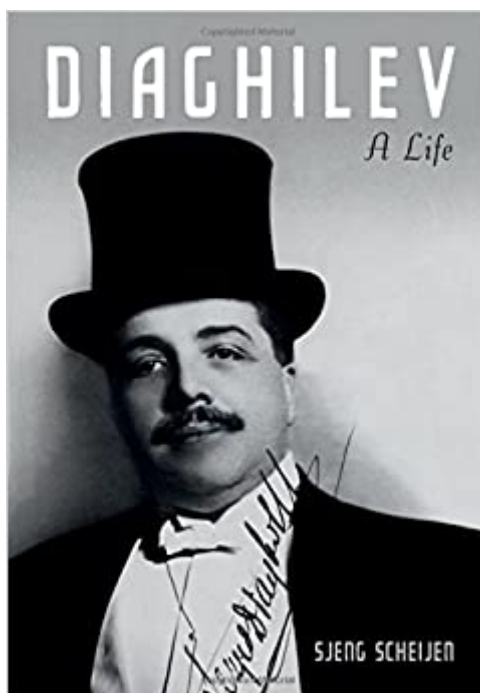


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# Diaghilev: A Life



## Synopsis

Featuring an eight-page gallery of full-color illustrations, here is a major new biography of Serge Diaghilev, founder and impresario of the Ballets Russes, who revolutionized ballet by bringing together composers such as Stravinsky and Prokofiev, dancers and choreographers such as Nijinsky and Karsavina, Fokine and Balanchine, and artists such as Picasso, Matisse, Bakst, and Goncharova. An accomplished, flamboyant impresario of all the arts, Diaghilev became a legendary figure. Growing up in a minor noble family in remote Perm, he would become a central figure in the artistic worlds of Paris, London, Berlin, and Madrid during the golden age of modern art. He lived through bankruptcy, war, revolution, and exile. Furthermore he lived openly as a homosexual and his liaisons, most famously with Nijinsky, and his turbulent friendships with Stravinsky, Coco Chanel, Prokofiev, and Jean Cocteau gave his life an exceptionally dramatic quality. Scheijen's magnificent biography, based on extensive research in little known archives, especially in Russia, brings fully to life a complex and powerful personality with boundless creative energy. A New York Times Editor's Choice

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

**\*Starred Review\*** Diaghilev turns up everywhere ballet and modern art are discussed, wrapped in a broad ribbon declaring him *l'Impresario Extraordinaire*. • But who was the man from Russia who founded and directed the revolutionary dance company Ballet Russes and who brought Nijinsky and Stravinsky to the stages of Europe to riotous effect? With unique access to Russian archives and a passion for researching the lives of the artists, composers, dancers, choreographers, and

prominent patrons drawn to the flame of Diaghilev's audacious artistic pursuits, not to mention the lifting of the censorious ban on truth-telling about homosexual relationships, Scheijen is the first to portray the charming, tyrannical, turbulent, and brilliant artistic ringleader in full. Writing with buoyant curiosity, and providing exceptional illustrations, he covers Diaghilev's first love affair with a cousin; his failure as a composer, which helped him realize that his genius lay not in artistic creation, but in perceiving the genius in others; and how his family's extreme reversals of fortune prepared Diaghilev for a life of aesthetic and financial gambles. Scheijen also offers sensitive accounts of Diaghilev's complex relationships with dancers Nijinsky and Massine and his sorrows once war exiled him from family and home, concluding that, as dramatic a public figure as Diaghilev was, he always kept his deepest feelings to himself. --Donna Seaman

"Sjeng Scheijen's biography of Ballets Russes impresario Serge Diaghilev (1872-1929) has been universally welcomed as the best to date...[This] biography of Diaghilev is indispensable and a well-written 'page turner' besides...Scheijen's command of the subject resounds on every page. Ninety years after his death we have the first scholarly biography of Serge Diaghilev in English and it is a winner." --Slavic Review "The parade of great dancers, composers, and artists through Diaghilev's life give this book the sweep of a Russian novel with a fascinating, brilliant, and complex protagonist who, according to the author, lived a very public life, but kept his most intimate feelings hidden." --Publishers Weekly "A vivid portrait of this morbid, nomadic, charming-yet-secretive visionary." --Classic FM Magazine "Drawing on a great deal of new research, and relying wherever possible on contemporary journals and letters, Scheijen puts Diaghilev into a different frame to any of his previous biographers.... Scheijen masterfully recounts the phenomenal way in which Diaghilev contrived, under virtually impossible circumstances, to nurture a sequence of works, from Stravinsky, Prokofiev, Debussy, Ravel, Falla, Milhaud, designed by Bakst, Picasso, Derain, Matisse, Miró, danced by Nijinsky, Karsavina, Massine, Lifar, choreographed by Fokine, Nijinsky, Nijinska, Massine, each more audacious than the last, many of them still in the repertoire."--Simon Callow, The Guardian "An expansive, immensely readable text... A must for anyone intrigued by the Ballets Russes and the ingenious impresario indelibly linked with its achievements." --Times Higher Education "Sergei Diaghilev was a transformative force in the history of 20th century culture thanks to his promotion of Russian art, Russian opera and, of course, the Ballets Russes. After exhaustive research in Russian, European and American archives, Sjeng Scheijen presents us with a multi-faceted and synthetic portrait of Diaghilev, adducing much new biographical and critical material. With important sections on Diaghilev's family, education, esthetic criteria and psychological

makeup, Sergei Diaghilev: A Life is a luminous, engaging and refreshing study of Diaghilev's national commitment, international mission and deep influence on the evolution of the visual and performing arts."--Professor. John Bowlit, University of Southern California 'Sjeng Scheijen's new book about Diaghilev is absolutely wonderful. It is filled with the most fascinating information and is a completely intriguing read.... [An] exceptional book'--Dame Monica Mason, DBE, Director of the Royal Ballet "No biography is definitive - yet I cannot imagine any book that will supersede this account of how Diaghilev ballets came into being. It is an astonishing achievement."--Michael Holroyd "Previous biographies... have said little or nothing of the family Diaghilev left behind in Russia. Mr. Scheijen, a Dutch expert in Russian art, demonstrates, however, that Diaghilev made repeated efforts to contact them... Mr. Scheijen draws happily from a wide range of sources that have become available in recent years in Russia and the West... an important addition to the large shelf of Diaghilev literature." --Alistair Macauley, The New York Times "...new document enable Scheijen to sweep out many cob-webbed corners in the Diaghilev story... The leading edge of Scheijen's revisionism, however, is not his fact-correcting but his reinterpretations... An admirable book. Apart from its revisionism, its most striking quality is its avoidance of clutter, and hence its rhetorical force... Above all, [Scheijen] has tried to provide a deep and unified account of Diaghilev's personality. It's not a soul laid bare - Diaghilev was secretive - but something closer than we've seen before." Joan Acocella, The New Yorker "Diaghilev's Ballets Russes attracted devotees who behaved as if under the spell of an almost cult-like intoxication. The rapture of art at its most transformative seemed to infect everyone connected to the impresario. The major achievement of Diaghilev: A Life is probably its detailed portrait of Diaghilev's private life, but at the same time Mr. Scheijen helps us to feel something of that rapture." -Joel Lobenthal, The Wall Street Journal "[A] meaty and rigorously researched new biography...Diaghilev: A Life is especially excellent on its subject's formative years... Scheijen dexterously plays his sources against one another to examine the erotic and professional dynamics between Diaghilev and his stars." -Jennifer B. McDonald, The New York Times Book Review "Diaghilev was larger than life, and this biography is an absorbing and dramatic account of an extraordinary individual and his time." -Library Journal "In Scheijen's hands, this is quite a read, quite a life, and quite a book." -Playbill.com "Scheijen provides a comprehensive, well-balanced chronicle of the professional and personal life of the famous, and infamous, Russian impresario Serge Diaghilev... A substantial addition to the literature on Diaghilev and his Ballet Russes, the book benefits from Scheijen's access to and selective use of materials from previously inaccessible Russian archives." -Choice "An admirable biographical study, and a fascinating overview of the Russian art world and its European connections in the early

twentieth century." --Times Literary Supplement "The epic life of the impresario of the Ballets Russes is captured in Sjeng Scheijen's *Diaghilev*, which... proves that 'design by committee' is not necessarily doomed." --Harper's Magazine

Sjeng Scheijen, recently cultural attaché at the Dutch embassy in Russia, has written an eminently readable, thorough biography of Sergei Diaghilev, one of the great artistic figures of twentieth century western culture. That Diaghilev was not himself an artist is ironic, though he initially wanted to paint. But in his many enterprises he help set in motion many of the trends that were to be dominant in twentieth century painting, music, and dance. It is somewhat unfortunate that Diaghilev's success with the Ballet Russes has obscured his achievements with the development of the plastic arts, way before he dazzled Parisian audiences with his dance company. It is providential that Mr. Scheijen is not a dance specialist, as he does not let Ballet Russe splendour blind him to the other significant achievements of Diaghilev, all thoroughly discussed in his book. But Dance is central and one of the delights of this biography is that the biographer lets contemporaries do the telling as to descriptions and analysis of the Ballet Russes. Indeed, I have read very few passages as revealing and absorbing as the long paragraph by Bronislava Nijinska quoted by Mr. Scheijen describing in minute detail her brother's fast and concentrated practice technique, his ability to create the illusion of being suspended in air by ending a jump not on the balls of his feet but on his extraordinarily strong toes. This is but a precious detail in a book that is full of many such jewels. The biography has made use of many Russian sources so that there is much illumination on Diaghilev's early life and career in Russia. Indeed there is much wealth of detail and atmosphere of the initial years of Diaghilev as a disciplined, hard working art scholar, administrator, organizer, and his pivotal role in the artistic life of St. Petersburg and promoter of Russian art. One learns much about the intricacies of Russian cultural politics of the time and the cliquishness that governed official and bureaucratic life notwithstanding nominal absolutism in all budgetary matters by the hapless Tsar. The first forays to Paris, of Russian music and staged opera are thoroughly documented. We go through a very interesting and informative approximate third of the book before the seventeen year old Nijinsky makes an appearance. Mr. Scheijen's text is also a corrective on many traditional interpretations of Diaghilev's personal life that with time have become unquestioned "fact" in all probability because the research has not been thorough. Thus one learns that rather than Diaghilev be the possessive pursuer of Nijinsky, the great dancer himself, unstable, at the core probably heterosexual, but very much a careerist, was the one who originally pursued Diaghilev relentlessly so as to advance his career. In this respect Diaghilev with time, apparently

learned to play his empresario role without bashfulness, expecting sexual payback from his young protégés. Though it may seem unfair to dwell on this aspect of the biography it being so much more than a listing of salacious detail, however, it is important to mention because, as so much in this book, thanks to Mr. Scheijen, it is revisionist, thoroughly informed, and contrary to what has been "traditional" Ballet Russe caricature of Diaghilev's personality. The fact remains that there has never been before or since a cultural figure such as Diaghilev, a man without fortune who was able to bring together for a while what was best in music, dance, and art, astonish the world and set its artistic course for the better part of a century. The word "impresario" indeed shortchanges the man. Yet that he also was. Mr. Scheijen never lets one forget that bills had to be paid, at least most of the time. Diaghilev struggled always to get the funds together. He also mastered the art of walking out of hotels with great panache, head held high, and leaving the bill unpaid. All told it was a wondrous, full, exciting, tempestuous life. Was there loneliness at the center of so much activity? One can speculate. However, one cannot escape the underlying melancholy of the perpetual Russian exile. The book has many illustrations throughout the text, and a center section of finely reproduced colored plates of Ballet Russes designs. This book is thoroughly recommended not only to balletomanes but to anyone interested in the cultural history of the twentieth century. It is the best book I have read about Diaghilev.

I am a fairly new convert to the glories of the ballet and this book taught me so much about this wonderful art, about its professional politics in late nineteenth century Russia, about its fascinating protagonist Diaghilev, about his nurturing of the dance in Western Europe when it fell on dark days after the Russian Revolution. The egos of the great dancers, the artistic temperament of the finest choreographers and set designers, the struggle to keep the ballet company alive under the severest financial difficulties, these are the subject of this wonderful history of a great company from which so many amazing companies arose world-wide. The greatest names of ballet are encountered here both in all their glory and as human beings living the dance as it strove to survive after being transplanted from the nurturing climate of Tzarist Russia to the bankers' paradise of France. This biography is so interestingly written and so informative that it belongs on the bookshelf of every ballet lover. I came to admire Diaghilev for his wonderful accomplishments under great difficulties and in spite of personal flaws that troubled his relationships with the inspired artists he worked with.

This book is an exceptional work of scholarship and storytelling. For me it struck the right balance between the complexities of the man and his substantial impact. This book is an especially good

introduction to the period and the many artistic forces in play at this most interesting of times in western art, music, dance, and politics. Highly recommended.

Fascinating bio of the Russian gentleman whose cultural acumen spearheaded just about every artistic "movement" in the early 20th-century.

I own most of Ballet Russes-connected books; this is the most insightful volume yet...correcting much erroneous information about the history of the important man responsible for the riches still evident in the ballet world.

Wonderful insight into the personal and professional life of Diaghilev and his involvement in the arts as well as the period of time with the Ballet Russes. Gave a thorough background to his family and those with whom he communicated over his lifetime.

This book not only give a wonderful insight to Diaghilev's mind, but to the intellectual thinking of the period as well as being a wonderful commentary of historical significance, culminating in the bringing together of the artistry that was the Ballet de Russe.

No issues with the item, thanks.

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