

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 44

“Charlatan and Charmer”

Transcript

[music: fanfare]

In the early twentieth century, Russia was still viewed by many western Europeans as an uncouth, even barbaric country. Few thought of Russia as a center of art or culture, fewer still looked to Russia as a source of new and groundbreaking art.

As for the Russians, well, *they* knew their country produced great art, but few cared that the rest of the world didn't realize it. Until one man, Sergei Diaghilev, brought Russian art to the western world, and became one of the most influential figures in twentieth century art, music, and dance. Which is surprising, when you consider that he was not himself an artist, a musician or a dancer. In fact, he is easily the most important figure in twentieth century art who was not himself any kind of artist. He was an impresario. A producer. One with an unparalleled knack for identifying great artists and presenting them to the world.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: opening theme]

Episode 44. Charlatan and Charmer.

Sergei Pavlovich Diaghilev was born in 1872, in the province of Novgorod. His father was a cavalry colonel and was stationed there at the time. His mother died shortly after his birth, and later in life, Diaghilev would tell everyone that it was his big head that killed her. This is just one of many fanciful stories that the flamboyant Diaghilev would tell; the truth is his mother died shortly *after* his birth, as too many women did at this time, in an age when cutting edge obstetric technology was to wash your hands before assisting in the delivery of a child. And even that level of technology probably hadn't reached Novgorod yet in 1872.

Pavel Diaghilev was a member of the landed nobility and owned estates in the vicinity of the city of Perm, in the Far East of European Russia, on the threshold of Siberia. In addition to land, the family owned a vodka distillery and held the local monopoly on the sale of the stuff, which gave them a comfortable guaranteed income. Unfortunately for the Diaghilevs, under the liberalizations of the Emperor Alexander II, government monopolies on vodka were abolished, which would gradually erode the family's standard of living. They owned a comfortable country home outside of Perm and an apartment in St. Petersburg, which was an essential asset for

Russian aristocracy of the time. St. Petersburg is where you went in the winter months to mingle with other members of the nobility.

The elder Diaghilev would remarry in 1874. He is supposed to have won the hand of his second wife, Yelena Panayeva, by charming his future father-in-law with a previously unsuspected gift for song. The Panayevs were aristocrats from St. Petersburg, a cultured and musical family, and when Poppa Panayev heard Pavel Diaghilev hit a high C, the marriage was as good as done. Yelena would be a loving and attentive stepmother to little Sergei, and would inspire in him a love of music. Sergei would receive piano and voice lessons and exhibited talent. When he was 15, he composed a song for the occasion of his parents' wedding anniversary. Yelena stored it away carefully; it is the only Diaghilev composition that survives.

The Diaghilevs hosted musical soirées in St. Petersburg every other Thursday when they were in town. Among the musicians who were hired to perform at these parties was Modest Mussorgsky, the Russian composer. In his own lifetime, Mussorgsky was better known as a performer than a composer. Another regular was Alexandra Panayeva, the sister of Sergei's stepmother, a singer who counted among her admirers Peter Ilych Tchaikovsky, Russia's greatest composer ever. Alexandra was married to Tchaikovsky's nephew, which made the composer a sorta kinda relative of Sergei's. In the Diaghilev household, Tchaikovsky was referred to as Uncle Pete. Sergei got to know Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov during this time as well, so he was hobnobbing with three of Russia's greatest composers early in his adolescence.

Unfortunately for the family, the income from the distillery was declining throughout Sergei's childhood, and they would have to abandon the gay social life of St. Petersburg and live full time at the Perm estate, to save money. But that didn't stop them from building a church in the village near their mansion. After the revolution of 1917, it would be converted into a movie theater. After 1991, it became a dance club. Today it is abandoned. The history of Russia in a nutshell.

As I have already mentioned, it was the custom at the time among the Russian aristocracy for a father to take the responsibility to relieve his son of the burden of virginity. In the old days, all you had to do was find an attractive serf, but serfdom had been abolished. You may recall that Alexander III took care of this business for his son Nikolai by turning to a ballet dancer, Mathilde Kshessinskaya, but that was not an option in Perm. So his father hired Sergei a prostitute, because what better way to give your son a healthy and well-adjusted introduction to sex, am I right? In Sergei's case, it had to have been particularly awkward, since he would live his entire adult life as a pretty openly gay man, and all his romantic relationships would be with men. To add injury to insult, as it were, Sergei would contract a venereal disease from the encounter.

In those days, nobles who wanted to get ahead had two paths open to them: the Army, as Sergei's father had done, and government service. Apparently no one thought Sergei was Army material, so when he was 18 he was sent to St. Petersburg to go to law school and prepare for a

job in government. In St. Petersburg, Diaghilev became acquainted with a cousin who was also a lover of the arts, and almost exactly his age, Dmitri Filosofov. Dimitri's mother, Anna, was Sergei's father's sister. She was a liberal and an activist for women's rights, and would eventually be arrested and exiled by the Russian secret police for political crimes, among which was giving the gift of an overcoat to a political prisoner on his way to Siberia.

Their family decided they would go together on a grand tour of Europe, something else that aristocratic Russian families were expected to give to their sons, which they did in 1890. They attended operas, concerts, went to the theater, and visited art galleries across Europe.

Dmitri was also gay, and the two cousins became lovers, sometime after their return to St. Petersburg. Although homosexuality was illegal in Imperial Russia, Russian aristocracy was very tolerant of homosexuality among its own young men, although there was the expectation that you would have to get married and produce heirs at some point, not that either of these guys ever would.

At about this same time, the vodka distillery stopped being profitable, Diaghilev Senior's money problems finally caught up with him, and he was forced to declare bankruptcy. In a peculiar twist of fate, a portion of the family estate had been inherited from Sergei's biological mother, which meant it was Sergei's property, and beyond the reach of his father's creditors. So at the age of 18, Sergei was now the only member of the family to own land and have a steady income. He would take in his two younger half-brothers, Yuri and Valentin, at his apartment in St. Petersburg, and would take over responsibility for raising them. Somehow he managed to balance the roles of university student, lover of the arts, lover of Dmitri, socialite, and surrogate parent. Oh yeah, and he took music lessons, too, at the St. Petersburg Conservatory.

Through Dmitri, Diaghilev would get to know the social and cultural elites of St. Petersburg, who were the social and cultural elites of all Russia, and would become immersed in the world of art. He continued to compose during this time, and presented his own works at small recitals. He fell in love with the music of Richard Wagner, a composer most Russians had no use for.

But Rimsky-Korsakov liked Wagner. And he taught music at the St. Petersburg Conservatory. In 1894, Diaghilev got an appointment with the man who was now Russia's most famous composer, after Tchaikovsky had died the previous year. He took along a portfolio of his compositions, and asked Rimsky-Korsakov to take him on as a student. There are varying accounts of what happened next. It seems that Rimsky-Korsakov told Diaghilev in no uncertain terms that he lacked the talent to become a composer. At best he was blunt, at worst cruel. Diaghilev responded angrily that history would show which of them was the greater.

But whatever the bluster, this must've come as a crushing blow to the 22-year-old Sergei Diaghilev. He spent the past two years of his life focused on music, at the expense of his university studies. What was he going to do now? Diaghilev moved to a new apartment a few months later and began to decorate it, including the purchase of some paintings. He already

counted a number of young painters among his and Dmitri's circle of friends in St. Petersburg, and within months he discovered a new passion: art. He bought paintings in St. Petersburg, and then took a trip across Europe shopping for more. He didn't have the money to be a great patron or collector, but he could become a connoisseur and critic. After all, he had no shortage of opinions.

By 1896, he had finally graduated the university, and began writing art reviews for newspapers and magazines. The brash young man criticized Russian art and suggested that Russian painters would do well to look to the West for inspiration. This went down not at all well in St. Petersburg, where Russian artists were accustomed to thinking of their work as superior to anything coming out of Britain or France or Germany. And Diaghilev did more than just talk; he organized his own art exhibition in a matter of months, 250 works, all painted outside Russia, cleverly presented in the exhibition and marketed with finesse. It displayed an impressive organizational ability, a shrewd eye for art, and media savvy. Sergei Diaghilev had found his calling.

There would be other exhibits, and then a magazine called *Mir iskusstva*, the world of art. Dmitri would be in charge of the literary section, and many other of their art-loving friends would be drafted into the project. The magazine was bold, spirited, avant-garde, and often snarky, and annoyed the St. Petersburg art establishment to no end. The little journal was a big success, never widely circulated, never making very much money, but hugely influential. Contributions from art lovers keep the thing going, and even the new Emperor, Nikolai the second, helped subsidize it.

In December, 1904, Diaghilev would attend a performance by the American dancer, Isadora Duncan, and be taken by her. Isadora Duncan was born in San Francisco in 1877, and caused a sensation in Europe in the early twentieth century, almost as much for her free-spirited, sexually liberated, dissolute lifestyle as for her free-spirited, liberated, intuitive form of dance. Duncan was self-taught, and rejected traditional ballet and other established dance forms in favor of her own unique and innovative style, a pioneering style of free movement with a heavy emphasis on emotional expression. She wore a tunic in the style of classical Greek sculpture, and danced barefoot. Half of her audiences thought she was mad. The other half thought they were seeing the birth of a whole new kind of dance. All of them were right. Isadora Duncan was inventing modern dance before their eyes.

Besides Diaghilev, some up and coming dancers in the Imperial Ballet, notably Anna Pavlova and Mikhail Fokine, attended Duncan's performances. They were inspired by Duncan's dancing, and they got to know Sergei Diaghilev. None of this would have seemed important at the time, but within a few years, Diaghilev and Pavlova and Fokine would be leading lights in the world of dance, stretching the boundaries of ballet, and following in the footsteps of Isadora Duncan.

Diaghilev had had five good years organizing exhibitions, publishing the magazine, and making both friends and bitter enemies as the number one gadfly in the Russian art scene. But *Mir*

iskusstva would fold in 1904, when the Russo-Japanese War broke out. As you may recall, the war hurt the Russian economy and the grants that Diaghilev needed to keep the magazine running dried up. But Diaghilev himself was still going strong. He had scoured the country to assemble the most remarkable exhibition of art Russia had yet seen: 4000 portraits painted over the last two centuries, a comprehensive, not to say monumental, overview of two centuries of Russian art, and two centuries of Russian history. The exhibition opened in February, 1905, which you may recall was just after Port Arthur fell to the Japanese and the outrage of Bloody Sunday. Russian morale definitely needed a boost. The Emperor himself opened the exhibition in a grand ceremony.

And you'll remember that in the aftermath of Bloody Sunday there was much unrest in Russian society, followed by brutal crackdowns. Diaghilev tried to stay out of the political turmoil. No doubt the fact that he was known by many to be gay, which was a prosecutable offense, gave him good reason not to challenge the authorities. But that fall, members of the Imperial ballet went on strike to protest political interference. Among the strikers were the dancers Anna Pavlova, Tamara Karsavina, and the dancer and now budding choreographer Mikhail Fokine. When the Imperial Ballet demanded that every dancer sign a loyalty oath, this group reached out to their new friend, Sergei Diaghilev, who urged them to refuse. Diaghilev was one of the few people in the arts community to stand up for the striking dancers; he published an article supporting them and demanded new management at the Imperial ballet.

Diaghilev's relationship with Dmitri ended about this time as well. Dmitri left St. Petersburg and spent the next three years in Paris, ostensibly to escape Russia's political violence, but it seems at least as likely that he was also trying to escape Sergei Diaghilev.

Diaghilev wasted no time before finding a new lover, Alexei Mavrin, who also became his secretary. You may have noticed Diaghilev has a habit of roping his lovers into working for him. We're going to be seeing more of that, hint, hint.

In 1906, Diaghilev put together yet another exhibition in St. Petersburg, this one much in keeping with the avant-garde reputation of *Mir iskusstva*. It was of Russia's most avant-garde painters, a group that came to be known as the "Miriskusniki," a word that doesn't translate into English very well. I suppose you could think of it as "The World of Art gang." It was after this exhibition that Diaghilev first began to toy with the idea of taking his exhibitions abroad and showing off Russian art to the rest of the world.

This was an exciting idea. As I've said, in Western Europe, Russia was considered an artistic backwater. Provincial at best, barbaric at worst. Well, Sergei Diaghilev will show them! That October, Diaghilev took his exhibition of modern Russian art to no less a cultural capital than Paris itself, where the exhibition was opened by no less a figure than the President of France. It was a huge success. Parisians flocked to the exhibition; the French press lavished praise on these hidden treasures of modern art. The show was a triumph, and Sergei Diaghilev was now a name

in Paris. His only disappointment was that his cousin Dmitri had carefully avoided both him and his exhibition.

After Paris, the exhibition moved on to Berlin, where Diaghilev mingled with the biggest names in German society, including a chat with Kaiser Wilhelm himself. Diaghilev would later say of the Kaiser that “he talks such nonsense one wants to block one’s ears.” And then it was on to Venice. Diaghilev returned to St. Petersburg by December, but in early 1907, he was back in Paris. St. Petersburg was old hat now. He had learned the art world there. St. Petersburg had taught him how to develop and defend a modern aesthetic, how to lease space, negotiate contracts, mollify artists, and persuade wealthy patrons to donate to his projects. But he had won his first victory in Paris, the world’s cultural capital. And now, at the age of 34, this self-described “charlatan and charmer” was out to conquer it.

He got a lot of backing back home in Russia. Diaghilev was certainly interested in furthering his own career, but his desire to expose Westerners to the best of the Russian arts and negate his home country’s image as the land that progress forgot seems sincere. In St. Petersburg, his friends supported him because they admired his goals, and his enemies supported him because they were happy to see him out of St. Petersburg.

But there was a problem. Further art exhibitions seem to be out of the question. Diaghilev had already put on a show of the best modern art Russia had to offer. Yes, it had wowed the French, but that meant any follow-up exhibition was likely to be a letdown. It was time to turn to a different art form. In 1907, that was music. Diaghilev put together a concert series of Russian music that was performed in Paris in May of that year. It included works by Tchaikovsky, Mussorgsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, and many other Russian composers.

Diaghilev even roped a reluctant Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov to come to Paris and conduct his own works. The two men had apparently gotten over their confrontation of 14 years ago, although they never really became what you would call friends. But that wasn’t the reason for Rimsky-Korsakov’s reluctance. The grumpy composer had heard that Tchaikovsky’s music was not well received in Paris and declared, “I’m not going to stand before an audience that didn’t appreciate our Tchaikovsky.” But Diaghilev kept after him, and reported one day coming home to his apartment and finding one of Rimsky-Korsakov’s visiting cards stuck in the door. On it, the composer had written, “if one has to go, one has to go! Cried the sparrow as the cat dragged him downstairs.”

Sergei Rachmaninoff also came to Paris to perform in his own First Piano Concerto.

[music: Rachmaninoff’s First Piano Concerto]

But Diaghilev went heavy on opera arias, as most Russians of the time felt that opera was where Russian music really shone.

On opening night, Richard Strauss was there, in Diaghilev's box, along with four Russian grand dukes and the Russian ambassador. The hit of the evening was a performance of an aria from the opera *Prince Igor* by Alexander Borodin. The audience applauded so enthusiastically that they would not stop. The conductor signaled for them to quiet down, and even tried to begin the next piece, but nothing could end the applause. At last, the conductor threw down his baton and walked off the stage in frustration. And so ended Diaghilev's first concert in Paris.

One of the concertgoers in the audience on that triumphant opening night was none other than Dmitri Filosofov, who had finally worked up the nerve to attend the concert. Afterward, he greeted Diaghilev, whom he had not seen in two years. And then spent that night in Diaghilev's hotel room.

The following winter, back in St. Petersburg, Diaghilev would meet for the first time the man with whom his name is most closely associated: Vaslav Nijinsky. Diaghilev and Nijinsky were destined to become the most famous gay couple since Oscar Wilde and Alfred Douglas, but it seems no sparks flew at this first meeting. They had dinner together, in the company of mutual friends, three times that winter altogether, but Nijinsky seems to have made no impression. To be fair, Nijinsky is at this point only 17 years old, less than half Diaghilev's age, a minor ballet dancer known to be shy and socially awkward. So what can you expect?

So we will leave Vaslav Nijinsky in St. Petersburg for a while, just as Diaghilev did, and move back to Paris for 1908. Diaghilev's concert series in Paris the previous year had confirmed that it was Russian opera that Parisians really wanted to hear. Well, that was fine by the Russians; as I said, they felt that opera was their strong suit. And a lot of Russians at that time would have said that Russia's greatest opera was Modest Mussorgsky's 1872 work, *Boris Godunov*, loosely based on the life of a 16th century Russian noble at the court of Ivan the Terrible, who would eventually become czar himself.

Diaghilev rounded up some of his Miriskusniki artist friends to design the sets and costumes. Because this wasn't going to be just a Russian opera, this was going to be a *ferociously* Russian opera. It would be performed in Russian, for one thing. It was the norm in those days, unlike now, for operas to be performed not in the native language but in the language of the audience. Not this time. This was a *Russian* opera.

Diaghilev sent buyers to comb through village marketplaces throughout northern Russia in search of traditional clothes, embroidery, and headscarves to use for the costumes. Diaghilev himself browsed the markets of St. Petersburg and bought the flashiest clothing he could find. The production would be billed in Paris as the most authentic recreation of traditional Russia ever staged. In truth, it was a multicultural mish-mash of traditions from times and places across history and across the Empire all thrown together into one glorious heap of flashy colors, the theatrical equivalent of a kaleidoscope. But that's okay. This is opera, not history.

Diaghilev brought to Paris a horde of singers, musicians, managers, costume and makeup artists, construction workers, and precious few of them spoke French. There were constant conflicts with the theater staff, which Diaghilev did his best to smooth over with a combination of management finesse and a few well-placed francs.

With just a couple of days to go until opening night, the production was a shambles. And Diaghilev had been informed that they would not be able to put up the sets until opening day. That meant there would be no dress rehearsal, and the singers would have to perform on a set they had had no practice with. Diaghilev called together the production and asked them if they should postpone the opening. “We mustn’t disgrace Russia,” someone in the group called out. Everyone else agreed. In the end, as no one who’s ever been involved in theater will be surprised to hear, the premiere was on time and it was a huge triumph. *Boris Godunov* was a hit, and Diaghilev returned to St. Petersburg that summer as a conquering hero.

As soon as Diaghilev got back, he and his circle began planning what they would take to Paris for 1909. Perhaps another opera? But the opera house where they had performed *Boris Godunov* was not available, and anyway, that production had strained Diaghilev and his team to their limits. Perhaps a different art form. Something that could be done in a smaller theater, with a smaller company and less set construction. Hm. Ooh, ooh, I know! How about ballet?

Ballet, like opera, is a product of the Italian Renaissance. The word ballet comes from the Italian *balletto*, which means “little dance.” Unlike opera, which spread widely across Europe, ballet has always been more of a niche entertainment. But it caught on at the court of Louis XIV in France. Louis established a dance academy, and France became the center of the world of ballet, as evidenced by the fact that so many ballet terms we use in English, like *pas de deux* and *corps de ballet* and, well, the word “ballet” itself for that matter, are French.

But being a niche entertainment, ballet is expensive and hard to support, and so it depends heavily on patronage from the aristocracy. In the latter part of the 19th century, as Republicanism took root in France, ballet was fading away in the very country with which it was most closely associated.

But no country at this time does aristocracy better than Russia. Nowhere else was the poverty of the lower classes more bleak nor the wealth of the upper classes more ostentatious. Russian aristocrats lived in palatial estates; their wives virtually dripped diamonds and pearls. And I’ve already mentioned how the Emperors supported the Imperial Ballet. Even the ones that went around in peasant shirts.

The Imperial Ballet imported teachers and choreographers from France and Italy, so Russian ballet was very much in the European tradition, and by the early 20th century, the Imperial Ballet had the finest ballet dancers in Europe. And no one outside Russia knew anything about them.

But while Russia had world-class dancers, its ballet tradition had been imported from other countries, and consequently, Russian ballet had become kind of stuffy and formulaic. Back in its heyday, Diaghilev's magazine had often complained about the stodginess of the Imperial Ballet.

And so, Sergei Diaghilev decided to take Russian ballet, infuse it with a Miristkusniki aesthetic, and take it back to France, to dazzle the French with the great things that Russians had accomplished with their own art form.

And dazzle them he did. It is in ballet that Diaghilev will reach his greatest heights, and ballet will become the art form with which his name is most closely associated. And he will accomplish this in partnership with the now 18-year old Vaslav Nijinsky, who will become the greatest male ballet dancer of the twentieth century. But in 1908, no one knows any of this yet.

We'll have to stop there for today, but I hope you'll join me next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we take up the story of Vaslav Nijinsky, his relationship with Sergei Diaghilev, and how over the next five years, these two men will revolutionize ballet, and change the face of twentieth century art. That's next week, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. Isadora Duncan would continue to tour Europe, and her personal life would continue to create scandal. She had numerous love affairs with men and women. She bore two children by two different men while remaining opposed to marriage on principle. She supported her children herself, even dancing while pregnant. Sadly, both children would die in an automobile accident in Paris in 1913. And of course, this was a crushing blow to Duncan.

After the Russian Revolution, the Soviet government invited her to come to Russia to teach dance. She married a Russian poet, Sergei Aleksandrovich Yesenin, who was 17 years her junior, so she could bring him on her tour of the United States. Unfortunately for them, the US was by this time in the throes of its first "Red Scare," and the couple were received with hostility and unfairly accused of being Bolshevik agitators. Duncan left America vowing never to return, and never did. Yesenin left Duncan, returned to Russia, mental illness soon drove him to suicide. Afterward, Duncan, now in her forties, tried to go back to touring as a dancer, and was struggling to support herself. She became noted primarily for her heavy drinking and her skipping out on hotel bills.

Duncan died in 1927, at the age of fifty, in Nice, in a tragic accident. She had just boarded an open car with her latest lover, and as he drove off, her long, flowing scarf caught in the spokes of the car's rear wheel, throwing her from the vehicle and strangling her. Gertrude Stein would morbidly quip, "Affectations can be dangerous."

And you can find the phrase "Isadora Duncan Syndrome" in medical literature; it refers to the characteristic throat injuries caused by the entanglement of a scarf in machinery.

In 1987, when the National Museum of Dance's Hall of Fame was established in New York, Isadora Duncan was among the first group of dancers inducted, along with such American dance luminaries as George Balanchine, Fred Astaire, Martha Graham, and Bill Robinson.

[music: closing theme]

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