

Ballet Story & History: Don Quixote



Don Quixote // © Compañía Nacional de Danza

The ballet *Don Quixote* is based on segments of the classic novel *The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha* by Miguel de Cervantes Saavedra. Published in two parts, in 1605 and 1615, it follows the comedic exploits of a nobleman who has read so many stories of heroic knights that he begins to believe he must set out to restore chivalry and honour to the world. A simple farmer, Sancho Panza, is his “squire”; his muse, Dulcinea, is in reality a local peasant girl but, in Quixote’s delusion, she is a vision of perfection and purity. The novel gradually becomes a masterful study of morality, deception, love, sanity and of the human condition.

Cervantes’ *Don Quixote* had been captivating readers for well over a century when the first ballet version was presented. Choreographed by Franz Hilverding, one of Austrian court choreographers in Vienna in 1740, he removed all vision of romantic story and focused on the comedic adventures of Don Quixote’s character. Other versions then followed one after the other: Jean-George Noverre’s in 1768, Charles-Louis Didelot’s in 1808, Paul Taglioni’s in 1839 for the Berlin Court Opera Theatre in Germany and Salvatore Taglioni in 1843 for the Teatro Regio Turino in Italy.

But the most influential version is the one by French choreographer Marius Petipa. The ballet *Don Quixote* also marks the beginning of the collaboration between Petipa and Ludwig Minkus. Ludwig Minkus composed the score for Petipa’s original *Don Quixote* ballet and collaborated with him on nearly two dozen others (including *La Bayadère*). He was known for his ability to work quickly and to include the rhythm of the story line in his music.

Don Quixote was danced for the first time on December 14th 1869 at the Imperial Russian Ballet. Later Alexander Gorsky restaged Petipa’s version in Moscow in 1900 and again in Saint Petersburg in 1902. Gorsky revised Petipa’s ballet as he believed ballet should incorporate greater realism and theatrical technique. He imbued the main characters but also the Corps de ballet with distinctive, playful and realistic individual movements; contrary to

Petipa's vision of the Corps as a uniform, symmetrical whole. Gorsky largely introduced Don Quixote's dynamic and stormy rhythm. It is this Petipa/Gorsky version that has endured since then. In 1924, staged in a shortened version, Don Quixote is danced for the first time in Western Europe at the Royal Opera House in London casting Anna Pavlova as Kitri (or *Quiteria*).

Don Quixote differentiates from other classical ballet by its comic choreographies and sense of humour. If the first versions of the ballet focused primarily on Don Quixote, the titular character, and were somewhat faithful to certain episodes from Cervantes's novel; the Petipa/Gorsky and furthermore the modern choreographies have shifted their focus onto Kitri and Basilio, with their famous "*Wedding Pas de Deux*" being the ballet's main highlight. Even in Petipa's scenario, Kitri and Basilio were meant to be supporting characters and their story is only allocated to two acts, which is primarily because they only appear in one chapter of the novel.

Over the 20th Century, Don Quixote has made its mark on the ballet stages and influenced so many dancers' and choreographers' careers. In 1966, Rudolf Nureyev staged the ballet for the Vienna Opera in its full-length production for the first time in Western Europe. In 1980, Mikhail Baryshnikov restaged the ballet for American Ballet Theatre. But George Balanchine's version, choreographed in 1965, is probably the best known. Partially for the perceived parallel between Don Quixote's love for his Dulcinea and the choreographer's love for his muse, Suzanne Farrell, who portrayed Kitri.

In most modern productions of the ballet, Don Quixote himself is a secondary character role and the dancer portraying him will have very few dancing scenes. He is an old man who, though ridiculed and eccentric, carries the thread of the storyline through the ballet. Don Quixote's choreography centres on just one of the elements from the novel: the romance and marriage of Kitri, an innkeeper's stubborn and fiery daughter, and Basilio, a penniless barber. Lorenzo's, Kitri's father, plans to marry her to the wealthy Gamache are turned upside-down when Don Quixote and Sancho Panza stumble into town and try to help the lovers elope. The ballet is beloved for its comedic flourishes, like the windmill scene, its larger-than-life characters and its thrilling technique in the Pas de Deux variations and Ensemble.



Don Quixote // © Opéra de Nice

SYNOPSIS

Prologue

The ballet opens in a dilapidated study in La Mancha, where we meet Don Quixote, a lesser nobleman with a taste for chivalric romance novels. Inspired but also driven mad by his books, which tell tales of celebrated knights daring adventures and damsels in distress, he falls asleep and dreams he is a knight in love with his muse, the ideal woman, Dulcinea. His sleep is interrupted by the entrance of Sancho Panza, a farmer from the village, clutching a stolen ham and chased by a band of housewives. Convinced that his dream is his reality, Don Quixote decides to embark on an adventure—with Sancho recruited as his squire—to defend the code of chivalry throughout the land.

This Prologue gives the audience a hint of the comedy to come in the ballet.



Jim Sohm and Pascal Molat in Don Quixote // © Erik Tomasson

Act I – Sevilla [or Barcelona depending on the production]

The curtains open on a town square, where we finally meet the ballet's heroine and hero: Kitri and her love Basilio. They dance with each other and with friends, Espada, one of the matadors, and his lover, Mercedes. In the middle of all this merriment, Lorenzo, Kitri's father, decrees that his daughter will never marry some poor barber, but instead a vain, extravagantly dressed nobleman named Gamache.

Don Quixote and Sancho arrive on a horse and donkey — usually real animals or very complex automated creatures — and join the festivities. Don Quixote mistakes Kitri for his love, Dulcinea, squaring off the love triangle between Basilio, Kitri, and Gamache and create enough troubles among the dancers for Kitri and Basilio to manage to sneak off, rapidly pursued by Don Quixote, Sancho Panza, Lorenzo and Gamache (ridicule riding the donkey).



Célia Drouy and Arthus Raveau - wedding scene in Don Quixote// © Opera de Paris

In this first Act, the spectator enjoys the alternate dancing variations between Kitri and Basilio which is traditional in classical ballets where women's and men's variations alternate. But in this particular ballet, it also has the sense of a conversation, or flirtation, in which each character is trying to surpass the other one. This Act also introduces the Spanish flair in this classical ballet through props like Kitri's fan and maracas, or the long red and black capes of the Matadors, arm gestures inspired from Flamenco, big jumps and leaps including the famous "Kitri" or "Plisetskaya jump" where the Prima ballerina does Sissonnes en avant trying to kick her hands with her back foot in a long diagonal.



Marianela Núñez is Kitri in Don Quixote // © Royal Ballet

Act II, Scene I - Gypsy Camp

Kitri and Basilio sneak into a gypsy camp, where they explain their love predicament and the Bohemians agree to help them.



Hannah O'Neill and Germain Louvet dancing in the gypsy camp // © Yonathan Kellerman, OnP 2024

When Don Quixote, Sancho, Lorenzo and Gamache (still ridicule riding the donkey) arrive at the camp, the gypsies distract them with a puppet show. Don Quixote gets confused and thinks one of the puppets is Dulcinea so he foolishly interrupts the show. He then imagines the windmill as a giant monster threatening Dulcinea and attacks it, before collapsing with exhaustion from one of the blades into a deep sleep, where he goes in the enchanted garden of his beloved Dulcinea...



Windmill scene in Don Quixote by the Mariinski Ballet // © Natasha Razina, Royal Opera House

Act II, Scene II – The Dream

While knocked out from his fall, Don Quixote dreams that Kitri finally becomes his Dulcinea and that he meets Cupid, the Queen of the Dryads and the whole Ensemble of nymphs in a mystical and enchanted forest decor.

During this mythic scene, the spectator will see a change in Kitri's personality going from seductive and fiery to pure, regal and angelic as Don Quixote transforms her in his mind as the perfect woman, Dulcinea. The Queen of the Dryads' and Cupid's variations and the beautiful Ensemble give the other dancers an opportunity to shine.



Mikhailovsky Ballet Don Quixote 2018 // © Doug Gifford

Act II, Scene III – Sunrise

Lorenzo and Gamache interrupt Don Quixote's dream. Sympathetic to the plight of the young lovers, Don Quixote attempts to lead the two astray as Sancho drags him off to a tavern.

Act II, Scene IV – In the Tavern

One of the comic highlights of the ballet ... Kitri and Basilio are already in the tavern when Don Quixote and his faithful squire arrive, still pursued by Lorenzo and Gamache. Basilio and Kitri beg to be allowed to marry and when Lorenzo refuses, Basilio stabs himself. Except, the whole scene is a farce, but only Kitri knows. Basilio then begs Lorenzo to allow him to marry Kitri as his dying wish. Kitri implores Don Quixote to help her and of course the brave knight – or so he thinks – can not refuse a dying wish since it does seem to be the chivalric thing to do after all. As soon as Lorenzo relents, Basilio jumps on his feet, good as new.

Triumphantly, Kitri leaves to prepare for her wedding while Don Quixote and Basilio salute Lorenzo and Gamache for stoically accepting the inevitable.

Act III – The Wedding

The whole village prepares itself to celebrate the Wedding. Many friends and acquaintances return, including Espada and Mercedes, and - of course - Don Quixote and Sancho Panza who come to congratulate the couple, bid them warm farewell and resume their everlasting adventures.

This whole Act is about the Pas de Deux and how Kitri's and Basilio's dancers are going to show off their talent in front of the village and the audience



Sae Eun Park and Paul Marque in the Wedding // © Yonathan Kellerman, OnP 2024

The most famous variations

The Dream – Act II

The Dream scene is one of the most famous scenes in the ballet, in which Don Quixote, after being knocked out unconscious from attacking the windmill, dreams he is in the enchanted garden of his beloved Dulcinea. This is perhaps one of the prime examples of what Gorsky changed in his 1902 revival. What is danced today as The Dream scene is very far derived from what Petipa firstly staged: The Dream scene began at the time with Don Quixote, dressed in shining armour, fighting various monsters (the last of which was a giant spider on its web). After Don Quixote successfully slew the beasts, he cut the spider and its web in half, which revealed the garden of Dulcinea. Don Quixote was brought before Dulcinea, who was accompanied by a huge Corps de ballet of dryads and seventy-two students as little Cupids. After a series of dancing, he knelt before her and everything vanished.

Today's stagings of The Dream scene contain three famous variations, but these variations were not part of Petipa's scenario. It was Gorsky who added these variations to The Dream scene and none of them were composed by Ludwig Minkus:

- *Variation of the Queen of the Dryads* – A dryad is a nymph or nature spirit who lives in trees and takes the form of a beautiful young woman.

This variation is set to music was composed by Anton Simon and was added in Gorsky's 1900 version as a variation for a new character the Queen of the Dryads, as it was Gorsky who created the character. This variation is sometimes used as an alternative for the female variation in the Pasde Deux from *Le Corsaire*.



Camille Bon as the Queen of the Dryads in Act II The Dream // © Yonathan Kellerman, OnP 2024

- *Variation of Cupid/Cupidon/Amour* – Did you know that Cupid’s variation is actually from the Grand Pas Classique Paquita composed by Vasily Barmin for Varvara Nikitina’s performance in 1885? For his 1902 version, Gorsky interpolated this variation into Don Quixote as a variation for love, where it has since been retained in modern productions. This is why this variation is danced today in both *Paquita Grand Pas Classique* and *Don Quixote*.

Costumes can differ drastically from one ballet to another:



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- *Variation of Kitri/Dulcinea* – this is a supplementary variation that was composed by Riccardo Drigo for Elena Cornalba’s performance in *The Vestal* in 1888. It was later added to *Don Quixote* by Gorsky as a variation for Matilda Kschessinskaya’s performance as Kitri in his 1902 revival.

Kitri’s variation “L’éventail” – Act I

The famous “*fan*” variation that Kitri performs in the Grand Pas de deux has quite a mysterious history. Almost from the beginning, the music score has been published in very curt and negligent editions. For many years, it has been widely believed that the “*fan*” variation, entitled “*L’éventail*”, was composed by Riccardo Drigo for Matilda Kschessinskaya’s performance as Kitri in Gorsky’s 1902 version, just as he composed the famous Variation of Dulcinea. However, other historians believe otherwise.

The music for this variation contains similarities to a harp variation composed by Ludwig Minkus for *Night and Day* that was created for the celebratory gala of the coronation of Tsar Alexander III. The harp variation in question is the Variation of the Queen of Day, so it seems that it was in fact Ludwig Minkus who composed the “*fan*” variation. Gorsky took the music to interpolate it for his 1902 production, where it is reputed to have been first danced by Kschessinskaya in the Grand Pas de deux (also known as the “*Wedding Pas de deux*”) and it has remained in the ballet since then as the traditional variation for Kitri.



Léonore Baulac as Kitri "L'éventail" variation // © Julien Benhamou, OnP

Kitri's variation 32 double fouettés - Act III

Why 32 fouettés? If you have seen Swan Lake before you will have noticed the exact same number during the Black Swan Coda variation at the ball in Act III. It is also present in the ballet Cinderella. So why this number? First reason is a question of musicality: 32 equals 4 times 8 counts which goes perfectly on ballet music and rhythm. The first ballerina to achieve these 32 fouettés was Pierina Legnani during a Cinderella performance in 1893. She then became famous doing it again portraying Odette/Odile in 1895 Swan Lake version. She wished at the time to show the dancer's talent on stage. And that is where the second reason resides ...

In Russian culture, there is a tradition that if the ballerina has perfected the 32 fouettés and the audience is clapping for her and continues clapping, then the ballerina is supposed to renewed the 32 fouettés for a second time. It is considered as an immense honour to be asked to do the 32 double fouettés sequence twice, it is also extremely tiring for the ballerina. It is what happened to Natalia Osipova in 2007 performing at the Mariinsky Theatre:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3wxf7qemjYs>

It is also a variation – especially in Swan Lake - that gives more freedom to the Prima ballerina. The principal dancer can decide to change her arms from the traditional 1st and 2nd position to the arms of the swan in the turns or to 4th position ... Or change the movements of her legs and do fouettés attitude instead of fouettés turns to the knee. Some dancers decide to go on a manège (going around the stage) instead of staying steady facing the audience.

The Matadors Ensemble with knives – Acts I and III

As soon as the matadors and courtisanes arrive on stage in Act I, the ambiance of the ballet shifts completely to Southern Spain (if you still had any doubts since the beginning of the ballet). The fiery costumes with bright colours, fans, maracas and capes finish to perfect the impression of travelling to a traditional Spanish village.

The music with Iberian notes and dramatic Flamenco rhythm adds to the attitude and authentic Spanish movements from the dancers' body.

The matadors appear first in Act I for the “knives” variation where, around the end of the variation they plant their knives in the stage for Kitri to dance around (several props are then used to do the trick for this variation – sometimes real knives are actually used, less and less today). They come back for the end of Act III in the grand finale to dance the clapping variation where the public is usually invited to clap and tap with the whole company dancers on stage (Kitri, Basilio, Don Quixote, Sancho, matadors, courtesanes, village people ...).



Mikhailovsky Ballet Don Quixote variation // © Doug Gifford, 2018



San Francisco ballet don quixote // © Erik Tomasson

Rehearsal's pictures



Kitri's saissonne en avant – Act I



The courtisanes - Act I – Ballet Met



The matadadors – Act I – Ballet Met

If you wish to watch Don Quixote rehearsal or in full on stage

- The Royal Ballet rehearse Don Quixote:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mx77D8113cM>
- Don Quixote by the Bolshoi Theatre with Natalia Osipova and Ivan Vasiliev:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ac_dUGQSpac
- Don Quixote by the Bolshoi Theatre with Evgenia Obraztsova and Artemy Belyakov:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hsL0_DRx88



Mathilde Froustey as Kitri // © San Francisco Ballet

Don Quixote is the perfect ballet for beginners (it was my husband's first ballet at the Opéra Bastille in Paris), it is not too long and usually has two entr'actes. The story is simple to understand and the comic within the classical ballet makes it easier for children or neophyte to handle the length of the ballet.

If you decide to go and see Don Quixote in the Theatre, it is important to know that it is a ballet that can be seen from the orchestra front rows (you will see better the fun facial expressions and the humorous farces as they come) or from the balconies (as you have many Ensembles and diagonals). And if ever you hesitate between the left side or the right side of the orchestra for your seats, I do recommend seating on the left side (so your left) as lots of diagonals start on the top right corner, like this you will have a better view of the whole Corps de ballet dance and variations during the performance.

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