Lana Jones and Adam Bull in *Ballet Imperial*, 2014
Choreography by George Balanchine, ©The George Balanchine Trust
Photography David Kelly

AN IMPERIAL EDUCATION

The choreographer George Balanchine was a child of both Tsarist Russia and the Revolution. Caitlyn Lehmann explores his early life and its influence on his style.

Artists of The Australian Ballet in *Ballet Imperial*
Choreography by George Balanchine, ©The George Balanchine Trust
Photography David Kelly

George Balanchine was a creative giant of the 20th century, hailed as the father of modern classical ballet and revered in America as the man who elevated "toe dancing" from a novelty to an art form. One of ballet's most musically gifted choreographers, his works range from traditional full-length story ballets to pieces of sophisticated abstraction. They reflect Balanchine's extraordinary ability to synthesise ballet with other styles and influences, varying from the subtlest intimations of jazz in his thrillingly modernist *The Four Temperaments* (1946) to the high-spirited hoedowns of his popular *Western Symphony* (1954).

Ballet Imperial, created during Balanchine's first decade in America, reveals a similar synthesis of influences even as it celebrates the purity of classical technique. It has been endearingly described as one of Balanchine's "Tchaikovsky gut-crunchers" for the ballerina, from whom it demands exceptional control, speed and pinpoint turns. From the audience's perspective, it is a work that can be enjoyed on many levels, offering a sumptuous vision of tutu elegance and dancing that unfolds in ever more complex structures. Yet *Ballet Imperial* is a deceptive title: it is a homage to ballet's imperial Russian past, but it delivers that homage in entirely "republican" terms.

Born in St Petersburg in 1904, Georgi Balanchivadze was a child witness to the sophistication and splendour of Russia's late imperial capital. In the years preceding the 1917 revolution, he absorbed the riches of the city's vibrant cultural life, studying music in the family home before finding himself a reluctant student at the Imperial Theatre Ballet School. Upon enrolment, George became a member of the Tsar's extended court, his education paid for from the imperial coffers, his bed made each morning by servants wearing livery. Although the school had its spartan aspects – it was a lonely and regimented experience for the young boy at first – it propelled Balanchine headlong into the brilliant world of the Mariinsky Ballet and the glamorous court it served.

Nicolas II, Russia's ill-fated last Tsar, took a liberal interest in ballet (his mistress was the Mariinsky's reigning ballerina), and the students were imbued with respect for the royal family's beneficence. After dancing in a special performance of the Tsar's favourite ballet, *The Little Humpbacked Horse*, George was among the students taken to meet the imperial family in their opera box. The students were given chocolate in silver boxes and porcelain mugs bearing the imperial monogram. The royal box, George recalled, was "like a colossal apartment: chandeliers, the walls covered in light blue." However, it was a man rather than an emperor who stepped forward to greet them. The Tsar, George noted, was not very tall and "had protruding light-colored eyes, and he rolled his Rs". The women were more imposing in their sumptuous dresses and finery. Empress Alexandra "was a very tall, beautiful woman" and her daughters, George remembered, "also beauties."

As a student, Balanchine was given small roles in many productions created by the illustrious choreographer Marius Petipa – the man responsible for ballet favourites such as *Swan Lake, Sleeping Beauty, Raymonda* and *La Bayadère.* Petipa had died, at the age of 92, just three years before George had entered the school, and the old master remained a living presence for the company's dancers and George's teachers. But St Petersburg was not a city in thrall to the past, and George was equally a product of Russia's extraordinary Silver Age. The cultural renaissance that swept early 20th-century Russia saw artistic traditions enhanced and rejuvenated by the dynamism of the avant garde. Many of the Mariinsky's dancers supplemented their homeland appearances with performances in Western Europe as members of Diaghilev's fashionable Ballets Russes. In Paris they danced the most groundbreaking ballets by choreographer Michel Fokine and their colleague Vaslav Nijinsky. Fokine's ballets for the Mariinsky ballet were also innovative, encompassing "tone poems" that used new musical forms, and Oriental fantasies that subordinated showy technique to dramatic expression.

That surge of creative experimentation, intensified by wartime privations and the chaos of revolution,

Brett Simon, Rudy Hawkes and Amy Harris in *Ballet Imperial*
Choreography by George Balanchine, ©The George Balanchine Trust
Photography David Kelly

lasted until the early 1920s. Balanchine was still an adolescent trying to complete his training when the old, glittering St Petersburg of his childhood was swept away. Bustling streets of elegantly attired men and women gave way to lonely thoroughfares, their neoclassical facades pock-marked by gunfire. By 1919, half the city's two million inhabitants had fled or died. The Mariinsky ballet, stripped of royal patronage, struggled on under vacillating revolutionary authorities. One by one, its leading artists slipped across the borders, including the revered ballerina Tamara Karsavina, who described the city she left behind as "a pathetic majesty of desecrated pomp." Left with a fluctuating covey of teachers, the students went without fuel for heating or pointe shoes for dancing. Balanchine suffered boils on his skin from malnutrition.

Yet amid the shortages and uncertainties, George encountered some of the most radical choreographic innovations of the time. In Moscow, ex-Mariinsky dancer Kasyan Goleizovsky was creating highly experimental ballets, which toured St Petersburg (by now Petrograd) during the summer months. Goleizovsky's dances used abstract symbolism, the music of modern composers like Scriabin and costumes that left arms and legs bare. In Petrograd itself, George and his fellow students began working with choreographer Fedor Lopukhov on perhaps the most influential ballet of the period, one that would establish an entirely new genre.

Lopukhov's ballet *The Magnificence of the Universe* (1922) was the first "dance symphony", a work of pure dance that subordinated movement to music and dispensed entirely with plot. Daringly set to Beethoven's Fourth Symphony – music usually reserved for the concert hall – Lopukhov's ballet used dance to evoke the complex ideas and shapes suggested by the music. It established a model that Balanchine would turn to repeatedly throughout his own choreographic career. At the first private performance of the work, those present recognised "the extraordinary significance" of Lopukhov's achievement, with its episodes depicting "Eternal Motion", "Thermal Energy" and "The Birth of Light". Unhappily though, events conspired against the ballet's public premiere and the work was jeered at and abandoned.

Left with a fluctuating covey of teachers, the students went without fuel for heating or pointe shoes for dancing. Balanchine suffered boils on his skin from malnutrition.

Ballet Imperial, created two decades later, owes a debt to Lopukhov's vision even as it draws inspiration from the classical vocabulary of Petipa and the grand spectacles of the Mariinsky's 19th-century ballets. In Tchaikovsky's music, Balanchine finds the means to evoke a bygone era without recourse to plot. Like Beethoven's symphony, Tchaikovsky's *Piano Concerto No. 2* was considered unconventional music for dance at the time – indeed, Balanchine made it something of a mission to feature the music of Tchaikovsky, who was little known in America when he arrived there. Over the years, changing tastes have seen the designs for *Ballet Imperial* progressively simplified to bring the dancing into sharper focus. The original backdrop of the ballet showed a view across the Neva to the fortress of Peter and Paul, framed by drapes of blue velvet and large St Stanislaus crosses. The ballerina wore a bodice with a ducal sash; her cavalier sported lace sleeves and a collar of white ermine.

Like many Russian exiles, Balanchine always looked back fondly on the glamorous world of his early childhood. Having been shielded in the Imperial Ballet School from the injustices and hardships that provoked the Bolshevik rebellion, he could be forgiven for taking a romantic view of the past. Nevertheless, the vagaries of American capitalism also taught him genuine appreciation for the security and resources that royal patronage had offered. "How wonderful it was to be under imperial patronage," he reflected after the School of American Ballet and the New York City Ballet had been established, "We didn't have to look for money from rich merchants or bankers."

Ironically, the quest for funding was precisely what brought *Ballet Imperial* into being. In 1941, Balanchine was casting about for means to support a small company when the US government announced plans to forge closer cultural and commercial relations with the southern American republics. The upshot was a subsidy for the choreographer to put together a touring group, and *Ballet Imperial* was tailor-made for the expedition. The premiere took place in Rio, ending in a rapturous reception and 18 curtain calls. The work was later danced with great success by Margot Fonteyn and the Sadler's Wells Ballet, and has since been taken into the repertoires of companies around the world.

Today Balanchine's imperial St Petersburg is a hundred years away and the splendours – and excesses – of absolute monarchy as much historical fiction as fact for contemporary audiences. Yet *Ballet Imperial* still brings into the present the elegance and technical mastery that made the Tsar's dancers such celebrated exponents of their art. "It was good that our tsar had respect for music and art. That was the tsarist tradition," Balanchine once mused. A perfect union of majesty and modernity, *Ballet Imperial* has something for the tsar and the revolutionary in us all.

Dr Caitlyn Lehmann is a cultural historian specialising in dance history and 18th-century studies

Marilyn Rowe and artists of
The Australian Ballet in *Ballet Imperial*, 1967
Choreography by George Balanchine, ©The George Balanchine Trust
Photography Paul Cox