



Initiating the Development of Modern Ballet Through the Ballets Russes Production of *L'Après-midi d'un Faune*

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Abstract

At the turn of the twentieth century, ballet stood at the intersection of refinement and stagnation. Under Marius Petipa's direction, the Russian Imperial Ballet had reached technical and artistic excellence, however its strict adherence to rigid structures and traditions left it vulnerable to cultural and institutional developments. It was a Russian impresario with a background in art criticism and exhibition curation who critically recognized the potential for ballet to evolve into a modern, interdisciplinary art form. As founder of the Ballets Russes, Sergei Diaghilev brought together known leaders in choreography, music, and visual design, fostering a creative environment which challenged established norms. This paper focuses on the 1912 Ballets Russes production of *L'Après-midi d'un Faune* as the project through which Diaghilev's dual role as artistic connoisseur and strategic manager is examined. Employing the perspectives of both ballet and management studies, the analysis considers how Diaghilev facilitated collaboration among choreographer Vaslav Nijinsky, composer Claude Debussy, and designer Léon Bakst, enabling each to contribute their distinct artistic perspectives. Ballet literature places *L'Après-midi d'un Faune* within the avant-garde movement, citing its controversial erotic content, radical two-dimensional choreography, and divergence from musical expectation. These new elements broke from the classical ballet tradition and redefined the expressive language of the discipline. Management scholarship illustrates how Sergei Diaghilev's entrepreneurial leadership through interdisciplinary project coordination was able to support such innovation. His strategic methods included recruiting top talent across all fields, mediating conflicts between complex personalities, and finding creative ways to leverage controversy for cultural capital. Such approaches align with contemporary theories of adaptive, knowledge-based management. Diaghilev's leadership ensured that *L'Après-midi d'un Faune* was both a groundbreaking artistic achievement and a carefully executed act of institutional entrepreneurship. The findings presented in this paper underscore how the modernist transformation of ballet was as much a managerial accomplishment as it was an artistic one. Through his ability to unite artistic disciplines under a cohesive vision, Diaghilev established a model for arts leadership that remains relevant today. This interdisciplinary case study therefore contributes to arts management scholarship by identifying historically grounded strategies for managing artistic risk to drive cultural innovation.

Keywords

Modern Ballet, Arts Management, Sergei Diaghilev, Ballets Russes, *L'Après-midi d'un Faune*

Context

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, ballet was a flourishing yet tradition-bound art form. Under the leadership of Marius Petipa, the Imperial Ballet in Russia had achieved technical brilliance and artistic prestige, marked by the synthesis of symphonic choreography, virtuoso pointe work, and collaborations with composers like Tchaikovsky (Harris-Warrick et al. 2025; Jaffé 2012). Even as ballet reached new heights of classical refinement, signs of stagnation were beginning to emerge, both artistically and institutionally. Political unrest in Russia, eventually leading to the 1917 revolution, would soon challenge the state-supported model that had sustained ballet's prominence (Scholl 2007).

Enter Sergei Diaghilev, a Russian impresario with a background in art criticism and exhibition curation, whose unique perspective prepared him for an unprecedented role in the performing arts. Having founded the journal *Mir Iskusstva* ("World of Art") in 1899, Diaghilev was passionate about the integration of artistic disciplines, rejecting boundaries between visual art, music, and theater (Lockspeiser 2025). His early successes as

a curator, including the landmark 1905 Russian portrait exhibition in St. Petersburg, demonstrated his ability to engage artists and attract audiences (Costonis 2025).

In 1906, Diaghilev identified the potential of the city of Paris as a hub for culture and avant-garde experimentation. His early projects in Paris included a production of the Russian opera *Boris Godunov* in 1908 as well as concerts of Russian composers' works. These laid the groundwork for the creation of the Ballets Russes in 1909 (Costonis 2025; Snodgrass 2015). By founding his own company, Diaghilev set out to transform ballet from a decorative art tied to aristocratic tradition into a vibrant, interdisciplinary, and modern form of expression. One of Diaghilev's top priorities throughout his time at the Ballets Russes was securing top talent across artistic fields, including choreographer Michel Fokine, designers Léon Bakst and Alexandre Benois, and composers such as Igor Stravinsky and Claude Debussy (Snodgrass 2015; Scholl 2007).

Under his leadership, Diaghilev's Ballets Russes was quickly noticed for taking ballet in a direction that differed from the academic traditions of the Imperial Ballet. The early works of Fokine for the company, including *The Firebird* (1910) and *Scheherazade* (1910), emphasized expressive movement, narrative depth, and the integration of choreography with music and visual design—rejecting the formulaic divertissements and hierarchical staging of Petipa's ballets (Harris-Warrick et al. 2025). In conjunction, Bakst's vivid sets and costumes introduced a bold visual aesthetic influenced by orientalism, symbolism, and modernist design, reinforcing the company's reputation for aesthetic innovation (Snodgrass 2015).

As will be discussed, Diaghilev played a visionary and managerial role in orchestrating these collaborations. He fostered an environment where artists across disciplines worked together closely, breaking down barriers to achieve unified artistic works. His understanding of cultural trends, selection of collaborators, and willingness to challenge audience expectations put the Ballets Russes at the forefront of European modernism (Lockspeiser 2025). In 1912, the established practice of innovation had laid the foundation for a radical new work to come out of the Ballets Russes: *L'Après-midi d'un Faune*.

In this historical context, the creation of *L'Après-midi d'un Faune* can be seen as a success of Diaghilev's efforts to reimagine ballet as a modern art form. Through his dual role as artistic connoisseur and strategic manager, he created the institutional and creative conditions necessary for such groundbreaking experimentation to emerge, setting the stage for a ballet that would challenge aesthetic norms and expand the expressive language of dance.

Literature Review

Sergei Diaghilev initiating the development of modern ballet through *L'Après-midi d'un Faune* can best be examined through the interdisciplinary lens of ballet and management. Scholarship from both fields highlights Diaghilev's multifaceted role as artistic visionary and strategic manager, providing evidence that his achievements can be viewed not only as artistic innovations but also as early applications of emerging management practices.

In literature from the field of ballet, scholars such as Munro (1951), Kirstein (1970), Kochno (1970), and Lieven (1973) have analysed the artistic synthesis that took place in *L'Après-midi d'un Faune*. Munro (1951) discusses the rarity of a single production including collaboration between such a high number of leading artists across disciplines, reflecting a significant undertaking of the Wagnerian ideal of a "total work of art" (Gesamtkunstwerk). Kirstein (1970) and Kochno (1970) propose that Diaghilev's leadership encouraged Nijinsky and enabled him to create radical, two-dimensional choreography, which was then integrated with Debussy's music and Bakst's designs. Despite resistance from some of his collaborators, including even Debussy, Diaghilev's organizational influence ensured that this innovative but controversial aesthetic was realized on stage.

Throughout the scholarly literature, the integration of these artists work is consistently attributed to Diaghilev's "organizing genius" (Munro 1951), which extended beyond artistic curation to include talent recruitment, managerial oversight, and strategic promotion. Lieven (1973) suggests that Diaghilev's careful coordination of museum visits and artist interactions inspired Nijinsky's choreography, while Kochno (1970) documents how Diaghilev persistently negotiated with Debussy to secure permission for the adaptation. Sgourev (2015) argues that these actions point to Diaghilev talent for brokering creative relationships. He assesses that this unique ability placed Diaghilev at the center of a network of artists and enabled him to connect previously isolated social and artistic worlds.

The concept of brokerage ties directly into management scholarship. Sgourev (2015) uses organizational theory to describe Diaghilev as a "broker" who facilitated not only artistic collaboration but also institutional entrepreneurship, developing unanticipated processes that reshaped the cultural landscape. Diaghilev's leadership style is also in alignment with Denning's (2010) description of entrepreneurial management, in which leadership departs from a traditionally strict hierarchical structure. In this style of management, leaders move toward an adaptive model, that empowers collaborators to enact a shared vision while ensuring they retain their creative autonomy.

In further discussion of the evolution of management, Scott (2003) provides the context for Diaghilev to be placed within a historical lineage of managerial innovation. He draws a parallel between Diaghilev's coordination of creative labor with early models of project management. Analysis of managerial practices in historical large-scale creative projects such as the construction of cathedrals, can be compared to Diaghilev's management of the Ballets Russes as a complex multidisciplinary business.

These insights from ballet and management literature reinforce that answering the research question requires an interdisciplinary lens. Ballet studies provides us with an understanding of the aesthetic innovations that Diaghilev facilitated, while management scholarship provides the tools to understand his leadership as an early model of creative management. Epstein (2022) reinforces this perspective, identifying Diaghilev as a prototype for later models of entrepreneurial patronage in the arts, whose leadership "teamed art and enterprise" to merge artistic innovation with marketplace realities. The integration of these perspectives will demonstrate that Diaghilev's initiation of modern ballet was not merely an artistic achievement but also a managerial one. It will show how management practices shaped not only the production of *L'Après-midi d'un Faune* but also ballet's transition into a new era, offering insights for contemporary arts management.

Through the Lens of Ballet

The Ballets Russes production of *L'Après-midi d'un Faune* (1912) was a turning point for the discipline of ballet. It marked a turn away from classical ballet traditions and a step into the modern era of the art form. Choreographed by Ballets Russes star dancer Vaslav Nijinsky, the work introduced "a strict two-dimensional limitation" in movement, inspired by Greek vase painting and bas-relief sculptures, with dancers posed in profile and stylized into a flattened aesthetic (Kirstein, 1970; Lieven, 1973). Nijinsky deliberately eliminated the style elements most characteristic of ballet including turned-out feet, pointe work, and virtuoso leaps. He instead chose to make use of angular gestures, abrupt changes in direction, and static poses, creating what Thomas Munro described as "an animated decoration conceived within the rigid limits of an antique bas-relief" (Munro, 1951).

The change in style was also a shift in ballet's relationship to music and narrative. Instead of using Debussy's *Prélude à l'Après-midi d'un Faune* as accompaniment for traditional dance, Nijinsky chose to challenge the music's expressive qualities. While the music might have conventionally suggested fluid and impressionistic movements, Nijinsky instead chose rigid geometric movements for his choreography. As Berman (1980) described, Debussy was "distasteful" toward Nijinsky's interpretation, feeling it diverged sharply from the tone of his composition. While this may have been the case, this very divergence enabled the choreography to embody modernism's move toward abstraction, stylization, and the autonomy of the arts, positioning movement as an independent expressive language (Kochno, 1970).

L'Après-midi d'un Faune also pushed the boundaries of the art form's thematic scope. The erotic undertones of sexual craving in its storyline and controversial ending scene interpreted as the faun's sexual climax, caused scandals around its premiere, leaving critics and audience divided (Lieven, 1973). The controversy however brought considerable attention to the work and sparked discussions regarding the acceptable boundaries of ballet being stretched by the avant-garde movement. Diaghilev and Nijinsky's willingness to push these boundaries helped establish ballet as a modernist art form capable of addressing complex themes (Sgourev, 2015).

In the discipline of ballet, *L'Après-midi d'un Faune* can be seen as representative of the broader innovations of the Ballets Russes. As Munro (1951) asserts, these developments paved the way for ballet's evolution from decorative spectacle to high art.

Through the Lens of Management

Sergei Diaghilev's leadership was paramount to the artist contributions of the Ballets Russes and the production of *L'Après-midi d'un Faune*. Far more than a manager, Diaghilev was equipped with a unique mix of artistic connoisseurship and entrepreneurial strategy, aligning his leadership with evolving management practices of the early 20th century (Epstein 2022; Scott 2003; Denning 2010). While contemporary management in industrial contexts was moving toward formalization and bureaucratic control (Denning 2010), Diaghilev embodied an alternative, flexible leadership model, what Denning identifies in decentralized organizations.

The role of Diaghilev as a cultural matchmaker allowed him to unite artistic disciplines which may have not come together on their own. For the production of *L'Après-midi d'un Faune*, he brought together Nijinsky, Debussy, and Bakst, each of whom brought their own unique artistic perspectives to the work. Munro (1951) credits Diaghilev's ability to merge "individualistic temperaments" into a cohesive performance, suggesting his leadership paralleled what Scott (2003) describes as effective project coordination across specialized contributors. Diaghilev's approach to fostering collaboration with the artists in his realm is what Denning (2010) calls knowledge-based collaboration, emphasizing adaptability and creative problem-solving over rigid control.

Diaghilev's influence often went beyond coordination to strategic intervention. According to Kochno (1970), it was Diaghilev who persuaded Debussy to consent to the adaptation of his *Prélude à l'Après-midi d'un Faune* for the stage, despite the composer's initial reluctance. Diaghilev can also be credited with taking Nijinsky's to museums to expand his cultural knowledge, likely leading to the inspirations behind *L'Après-midi d'un Faune*'s

archaic aesthetic drawn from Greek vase painting and bas-relief sculpture (Lieven 1973). The ability to see the bigger artistic vision while managing the practical aspects of the Ballets Russes reflects Scott's (2003) argument that modern management requires balancing different areas of expertise under a unifying purpose.

Another aspect of Diaghilev's leadership was his exploitation of publicity and controversy. The premiere of *L'Après-midi d'un Faune* caused a scandal with both its aesthetic and narrative choices. The angular movements and eroticism shocked audiences, however Diaghilev found a way to spin the story for cultural capital, highlighting how the Ballet Russes had become a hub for modern experimentation (Lieven 1973; Dunning 1983). This aligns with Denning's (2010) observation that innovative leadership involves embracing disruption as a driver of attention and change. By strategically navigating artistic risk and public reactions to it, Diaghilev managed to leverage a controversy as a resource.

An additional notable facet of Diaghilev's leadership was his understanding of interdisciplinary management. Munro (1951) draws a parallel between *L'Après-midi d'un Faune* and a Wagnerian Gesamtkunstwerk, where music, movement, and design form a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. This phenomenon could only be achieved by advanced curatorial oversight, such as that which Diaghilev possessed. His ability to "select and combine artists whose collaboration pushed the boundaries of their respective fields" displays managerial foresight that aligned with early 20th-century shifts toward cross-functional teams and project-based leadership (Scott 2003).

Diaghilev's dual role as artistic visionary and strategic manager established a leadership model that not only facilitated major developments in ballet but also laid the groundwork for modern arts management.

Conclusions

Through the combined interdisciplinary lens of Ballet and Management, it can be concluded that Sergei Diaghilev played a significant role in the development of modern ballet through his production of *L'Après-midi d'un Faune* by leveraging his dual role as artistic and strategic manager to foster an environment that facilitated groundbreaking collaboration between choreography, music, and visual design.

The contribution of this research to the field of arts management offers a historical case study of Sergei Diaghilev's leadership in ballet as an early model of collaborative entrepreneurial management in the arts. By analyzing how Diaghilev fostered partnerships across artistic disciplines at the Ballets Russes, transferable strategies can be identified for facilitating interdisciplinary collaboration while managing artistic risk. These strategies remain relevant for arts leaders of today who continue to navigate complex creative ecosystems.

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