

Choral Review

Lionel Daunais's *Figures de danse*: An Accessible & Theatrical Québécois Choral Gem

by Brian C. Murray

Lionel Daunais (1901–1982) was a prominent twentieth-century *Québécois* musician whose compositions—solo vocal works, song cycles, folksong arrangements, individual choral works, and multi-movement choral works—markedly impacted Canadian music. This choral review offers an overview of Daunais's *Figures de danse*, which features his signature luxurious vocal writing and refined drollery. Through six nonsensical movements, Daunais delves into death and dance with exquisite choral and piano writing. As the entire work is in French, reading a translation before each movement may benefit a non-French speaking audience. This narration is an invaluable opportunity to collaborate with colleagues in theatre and dance, adding vibrancy and humor to the performance.

Figures de danse is appropriate for youth choirs, community choirs, university choirs, and professional choirs alike. And indeed, it has seen performances by myriad types of choral ensembles at institutions including Baylor University, Canadian Chamber Choir, Chœur de Chambre du Québec, Creekview High School, Michigan State University, R.L. Turner High School,

University of North Texas, University of Wyoming, and Vancouver Youth Chorus. As the majority of choral repertoire deals with the topics of love and loss, Daunais's *Figures de danse* can serve as a light-hearted and comedic foil to an otherwise serious and moderate-to-slow program.

Upon winning the *Prix d'Europe* in 1926, Daunais's career as a singer soared. After studies in Paris and work with the Algiers Opera, he returned to Montréal, where he founded *le Trio Lyrique* and *Les Variétés Lyriques*. As a renowned vocalist, his compositions exude the effortless melodicism of French *mélodie*. Daunais's works all feature traditional harmonic language, idiomatic vocal writing, and often include challenging piano accompaniments. His foremost attribute, however, is a dedication to the text—often humorous and written by Daunais himself.

Figures de danse comprises six short tragicomic miniatures for mixed choir and piano. In his whimsical and nuanced writing, Daunais explores the outlandish fates of various dancers. *Éditions d'Alliance* first published the choral score in 1975. They published the piano accompaniment as a separate score in 1992.¹

Each movement in the work functions as a stand-alone caricature. In the opening movement, “Pas grave,” Daunais succinctly reports of Natascha's determination to conclude her dance career at the behest of a Shah, who lavishes her with exotic jewelry. Next,

Choral Reviews

in “Jetés-battus (Építaphe),” he chromatically beseeches the listeners to mourn for Idoménée who tragically toasted her tutu too near the fireplace. The third movement, “Grand-Écart” translates to “the splits.” In the introduction, the piano begins in prime unison and then expands by more than five octaves. Subsequently, the voices then mirror the same musical acrobatics. Unfortunately, because a nail was left precariously on the stage, Graziella can no longer perform the titular *grand-écart*.

The composer ironically sets the fourth movement, “Adagio,” to a lively *tarantella*. In this miniature, two onlookers witness Saltarello in a sartorial scandal while performing his adagio. In the fifth movement, “Bayadère,” Daunais reveals the dancer’s striking entry for a performance on the back of a panther after a rhapsodic piano introduction. In a dramatic *coup de*

théâtre, the panther enters solo, having engorged the dancer. This movement ends with an unaccompanied Brahmanic prayer that entreats successful digestion. Finally, in “Maryse and partner” Daunais portrays Maryse and Jos as two trapeze partners who valiantly execute spellbinding acrobatic acts. Lamentably, this routine abruptly ceases with Jos’s unexplainable absence. Daunais then punctuates Maryse’s demise with the pronounced interrogation, “où est Jos?” [Where is Jos?].

In addition to performing the work in its entirety, conductors might consider excising various movements for a concert. This simplification will provide the flavor of the work while also reducing the difficulty. Movements five and six are the most substantial and could be excerpted as stand-alone pieces. Another option is to pair this work with other repertoire based around

*New Choral Titles for All Ages
Fall and Christmas 2025*

CELEBRATING GRACE


(877) 550-7707

celebrating-grace.com

dance. For example, numerous Baroque works based on dance, *walzer-Liebeslieder*, *Neue Liebeslieder*, “Wechsel-
lied zum Tanz” by Brahms, or Schubert’s “Der Tanz.” Other possibilities are works by living composers, for example: “Dance!” by Robert T. Gibson, “Solidaridad” by Rosephanye Powell, “Danse macabre” by Z. Randall Stroope, “Vital Dance” by Dale Trumbore, or *An Hour to Dance* by Gwyneth Walker.

Daunais’s *Figures de danse* is a fanciful delight and a welcome respite to programs that are often replete with somber repertoire.

There are multiple challenges when performing this work. Fast French text, local references, and issues with the score often inhibit regular performance. Various resources and strategies can ameliorate these challenges, however.² Additionally, with the publication of a new edition that combines the choral and piano scores and removes numerous errors, *Éditions d’Alliance* mitigated the foremost challenge to frequent performance of the work.³ Further, a thorough understanding of the text is necessary to comprehend and savor the satire in Daunais’s captivating work.

Daunais’s *Figures de danse* is a fanciful delight and a welcome respite to programs that are often replete with somber repertoire. Fancy the professional recording of *Figures de danse* by Julia Davids and the Canadian Chamber Choir or various reference recordings of the work available on YouTube and other streaming platforms.⁴ Revel in the wittiness of the text and enjoy an exploration of this moribund musical fantasy. 

Brian C. Murray is the director of choral activities and assistant professor of music at the University of Wyoming. bmurray7@uwyo.edu

include musical examples from the publisher, Alliance Chorale du Québec (Éditions de l’Alliance). Interested readers can view score samples or purchase at: <https://boutique.chorales.ca/products/figures-de-danse-satb-piano>

- ² Patricia Abbott, “The 30-Year History of the Alliance des Chorales du Québec and Its Impact on Choral Singing in the Province.” *The Phenomenon of Singing* [Online], Volume 5 (July 1, 2005). <https://journals.library.mun.ca/ojs/index.php/singing/article/view/584/402>; Patricia Abbott, “The Vocal and Choral Music of Lionel Daunais (1902-1982).” Paper presented At the 3rd Phenomenon of Singing International Symposium, Memorial University, St. John’s, Newfoundland, Canada (2001); Hilary Apfelstadt, “Canada’s Choral Music Development.” *Choral Journal* 54, no. 8 (March 2014): 34–41; Brian C. Murray, “A Conductor’s Guide to Lionel Daunais’s *Figures de danse*” (DMA diss., University of North Texas, 2020). <https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc1703295/>; Oscar O’Brien, “L’Esthétique de notre folklore,” *La Presse Montréal* (October 21, 1942): Microfiche, MIC A28.

- ³ Lionel Daunais, *Figures de danse: Suite fantastique pour voix mixtes*. ed. Brian C. Murray (Alliance des Chorales du Québec, 1975).

- ⁴ Lionel Daunais, *Figures de danse*. Choeur de Chambre du Québec, Robert Ingari, conductor. Recorded October 2013. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JT_-tddR6Z8; Lionel Daunais, *Figures de danse*. University of North Texas University Singers, Dr. Richard Sparks, conductor. Recorded April 2014. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gptvRSzQ6tw&t=2s>; Julia Davids, conductor. *In Good Company*. Recorded in 2009. Polar Bear Records, 2010, compact disc. Includes Daunais’s *Figures de danse*.

NOTES

¹ As of this printing, we were unable to secure permission to