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Sophie Benn

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Balanchine and Kirstein's American Enterprise. By James Steichen. New York: Oxford University Press, 2019.

Sophie Benn

Western Kentucky University, Bowling Green, KY, USA

Balanchine and Kirstein's American Enterprise invites a reconsideration of the narrative surrounding the early years of George Balanchine's residency in the United States, when Lincoln Kirstein played a substantial role in installing the choreographer into US artistic life. James Steichen is forthright about the book's methodological orientation and, after a brief thirteen-page introduction, he launches into the historical record. His prose is laced with plentiful quotations and paraphrases and supplemented with a few well-chosen photographs and reproductions of concert programs. The temporal scope of the book is carefully circumscribed and is confined to Balanchine's and Kirstein's activities between 1933 and 1940. As Steichen makes clear, this brief period was a crucial one for the formation of US dance institutions: between the end of the first iteration of the Ballets Russes in 1929 and the ascendancy of the companies now known as American Ballet Theatre and New York City Ballet in the 1940s, there was furious competition among companies and dancers at the top echelons of ballet in both Europe and the United States. It was also a pivotal time, both personally and professionally, for Balanchine and Kirstein, and it is fascinating to witness—through primary documentation—the development of both men's notions of themselves as they grappled with this chaotic artistic landscape.

Steichen's word choices in the title—"Balanchine and Kirstein," "American," and "Enterprise"—illustrate the pillars of his argument. First, Kirstein and Balanchine are presented

as equal partners who often diverged in their opinions and projects. They were strong-willed and individualistic men who had an uneasy working relationship. Second, the projects they created both separately and together toyed with notions of US American identity, a fraught concept in ballet. At the time, ballet was considered equivalent to its Russian interpreters and its French origins and, according to one quoted reviewer, was downright “foreign to the American idiom” (108). Both the newly immigrated Balanchine and the US, East Coast patrician Kirstein are therefore revealed to have had complex and unstable relationships with questions of a national personality. Third, Steichen argues that their activities in the period were not limited to a small roster of organizations, but instead amounted to a complex and ever-shifting enterprise that encompassed ballet schools, companies, touring expeditions, Broadway musicals, and Hollywood films. Importantly, he treats all of these branches of the Balanchine-Kirstein enterprise with equal care.

Of the two “great men” in the book’s title, one looms rather larger than the other in Steichen’s recounting. Lincoln Kirstein, whose diaries and letters form the backbone for most of the book’s unfolding, is drawn with more personality and fine-grained detail than his collaborator. Kirstein was a prolific diarist and correspondent and his written accounts provide a trove of vibrant particulars. For example, a set of letters to Kirstein’s friend Muriel Draper contain colorful (often profane and occasionally bigoted) observations of life on the road with Ballet Caravan during their transnational tour in 1938, and the tidbits that Steichen selects make this reviewer yearn to read the correspondence in its entirety. Steichen’s reliance on Kirstein’s own words is particularly substantial in moments that are otherwise thinly documented in the primary record, such as the early years of the Balanchine-Kirstein enterprise. On occasion, Kirstein’s diaries seem to offer the only extant, detailed account of the workings of their various

organizations. The author's admirable synthesis of multiple strands of primary material shines brightest in the later chapters of the book, where there is more extensive coverage from newspapers, magazines, and other ephemera. In these moments, Steichen is able to contrast external accounts of the pair's activities with the observations from those within the company, creating a rich dialogue that is complex and often contradictory.

In the 1930s, many of the features that are most associated with Balanchine's artistry remained latent. For example, while a shared investment in Neoclassicism defined the collaborations between Balanchine and Stravinsky that figure heavily in the reputation of both artists, Neoclassicism was only one of a number of styles that interested the choreographer. In fact, Stravinsky and Balanchine did not collaborate much at all in this period, only renewing their association for a triumphant 1937 festival dedicated to the composer. Furthermore, it was not clear that Balanchine would be remembered as a choreographer of prestige ballets at all. His national reputation was in ascendancy at the end of the decade, but Steichen asserts that he primarily was known as a choreographer on Broadway and for film. Steichen thus provides numerous close readings of Balanchine's Broadway shows, including the Rogers and Hart musicals, *On Your Toes* (1936), *Babes in Arms* (1937), and *I Married an Angel* (1938). Some of these details are not readily available elsewhere and contribute a rich dimensionality to our understanding of Balanchine's work. Steichen's book also maintains the centrality of Vera Zorina, Balanchine's wife from 1938–1946. Most of the dances he created for the popular stage and screen in these years starred Zorina, enveloping her in the resplendent, glamorous idioms of Depression-era escapist theater and film. Her dancing was never far from Balanchine's creative imagination in this period and Steichen asserts that his work in the late 1930s was “profoundly affected by, and arguably premised upon” his relationship with her (169). This insight is but one

example of Steichen's welcome intervention in the mythologizing of Balanchine as the lone genius, *pater familias* of US American ballet—a narrative that he alludes to and challenges from the very beginning of the introduction.

The work is presented in a strict chronological fashion with ten chapters that are titled with the years they recount. Although the author raises many of the complex issues surrounding ballet's figures and their institutions, he does not dwell in analytical, cultural-historical, or hermeneutic modes for very long. Instead, Steichen adopts a "set-the-record-straight" type of narrative style that leaves room for other scholars to develop what he has revealed here. Elsewhere, however, one craves a stronger sense of framing and ideological staking. For example, a more extended engagement with Balanchine's notions of race and US dancing cultures would have provided some useful context for the choreographer's work, since he frequently collaborated with African American dancers and worked within popular idioms. These points of contact have the potential to reveal much about Balanchine's shifting notions of US American identity. Steichen seems interested in these matters, but he does not invest in them at length. Moreover, like the enterprises described therein, the book offers little sense of closure at its end and it is unclear why Steichen concludes his work in 1940, only seven years after Balanchine's arrival in the United States. Indeed, the strands that Steichen pursues throughout the book's course were beginning to unravel by 1940, but in no conclusory or final way. And despite the distance that had developed between Balanchine and Kirstein, their collaborations were hardly finished—as the founding of New York City Ballet in 1948 would prove. A continuation of such carefully researched work into the 1940s would therefore have been welcome.

One of Steichen's central goals is to equally illuminate the pair's failures and successes, giving scholars a more balanced portrait of their endeavors than those found in institutional histories from the New York City Ballet and other related organizations. The book reveals the trial-and-error approach that Balanchine and Kirstein seem to have adopted in this period, which results in a much more useful and interesting story than any narrative of ascendancy could achieve. To overlook the pair's missteps would be to miss many illuminating moments in their activities. Indeed, one of the most conspicuous of these was the installment of the American Ballet as the resident company of the Metropolitan Opera—a period of three years that “have been construed as an unfortunate detour at best or a Babylonian captivity at worst” (103). By examining the reception of Balanchine's works for the Metropolitan Opera, Steichen shows that some of his experiments with Kirstein may have been ill-conceived from the beginning.

Balanchine and Kirstein's American Enterprise does exactly what an excellent, archivally rooted book should: it invites new connections, opens avenues for interpretation, and raises questions to be taken up elsewhere. It will no doubt prove a useful contribution to scholars invested in any number of overlapping concerns, many of which do not start with the title's pair of figures. These topics might include constructions of US American identity, aesthetic modernism in the 1930s, ballet in the post-Ballets Russes vacuum, institutional development, Depression-era arts economics, competing notions of Americanism and Europeanism, or interactions between “highbrow” and “middlebrow” in the interwar period. Writing in his eminently readable and engaging prose, Steichen provides scholars with new materials and revisionist perspectives on a critical decade of US dance history.

Sophie Benn is assistant professor of music history and literature at Western Kentucky University. Recent and forthcoming publications explore topics in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century dance theory, social dance on early film, and cello literature. She serves as the chair of the Dance Studies Association's Dance and Music Working Group, and also maintains an active career as a cellist and baroque cellist.