

PITTSBURGH BALLET THEATRE



Audience Guide

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Mixed Repertory Production

PBT is thrilled to include two Pittsburgh premieres on this program, *1st Flash* by Jorma Elo, and *Polyphonia* by Christopher Wheeldon. These are the first works by these choreographers to enter PBT's repertory. This is the sixth time PBT has performed Balanchine's spectacular *Theme and Variations*.

1st Flash



Choreography: Jorma Elo
Music: Jean Sibelius, Violin Concerto in D Minor
Staging: Christophe Dozzi
Costume Design: Joke Visser, Jorma Elo
Lighting Design: Jordan Tuinman, recreated by Kristina Kloss
Set Design: Jorma Elo
World Premiere: September 18, 2003, Nederlands Dans Theatre, NDT 1

Elo is a master of choreographic structure and transitions, each section brilliantly nuanced the music of Jean Sibelius through both movement and spatial patterns.

- artsatl.org

Jorma Elo created *1st Flash* in 2003 for Nederlands Dans Theater where he was also dancing in the company. It was his sixth work; he had previously choreographed for Alberta Ballet, Boston Ballet and Finnish National Ballet. Since then he's created more than 50 additional ballets and is one of the most distinctive ballet choreographers working today.

1st Flash has been called an "ultra-modern" ballet with a daring physicality that combines elegance, speed, and agility.* As with many of Elo's works the movement emerges from and plays with classical form and ballet's inherent geometry - we see shapes and steps familiar in classical ballet but updated with Elo's visceral energy and unique style. There is a quirkiness to some of the movement that is humanizing; there's also virtuosity and precision in the work that are breathtaking.

- [*broadwayworld.com](https://www.broadwayworld.com)

[Watch an excerpt](#) of *1st Flash* performed by Alberta Ballet.

Watch PBT's [Virtual Preview](#) with Elo on Facebook Live

Artists: Atlanta Ballet; Photo: Charlie McCullers

Choreographer Jorma Elo

Finnish-born Jorma Elo is one of the dance world's most prolific choreographers. Mr. Elo has created more than 60 ballets for over 30 companies worldwide, including New York City Ballet, San Francisco Ballet, National Ballet of Canada, Vienna State Opera Ballet, America Ballet Theatre, Bolshoi Ballet, Houston Ballet, Dutch National Ballet, Royal Danish Ballet and Nederlands Dans Theatre. Mr. Elo was named Resident Choreographer of Boston Ballet in 2005.



For Boston Ballet Elo has created many world premieres, including *Carmen*, *Le Sacre du Printemps*, *Plan to B*, *Brake the Eyes*, and the full length *Elo Experience*. Elo's *From All Sides* debuted in 2007 for Hubbard Street Dance Chicago, to a commissioned score from Chicago Symphony Orchestra's Mead Composer-in-Residence, Mark Anthony Turnage, conducted by Maestro Esa-Pekka Salonen. Elo's full-length ballets include *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, commissioned by Vienna State Opera Ballet, *Alice in Wonderland*

and *Sibelius* for Finnish National Ballet.

Mr. Elo trained with the Finnish National Ballet School and the Kirov Ballet School and enjoyed a long performing career with Finnish National Ballet, Cullberg Ballet and Nederlands Dans Theater. Mr. Elo was awarded the 2011 Benois de la Danse prize and the Helsinki International Ballet Competition's choreographic prize in 2005. He is the 2006 recipient of the Prince Charitable Trust Prize and the Choo-San Goh Choreographic Award. In 2015 Elo was awarded the Pro Finlandia Medal of the Order of the Lion of Finland, one of Finland's highest honors.

Photo: Liza Voll

Music

Finnish people have Sibelius's music in their blood. His Violin Concerto has always been the most important piece of music for me . . . I never stop marveling at how deeply that music touches me, the audience and the dancers. It just pulls you in.

- [Jorma Elo](#)

1st Flash is set to Jean Sibelius's Violin Concerto in D Minor. Sibelius is often thought of as the people's composer of Finland - for many his music captures the austerity and incredible beauty of the Finnish landscape as well as the character of the people themselves. He composed during a time of great turmoil for the country: at the turn of the 20th century Finland had been under Russian rule for 100 years and was subject to its increasingly draconian strictures. Along with other artists Sibelius sought to lift up Finnish culture during this time - one of his compositions, *Finlandia*, immediately struck a nationalist chord, giving "musical voice to

Finland's struggle** for freedom. Finland won its independence in 1917 and Sibelius has remained a national hero in the eyes of many Finnish citizens.

Filled with dreamy melodies and violinistic brilliance,** the Violin Concerto is extraordinarily demanding, requiring extreme talent and even physical stamina of the musician. Sibelius composed the work not for himself but for virtuoso performers. He considered himself a failed violinist and the Concerto is said to be imbued with both his passion for the instrument and the pain of that failure.**

[Listen](#) to the Violin Concerto in D Minor, performed by violinist Ray Chen.

*backstage.ravina.org

**sfsymphony.org

Costumes



The costumes were designed by Elo and Joke Visser, who was a long-time designer at Nederlands Dans Theater where the ballet premiered. They are sleek, simple leotards or shirt/pants, in a mauve-y - gray tone that shifts colors slightly in varying lights. Visser also designed the costumes for *Petite Mort*, by Jiří Kylián, performed by PBT in 2015 and 2018.

Photo: Aspen Santa Fe Ballet

Polyphonia



Choreography: © Christopher Wheeldon

Music: Selections by György Ligeti

Staging: Michele Gifford

Costume Design: Holly Hynes

Lighting Design: Mark Stanley

Regarded as one of Wheeldon's breakthrough contemporary works, *Polyphonia's* four couples wind their way through ten eerily melodious Ligeti selections, including music made famous by Stanley Kubrick's *Eyes Wide Shut*.

Polyphonia was the fourth work Christopher Wheeldon created for New York City Ballet, and his first after retiring from dancing with the Company and being named NYCB's first-ever Artist in Residence in 2000. A work for eight dancers, *Polyphonia* is set to ten piano pieces by the composer György Ligeti, who developed micropolyphony, a type of musical texture involving the use of sustained dissonant chords that shift slowly over time.

- nycb.com

Photo: Pacific Northwest Ballet

Christopher Wheeldon



Christopher Wheeldon is Artistic Associate of The Royal Ballet and a choreographer who has created and staged productions for many of the world's major ballet companies. He is a lauded dancer who trained at The Royal Ballet School and joined the company in 1991; in 1993 he joined New York City Ballet and was promoted to Soloist in 1998. He retired from dancing in 2000 to focus on choreography and was named NYCB's first Resident Choreographer in 2001, choreographing *Polyphonia* that same year.

Mr. Wheeldon's choreographic range is remarkable, encompassing contemporary works, full-length ballets, Broadway musicals and more. A short list includes *Alice's*

Adventures in Wonderland, *The Winter's Tale*, and most recently, *Like Water for Chocolate* (2022) for The Royal Ballet; *Cinderella* for Het Nationale Ballet (restaged for English National Ballet and performed extensively by other companies); "Dance of the Hours" for *La Gioconda* and *Carmen* at the Metropolitan Opera; and ballet and dance sequences for the London 2012 Olympic Closing Ceremonies and the feature film *Center Stage*. Broadway credits include the musicals *Sweet Smell of Success*, *An American in Paris* and *MJ the Musical* (2022) the latter two garnering him Tony Awards for Best Choreography.

Additional awards include the Outer Critics Award for Best Choreography and Direction for *An American in Paris*, the Martin E. Segal Award from Lincoln Center, the American Choreography Award, the Dance Magazine Award, South Bank Show Award, multiple London Critics' Circle Awards and the Léonide Massine Prize for new choreography. Mr. Wheeldon is an Olivier Award winner twice over and was named an Order of the British Empire. He is an Honorary Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and is a dual citizen of the United States and the United Kingdom, residing in New York City.

Photo: Angela Sterling

Music

The music for *Polyphonia* is a selection of ten works by György Ligeti, an avant-garde, Hungarian-Austrian composer. Ligeti fled Hungary's Communist regime in the 1950s, where his composing style and musical aesthetic had been restricted. When he settled in Austria he was able to more freely experiment with new forms of sound, including micropolyphony, a musical texture consisting of two or more simultaneous lines of independent melody.

The music used in the ballet shows the great range of Ligeti's compositional style:

- The ballet opens with what sounds like musical chaos. This first section, for eight dancers and set to Ligeti's *Désordre (Disorder)* one of several études by the composer. Wheeldon's choreography, with its clarity and geometry, becomes a counterpoint to the cacophonous sound, in effect giving "order" to the music.*
- The sixth section is a pas de deux set to a gentle melody that Ligeti reworked from an Eastern European folk song (and which Wheeldon played as a child in piano lessons). The movement here is clear, expressive and emotional. It beautifully mirrors the tone of the music, which he describes as "a balm on the soul."**
- The music for the ninth section may be familiar to 1990s movie buffs - it was prominently featured in *Eyes Wide Shut* starring Nicole Kidman and Tom Cruise (director Stanley Kubrick was a huge fan of Ligeti). This pas de deux is angular, abstract and evocative of the disquiet of the movie and music.

*[Royal Ballet Live, YouTube](#)

**[PNB's Lecture Demonstration, YouTube](#)

Costumes



The costumes were designed by Holly Hynes, an award-winning designer with more than 250 ballets to her credit. The PBT Costume shop consulted with Hynes to build a new set of costumes for PBT. The wardrobe for the bullet consists of unitards and leotards with belts - the design is simple and efficient, the color is a gorgeous bright plum.

Photo: New York City Ballet

Theme and Variations

Choreography: George Balanchine, © The George Balanchine Trust

Music: P.I. Tchaikovsky, Final Movement of Suite No. 3 for Orchestra in G Major

Staging: Judith Fugate

Costume Design: Janet Groom Campell

Lighting Design: Kristina Kloss

The performance of *Theme and Variations*, a Balanchine® Ballet, is presented by arrangement with The George Balanchine Trust and has been produced in accordance with the Balanchine Style® and BalanchineTechnique® Service standards established and provided by the Trust.

A work that drips with gilded grandeur, *Theme and Variations* pays tribute to Balanchine's imperial Russia with its regal structure and sumptuous Tchaikovsky score.

An intensive display of the classical ballet lexicon, *Theme and Variations* was intended, as Balanchine wrote, "to evoke that great period in classical dancing when Russian ballet flourished with the aid of Tchaikovsky's music." Set to the final movement of Tchaikovsky's third orchestral suite, the score consists of a theme and 12 variations, culminating in a polonaise in the Imperial style. Arguably the most substantial part of the suite, Tchaikovsky himself began the concert tradition of playing this final movement as a separate piece. Balanchine created *Theme and Variations* in 1947 for Ballet Theatre (now American Ballet Theatre), and it briefly entered the NYCB repertory in 1960. In 1970 Balanchine used the complete orchestral suite to create Tchaikovsky Suite No. 3, and *Theme and Variations*, with a few minor revisions, returned to the repertory as the fourth and final movement of the ballet.

- nycb.com

Learn more with New York City Ballet's [great article](#) on the creation and legacy of *Theme*.



Photo: Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre Archives

Movement

Theme is rooted in strict classical technique, starting off with simple tendus by the principal couple. There is a gradual building to include more dancers (26 in all) and more complex technique. While the movement style is classical, it is accented with the speed, attack, and clarity that are central to Balanchine's aesthetic (expertly displayed in this solo by [NYCB's Tiler Peck](#)) and it is absolutely resplendent with his keen sense of music and musicality (watch the pas de deux at the beginning of [this video](#) featuring the Dutch National Ballet). The ballet is also extremely physically demanding, pushing the artists to the limit as far as technique is concerned. The energy created on stage, and the spectacle of the final polonaise, are

brehtaking. The polonaise is fantastic in [American Ballet Theatre's video](#) from 1978 (starting at 19:15).

George Balanchine



Born in St. Petersburg, Russia, George Balanchine (1904 - 1983) was one of the most brilliant choreographers of the 20th century. He made his dancing debut at the age of 10 with the Imperial Ballet of St. Petersburg's famed Mariinsky Theatre and joined the company at 17. He gained an extensive knowledge of music early in life, studying piano at age five; following his graduation from the Imperial Ballet School he enrolled in the state's Conservatory of Music, where he studied piano and musical theory, composition, harmony and counterpoint - invaluable knowledge for translating music into dance. He found a deep connection with, a lifelong love of, and profound inspiration in the works of composer Pyotr I. Tchaikovsky.

In 1924 Balanchine joined Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes in Paris where he danced for a time and served as rehearsal director. After a few years in Europe he came to America, where he and philanthropist Lincoln Kirstein established the School of American Ballet in 1934; in 1948 they founded New York City Ballet (NYCB). From that time until his death, Balanchine served as NYCB artistic director, choreographing (either wholly or in part) a catalog of 465 works.

Classical ballet, defined by the work of Marius Petipa, the great 19th century choreographer and ballet director at the Mariinsky - the theater in which Balanchine grew up - was ingrained in Balanchine's soul. It was the foundation for his own style of choreography, which in the middle of the 20th century was quite radical, and which became known as neo-classical ballet. Balanchine's style was characterized by brilliant speed and attack, creating a higher, bigger, faster version of the art form. His unique sensibility, musicality and artistry ushered in a new era in ballet.

Photo: Jack de Nijs for Anefo

Répétiteur Judith Fugate

Miss Fugate is a répétiteur for the George Balanchine Trust and stages his works worldwide. She is a former Principal Ballerina with the New York City Ballet and danced roles in virtually every ballet in the NYCB repertoire, counting among her partners Helgi Tomasson, Mikhail Baryshnikov and Peter Martins. During her career she toured extensively with groups led by renowned artists such as Mr. Baryshnikov, Cynthia Gregory and Mr. Martins. Miss Fugate appeared on "Live from Lincoln Center" with Ray Charles in Peter Martins' *A Fool for You*. In the Metropolitan Opera's production of *La Traviata*, conducted by Plácido Domingo, she was

partnered by Peter Boal and Fernando Bujones. She left the company in 1997 and as long with her work for the Balanchine Trust she is a répétiteur for the Jerome Robbins Rights Trust.

For Pittsburgh Ballet Theatre she has staged *Diamonds* and *Divertimento No. 15*, in addition to *Theme*.

Judith Fugate on *Theme and Variations*

On the structure of the ballet

[*Theme and Variations*] shows so beautifully the depth of Balanchine's choreography and what he brought to the table - how he used his dancers and created for them. It starts with the theme, and the principal couple starts with just a tendu sequence - it's very simple, and slowly the movements get a little bigger and bigger. Then they leave the stage and the corps de ballet and the demi-soloists repeat that same theme. There's a section where the [principal] female starts a solo with eight corps de ballet ladies in a line holding her hand. She développés her leg and they bourrée in formation around her while she's just calmly doing adagio. They leave the stage magically, and she goes into this powerhouse solo. And after that solo comes the gorgeous adagio with the [principal] man. So it's developed from those simple tendu combinations into what becomes a wonderful challenge for everyone in the ballet, because it pushes you to your limit as far as technique is concerned.

There are so many different facets and nuances. Everything has to be crystal clear and sparkling; there's no muddiness out there.

On coaching the ballet and passing on Balanchine's intention

[I had the opportunity to dance in the corps in *Theme*] at age 18 or 19; by the time I danced the principal part Balanchine had passed away. But I had the great fortune to watch him coach all the ballerinas who were doing it while I was in the corps, so that stayed with me. I think that's why I'm capable of staging these ballets - even though he didn't coach me on the principal part I got to see [him work] with the ballerinas I looked up to.

[Balanchine] gave liberty to his ballerinas. I think he loved the individuality of his dancers and played to their strengths, so I try to pass that on. I want to bring out the best in those individuals the way he did. He was all for "different" - I try to emulate that. [He would want them to] bring their own self to the role - they're not confined by being the same [character] all the time.

He is famous for saying, "Don't think about it, just do it." I think that's so important because you put yourself in the movement rather than analyzing. When someone would fall down in rehearsal he would immediately say, "You're doing it correctly." If you push yourself so far that you would actually fall down, then you're giving it [all your] energy.

On the music

You know it's Tchaikovsky when you move to it. I can't imagine not dancing to this music - it builds you up and wants you to dance to it.

The reverence that Balanchine had for the music is almost primary. With his choreography, he never wanted the conductor to follow the dancers. We had to follow the music - that's a very different thing. [It's like] tough luck, you have to finish on the music! It makes it that much more challenging than the conductor following the dancer - more challenging and also more musical. And wait 'til you hear the full orchestra playing these sections. I get goosebumps just thinking about it - and I would get goosebumps on stage when I was dancing to it. The orchestra - it gives you more power somehow, it keeps you going.

The Music

Tchaikovsky was immensely important to Balanchine - he felt a kinship with him due to their shared cultural heritage, and because Tchaikovsky was such a revered figure in the world he grew up in at the Imperial Theater in St. Petersburg. In fact *Theme* was intended to memorialize that time, to "evoke that great period in classical dancing when Russian ballet flourished with the aid of Tchaikovsky's music."^{*}

Tchaikovsky composed only three ballets in his lifetime - *Swan Lake*, *The Nutcracker* and *The Sleeping Beauty* - but Balanchine used several other works by the composer to create new ballets. He found Tchaikovsky's orchestra suites particularly compelling, saying "they were not composed for dancing, yet to listen to them is to think immediately of dancing."^{*} *Theme* is arranged to the final movement of Suite No. 3 in G, "one of the jewels of Tchaikovsky's mature orchestral writing,"^{*} containing beautiful, moving melodies and a dazzling final polonaise.

PBT patrons may recognize the music from another ballet - William Christiansen used that same movement in his *Beauty and the Beast*, which PBT last performed in 2020 and will perform again next season.

^{*}*Balanchine's New Complete Stories of the Great Ballets*

^{**}laphil.com

Costumes

Theme and Variations was on the program for PBT's March 2020 production, which was canceled due to the pandemic and postponed until *The Masters Program: Balanchine and Beyond* in 2023. Former PBT Costumier Janet Groom Campbell had designed a new wardrobe of *Theme* costumes in 2019 and they were partially built by her team at that time. After the cancellation, construction on the costumes continued through the pandemic.

The costumes for the ballet are classical - tutus, tiaras and jackets with gorgeous ornamentation and jewels. Balanchine created a number of ballets for which he wanted dancers to be in simple leotards or other costumes, in order to strip away artifice and to display the athleticism of the dancers. But he also choreographed ballets for which he felt tutus were crucial. The tutus in *Theme* play an important part in evoking that regal, imperial atmosphere that Balanchine envisioned for the piece.



Campbell chose shades of blue - sky blue for the corps (above), deep royal blue for the demi-soloists and an icy blue for the principals. The palette is not common in ballet and makes a stunning stage picture. [In this video](#) Ms. Campbell discusses the design and build process for the *Theme* costumes (3:15 - 15:38).