

Recording a dream

With the help of Company Dance Notator, Patricia Tierney, we look into the history and notation of Ashton's *The Dream*



Patricia Tierney; photo: Andrew Ross

One of Shakespeare's most famous plays, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, has been subjected to numerous treatments and manipulations at the hands of more recent creative artists. As well as being a regular in repertory theatres, it has been adapted for seven films, and the story and/or characters have made their way into books, musicals, operas, and, of course, ballets.

1964 saw the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's birth, and Frederick Ashton was to create a new Shakespeare ballet to feature in a triple bill with Kenneth MacMillan's *Images of Love* and a revival of Robert Helpmann's *Hamlet*. He approached John Lanchbery, his regular musical collaborator (who had arranged the scores for *La Fille mal gardée* and *The Two Pigeons*), about using Felix Mendelssohn's famous music for his ballet.

Lanchbery agreed, but did not stick exactly with the music as Mendelssohn wrote it. Instead he moulded it to fit Ashton's needs. For example the 'Nocturne', which Mendelssohn used to link two of the lovers' scenes, becomes Oberon and Titania's final reconciliatory *pas de deux*; the 'Dance of the Clowns', which Mendelssohn associated with the performance of Pyramus and Thisbe, Lanchbery associates with Bottom.

The plot for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is notoriously complicated, so Ashton skilfully streamlined it by concentrating on the fairies and the four lovers. The events in Athens and the 'play within the play' are gone. The ballet opens in the woods outside Athens with a quarrel between Oberon and Titania, the king and queen of the fairies. Oberon wants Titania's changeling

boy to be his page, but she refuses. Oberon's decision to get his own back sets in motion the somewhat ridiculous, though highly entertaining tale of misused potions, lovers falling for the wrong partners and the fairy queen falling in love with a donkey!

When the ballet is staged next year, Birmingham Royal Ballet will use the original score, recorded by The Royal Ballet's first choreologist, Faith Worth, in 1964. The original cast included Anthony Dowell as Oberon, Antoinette Sibley as Titania, Wayne Sleep as Puck and Alexander Grant as Bottom. *Choreography* © Frederick Ashton, London 1964. All rights reserved. Notated in Benesh Movement Notation™. Benesh Notation Editor © The Benesh Institute 2002.

A brief guide to Benesh Notation

Each symbol on the stave depicts the position of a part of the dancer's body, or a prop that features. These are written within five-line staves, each referring to the positions of the extremities (hands, feet, elbows and knees) in relation to different parts of the body:

Top of head	
Top of shoulders	
Waist	
Knees	
Floor line	

There are three basic symbols marking positions of hands and feet in relation to the body within the five areas on the staff:

Basic positions (hands and feet)

- level
- | in front
- behind

Equally, there are three basic symbols showing the positions of the elbows and knees:

Basic positions (knees and elbows)

- level
- | in front
- x behind

Although the same symbols are used to represent both hands/feet and elbows/knees, if the symbol is below the waist, it is assumed that it is a foot or knee; above the waist, a hand or elbow.

Bends in the body and tilts of the head are also represented. Lines in the centre of the frame indicate any body or head position other than upright.

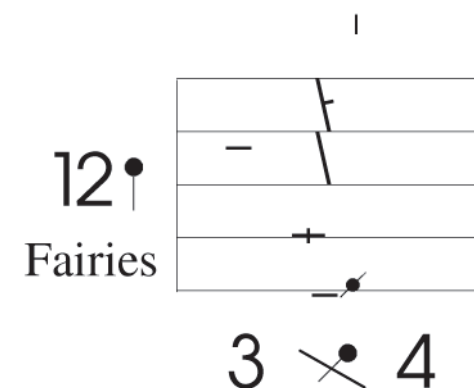
Basic positions (torso and head)

- / tilt to right
- \ tilt to left
- ⊕ bend forwards
- † bend backwards
- ⊥ turn to right
- ⊥ turn to left

Above the staff, dancers' counts, musical beats and props are noted. Below the staff, jump/step and 'travel' lines indicate motion, and stage locations and relationships with other characters are noted between the two characters' staves. The notation for any simultaneous action appears vertically on the staff, one character above the other.

The movement is notated as though standing on the stage looking at the back of the dancer, so the photographs appear to show a mirror image. The following are three examples of the notation from *The Dream*.

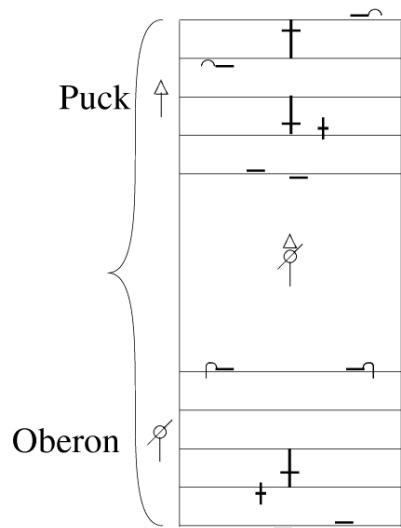
Example 1: 12 Fairies



Information to the left of the staff indicates that there are 12 fairies, and below the staff, their positioning is noted. In this case, three lines of four, facing diagonally up-stage-right. From top to bottom:

- The right arm is raised, forward of the body, above 'top of head' level.
- The head is tilted to the left and turned slightly to the right.
- The body is bent slightly to the left and the left arm is held to the side, level with the body.
- The left knee is bent, level with the body.
- The right foot is flat on the floor (indicated by the symbol being slightly below the floor line); the left foot (●) is crossed, behind the right, the dash through the 'behind' symbol showing that the foot is **not** the right foot. That the foot is on pointe is shown by the symbol resting on the floor line.

Example 2: Puck and Oberon



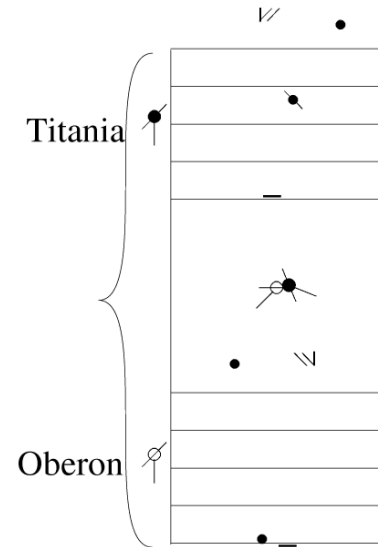
Oberon and Puck are almost in mirror image, and standing in front of each other, as shown by the relationship symbols between the two staves. Like all symbols in Benesh notation, if they are not necessary, they don't normally appear. However, as both characters have to have their wrists in particular positions, they have notation attached to their 'level' hand symbols (—) to show this:

Basic positions (wrist facing)

- ∪ ∪ front
- ∩ ∩ behind
- ∪ ∩ upwards
- ∩ ∪ downwards

Additionally, both have body bends noted, Oberon's a slight forward tilt, and Puck's a large forward bend of the body and backwards tilt of the head. Both characters' feet are level with the body, but one is flat on the floor, whilst the other is touching with the toe, hence them appearing on opposite sides of the floor line.

Example 3: Titania and Oberon



This example introduces the concept of contact between two dancers. *Pas de deux* involve complicated grips, which are not notated precisely, but indicated by 'contact' signs, always reciprocated in the notation for the dancer being contacted. These can be attached to an extremity or body surface. In the example above, it is the hands making contact:

Basic positions (hand contact)

- ↘ level, contacting to the right
- ↙ level, contacting to the left
- ↘ in front, contacting to the right
- ↙ in front, contacting to the left
- behind, contacting to the right
- behind, contacting to the left

Titania's left and Oberon's right hand are in contact. There are no body lines as both bodies are upright; Oberon's left foot is behind and touching the floor with his toe; Titania's right foot (●) has a slash through it, showing that although it is above centre, it is a foot and not a hand.