# America in the Transatlantic Imagination: The Ballets Russes and John Alden Carpenter's Skyscrapers

**Title:** America in the Transatlantic Imagination: The Ballets Russes and John Alden Carpenter's Skyscrapers  
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Abstract: During its twenty-year lifespan, the Ballets Russes (1909 to 1929) was celebrated for bringing together illustrious artistic and cultural figures to collaborate on exotic productions based on Russian, Spanish, English and French themes. Notable by its absence from the Ballets Russes’ exotic interests is the culture and music of America, and this despite that during the 1920s Americans culture was a source of fascination and unease in the European cultural imagination. The Ballets Russes’ impresario, Serge Diaghilev, is recognized as holding the culture of the New World in disdain, yet nonetheless commissioned a “typically American” ballet score from Chicago composer John Alden Carpenter in 1923, which resulted in a score featuring a skyscraper-inspired machine aesthetic, and the inclusion of jazz and spirituals. Carpenter’s ballet was dropped by the Ballets Russes before production and was ultimately premiered as Skyscrapers: A Ballet of Modern American Life by the Metropolitan Opera Company on 19 February 1926. This thesis seeks to better understand Diaghilev’s perceived disdain for American culture, the reasons that caused him to avoid the inclusion of an American ballet in the Ballets Russes’ repertory, and his motives for commissioning a score from Carpenter. Drawing on archival documents from the Library of Congress, I construct a historical narrative of the commission and offer insight into the complex politics of patronage in the Ballets Russes. Furthermore, I position Skyscrapers as a product of cultural transfer, thus illustrating the manner in which Carpenter conceived of his ballet as an American work for an international audience. Finally, I examine the Metropolitan production of Skyscrapers and how it perpetuated racial stereotypes and participated in the debates about the mechanization of American life during the 1920s.

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John Alden Carpenter [1], 1876–1951, American composer, b. Park Ridge, Ill.; pupil of J. K. Paine at Harvard and of Elgar. Other important works are his ballet The Birthday of the Infanta (Chicago, 1919), a violin concerto (1937), a concertino for piano and orchestra (1915), songs, symphonies, and chamber music.

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MLA. Chicago. APA.
"Carpenter, John Alden." The Columbia Encyclopedia, 6th ed. . . Encyclopedia.com. John Alden Carpenter, (born February 28, 1876, Park Ridge, Illinois, U.S.—died April 26, 1951, Chicago), American composer who was prominent in the 1920s and was one of the earliest to use jazz rhythms in orchestral music. Carpenter studied at Harvard University under the conservative German-influenced composer John Knowles Paine but then joined his father's shipping-supply firm, of which he was vice president (1909–36). In 1906 he studied music with Sir Edward Elgar. After 1936 he concentrated solely on composition. Title page of the piano score for John Alden Carpenter's Krazy Kat: A Jazz Pantomime (1922). The Newberry Library, Gifts of Mrs. Patrick Hill, 1978. This article was most recently revised and updated by Kathleen Sheetz.