The ballet: stars, swans, and hokum

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Of all art forms, surely ballet has the most inextricable intertwining of the sublime and the ridiculous, and Balanchine's New York City Ballet provides plenty of examples in both categories.

The Saturday matinee began with a performance of "Swan Lake" which seemed almost perfect. The much-flogged music is still as likeable as anything ever written. One could even enjoy that slender melodramatic plot line. The thought of watching a girl try to dance like a bird is enough to make anyone cringe, but somehow the whole thing was done charmingly and gracefully.

It is often said that Tchaikovsky's dramatic range is very limited, and alas! how true. The music that accompanies the villain's first entrance would not sound out of place in a church choir concert.

Second Rate

The second of the ballets was Hindesmith's "Four Temperaments," which was divided into four movements, titled Melancholic, Sanguinic, Phlegmatic and Choleric. The choreography was at least interesting and novel, but the music seemed formless, with a heavy emphasis on Temperament No. 3 throughout the work. After that came a patched-together Tchaikovsky ballet, called "Allegro Brillante." The dancing had a delicate classical beauty of sorts, but except for a few passages, the music was altogether second-rate.

The last, the poorest, and perhaps the most fascinating ballet on the program was "Stars and Stripes: A Ballet in Five Campaigns: Music adapted and orchestrated by Hershy Kay after music by John Phillip Sousa." This incredible hodge-podge actually consisted of six Sousa marches strung together in the most peculiar orchestration imaginable: "Concoran Cadets," "Rifle Regiment," "Thunder and Gladiator," "Liberty Bell," "El Capitan," and, of course, "Stars and Stripes Forever."

Marches Slowed

I was unfamiliar with all of those except the last, which was arranged hokily enough to satisfy any brass fiend; but a knowledgable friend assures me that some of the simple melodies of the other marches were distorted beyond belief into slow lyrical Hollywood-type love songs, or anything else the arranger had in mind.

I could not have even begun to predict what a tasteful, world-famous choreographer like Balanchine would do with music like that, but the answer really is obvious: he choreographs it more or less as it would be done on the Ed Sullivan show, with gaudy red-