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Sōphrosynē in the city Plato's *Laws* and modern ballet

Abstract

Plato's final work, the Laws, plans a new city in Crete. Far from censoring the arts as in Republic X, this new city requires everyone to sing and dance at civic festivals. Plato made two major changes from his earlier account of art as mimēsis (imitation). First, artworks can be accurate and beneficial; second, art's pleasures help educate youths in virtue (especially sōphrosynē or moderation) while sustaining civic harmony. Plato's Timaeus similarly links individual and cosmic harmony. Together these texts helped stimulate the foundation of Renaissance arts "academies" that led to court dance and, later, ballet. We argue, focusing on works by choreographer George Balanchine, that the notions of mimēsis and sōphrosynē have continuing relevance for modern ballet. Balanchine had to invent new ways for dance to foster harmony within a tumultuous, increasingly irrational, new city and universe.

Keywords

Plato, Mimēsis, Ballet

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1. Introduction

In Book X of Plato's *Republic* Socrates famously banned tragic poets from the ideal society, thereby making himself art's first censor (607b5-6). Less well-known is that in his final work, the *Laws*, Plato flipped that pessimistic picture on its head by outlining an essential role for the arts in a good society. Instead of censoring some arts, as Socrates did in *Republic* X, the *Laws* mandates artistic performance to ensure the success and harmony of the planned new city. Remarkably, choral dance (*choreia*) is proposed for all its citizens – young and old, slave or free, male or female. Scholarly treatments of the *Laws* in English have proliferated since 2000 (Bobonich 2002-2010; Annas 2017). The foreword to Bobonich 2010 remarks on this: "Long under-studied, Plato's *Laws* has been the object of renewed attention since the late 1990s and is now considered to be his major work of political philosophy besides the *Republic*". Several recent works have focused on the unique nature and value of dance in the *Laws* (Pfefferkorn 2021; Peponi 2013), but the text is still not well known or much studied in the philosophy of art. We have found only one article on it in the *Journal of aesthetics and art criticism*, and it is brief and appeared over 50 years ago (Schipper 1963). Our goal here is twofold. We will first explore implications of recent scholarly work on the *Laws* for a new understanding of Plato's contributions to aesthetics. Second, we will identify influences of Plato's ideas in modern ballet by discussing two works of the 20th-century choreographer George Balanchine.

The *Laws* narrates a discussion among three men walking through the mountains of Crete to a temple of Zeus: an unnamed Athenian; a Spartan, Megillus; and a Cretan, Clinias. The text is long, at twelve books, with repellent features of authoritarianism. As in the *Republic*, the speakers are planning a good city (*polis*) – here, not an ideal but a real one, Magnesia, in Crete. They decide first on the aim for the city's inhabitants, then consider laws that would be acceptable to them, along with provisions for future changes.

The Athenian boldly claims that "the art of the chorus (*choreia*) as a whole is the same as the whole of education (*paideusis*, 672e5-6)"¹. He recommends physical activity including *choreia* – a combination of poetry, music, and dance – in education for everyone. Through learning and performing in public events, children and young people express their natural enjoyment of harmony and rhythm, developing the mature virtue of

¹ All translations from Plato are from Cooper, ed., 1997.

sôphrosynē: the ability to harmonize reason with feelings of pleasure and pain². This virtue is the precondition for others like courage and justice. Adults will continue to appreciate choral performances at the city's regular civic festivals. Education for the city's legislators will encompass advanced studies that link mathematics with music and astronomy³.

In defending his plans, the Athenian first secures agreement that the three arts of *choreia* are all types of *mimēsis* (imitation or representation), like painting, sculpture, and poetry (668b9)⁴. He then identifies criteria for the "correctness" of *choreia*. We will outline these in Section 2 below, comparing the view here to the generally negative assessment of *mimēsis* in the *Republic*. The term *mimēsis* has multiple meanings. Though it is often translated as "imitation", scholars also use the term "representation" to capture its meaning, or sometimes "enactment" (as when an actor portrays a character). It is used in many contexts across Plato's corpus, and although in *Republic* X it is treated as deceptive and dangerous, it is not always denigrated. In his overview of the topic, Stephen Halliwell concludes bluntly that, "there is no unified and stable conception of *mimēsis* to be found in Plato, let alone a uniformly negative conception" (2021: 29).

In Section 3 we focus on the *Laws*' defense of mimetic pleasures. The Athenian argues that the pleasures of *choreia* help foster *sôphrosynē*. As young people enjoy representing good characters through *mimēsis* they reinforce their own virtue. Adults continue to enjoy performances as audience members at festivals or in private symposia. This positive view of the pleasure of mimetic arts differs strikingly from the familiar *Republic* X account of the seductive and dangerous pleasures of *mimēsis*.

The *Laws* places an unusual emphasis on dance as a key part of *choreia*. Partially due to this, the dialogue played an important role historically. As the *Laws*, along with Plato's *Timaeus*, became known to subsequent generations, the texts acquired a special meaning for dance theory and practice. In section 4 we offer a brief historical overview of how these works influenced later thinkers. Their Christianized Neoplatonic heritage gave Renaissance intellectuals like Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499), who established new "Academies" of art, a warrant for including dance in their curriculum (Carter 1992, Berghaus 1992, Wade 2025). This heritage built upon a picture of the beneficent geometrical organization of a universe

² Here we follow Pfefferkorn's way of defining *sôphrosynē* as the notion of "harmony between reason and the feelings of pleasure and pain" (2021: 337).

³ See *Laws* XII, 963-68; for discussion, see Pöhlmann 2010.

⁴ Although sculpture is mentioned here, it is not always considered mimetic; see Petraki 2023, especially Chapter 6.

where numerical ratios governed the harmony and “dances” of stars and planets. Such cosmic mathematical order could be transmitted to the human realm via dances held in the palaces of divinely anointed royal personages. The union between orderly music and movement, as between reason and emotion in *sōphrosynē*, was visibly demonstrated when kings themselves observed – and often participated in – dances staged at royal courts.

This emphasis on number, harmony, balance, and proportion has always mattered for ballet, as is still evident in 20th-century works like those of George Balanchine and Igor Stravinsky. We will argue that Platonic ideas about number and cosmic patterns, as well as ideas specific to the *Laws* concerning the ideal of *sōphrosynē*, proved significant as Balanchine navigated his difficult transitions from Imperial Russia to Europe and finally New York City, where his works addressed hard questions about what still matters from this Platonic inheritance as the artform of ballet goes forward.

2. *Mimēsis in the Laws*

In the *Laws* the Athenian argues that all inhabitants of the new city, Magnesia, should participate in the three mimetic arts of *choreia* (poetry, music, and dance). Choruses are to be organized to present performances at civic festivals, divided into different age groups of children, young adults, and older adults (664b-666d). To be approved, works of *choreia* must offer correct representations of gods and virtuous humans.

As we noted above, Plato’s many works used the term *mimēsis* in different ways⁵. Since our concern here is with aesthetics, we are mainly focusing on his most significant assessments of its role in art, i.e., in mimetic arts such as poetry, sculpture, music, and dance. Plato’s other major, and best-known, treatise addressing the nature and value of art, the *Republic*, presents a vastly different view from that of the *Laws*. On the one hand, in its early books Socrates acknowledges some value for arts in educating the youths. However, he does not explain *how* an exposure to excellent arts will promote children’s virtue. The process hardly sounds rational when he says that fine features of art will “strike their eyes and

⁵ Halliwell (2002; 2021) is an invaluable source on this.

ears like a breeze that brings health from a good place, leading them unwittingly from childhood on, to resemblance, friendship, and harmony with the beauty of reason” (401c-d1)⁶.

Even this limited approval seems inconsistent with Socrates’ fierce critiques of *mimēsis* later in the text, culminating in Book X. The ontological status of images, especially those made by artists, is inferior in relation to higher truths⁷. A painter imitates a real bed, which is in turn the imitation of some higher reality, putting the painting at a third remove from the truth (602c). Socrates asks, “Is it a representation of appearances or of truth?” (598a-b). Poets similarly make imitations without knowledge. Socrates emphasizes this problem: “... [W]e’re fairly well agreed that an imitator has no worthwhile knowledge of the things he imitates, that imitation is a kind of game and not something to be taken seriously, and that all the tragic poets, whether they write in iambics or hexameters, are as imitative as they could possibly be” (602b). Even though he purports to be a great lover of tragic poetry, Socrates finally argues that it must be banned from the ideal city because it offers dangerous pleasures; we will see in our next section that the falsehoods of mimetic art extend to and contaminate any pleasures they offer.

After such critiques, it comes as a shock to find the Athenian in the *Laws* advocating wide social use of mimetic arts and, moreover, defending what he calls “correct imitations” (*mimēseōs orthotēs*). Criteria of correctness ensure that the choral performances will present things that are good. Indeed, even an image (*eikōn*) may be good. The legislative council of Magnesia will specify broad parameters for *choreia*. Once established, these rules should be monitored but mostly sustained. The Athenian frequently expresses admiration for the Egyptians, emphasizing that their historic stability derived from prohibiting innovation in poetic and musical forms.

The Athenian proposes his account of correct imitations beginning with music. Andrew Barker notes that the *Republic* had also called these arts mimetic: “Just as a picture is not the person depicted but a *mimēsis* of them,

⁶ Szaif (2024: 288) is more convinced that, “[R]eceptiveness to musical structure [was] conducive to the development of the child’s rational faculty and its ability to discern ethico-aesthetic properties”. Vlastis (2021: 159, n. 34) downplays intellectual aspects of this process: “By framing this in terms of ‘representation’ I do not mean to make this out to be a highly intellectual or reflective process”.

⁷ Criticisms of imitation are also made in the famous three analogies of the *Republic* (the Cave, Line, and Sun); but since these are not about types of artistic *mimesis*, and for reasons of space, we do not address them here.

and just as what we find in Homer's poetry are not the real actions but only *mimēseis* of them, so a piece of music represents or 'imitates' something that is not really there in the composition or the performance" (Barker: 2010a).

There are three broad aims of proper *choreia*: correctness (*orthotēs*), benefit (*ōphelia*), and pleasure (*charis*) (667b4-6). Later, at 669a7-b and following, the Athenian describes types of knowledge needed by the judges of correctness. First is knowledge of the "what". This involves judging whether the composer has chosen the appropriate genre and musical techniques for a given subject based upon accurate awareness of that subject's nature. Second, judges must know how to assess whether the music has been "made correctly", by asking whether musical features represent the subject's important parts. Justin Vlastis (though describing the *Republic's* account of musical *mimēsis*, and not that of the *Laws*) suggests that Plato thinks musical representation involves a resemblance that is not literal: "[...] The musical sound (whether vocal or auditory) is similar to and thereby represents the vocal cadence of a person with a certain character trait (say, courage) in a context in which that character trait shines through (say, war)" (Vlastis 2021: 155).

Third, judges must evaluate whether music for *choreia* is "made well", exhibiting the proper *kalon*, beauty or excellence. Music must not simply portray the proper objects (gods, heroes, etc.) but must do so using the correct forms. Music has diverse features such as modes, harmonies, and rhythms, and Barker explains that these elements can be mimetic in good or bad ways: "[...] particular kinds of melody, rhythm, *schēma* and so on can rightly be interpreted as *mimēseis* of the characters of free men or women or slaves" (Barker 2010b).

Next the Athenian moves from music to dance and its criteria. Choral dance, typically featuring a group with a leader, was performed at public festivals and often in competitions. Pfefferkorn and Spinelli note that in both the *Republic* and the *Laws*, "choral dance is defined as being generally engaged with 'representations of characters'" (2021: 11). But how does *choreia* "represent" characters? As in music, aspects of style and expression matter in dance⁸. These include, in Claude Calame's words, "musicality (*melos*)... beautiful words... and 'scanned choreographic rhythms'" (2013: 93-4). Song and dance must be integrated in orderly ways to succeed;

⁸ Halliwell (2002: 64) notes that Peponi "uses 'represent' not in the sense of 'portray in a performance' but in an abstract or metaphorical sense".

expressive movements in dance convey properties of good or bad characters and would be approved or banned accordingly.

As mentioned just above by Barker, the Athenian uses the term “schēma” (plural “schēmata”) with reference to both music and dance⁹. This word ordinarily denotes “shape” but its meaning in these more technical contexts is less clear. Perhaps it indicates a pose. This account might apply to men’s dances in which a performer assumes a heroic position, say, standing to aim a javelin. Scholars sometimes infer features of ancient Greek dance styles from depictions in statues or vase paintings. Alternatively, since dance involves bodies in motion, *schēma* might denote aspects of movement: slow and dignified, say, vs. fast and funny.

In Book II, after identifying three civic choruses based upon gender and age groups, the Athenian does not say much about their different types of performances. Returning to the topic of dance in Book VII, however, he mentions two different categories of dance. First are various warlike “Pyrrhic” (*pyrrichē*) dances depicting valor in battle (see Spaltro 2011). These fit with the interpretation of “schēma” as a pose. While displaying “fine physiques and normal characters”, such dances might represent a man crouching, or shooting javelins, with his body “kept erect in a state of vigorous tension, with the limbs extended nearly straight” (815b). The second category the Athenian mentions are dances of peace (*emmeleiai*), which portray “a man of temperate character enjoying moderate pleasures in a state of prosperity” (814e-815a). Pfefferkorn argues that no specific poses are listed for *emmeleiai* because these dances represent the life of the peaceful city as a whole (2021: 355).

Since the nature of these peacetime dances seems vague, we offer examples from a modern ballet we hope is familiar, that ever-popular Christmas favorite *The nutcracker suite*, first choreographed by Maurice Petipa and Lev Ivanov, with music by Tchaikovsky, in 1892. Balanchine’s 1954 version, set to the same music, begins with a party scene organized around an intergenerational dance celebrating the peace and prosperity that the guests enjoy. It begins with a short “Pyrrhic” dance, as the party’s host leads the young male children through a series of military exercises: raising a gun to firing position, mounting a horse, etc. It then proceeds to a three-part social dance that spans multiple generations. The host parents lead the assembled children through a dance in which they learn how

⁹ Pfefferkorn argues the Athenian mainly uses *schēma* to describe dance and not music: “in fact, at the end of Book II it is defined as the distinguishing feature ... of the bodily movement that is dance” (2021: 347).

to move graciously and elegantly together. At the end is a duet for two tottering octogenarians whom everyone watches with rapt and affectionate attention. It is clearly important that everyone in the community depicted take part – with enjoyment¹⁰.

We wonder, though, whether dance as conceived in the *Laws* can go beyond these somewhat simplistic depictions to be more conceptual while still representing a life of harmony or *sōphrosynē*. The Athenian says that these dances portray “*the keen pleasure* felt by people who have emerged from trouble and danger into a state of happiness”, or “*the quieter pleasures* of people whose past good fortune has not only continued but increased” (815e, our emphasis). This allows room for a more creative enactment that shows performers enjoying the quality of their performance itself. Scholars see such possibilities. Calame explains how distinctive the ideal of *mimēsis* for dance is in the *Laws*: “In choral poetry as Plato conceives of it in the *Laws*, the act of a good man is in some way modelled on the figures of dance and on the harmony of music...for the whole of the civic community choral poems have this almost physical power of integration, *via aesthetic pleasure*, in the midst of rhythm and harmony, of the values that animate good people” (2013: 94, our emphasis).

An example of this more conceptual visualization of harmony can be found in the iconic last tableau from Balanchine’s *Apollo*, when the dancers create a radiating, star-like pattern with their bodies, particularly their fanned-out legs, symbolizing divine order. Here the emphasis is on the sculptural beauty and lines of the human form. The dancers are still imitating characters (Apollo and the three Muses) in a highly-stylized narrative (Apollo’s education by the Muses). However, the focus here is not on individual characters enjoying their prosperity. Instead, it is on how the structural relations among the limbs of the dancers represent the structure of the human soul that is the essence of good character.

¹⁰ For a wonderful breakdown of this party scene, see Morgan 2024.



Photo credit: Andrea Mohin/The New York Times/Redux¹¹

This “aesthetic pleasure” of dance “in the midst of rhythm and harmony”, hints at possibilities of abstraction, especially when we remember the term applies to *both* music and dance. Rhythm and harmony are types of order that Plato associated with sound and movement, respectively. He also associates order as measuredness (*emmetria*) with knowledge and truth. Jan Szaif explains that this “denotes...the internal condition of a mind that preserves the right proportions and balance...” (2024: 279), and it is associated with musical harmony. There is an “alleged link between the mind’s ability to restore such balance and proportion to its cognitive system and its ability to appreciate, and accord with, proper melodic and rhythmic patterns” (2024: 279). The association of harmony and rhythm with rationality is also emphasized in *Timaeus* 47d-e; see Szaif (2024: 287).

¹¹ We are grateful to Vanderbilt University for purchasing the rights for Mohin’s stunning photograph to be used in this article.

To review: we have described how the Athenian explains and defends a notion of correct *mimēsis* in relation to art that is very different from the *Republic's* analysis. Nothing in the *Laws* implies, as the *Republic* did, that artists are just playing games or creating works that are at three removes from reality. The appropriate choral performances must be “made well” or be “*kalon*”, fine or beautiful. This requires being well-composed and performed, as well as representing the right kinds of character. By this we mean *moral* character, as generally exhibited by types of people, not individuals. Good character is both indicated and enjoyed by performers making excellent use of suitable kinds of melody and posture, exhibiting harmony and rhythm. The Athenian concludes the long discussion of correct *mimēsis* as follows: “That is just what the true legislator will persuade (or, failing persuasion, compel) the poet to do with his rhythmic gestures, and harmonious music: to compose correctly by portraying men who are moderate (*sōphrōnōn*), courageous, and good in every way” (660a, translation by CF).

Perhaps, however, we might think that the Athenian proposes the practice of *choreia* for purely instrumental reasons, to help produce virtuous people. Observing this, Halliwell comments, “One has the impression that Plato is here renegotiating ground he had traversed in *Republic* 2-3 and to a lesser extent, *Republic* 10...But the Athenian’s moral tenor does not make his arguments merely moralistic” (Halliwell 2002: 65). What Halliwell means is that the Athenian is not looking simply for ways to make *choreia* morally useful, but for genuine criteria of aesthetic quality¹².

3. *Pleasures of art in the Laws*

There is a second important way in which the *Laws* revises the *Republic*: the Athenian contends that the *pleasures* of mimetic art are *themselves* valuable. By contrast, in the *Republic* analysis of Books IX-X, many people are seduced by pleasures that are so faulty he even calls them “false”. These include bodily and mimetic pleasures. A tyrannical person who seeks constant fulfilment of bodily desires is described as pursuing pleasures that are “filled with things that are less real” than higher goods (585d). Hence, he enjoys those pleasures less fully – he “partakes of a less

¹² Barker (2010a) and Halliwell (2002: 65) both interpret the third criterion for judges as involving aesthetic as well as ethical aspects.

trustworthy and less true pleasure” (585e). Notably, these kinds of deceptive pleasures are described as “mere images (*eidōlous*) and shadow-paintings” of true pleasures (586b-c). The tyrant who seeks such pleasures is really after illegitimate and false objects; he is said to be “at three removes from an oligarch” who is himself “third from a king” (587c-d). Note that this language directly parallels Socrates’ account of the artist’s product as being at three removes from reality. Beyond supplying false pleasures, the particular *mimēsis* that many people feel an erotic passion for, tragic poetry, presents falsehoods in an alluring disguise. Indeed, the “most serious charge against imitation” is that it can corrupt even decent people; he says “we enjoy it, we give ourselves to following it”, but when by ourselves, realize such behavior is shameful (605b-606a)¹³.

In contrast, the pleasures of *choreia* are described as natural, beneficial, and even reasonable. Performers who have been raised well and taught to represent good characters in public will find doing so pleasant and will enjoy their own similarity to such goodness. The Athenian explains: “Performances given by choruses are representations of character, and deal with every aspect of action and incident...The individual performers enact their roles partly by expressing their own characters and partly by imitating others. That is why, when they find that the speaking or singing or any other element in the performance of a chorus appeals to their natural character or acquired habits, or both, they can’t help applauding with delight and using the term ‘good’” (655d-e).

To show that *mimēsis* is naturally pleasant, the Athenian first offers a purported etymology for the term “*choros*” that links it to “*chara*,” charm or joy (654a). He notes that all young animals share basic tendencies to move and make noises (653d7-654a5). However, humans have special abilities to modify their behaviors by perceiving types of order that make engaging in them even more pleasant: and whereas animals have no sense of order and disorder in movement (‘rhythm’ and ‘harmony’ as we call it), we human beings have been made sensitive to both *and can enjoy them* (653e-654a, our emphasis).

Plato speaks here of the recognition of order as a perception (*aisthēsis*). Such a perception must be *rational*, since both harmony and rhythm are forms of order (Pfefferkorn 2021: 345). The Athenian’s account of this role for *mimesis* is much more detailed in the *Laws* than the vague account of the value of mere exposure to excellent art in *Republic* III. We noted earlier that the *Republic* III account seems to presume that

¹³ See Freeland 2008 and 2019.

exposure to fine works of art will inspire young Guardians into emulation. However, this is quite different from the *Laws*, which insists on active training and public performance¹⁴. The Athenian explains that through the *mimēsis* of virtuous people, young people develop their natural rational abilities to recognize and embody *sōphrosynē*, the balance between pleasure and moderation. Such youths, with perceptions sharpened by training, will both recognize and enjoy the fact that they themselves resemble the good characters they portray.

Not only will the citizens of Magnesia have a duty to participate in *choreia*, but doing so will provide them with sustained and unlimited pleasures. The Athenian says, "... every man and child – free-man and slave, male and female – in fact the whole State – is in duty bound never to stop repeating to each other the charms we have described ... so that the performers always long to sing the songs and find perpetual pleasure in them" (665c). Pfeifferkorn comments, "Participation in *choreia* by all members of the city will thus sustain the city's virtue and harmony" (2021: 342).

In the new city of the *Laws*, practice in the arts is lifelong; it includes activities that range from actual performing to audience involvement while observing. The pleasures of *choreia* are shared, whether by large audiences at public festivals or among small groups of friends (typically men) at private symposia. A-E. Peponi adds that the audience would experience close engagement with dancers by registering diverse aspects of their performance: "While it is true that a large portion of performances involving dance were indeed an essential part of participatory civic rituals in various Greek cultures, a considerable number of these rituals took place in front of a larger body of citizens whose presence and delight are explicitly noted" (2015: 207). Not all ancient practices employed mimetic aspects of dance, but Peponi notes that even for those that did, audiences still took pleasure in assessing "the corporeal medium itself" (Peponi 2015: 209).

¹⁴ Thus we disagree with Halliwell (2021) who links *Republic* III to Book VI's account of what he calls the "assimilationist" position, which emphasizes emulation of fine things. He acknowledges that there is a difference between "emulation and performative engagement" (40), but misses the point that in the *Laws* "performative engagement" goes beyond just sitting in an audience, as it is understood to be both active and lifelong.

4. *Cosmic harmony in the Laws and beyond*

We have seen that *choreia* would function in the *Laws* to promote *sōphrōsynē* in both individuals and their audiences to mold and sustain civic virtue. But it may have had the even broader function of connecting the city to cosmic and divine forces, since performances were an essential part of civic religious festivals. In enjoying complex rhythms and harmonies, virtuous citizens would also reflect and reinforce the orderly movements of the heavens as a whole. The *Laws* envisions *choreia* as manifesting a truly unified and harmonious set of pleasurable bodily motions. Participants attain virtue through enacting the proper behavior of noble persons.

In Book VI of the *Laws*, the Athenian outlines a calendar of civic festivals (828a). Each month's performance will be dedicated to one of the twelve Olympian gods, and they will be held at the city's various temples to these gods, which are arranged in a circle at the outskirts of the city (778d-e). It is important for morality that the citizens reject atheism, and the Athenian argues that religious belief can be sustained through the study of astronomy. In a conversation with Clinias, he secures agreement that the gods in heaven follow principles of harmony and order in movements that are good and rational.

The *Laws*' account of the orderly motions of the stars evokes Pythagorean associations among harmony, ratios, geometry, and the soul. In Book X (895a-b) the Athenian extrapolates from premises about how self-motion characterizes a good human soul and its actions to describe the gods. The motion which moves in one place "necessarily implies continuous revolution around a central point ... and bears the closest possible affinity and likeness to the cyclical movement of reason" (898a).

These passages in the *Laws* recall similar ideas in Plato's *Timaeus*. The chief speaker there, the astronomer Timaeus, offers a "likely story" (*eikōs mythos*) of the creation and structuring of the cosmos by a "Demi-urge". This good godlike force organized the harmonious motions of all the heavenly bodies into circular orbits and molded material into elements which are geometrical solids. Living beings are compounds of matter and soul. The Demi-urge did his best making humans by placing rational forces of the soul within a round head, permitting us to experience the orderly circular motion of the cosmos with our soul's own rational circles. However, due to the head's necessary attachment to a body, these orderly motions are disrupted by erratic bodily movements of desire and disease. The *Timaeus* presents a dualistic picture: virtuous human souls must struggle against disorderly forces of the body. At best, we can promote psychic

order by regular exercises that protect our head's orderly thoughts, "in imitation of the structure of the universe" (88b-d)¹⁵. A good person's soul might eventually escape bodily existence to achieve union with a predestined star.

The *Timaeus*, then, does not offer the positive vision of soul-body harmony, or *sôphrosynē*, that we find in the *Laws*. The *Laws* envisions *choreia* as manifesting a truly unified and harmonious set of pleasurable bodily motions. Participants attain virtue through imitating, and indeed embodying, the proper and dignified behavior of noble persons. Together, these two dialogues, the *Laws* and the *Timaeus*, had a major influence upon later philosophers for centuries, and through them, upon the theory and practice of dance. The two texts were associated in translations or commentaries as Plato's works passed from ancient Athens and Rome through medieval philosophy and then into the Renaissance¹⁶ (Berghaus 48-51), when they became especially influential through new translations by Ficino (Berghaus 1992: 52), leading to the founding of new arts academies in both Italy and France.

5. *The Laws, the Timaeus, and the birth of ballet*

Plato's *Laws* and *Timaeus* have been with ballet from its beginnings in Renaissance Italy and France. In Italy, *balletto narrativo* grew out of a system of court dance developed in the early part of the 15th century. Manuals for court dance did not just provide practical instruction; they also used Platonic and Pythagorean principles to explain the moral and metaphysical significance of the art of dancing. Dance, one such manual explains, is a "natural product" of the "most gentle science of music" whose "measured and perfect harmonies ... relate to our intellect and our emotions ... giving us pleasure and stirring our affections, while at the same time linking our nature to the balanced composition of the four Empedoclean elements: fire, air, water, and earth" (Berghaus 1992: 57). With the kind of training his system provides, the author argues, the movements of the dedicated dancer become a "virtuoso contemplation" of universal harmonies and "offer insight into the rational order of the movements of

¹⁵ Kowalzig points out this even applies to babies, who should be rocked (2013: 197).

¹⁶ An invaluable resource on the transmission and impact of the *Timaeus* from antiquity to now is Reydam's-Schils 2003. The *Laws* greatly influenced Plotinus and, through him, the lengthy tradition of Neoplatonism; see Wade 2025 and Sheppard 2020.

the cosmos” (Berghaus 1992: 58). Another surviving document, Rinaldo Corso’s *Dialogue on dance*, argues that the true *telos*, even of narratively-based “theatrical dances”, is this kind of *mimēsis* of universal harmony. Although in its “outer form”, theatrical dance may “imitate human behavior” and have the dramatic structure of a five-act play, “underneath it imitates a more fundamental principle, that of ‘sweet, perfect harmony’” (Berghaus 1992: 57-8, emphasis ours).

When, in the French court of the Italian Catherine de Medici and her son, Charles IX, attention shifted more squarely to “theatrical” dance, this conception of what dance imitates remained central. Charles was guided by the conviction that the performing arts had an important role to play in bringing the “shattered chaotic surface of political life” back into harmony with the “rational and mathematical relations” that express the order of the cosmos. The aim of his new *Académie de Poésie et de Musique* (1570) was “to create a new kind of spectacle that would harmonize dance, music and language into a measured whole that more completely and perfectly imitated that order” (Homans 2010: 5). The spectacle which, according to historian Frances Yates, most perfectly realized that ambition was Balthazar de Beaujoyeulx’s *Le balet comique de la royne* (1581), which many scholars consider to be the first ballet (Yates 1946: 47; cited in Carter 1992: 25).

Beaujoyeulx, who was known as the “geometer”, reveals Platonic principles as he imitates the harmony that binds together the individual, *polis* (now a monarchy) and cosmos. Creating his choreography according to mathematical principles, he synthesized dance with music in complex patterns of steps designed to be viewed from above so that the geometry of their patterns could be appreciated. Like many ballets and court masques that followed it, *Le balet comique* was organized around different permutations of the number twelve. This number was especially significant for its “mystical meaning – the twelve-sided dodecahedron is the shape of the heavenly bodies (or quintessence), there are twelve signs of the Zodiac, the twelve apostles and so on” (Carter 1992: 28). The ballet was danced by twelve court ladies, led by Queen Louise, who all danced twelve different geometric figures culminating in a crescent facing the King. The meaning of this precision was clear: “to show that divine order and beauty can be imitated and achieved on earth when law and order are upheld” (Carter 1992: 27). In so doing, the artists adapted to a new form of political organization – a monarchy rather than a city-state – the idea that dance had a particular role to play in creating and sustaining a peaceful order among the individual, social/political world, and cosmos.

It was not just the new integrated spectacles like *Le balet comique* that bore the Pythagorean imprint of the *Timaeus*, but also the system of movement and bodily training that evolved to transform the body into a finer instrument for symbolizing cosmic harmony. That system was organized axiomatically around five basic positions of the body from which all “movements” in the system begin, and to which they all return. Just as mathematical practice explores the wealth of implications that unfold from a small set of simple “self-evident truths”, so ballet explores the astonishing wealth of movement possibilities that, for the well-trained dancer, unfold from this small set of bodily position¹⁷. This artistic exploration depended upon a rigorous system of daily training – ideally undertaken from early childhood – that slowly cultivates the right combination of strength, flexibility, and mental discipline to execute these movements with grace, clarity, and control.

This system of movement and techniques for training the body decisively outlasted the Renaissance interest in visualizing cosmic harmony that had brought it into being. Modern choreographers have continued to find ways to make new art that speaks powerfully to a world that no longer aspires to the kind of stability that the Athenian imagined for Magnesia, or the artists of the *Académie de Poésie et de Musique* for France. In the new world, questions of what forms of harmonious “hanging together” are possible are no less pressing than in Plato’s Greece or Renaissance Europe. Some of the ballets that have spoken most powerfully to a modern context remain addressed to the question of reimagining harmony in our new cosmos – no matter how fragile and partial that might be. We will make this argument in the next section by focusing on work of the choreographer who has arguably succeeded most deeply in creating a place for ballet in the contemporary world, George Balanchine.

¹⁷ For this reason, it should not be surprising – but somehow is! – that Descartes took a lively interest in this new art, and even tried his hand at writing the libretto for a ballet shortly before his death (Homans 2010: 9).

6. Sōphrosynē and New York City

As we have shown, the *Laws*, in combination with the *Timaeus*, could scarcely have been more important for ballet in its early stages of development. It might, though, seem unlikely that the concepts of *mimēsis* and *sōphrosynē* can shed much light on the living present of the art-form of ballet. Indeed, Carter suggests that dance conceived as a medium for reflecting and effecting harmony among “macrocosm, geocosm, and microcosm” is so far afield from our own ways of thinking that it is difficult to believe that such a conception was ever taken seriously (Carter 1992: 33). But ballet’s ancient inheritance has stayed with it insofar as its axiomatic technique building on basic figures has stayed with it, continuing to evolve and remaining at the heart of what distinguishes ballet from other forms of dance. The question of ballet’s place as a living art, then, is closely tied to the question of the possibilities to be found – or reinvented – in this technique. We will argue that the conceptual framework provided by the *Laws* and *Timaeus* can shed considerable light on some of the most powerful ways that have been found to answer this question.

To show this, we will focus on the person who has done the most to create a place for ballet in the contemporary world, the founding choreographer and artistic director of New York City Ballet, George Balanchine. Georgian-born Balanchine trained as a dancer at the Imperial School of Ballet in St. Petersburg, studied composition at the Petrograd Conservatory, and cut his teeth as a choreographer during the Bolshevik Revolution. In 1924, he fled to the West, first to Berlin and then to Paris, where he joined Serge Diaghilev’s *Ballets Russes* and met Igor Stravinsky, with whom he continued to collaborate until Stravinsky’s death in 1971. Balanchine arrived in the United States in 1933 at the invitation of Lincoln Kierstein, an important patron of the arts who dreamed of creating an American ballet that could reflect and flourish within an American present, instead of Russian and European past. Together, the two men founded the School of American Ballet in New York to train young American dancers to perform the new repertory that Balanchine had already begun to create.

Creating ballet that could flourish in 20th Century America was not primarily a matter of placing classical technique in the service of American themes and stories. True, Balanchine did create successful ballets which did just that – for example, *Western symphony* and *Stars and stripes*. However, the ballets that struck the deepest chord with City Ballet’s rap-

idly-growing audience were not those with updated stories and characters. They were, rather, ballets that dispensed with characterization and narrative altogether – along with sets and costumes. These modernist “black and white” ballets were performed by dancers dressed only in rehearsal clothes – i.e., black and white leotards and tights. Performed on a brightly-lit bare stage, there was nothing to distract attention from the essentials. These included the music, the shape and line of sculpted bodies, and Balanchine’s ever bolder experiments with the precision, balance, flexibility, and speed made possible by the rigors of training in classical technique.

With these black and white ballets, which registered as shockingly and thrillingly modern, Balanchine at the same time looks back most explicitly to ancient Greece. Consider for example, one of the earliest of the black and white masterpieces, *The four temperaments*. This ballet, originally subtitled “A ballet with no plot”, premiered on the program that inaugurated The Ballet Society in 1946. Its music was commissioned by Balanchine from German composer Paul Hindemith, who emigrated to the United States after his music was banned by the Nazis in 1940 as “cultural bolshevism” (Homans 2010: 268). The title refers to the ancient Hippocratic and Galenic theory of the four humors. In his description of the ballet, Balanchine describes that theory as his “point of departure”:

The Four T’s is an expression in dance and music of the ancient notion that the human organism is made up of four different humors, or temperaments. Each one of us possesses these four humors, but in different degrees, and it is from the dominance of one of them that the four physical and psychological types – melancholic, sanguinic, phlegmatic, and choleric – were derived. Greek medicine associated the four humors and temperaments with the four elements – earth, water, fire, and air – which to them composed the human body as well as the world. (Balanchine, Mason: 270)

Jennifer Homans argues that it was no accident that Balanchine turned to a “medical model” of the body at this pivotal point in his career, when a new form of “clinical attention” to the body was emerging in his choreography. According to the ancient model, Homans reminds us (2010: 270), “the body and emotions were thought to be governed by inner ‘humors’ or bodily fluids”, and “a person’s mental and physical health depends on keeping these precarious humors in balance”. However, the ballet Balanchine created was a physical and musical portrait not of the balanced body but of sick bodies in extreme states of anxiety and pain – bodies in which one of the humors has come to predominate unchecked. Homans

explains that this portrait was conveyed not through acting, narrative, or facial expression, but by “body alone”, and that it uses a new “physical language”. In short, Homans notes (2010: 272), this is when “abstraction in ballet begins”.

When Balanchine turned, at this pivotal point in his career, to an ancient medical model of the body, it was one that had mattered greatly for early ballet masters and choreographers. For Balanchine’s predecessors, though, this was not just a model of the body but of the “direct relation” between microcosm and macrocosm. Indeed, Balanchine acknowledges this direct relation in his description of theory, which concludes by calling attention to the correspondence between the four humors and the four elements “which to them composed the human body as well as the world”.

Given Balanchine’s own emphasis, we can conceive the shift evident in *The four temperaments* not as moving from representation to abstraction, as Homans said, but rather as replacing one kind of representation (or *mimēsis*) with another: namely, from the *mimēsis* of individual characters to the *mimēsis* of “character” in the sense of the structure of the soul, and, by extension, the peaceful city¹⁸.

In alluding to ancient medical theories of the four humors, *The four temperaments* uses a different theoretical account of harmony than the Platonic account of *sôphrosynê*. Nevertheless, this work still highlights a concern about how artistic performance can speak to broad issues about individual, social, and cosmic harmony. It draws attention to questions about the relation between the brokenness of bodies, rendered so starkly visible by Balanchine’s newly evolving “physical language”, and the brokenness of a world so recently devastated by World War II. In doing so, it asks the audience questions about what role, if any, remains for the traditional “bony spine of classical form” in a new macrocosm rendered terrifyingly “fluid” and chaotic by that breakdown (Homans 2010: 271).

However, in his new work, Balanchine shifts to a form that would work better in his time at achieving a primary aim of dance in the *Laws*. What we mean is that his new forms imitate not so much types of noble char-

¹⁸ Balanchine himself resisted descriptions of his works as “abstract”. He wrote, “I said on another occasion that no piece of music, no dance, can itself be abstract”. And further, “Does abstract mean that there is no story, no literary image....The dance has its own means of telling a story and need not invade the realm of the drama or the cinema. The quality of the movement and the choreographic idea decide whether the story is understandable. In most cases, the criterion of success or failure lies in the success of the subject matter” (Balanchine 1947: 81).

acter but instead the harmony (or in this case, the *breakdown* of harmony) of the soul. By extension, the ballet extends concern about this breakdown to the chorus. That is, it alerts the audience to how a more perfect harmony could be constitutive of the world of the dancers, and beyond, to that of a peaceful city.

The relevance of such questions to Balanchine's modernist ballet becomes clearer and more pressing if we turn to the ballet which, in Homans' words, represented the "culmination of years of work and experimentation", and the clearest "statement of his modernist style", *Agon*. Balanchine modestly conceived of *Agon* as a "ballet to end all ballets" (Homans 2022: 360)¹⁹. It premiered at City Center in 1957 to a newly commissioned score by Igor Stravinsky. Along with the earlier works *Apollon Musagetes* (1928) and *Orpheus* (1948), *Agon* formed a "triptych" of Greek-themed ballets that Balanchine and Stravinsky created together.

Each of the two earlier works, both highly stylized narrative ballets, had been an important watershed in its own right. Balanchine described *Apollon Musagetes* as the "turning point" of his life (2008: 83). *Apollon Musagetes* depicts the education of the god Apollo by the Muses of poetry, music, and dance. Stravinsky conceived it in Nietzschean terms as the "Apollonian" response to his storied collaboration with Vladislav Nijinsky on the *Ballets Russes's* "Dionysian" work *The rite of spring*. This "Apollonian" ballet was the first major collaboration between Balanchine and Stravinsky, and their first major success. *Orpheus* depicts the ancient musician's journey to rescue his beloved Eurydice in the underworld. It also marked an important turning point: the success of this production earned the itinerant Ballet Society an invitation to become the resident company for "City Center for Music and Dance", where it was renamed "The New York City Ballet".

Enthusiastically as they were received, neither *Apollo* nor *Orpheus* could match the wild furor with which audiences greeted the premiere of *Agon*. Marcel Duchamp said that only at the premiere of the *Ballets Russes's rite of spring* in 1913 had he witnessed and felt a comparable level of excitement about a new work. The critic Edwin Denby wrote, "the accumulated momentum of the piece leaps forward in one's imagination, suddenly enormous" (1986: 247). *Agon* was the ballet that most fully realized Kirstein's dream of a ballet for America. In this ballet Balanchine made contact with the America of its present moment – the late 1950's – in the

¹⁹ The quotation is taken from a letter from Lincoln Kirstein to Stravinsky, communicating Balanchine's idea for the ballet (Kirstein 1953).

most profound and thrilling way. Perhaps surprisingly, it is also the ballet for which the ancient concepts of *mimēsis* and *sōphrosynē*, as Plato unpacked them in the *Laws* and *Timaeus*, remain most explicitly and deeply relevant.

Agon looked to ancient Greece not for its setting, characters, and narrative structure, but for its philosophy. As Kirstein described the initial conception of the ballet in a letter to Stravinsky, August 31, 1953, Balanchine envisioned it as creating a “cosmic space” in which the dance forms that “began quite simply in the sixteenth century” could “take fire and explode”, waking up the “sleepwalking souls” of the twentieth century and offering a “new way to order life aligned with the eternal principles of music” (Homans 2022: 360). The basis for the *mimēsis* of this cosmic space, both musically and choreographically, was a copy of F. de Lauze’s seventeenth century dance manual, *Apologie de la danse*. That manual included excerpts of text and music from Lauze’s contemporary, Marin Mersenne, whose compositions and writing were steeped in Neoplatonic conceptions of music and dance.

Agon’s score and choreography both play exuberantly with the number mysticism that was so central in early ballets. Stravinsky’s first idea for a title included the phrase “Ballet for twelve dancers”, and it is not difficult to see why. *Agon* is, as Homans underscores, a ballet “about math”: “There are four parts, twelve sections, and dances for two, three, four, eight, twelve dancers that accumulate with astonishing precision as dancers tear across the stage, bend, contort, toe shoes digging, pulling, striking their way through intricate footwork, legs flying, switchbacks, acrobatic extensions, gracious bow, physical and musical wit, and always on time (the pulse, the pulse)” (Homans 2016: 34).

In his program notes for the premiere, Balanchine placed this ancient and Renaissance number mysticism into the context of the contemporary fervor about math swirling around the invention of early electronic computers. *Agon*, he wrote, was like “an IBM electronic computer...a machine, but a machine that thinks” (quoted in Homans 2022: 375). The electrifying pleasure the ballet afforded is deeply tied to its math. Dancers were required to navigate unprecedented rhythmic challenges posed by the score and choreography. Homans writes, “We hang on every beat, and the experience is intense, engrossing, but also joyful and fun, because it is fun to be on time and in time – to divide, count, multiply, keep up. When on opening night Melissa Hayden coolly resolved the competing rhythms in her riveting dance, the audience, [one critic reported] ‘caught

the acute edge of risk' and broke into a spontaneous 'roar' of applause" (Homans 2022: 372).

Agon, then, gives us an intensely joyful yet rigorously structured "cosmic space" that looks back to the ancient mathematically-structured harmonies that govern both microcosm and macrocosm. At the same time, the ballet looks forward to the no less mathematically-inflected wonders of computer science and the horizon of artificial intelligence. This in turn raises a distinctly contemporary version of the age-old question about the role that dance, and in particular the axiomatic rigors of ballet technique, can play in helping things hang together – how, that is, dance might help the world of the present cohere harmoniously with both its past and future.

New versions of the old questions about art's social role multiply if we turn our attention to *Agon's* extraordinary *pas de deux*. It is the longest and most sustained dance in the ballet and is radically distinct from the rest of the ballet, both musically and choreographically. As musicologist and dance scholar Stephanie Jordan emphasizes, "here, for the first time, the tempo is adagio", and there is a fundamental change in the breath rhythm of the dancers. This is "manifest in the long sustained lines of intertwining and stretching motion, which Arthur Mitchell, on whom the dance was created describes as 'one long, long, long, long breath'" (Jordan 1993: 17). This is the only part of *Agon* that is not counted, and it allows the dancers to have some freedom to set their own tempo. As one of the ballet's most significant interpreters, Wendy Whelan, put it in an interview with dance scholar Stephanie Jordan, the *pas de deux* is the "core" or "soul" of the ballet, the part that dramatizes the "spirit of the contest" (Jordan 2022: 1:24:15-01:26:41).

There are, in fact, multiple forms of *agon* dramatized in the *pas de deux*, all of them at the time shockingly contemporary. The sequence highlights, for one, the *agon* that lay at the heart of the nascent women's liberation movement, dramatized in the precarious and tension-filled choreography, which was "overtly sexual" without being "steamy or passionate." It often involved the man manipulating the flexible but "practically inert" limbs of the woman's body into extreme extensions and poses that left her "gripping her partner's hand, arms quivering with effort as she fought to stay balanced" (Homans 2022: 372).

There were at the same time the even more profound and destabilizing forms of *agon* at the heart of the civil rights movement, which were intensifying in 1957. Balanchine created the *pas de deux* on Arthur Mitchell, one of the few Black dancers in classical dance at the time, and Diana Adams, the palest and most reserved of Balanchine's principal dancers.

Reflecting on the experience in an interview, Mitchell recalled Balanchine telling him, “[T]his *pas de deux* has taken me longer than anything in my life to choreograph because it has to be right”. “To take a young black male and put him with a beautiful – and Diana Adams was one of the great patrician-type ballerinas – was unheard of. He used color, my color, against Diana’s, because she was very pale, so that the color was part of the texture along with the steps. It was an incredible experience” (Mitchell 2009).

At a time when Black and white artists rarely occupied the same stage, Balanchine placed at the “heart” of his ballet not just a duet between a Black man and white woman, but one full of intimacy and sexual tension. As if this were not enough, the *pas de deux* at the same time dramatized the agonizing international tragedy of the polio epidemic. This agony was deeply personal for Balanchine, whose wife, the principal dancer Tanaquil Le Clercq, was permanently disabled by polio in 1956. Those dancers who knew what kind of “partnering” Balanchine had done with Le Clercq in physical therapy could see the way it shaped the choreography as Mitchell supported and manipulated the extraordinarily flexible limbs of Diana Adams, which at times appeared to be almost completely passive and inert.

Agon, used in the dance’s title, is a multifaceted Greek word which can designate a contest, battle, agony, or struggle. The dance dramatizes breakdowns of harmony at multiple levels of both microcosm and macrocosm: the breakdown of the human body ravaged by polio, as well as breakdowns of the social and political order undermined by sexual tensions and racial violence. But it also creates a context for those breakdowns: a “cosmic space” of stable structure. The question it raises is whether those stable structures could still have a meaningful role to play in helping this world – the democratically structured world of America in the 1950’s (or, for that matter, the present) – cohere. The good city envisioned in *The Laws*, of a *polis* stable and (mostly) immune from outside forces, surely has little purchase on the democratic world of America in the 1950’s (or the present). Any form of harmony that could be possible for the new world is surely far more fragile, partial, and mutable. Nevertheless, the need to find our way to some such form of hanging together, both as individuals and as a nation, is no less pressing.

Reflection on how *Agon* itself is structured, we would argue, suggests two significant ways that ballet as an artform might continue to help us find our way to new forms of harmony. The first way is to aid the imaginative effort to envision the conditions of finding new forms of hanging together. *Agon* does this by putting those contemporary agonies which

most deeply threaten our capacity to cohere harmoniously (whether as individuals or as a nation) into a larger context by connecting them with agonies of the past and hopes for the future. The second way a ballet can work is a function of the discerning enjoyment afforded by the “math dances” that surround *Agon*’s central *pas de deux*. By immersing us, the audience, in the joyful pleasures of following the dancers through unprecedented counting and rhythmic challenges, it can help place us more fully in possession of our capacities as a whole person. These will surely be necessary if we are to have a chance of responding constructively to the agonies of the present world instead of breaking down in fear or rage. Of course, *Agon* does not guarantee that its joyful pleasures have this kind of efficacy. To hold out the hope that it might is to find a foothold in the contemporary world for (something like) the Platonic concept of *sōphrosynē*.

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