It is well known that in the 1920s in Soviet Russia there was an extraordinary diversity of trends in dance. Not only was there traditional ballet (known in Russia since the eighteenth century), but also new experiments in this field (from Michel Fokine to Kassian Goleizovsky and George Balanchine), as well as many kind of studios derived from Isadora Duncan’s dances: some named “plastic” or rythmoplastic, eccentric dances, machine dances, all kind of dances with pantomime, dances derived from sports, and dalcrozian rhythmic gymnastics. I doubt that in any other country at that time was dance as popular as it was in Russia. The well-known scholar and critic, Alexei Sidorov wrote in 1923: “Dance has become the characteristic feature of our times. It is as if the world is tired of sitting still.”

Why was there this keen interest in dance in Russia?

It did not really begin in the 1920s. Already in the 1910s and through the so-called “Silver Age,” dance had a special place among the arts that attracted the Russian intellectual. It was really extraordinary how the attitude changed from the second half of the nineteenth century: one need only remember what Leo Tolstoy and Anton Chekhov thought of ballet – how they despised it!

In the 1910s dance had become not just a point of attraction, but had a universal meaning. The idea of dance had become a kind of symbol for freedom, for defying convention, following the prompting of instinct and the dictates of nature. Researchers in literature have already pointed out in their studies the importance of dance for poets and writers of the “Silver Age”: especially the free spontaneous joyful dance that in Russian is called pliaska which was different from tanetz (which has a larger meaning and designates any kind of dance).

That is what dance meant for Alexander Blok in the “Snow Mask” Snezhnaia maska (Snow Mask) with its dancing rhythm, or his Pliaski osen-
niyi (Autumn Dances) and “Echo,”4 for Anna Akhmatova in Poema bez geroia (Poem without a Hero), for Osip Mandel’shtam, even for Maksim Gorky when he said: “What does it mean “to live”? I think it is something very pleasant, like a dance, a tireless and crazy dance. One must dance in such a way that everything around becomes joy . . .”5 And even for Vladimir Mayakovsky who wrote in 1915: “A crazy dance should wind round the earth that is as insipid as a tin of preserves.”6 One can also name artists whose names are closely associated with dance, not only those from “Mir Iskusstvo,” who worked for ballet (like Leon Bakst or Alexandre Benois), but painters like Filip Maliavin with his famous painting Vikhr (The Whirlwind), this whirlwind being really a dance performed by peasant women. And can not help remembering that it was the Russian mécène Sergei Shchukin who commissioned Henri Matisse to paint for him in 1909-1910, not only the La Musique panneau, but also the one that represents dancing (La Danse).

So it is perfectly natural that when Isadora Duncan came to Russia in 1904, then in 1907 the first who ventured to discuss her art were poets, artist and thinkers, all those who viewed dance within a broad cultural and artistic framework. For them Duncan’s art was more than a dance novelty, she represented a new aesthetic.

But dancers and choreographers of the “new school,” those who felt the restrictions of the “academy,” were also present in the concert halls where Duncan appeared. So when she performed dances that were free-form improvisations, a kind of antithesis to the strict danse d’école, appearing semi-nude and using concert music by great composers, she instantly attracted their interest. Duncan’s success in Russia was enormous and one can say that it was her influence that was of the greatest importance to the development of Russian dance. (This is true especially for the 1910s, because when in the 1920s she came again to stay in Moscow, her style was already considered old-fashioned. The performances she gave and the opening of her school were political events rather than an artistic ones).

The result of this influence is: on one hand – the appearance of dance groups imitating her, the so-called bosonozhki (barefoot dancers); on the other

4. О, что мне зачатый румянец, Что злы тревоги разлук? Все в мире - кружащийся танец И встречу гнущихся рук. 
A. A. Blok, Sobranie sochinenii v 8 tomakh (Moscow: Gos. izdatel’stvo khudozhestvennoi literature, 1963), 2: 278.

5. “. . . Что же такое - жить? Я думаю, что это занятие приятное, 'вроде танца - неутомимого и бешеного танца. Нужно так танцевать, чтобы все вокруг было весело. . .”

6. . . . бешеной пляской землю овить, Скучную, как банка консервов.