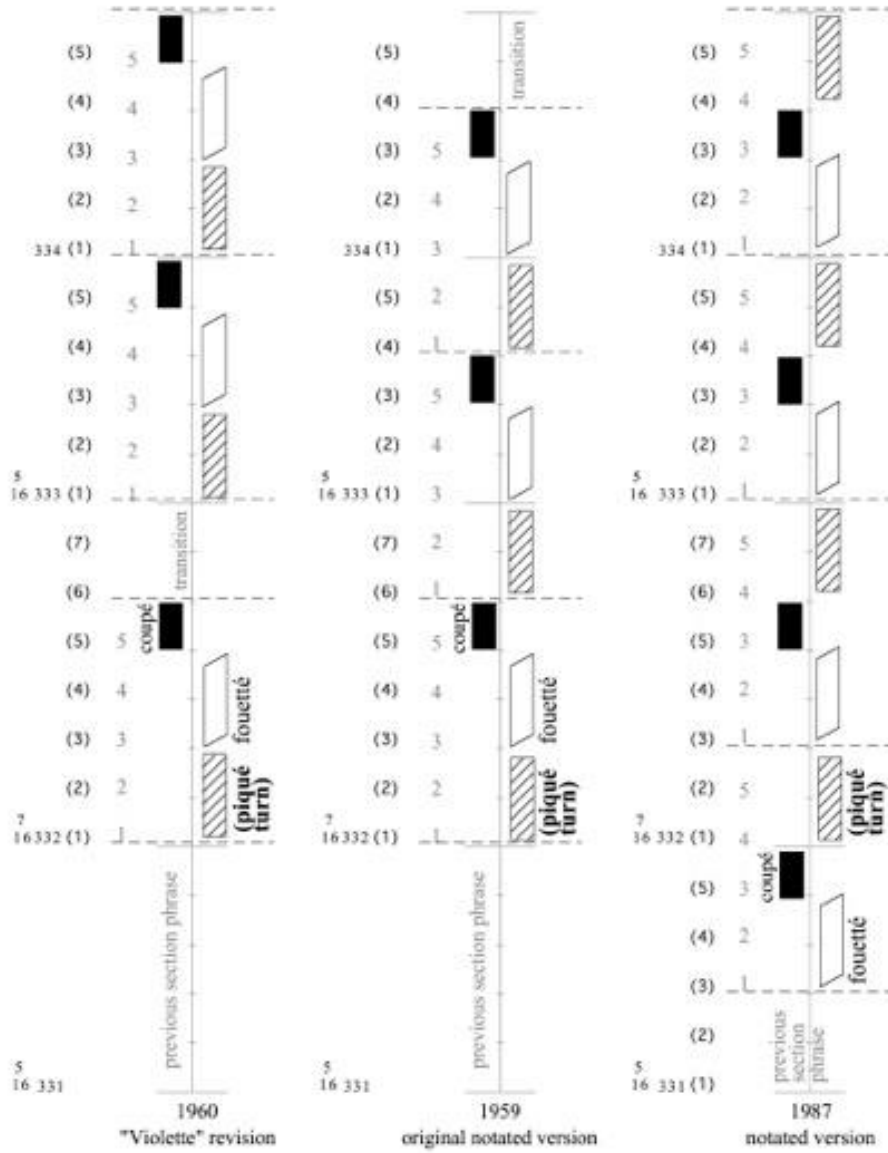


Figure 3. Comparison of movement sequence and musical relationship in the final section of the "Bransle Gay" solo, measures 331-334, from *Agon*.

The older choreography shown in the 1959 and 1960 scores notated by Topaz set up an antagonism between the 5-count dance phrase, and the changing 7- and 5-beat music meters. These versions began the turning phrase on measure 332 count 1, the 7-beat measure, so that the following 2 repeats were out of sync with the musical bar lines. The final phrase repeat ended with a 2-count transition out of turning that re-synchronized the movement with the musical meter. The ending rhythm for the rippling arm was 6 beats, matching the music meter of 6/16, and mirroring the rhythm of the castanets: snap 1, snap 2, snap 3, (hold 4), snap 5, (hold 6).

One of the Topaz scores (Balanchine, ca. 1960) included an addition to this section indicated by a note "New Version Mar 3, 1960 (changed for Violette)."² In this change, the first instance of the 5-count turning phrase matched the original, but added a 2-count transitional step just before the phrase repeats. The inserted transitional step essentially filled out the final 2 beats of the 7/16 meter measure, ensuring the repeats of the turning phrase were synchronized with the musical bar line. However, this addition made Verdy "late" for the ending coda because she also took the same transition step out of the final repeat as in the original version. She crossed into the last measure and rushed through the ripple arms, with a rhythm of: step 1, touch/*pointe* 2, snap 3, snap 4, snap 5, (hold 6). In the "changed for Violette" version, the snaps rhythm did not mirror the castanets rhythm.

The 1987 score, which matched the Whelan and Calegari performances, combined aspects of both previous notated versions to align with the musical bar lines and retain the original ripple rhythm. The turning phrase began two counts sooner in measure 331 on count 3, eliminating the end of the previous dance phrase. However, no transitional steps were then needed to align the movement phrase with the musical bar line, either at the beginning of the section as in the "changed for Violette" version, or at the end as in the original version. Beginning the 5-count phrase earlier kept each repetition in line with the music meter, and increased the number of repetitions of the phrase from 3 to 4. The section ended with the arm ripple coda in the final measure, just as the original version, and mirroring the castanets' rhythm: snap 1, snap 2, snap 3, (hold 4), snap 5, (hold 6).

In addition, the order of the steps was altered: *fouetté* turn, *coupé*, *plié-relevé* turn. By altering the order of the steps and beginning the phrase sooner in the music, the two different turns visually occurred on the same musical counts as in the 1959 version. This solution returned to the visual-aural relationship of the movement and music, but potentially made counting and sensing the relationship easier for the dancer to track because the movement phrase counts aligned with the musical phrase counts. When Whelan (personal communication, August 12, 2016) learned the "*Bransle Gay*," *répétiteur* Richard Tanner gave her a written sheet of counts to practice with, but later allowed her to count the movement in a way that made sense to her. Although no dance steps were change for Whelan, she was given

some freedom to feel the phrasing of the movement differently (personal communication, August 12, 2016).

The second specific choreographic moment for close analysis was the rippling arm motif of the 2nd break in measure 320. As the quantitative, spatial content of this arm motif changed, its qualitative character changed as well. The overall difference lay in the shaping of the arms and the space through which they rippled. Figure 4 shows a comparison of the notation for the arm ripple.

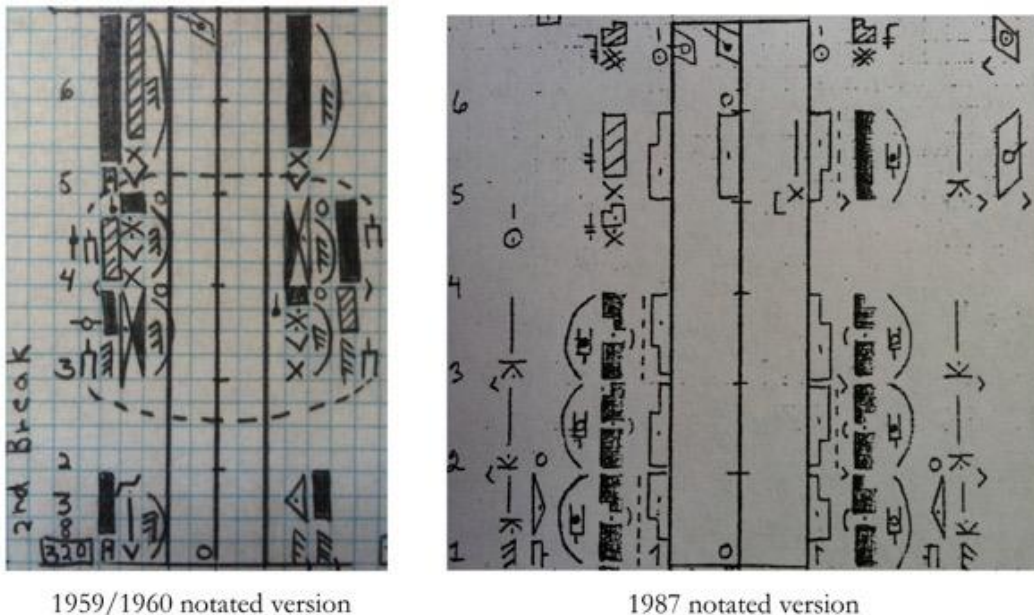


Figure 4. Labanotation score excerpts comparing the ripple arm gesture of the 2nd break (measure 320) in the “Bransle Gay” solo from *Agon*. From left to right: 1959 original score notated by Topaz (Balanchine, ca. 1959); 1987 score notated by Doris (Balanchine, 1985-1987). Labanotation score excerpts reprinted with permission of the George Balanchine Trust and the Dance Notation Bureau.

The 1959 and 1960 scores were written with the arms bent close to the front of the torso in the vertical plane. This gestural motif emphasized a rising-sinking action in the forearms leading with the wrists, as well as a constant nearly-touching relationship between the fingertips as the hands flip. The motif ended with the arms stretching away from each other, one straight upward and one straight downward, in the Spanish-like pose.

In the 1987 score and Whelan and Calegari performances, the arms swung forward and backward through the sagittal plane, led by the wrists as they flexed. The early incarnation of the arm ripple gave a look of conjuring or condensing the air before releasing it as the arms stretched away from each other in the. The later incarnation sliced sagittally through the space, swinging broadly back and forth.

The second difference for the arm ripple motif emerged through a change for the final repetition of the motif in the last moment of the "*Bransle Gay*." In the 1959 and 1960 versions, the dancer's spine twisted to initiate small arm ripples outward that ended in finger snaps. Doris Hering (1958) described Melissa Hayden's performance of this moment as a witty ending, "she brightly snapped her fingers as if to say, 'Twas nothing!'" (p. 25). With Verdy's especially quick finish and staccato punctuation, this moment was cheeky, as if to surprise the audience by arriving at the last possible second. This final moment was the only time Verdy's spine noticeably twisted, initiating the arm ripple. Throughout the rest of the solo Verdy's torso was held and square, which made the subtle shimmy of her shoulders here all the more remarkable. Hayden's performance of this final moment focused on the subtle detail of the hands, while Verdy's highlighted the shimmy in the shoulders (Witchel, 1997, p. 62).

In the 1987 score, and Calegari and Whelan performances, the final arm ripple motif appeared in the same manner as elsewhere in the solo. However, in the 1987 score notated during Sara Leland's staging with *Les Grands Ballets Canadiens*, rather than the movement initiating from the torso and sequencing outward, the shoulders press forward simultaneously with the arms when they swing forward, and relax when the arms swing backward. Calegari's shoulders seemed to initiate the arms' movement even as they swung forward and back, in a subtle flirtation. In contrast, Whelan's torso was almost completely still and only her arms moved, slicing through the most space. In Whelan's performance, the witty, coquettish energy was replaced with a sense of efficient and commanding purpose.

The qualitative character of the "*Bransle Gay*" has changed, whether by method of transmission between bodies and *répétiteurs* or by conscious choice of Balanchine as the choreographer. The early scores (Balanchine, ca. 1959, ca. 1960) noted "Style of movement is crisp and sharp," and the casting note for the 1987 score (Balanchine, 1985-1987) required this dancer to be "quick and precise with excellent pirouettes and balance" (p. viii). This was quite clear with Verdy. Her overall energy throughout her entire body was staccato, accented, and precise. She rode the musical pulse arriving with precision of timing, as if she could easily get ahead of the music.

Verdy's body parts mostly moved in simultaneity. Her only sequential actions were in the final arm ripple, which was all the more striking because it created contrast. The rhythms of the solo, especially in the footwork, stood out in Verdy's performance. Critic B.H. Haggin (2008, p. 226) described Verdy's musical understanding, the way she makes a person see the music, as her most outstanding quality. Verdy was quick, spritely in this solo. Her upper body was primarily stationary, to the point that by today's standards her arms and spine could be perceived as stiff.

While the 1987 score (Balanchine, 1985-1987) gave no such note about the style indications for crisp or sharp quality for the solo, the casting requirement for this soloist called for quickness and precision (p. viii). However, both Calegari and Whelan danced with apparent legato sustainment. Whereas Verdy rode directly on top of the pulse, Calegari and Whelan showed no sense of rush, riding the end of the pulse as though they could stretch out time even more.

Calegari had a pronounced fluidity to her upper body, and her arms took visual prominence over her footwork. She was almost entirely sequential and rarely simultaneous: her actions overlapped one another, rather than creating clear cut-offs from one to the next. Calegari suspended her phrasing between actions, melting one phrase into the next, which was largely responsible for the sense of time-stretching. With her unhurried timing she was like a cat on the prowl. Whelan's phrasing was just as legato as Calegari's, and her energy read as efficient, cool. In Whelan's performance, languid arms stood out above dabbing footwork. Her upper body, like Calegari's, was primarily sequential and fluid.

Whelan was influenced by seeing Calegari's performance as a young dancer, later modeling her own performance interpretation of the "*Bransle Gay*" from it (personal communication, August 12, 2016); Calegari's performance opened her eyes to how a ballerina command strength, power, and femininity. and in creating her own interpretation of the "*Bransle Gay*." Whelan strategically punctuated her arms at the ends of each section during the arm ripple. She would pause briefly and completely just beforehand, creating a striking contrast to the otherwise perpetual motion of her upper body.

As a result of the qualitative split between arms and legs, at first glance both Whelan and Calegari seemed less spatially and rhythmically precise in time than Verdy. However, upon closer viewing, Whelan's performance especially, revealed intricate timing relationships between her upper and lower body, and the music.

Conclusion

In this study, the various texts of *Agon* revealed an evolving sense of "*Agon-ness*." Sensibilities and tastes in movement change, as do training practices and expectations. This research sought to challenge the idea that a living, moving work of choreography is a singular, immutable entity. Because choreography and dance live through repeated, enacted performance, tension and negotiation between the fixed content and the fluid transmission between bodies exists. The various texts of *Agon*, point to its history, its stability, and its evolution; the dance need not be lost to the ephemeral present, nor need audiences mourn nostalgically for an unknown past.

Original versions provided a starting point for analyzing "*Agon-ness*," in

terms of steps, performance qualities, perceptions and interpretations. However, Balanchine is well known for often revising his dances, to suit a particular dancer's strengths or his own changing tastes. The evolution of Balanchine's *Apollo* demonstrates his prolific tendency toward revisions. Who can say whether and when the original or the most recent performance version is the most definitive? Originals certainly hold esteem in the perception and memories of those who experienced it, and without doubt influences versions that come later. Later versions can include the choreographer's revised and developed ideas about the dance.

Inclined to mix past and present, this author would be curious to see a performance fusing the qualitative sensibilities of a Violette Verdy with some of today's aesthetic qualities: staccato and rhythmically precise, accented, and coquettish; with sequentiality, suspension, fluid arms, and higher leg extensions. Restagings of *Agon*, such as Francia Russell's with the Pacific Northwest Ballet, might grapple with how to successfully combine the two. What a privilege it would be to discuss with Russell which baseline texts she used, i.e., kinesthetic memory, notes, or videos, and to witness her arbitration process in action.

Perhaps Sara Leland's staging, which resulted in the 1987 Labanotation score, realized a fusion of old and new. Through this research process, only one rehearsal tape of Leland's staging was uncovered (Balanchine & Leland, 1986); it seemed to capture a run of *Agon* early in the staging process. This rehearsal tape featured Nicole LaMontagne as the "*Bransle Gay*" soloist. She struggled with keeping up with the brisk tempo, and Leland can be heard clapping and counting off-camera.

In this rehearsal, LaMontagne struck a middle ground between Verdy and Whelan. Her phrasing was frequently accented and staccato as noted in the 1987 score casting requirement (Balanchine, 1985-1987, p. viii); the precision and rhythm of her footwork stood out over her upper body; yet, she had a more contemporary quality of sequentiality and fluidity to her arms and spine, and suspension of timing between phrases.

By naming particular defining characteristics of "*Agon-ness*," e.g. tension, risk or challenge, rhythmic surprise and complexity, and cool wit, there exists flexibility in how these characteristics emerge. By restaging and performing the dance across time, dancers and *répétiteurs* grappled with defining and exploring "*Agon-ness*" for themselves. Considering the "*Bransle Gay*," "*Agon-ness*" appeared particularly through tension in musical relationships and dynamics. Movement phrasing crossed the musical bar line and competed with the musical phrasing, which was especially present in Verdy's performance. Calegari's suspensions and stretching of time marked a different tension with rhythm between her body and the music. Whelan's upper/lower body timing and dynamics presented a complex intricacy that aligned and contrasted with the music.

As choreography is transmitted via various modalities from written scores and notes, to body-to-body transmission, or video, it lives again. The dance will morph and revise and originals will be sought, but something essential continues across time that makes us want to experience the dance again and again. To an audience or performer, continuity and variation compete in the work. This tension between the two continues to keep the ballet vital today through its varied levels of textual analysis.

Notes

¹Descriptions in square brackets within this quote indicate Mitchell's actions and gestures that augmented his verbal commentary during the interview.

² The change was most likely made by Balanchine for Verdy when she stepped into the "*Bransle Gay*" role (Hutchinson Guest, 2016).

Author Note

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