

ISADORA DUNCAN'S SEVENTH SYMPHONY IN THE NETHERLANDS. REACTIONS
TO HER CHOICE AND INTERPRETATION OF THE MUSIC

Nancy de Wilde

Isadora Duncan danced her Seventh Symphony to the music of the same name by Ludwig van Beethoven in the Netherlands in October 1907. Duncan was then thirty years old and a famous dancer in Europe, especially in France, Germany and Russia.¹ She danced regularly in the Netherlands in the years 1905, 1906 and 1907.² Since about 1890 there had been no ballet performances in the Netherlands, but there did exist a culture of music, drama, literature and visual arts. The performances of Duncan were reviewed mainly by music and drama critics.³ From April 1905 up to and including April 1907 Isadora Duncan had success in the Netherlands: she got predominantly positive reviews and drew relatively full houses. In October 1907 she was a famous dancer in the Netherlands.

One of the innovations in theater dance by Isadora Duncan was that she danced to existing music. She did not have music composed for her, as was customary around 1900 in ballet and popular theater dance; she also did not use improvised music according to fixed patterns, as was often customary in folk dance, social dance and ballet classes. Up to and including the tour in April 1907 Duncan's choice of music was predominantly well-received in the Netherlands, because she danced mainly with instrumental opera music and with dance music, that is music that was composed for social dance or that was named after a social dance.⁴ One critic wrote about the Chopin-Schubert Evening (sometimes also called Waltz-Evening) that the waltzes were not written to dance to and that the rhythm was too fast.⁵ Several writers criticized the interpretation of the music; they thought that the waltzes resembled each other too much or they had imagined something else to the music. Most of them however were enthusiastic about the Chopin-Schubert Evening, as they were about the Dance Idylls and Iphigénie programs.

Isadora Duncan danced the Seventh Symphony three times in the Netherlands. The first performance was on Thursday night October 17 1907 in the Large Theater in Rotterdam, with an intermission

between the movements two and three.⁶ The intermission was inserted contrary to Duncan's wishes, according to Frits Lapidoth.⁷ This Dutch drama critic was exceptionally enthusiastic about Duncan's work since 1905. He was the founder of the Dutch department of the German Society for the Support and Maintenance of the Dance School of Isadora Duncan and wrote many positive reviews and articles about her. In her autobiography Duncan mentioned his regular visits to her, when she lived in Noordwijk aan Zee in the Netherlands.⁸

On Monday night October 28 Duncan danced the Seventh Symphony in the Building for Arts and Sciences in The Hague.⁹ Before the intermission Duncan did not dance: the orchestra played the overture Leonore Number 3 by Beethoven and George Shapiro, Duncan's pianist and conductor, played Beethoven's Sonata for Piano Opus 31 Number 2. After the intermission Duncan danced the Seventh Symphony.

The third performance was on Thursday night October 31 in the Municipal Theater in Amsterdam.¹⁰ Before the intermission Duncan danced the Seventh Symphony, after the intermission she danced the world premiere of Five Spanish Dances to the orchestrated music of the same name by Moritz Moszkowski. In Rotterdam and The Hague she had given one of the Five Spanish Dances as encore.¹¹ In Amsterdam she gave the waltz Christmas by Peter Tchaikovsky from The Seasons in orchestrated version as encore.¹²

In Rotterdam and Amsterdam Duncan was accompanied by the Utrecht Municipal Orchestra, in The Hague by the Residentie Orchestra, all three times conducted by George Shapiro. During earlier Dutch tours Duncan was accompanied by the Haarlem Municipal Music Band, that continuously played badly according to many reviews, her conductor Martin Shaw and Duncan herself. In March 1907 Duncan wrote about the Utrecht Municipal Orchestra, with which she had not worked earlier: "I wouldn't mind dancing B(eethoven), if he (Willem Stumpff, her Dutch impresario¹³) has a really first class symphonic orchestra - not the Utrecht one - it wouldn't be fair. Every orchestra has the notes."¹⁴ Now that she had better orchestras from Willem Stumpff, some critics criticized the conducting of George Shapiro in comparison with that of one of the permanent conductors.¹⁵

Isadora Duncan choreographed the Seventh Symphony in the beginning of 1904 in Germany and gave the premiere in April 1904 in the Trocadéro in Paris.¹⁶ In Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft Richard Wagner called Beethoven's Seventh Symphony the apotheosis of the dance.¹⁷ In 1904 Wagner and Beethoven were beloved composers for Duncan. Probably Duncan knew Wagner's characterization of the Seventh, that will have been the reason that she chose this symphony.

Not many descriptions of the choreography of the Seventh Symphony, a piece that remained nineteen years in Duncan's repertory,¹⁸ have been published. In February 1905 the Russian critic Vilkina compared Duncan with a flutist on a Etruscan vase, with Botticelli's Venus, with a maenad and with an Amazon.¹⁹ In November 1909 the American critic Carl Van Vechten compared Duncan in the Seventh Symphony with the headless sculpture of Nike of Samothrace in the Louvre.²⁰ The Dutch reviews give some additional information about the choreography.

Duncan let the first movement of the symphony be played as a musical introduction and danced the remaining three movements. After the movements two and three she took applause and there were short pauses in which she changed her costume.²¹ For the second movement (Allegretto) she wore a white dress, for the third movement (Presto-Assai Meno Presto) a pink dress and for the fourth movement (Allegro Con Brio) a red and green dress. She wore her hair loose.²²

In Rotterdam the orchestra was visible, probably on stage, which disturbed the illusion according to Frits Lapidoth. The placement of the orchestra in The Hague is unknown; in Amsterdam the orchestra played in the pit.²³ The first movement of the symphony was played with the house lights off and with an empty, gold lighted stage.²⁴ According to Lapidoth Duncan had brought a blue backdrop to the Netherlands for the first time for this tour.²⁵

Duncan appeared at the beginning of the second movement in the semidarkness from the background and strode along the shadow edge seriously contemplating.²⁶ A critic mentioned that she made the gesture of listening to the music at the alternated passage for flute and horn at the end of the Allegretto and in the second part of the Presto.²⁷ A Dutch poet affirmed this image in a sonnet

about Duncan's Seventh Symphony with the verse: "who there listening waiting stood".²⁸ In the same sonnet the flute playing was mentioned:

"with tender love-hands

Looked for the keys of flutes, unseen,

Then extended the arms and on the flat palms

Felt influence of the gods, that descends".

The flute playing in the second and third movements was apparently the most striking image of the choreography, because three other critics mentioned it. One spoke of the playing of the shawm,²⁹ another of a panpipe,³⁰ and a third one thought of the gesture of a Greek flutist.³¹ The fourth movement began with some bars of music before Duncan entered.³² Lapidoth compared her in the last movement with a fairy of the spring.³³

From the Dutch reviews it appears that Duncan told no story in the Seventh Symphony and that she did not follow the musical structure. She let herself be inspired by the atmosphere of the music. Duncan told Lapidoth that she wanted to complete her solo dance with a group of dancers.³⁴ Years later she wrote about the Ninth Symphony by Beethoven in her autobiography: "I was possessed by the idea of (...) - a vast ensemble - dancing the Ninth Symphony of Beethoven (...) an orchestra of dancers (...) which would be to sight what the great symphonies were to sound."³⁵ In Rotterdam she also said to Lapidoth that her choreography was only a sketch, what he doubted when he saw the piece for the second time in The Hague. Duncan had received a mainly negative press about the Seventh Symphony especially in Russia in February 1905;³⁶ perhaps for that reason she talked carefully about this piece.

Duncan's innovations in dance style, costume, decor and choice of music had been accepted in the Netherlands rather easily, until she chose the Seventh Symphony by Beethoven. Just as in Russia this choice of music and her interpretation of it raised dance aesthetic questions. Negative reviews dominated, but there were also three writers who defended Duncan. In one newspaper a polemic arose about this subject, between the musician Anton Averkamp as opponent and the journalist Johannes Raaff as supporter.³⁷ The arguments of opponents and supporters give us some insight into Dutch dance aesthetics in 1907.

The most important question concerned her choice of music: is it allowed to dance to music that is not specifically composed for dance? Most of the critics were definite in their negative answer with as first argument: it is incorrect to use a work of art in a different way than the artist intended. Anton Averkamp wrote: "A symphony by Beethoven is a complete work of art; one is not allowed to add something to it, neither also to take away something from it."³⁸ "Nobody is free to make use of a work of art in the vein as Miss Duncan did with Beethoven's Seventh, when one can assume that the creator of the work of art would resist it. (...) One can imagine Beethoven, the giant, the proud withdrawn man, facing the elegant, graceful, always smiling Miss Duncan. What would he have answered her, if she could have asked him to give her his Seventh Symphony? Even a person of much less grim nature would have refused her with indignation."³⁹ The musician Willem Hutschenruyter called the work of Duncan a sacrilege,⁴⁰ another called it a desecration of the music⁴¹ and another spoke of an artistic crime.⁴²

A second argument against the choice of music was: a choreography is an unnecessary interpretation of the music and disturbs the listener in his concentration. Anton Averkamp said: "One needs no comments or explanation to music. And no means to come to an enhanced mood. (...) He that needs external means to get in the mood does better not to occupy himself with Beethoven."⁴³ A critic wrote: "Everyone has the right to think of something completely different from the dance when hearing the music, in spite of the dominant severe rhythm."⁴⁴ Another writer stated: "Where the music springs from such deep sensations as does Beethoven's - so deep, that each seeks to probe the ground of it for himself (...) up to the measure he feels deeper by nature - there the dance cannot help us to better understanding of it. On the contrary, it hinders, diverts, creates ambiguity between the music and the visual performance."⁴⁵

The second question that the Seventh Symphony raised was: had Duncan interpreted the music well? Was the symphony musically choreographed? One critic thought that Duncan did not interpret well the solemn striding rhythm of the Allegretto and ignored the melancholic complaining singing of the melody.⁴⁶ The critic

Louis van Gigch said that she found only the gaiety and the joy of living in the music and not the tragedy: "She is so often not in harmony in her utterance, even in disharmony with the music that she wants to perform. That brings her to interpret the dynamic climax of the Allegretto as elation, where the tragedy that she apparently does not hear in fact lies hidden. (...) The music is for her only an occasion, a rhythmic motive to her fine play of happy moods and tender lines."⁴⁷

But Louis van Gigch also defended Duncan: "Take her as she is. Because she is sublime when she is able to reach the music. (...) One all-too hastily shouts 'a sacrilege' and bold statements like 'absolute music cannot be danced' (...) leave me cold. There is nothing more relative than the absolute. (...) Duncan has chosen to dance this symphony (...). And if the interesting and artistic effort fails to result, that is no reason to see it as a 'desecration'."

Johannes Raaff, who worked for the same newspaper as Frits Lapidoth, wrote an open letter criticizing the articles by Anton Averkamp and Willem Hutschenruyter and he pleaded for the freedom of an artist to interpret another work of art. "Isn't a verse by Heine or a drama by Shakespeare or the Egmont by Goethe a complete work of art? Shouldn't we then condemn Beethoven because he wrote music to the Egmont, or Verdi because he did the same with Shakespeare or Schumann for his music to so many songs by Heine? (...) Let an artist express his mind in the way he prefers; a good result is all that matters. So it becomes not a fundamental question about the possibility to express something with Beethoven's music through dance what is congenial to Beethoven. Why should it not be possible? Why should not someone be able to write an epic based on the Seventh Symphony, that was equal to the symphony? (...) Better, purer, more naturally is possible a combination of music and dance; in both is existing a similar movement element, while in none of both is found something that is conflicting with the other form of artistic expression."⁴⁸ Raaff also criticized the assumption of Averkamp that Beethoven banned dance to his music: "How would the 'grim' Beethoven have spoken against the 'elegant, graceful, always smiling' Miss Duncan? I dare to put

the following into Beethoven's mouth roughly: My dear child, you are not able to do it, but I will compose something that lies more within your powers.' (...) The fuss that there is made today about piety to works of art, is quite unbearable. This does not have to happen and that is not permitted. Good heavens, the work of art itself does not suffer through it. Which damage can it bring to Beethoven's Seventh Symphony, when Duncan dances to it? Just as little as when someone composes bad music to a good poem."⁴⁹

So Johannes Raaff had his doubts about the choreographic interpretation by Duncan, but he was of the opinion that a choreographer is allowed to use all music, like a composer uses poetry for a song or a play for an opera.

Frits Lapidoth defended not only Duncan's choice of music, but also her interpretation of the music; he was the only one to do this. "Since some confusion of concepts about the intention of Isadora Duncan seems to prevail, we might point out once again that she did not pretend to complete Beethoven. She merely creates images in dance movement, inspired by the work. (...) And, he who can appreciate this has to admire the overwhelming variety of her series of images, has to feel the dancer's great intimate understanding of this delightful music, that she makes to live plastically in her work, of course according to her personal conception."⁵⁰

At Duncan's death twenty years later Lapidoth returned to the issue: "And some people did not want to recognize that it was not at all her idea to complete an orchestral number or just to illustrate it, but to express her feelings and her visions, that she felt in herself and saw come up before her spiritual eye, when hearing certain works of music. It was not plastic transposition of the musical idea, that she pretended to give; but expression of her own sensations and imaginations, awakened by the music."⁵¹

The attack on the Seventh Symphony was repeated a year later in New York in November 1908. The Duncan literature does not say whether Duncan was defended there in the same way as in the Netherlands. The defence by Frits Lapidoth, Johannes Raaff and Louis van Gigch is especially interesting in the light of the liberalization of criteria for beauty in international Western dance

aesthetics after about 1940. The so-called symphonic ballets or dance symphonies in the period 1920 to 1940 (that are choreographies to mainly nineteenth-century symphonies) prepared the way to the freedom to use any music for theater dance.

In 1915 Duncan choreographed the Unfinished Symphony by Franz Schubert and a year later the Sixth Symphony by Peter Tchaikovsky. In 1923 Fyodor Lopukhov made in Petrograd The Magnificence of the Universe to Beethoven's Fourth Symphony. In the 1930's Léonide Massine made several symphonic ballets. In 1938 he made his Seventh Symphony, the second choreography to Beethoven's Seventh. Discussions arose again around the symphonic ballets by Massine about the choice of music, especially in London, that developed in favor of Massine. These dance aesthetic discussions did not arise anymore when George Balanchine presented his Symphony in C to the symphony of the same name by Georges Bizet. Since about 1940 tolerance prevailed to dancing to a symphony and choreographers could choose any music, although the old moralized counter-arguments are still used by some music lovers.

The second dance aesthetic question that Duncan's Seventh Symphony raised in the Netherlands - has the choreographer interpreted the music well - is asked even today now and then when judging choreographies to existing music.

Massine's Seventh Symphony was never danced in the Netherlands. The second premiere of a choreography to this music in the Municipal Theater in Amsterdam was very recently: in March 1986 by the Dutch National Ballet in a choreography by its own choreographer Toer van Schayk. Of course there were no objections to the choice of a symphony in the Dutch reviews. The choreographic interpretation of the music was judged mainly positively. But no critic mentioned the first choreography to the same music by Isadora Duncan, that raised so many reactions in the Netherlands. Well, that is nearly eighty years ago and has been forgotten for a long time.

NOTES

1. Fredrika Blair, Isadora. Portrait of the Artist as a Woman, New York 1986
Francis Steegmuller, 'Your Isadora'. The Love Story of Isadora Duncan and Gordon Craig told through Letters and Diaries, New York 1974
2. Lillian Loewenthal, Isadora Duncan in the Netherlands, in: Dance Chronicle volume 3, number 3 (New York 1980), p.227-253
3. Dutch newspapers are present in the Royal Library in The Hague. Programs of Isadora Duncan performances are present in several municipal archives and in the Netherlands Theater Institute in Amsterdam.
4. In the first Dutch program Dance Idylls she chose social dance music by Fabritio Caroso and Cesare Negri, probably instrumental opera music by Jacopo Peri, Giovanni Picchi and Attilio Ariosti, instrumental opera music by Christoph Willibald Gluck and music with a dance name by François Couperin, Jean-Philippe Rameau and Johann Strauss. The Maiden and the Death she danced without music. In the second Dutch program Iphigénie she chose opera music by Christoph Willibald Gluck from Iphigénie en Aulide, Iphigénie en Tauride and Armide. For the Chopin-Schubert Evening she chose music with dance names by Frédéric Chopin (Mazurkas and Waltzes), by Franz Schubert (German Dances) and by Johannes Brahms (Waltzes). She chose further Preludes, Nocturnes and a Berceuse by Chopin.
5. Lillian Loewenthal, op. cit., p.240-241
6. Program is present in the Municipal Archives in Rotterdam. The Large Theater (Grote Schouwburg) in Rotterdam was opened in 1887 and burnt down in 1940.
7. De Nieuwe Courant (The Hague), October 29 1907, F(rits) L(apidoth) (1861-1932, drama and literature critic). Lapidoth was married then to the poetess Hélène Swarth. See also: Jeroen Brouwers, Hélène Swarth: haar huwelijk met Frits Lapidoth 1894-1910, Amsterdam 1985
8. Isadora Duncan, My Life, New York 1927, p.192
9. Program is present in the Municipal Archives in The Hague. The Building for Arts and Sciences (Gebouw voor Kunsten en Wetenschappen) in The Hague was opened in 1874 and burnt down in 1964.

10. Program is present in the Municipal Archives in Amsterdam.
The present Municipal Theater (Stadsschouwburg) in Amsterdam was opened in 1894.
11. De Nieuwe Courant, October 29 1907, F(rits) L(apidoth)
12. De Telegraaf (Amsterdam), November 1 1907, L(ouis) van Gigch Jr. (1884-1939, critic and lawyer)
13. Willem Stumpf (1868-1932) had the music agency De Algemeene Muziekhandel, voorheen Stumpf en Koning in Amsterdam. He organized Duncan's performances in the Netherlands in 1905, 1906 and 1907.
14. Francis Steegmuller, op. cit., p.213
15. Algemeen Handelsblad (Amsterdam), November 1 1907, Sibmacher Zijnen (1859-1926, music critic)
De Telegraaf, November 1 1907, L(ouis) van Gigch Jr.
Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant, November 2 1907, anonymous
16. Algemeen Handelsblad, April 29 1904, anonymous
Allan Ross Macdougall, Isadora. A Revolutionary in Art and Love, New York 1960, p.87
17. Richard Wagner, Das Kunstwerk der Zukunft, 1849 in: Gesammelte Schriften und Dichtungen, Leipzig 1887, dritter Band, p.94
18. June Layson, Isadora Duncan. A Preliminary Analysis of her Work, in: The Journal of the Society for Dance Research volume 1, number 1 (London 1983), p.39-49
19. Fredrika Blair, op. cit., p.112
20. Paul Magriel, Isadora Duncan, New York 1947, Reprint: Nijinsky, Pavlova, Duncan. Three Lives in Dance, New York 1977, p.20
21. Algemeen Handelsblad, November 1 1907, Sibmacher Zijnen
See also: Fredrika Blair, op. cit., p.424 note 9
22. De Nieuwe Courant, October 18 1907, F(rits) L(apidoth)
23. Algemeen Handelsblad, November 1 1907, Sibmacher Zijnen
24. Het Nieuws van den Dag (Amsterdam), November 2 1907, anonymous
25. De Nieuwe Courant, October 8 1907, F(rits) L(apidoth)
26. De Avondpost (The Hague), October 29 1907, E.J.B.
Het Nieuws van den Dag, November 2 1907, anonymous
27. Het Nieuws van den Dag, November 2 1907, anonymous
28. De Amsterdamer, November 10 1907, Hein Boeken (1861-1933, poet)
29. Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant, November 2 1907, anonymous
30. De Telegraaf, November 1 1907, L(ouis) van Gigch Jr.

31. De Avondpost, October 29 1907, E.J.B.
32. Algemeen Handelsblad, November 1 1907, Sibmacher Zijnen
33. De Nieuwe Courant, October 18 1907, F(rits) L(apidoth)
34. De Nieuwe Courant, October 29 1907, F(rits) L(apidoth)
35. Isadora Duncan, op. cit., p.213
36. Fredrika Blair, op. cit., p.112
37. De Amsterdammer, November 10 1907, Ant(on) Averkamp (1861-1934, musician and music critic)
 Willem Hutschenruyter, Heiligschennis, in: Toonkunst, December 5 1907, p.361-362. Willem Hutschenruyter (1863-1950, musician and music publicist)
De Amsterdammer, January 5 1908, J(ohannes) J.Raaff (1871-1930, journalist and lawyer) and Ant(on) Averkamp
De Amsterdammer, January 19 1908, J(ohannes) J.Raaff and Ant(on) Averkamp
38. De Amsterdammer, November 10 1907, Ant(on) Averkamp
39. De Amsterdammer, January 5 1908, Ant(on) Averkamp
40. Willem Hutschenruyter, op. cit., p.361
41. Land en Volk (Den Haag), October 29 1907, J.
42. Het Vaderland (Den Haag), October 29 1907, anonymous
43. De Amsterdammer, November 10 1907, Ant(on) Averkamp
44. Het Nieuws van den Dag, November 2 1907, anonymous
45. Nieuwe Rotterdamsche Courant, November 2 1907, anonymous
46. Algemeen Handelsblad, November 1 1907, Sibmacher Zijnen
47. De Telegraaf, November 1 1907, L(ouis) van Gigch Jr.
48. De Amsterdammer, January 5 1908, J(ohannes) J.Raaff
49. De Amsterdammer, January 19 1908, J(ohannes) J.Raaff
50. De Nieuwe Courant, October 29 1907, F(rits) L(apidoth)
51. F(rits) L(apidoth), Isadora Duncan†, in: Het Tooneel 13, 1927, p.89-93