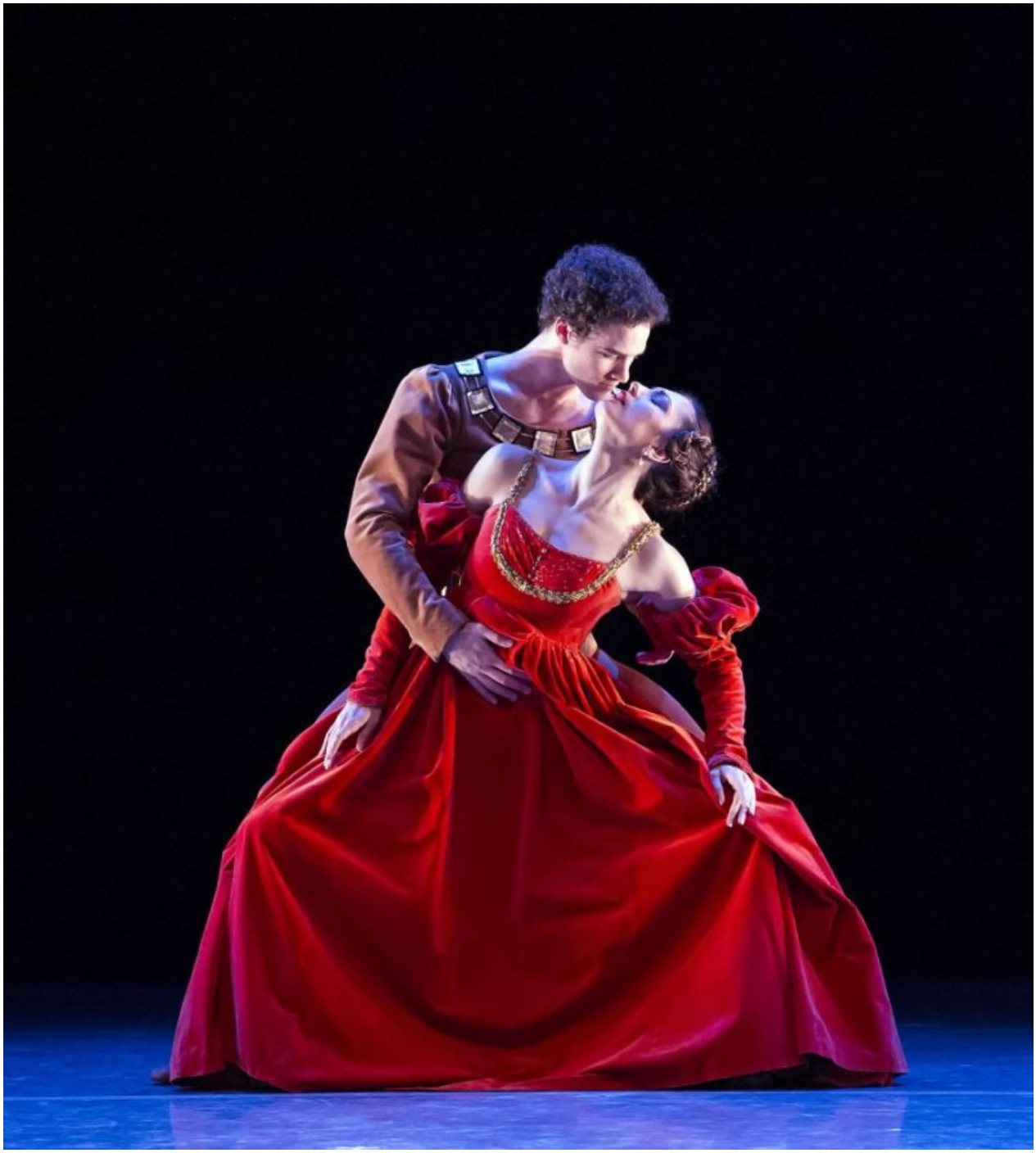
NEW YORK ARTS

New York Arts

An Afternoon of Contrasts: American Ballet Theatre at New York City Center

newyorkarts.net/2012/11/american-ballet-theatre/



Cory Stearns and Veronika Part in ‘The Moor’s Pavane.’ Photo Courtesy American Ballet Theatre.

One would have difficulty imagining a more diverse ballet program than that presented by the American Ballet Theatre last Friday afternoon, in its brief series of fall performances at New York City Center. It was a journey through four centuries of music, and over half a century of choreography.

First on the program was “The Leaves Are Fading,” regarded by many connoisseurs of dance as Antony Tudor’s final masterpiece, and considered by the choreographer himself to be his “autobiography.” The ballet was created expressly for the ABT in 1975, when Tudor was Associate Director. Set to Dvorak’s haunting “Cypresses” and fragments of other compositions for strings, it is a poignant portrayal of reminiscence and nostalgia. A single female dancer appears onstage at the outset and at the conclusion of the ballet, her demeanor musing and reflective in the beginning, and quietly resigned, yet satisfied and content at the end. In the context of Tudor’s autobiography, it would seem that this woman represents the aging choreographer himself, looking back at the “fading leaves” of his life and career (beautifully reflected in the melancholy autumnal colors of Patricia Zipprodt’s costumes and Ming Cho Lee’s scenery).

In many ways, the ballet has a classical quality, created by its composition of successive pas de deux and occasional ensemble interludes . The dancers in this performance did credit to the company’s Tudor legacy, successfully managing to internalize their roles, just as the choreographer would have wished. Each partnership expressed a different motivation and spirit. In the exquisitely beautiful second pas de deux (the centerpiece of the ballet), principals Julie Kent and Marcelo Gomes compellingly conveyed a tenderly intimate, yet passionate connection through physical movement – emotion through motion. The sensitive intelligence with which they embodied their characters brought to mind Mikhail Baryshnikov’s statement that performing a Tudor ballet was “a passport to become mature; to be an adult dancer, a dancer in depth.”

Perhaps the ultimate balletic work requiring expressive artistic maturity is “The Moor’s Pavane,” Jose Limon’s legendary and timeless choreographic masterpiece from 1949. Subtitled “Variations on the theme of Othello,” the piece is a harrowing depiction of true love’s destruction through suspicion, jealousy, and betrayal. Although it is impossible to match Limon’s powerful and riveting original performance as The Moor (fortunately preserved on film), Roman Zhurbin gave a gripping and convincing interpretation, sustaining the dramatic tension until the piece’s devastating conclusion. Xiomara Reyes was the epitome of the Moor’s trusting, loving wife, while Thomas Forster and Simone Messmer creditably depicted the scheming, duplicitous friend, and his loyal, yet scrupulous wife. All four dancers, richly attired in Pauline Lawrence’s Renaissance-inspired costumes, performed with grace and elegance the stately and courtly rhythms of the Henry Purcell score, an amalgamation of excerpts from “Abdelazar,” “The Gordian Knot Untied,” and the pavane from “Pavane and Chacony for Strings.”

The final piece on the program presented a shocking contrast in every respect. Twyla Tharp's "In The Upper Room" from 1986 is an adrenaline-driven apotheosis of meaningless virtuosity and continuous mechanistic motion, set to a characteristically relentless motoric score by Philip Glass. Unlike the previous works, in which the dancers were accompanied by a live orchestra, the music for "In The Upper Room" was a recording (presumably by the Philip Glass ensemble), broadcasted at a deafening decibel level. The entire experience, complete with convict-like black and white striped suits with red accents (socks/shoes), theatrical smoke effects and blinding shafts of light, was a rude awakening into the modern age, after the gentleness and subtlety of Tudor's Dvorak and the nobility and restrained passion of Limon's Purcell.

The undeniable power of "In The Upper Room" lies in the perfect melding of dance and music, and it is an eloquent testimony to the virtue of artistic collaboration of equals and contemporaries. Tharp and Glass share a common vision of the energy that can be unleashed by repetition and perseverance, as well as a certain emotional coolness and detachment that paradoxically heighten the thrillingly visceral effect of the work. Unfortunately, the dancers in this performance did not fully meet the extraordinary technical challenges of "In The Upper Room." Although exuberantly transmitting the raw vitality of the piece, they were often imprecise in their movements, their ensemble coordination seemed under-rehearsed, and there were several lifts that nearly failed.

Whereas ballets like "The Leaves Are Fading" and "The Moor's Pavane" can be carried by the intensity of emotional expression and a commitment to the integrity of the narrative (whether implicit or explicit), a mechanical exercise in sheer technical brilliance like "In The Upper Room" demands no less than perfection. Nevertheless, one left the theatre with a certain sense of exhilaration, and the autumn afternoon came full circle in an encounter with the fading leaves of trees in Central Park.

NEW YORK ARTS

New York Arts

Birthday Bashes Abound in the Big Apple: Garrison Keillor at 70 and Barbara Cook at 85

newyorkarts.net/2012/10/birthday-garrison-keillor-barbara-cook/

October 16, 2012, Avery Fisher Hall, Lincoln Center
Mr. Keillor at 70
with the New York Phiharmonic
Rob Fisher – conductior
Christine DiGiallonardo – vocalist
Richard Dworsky – piano

October 18, 20012, Carnegie Hall
Barbara Cook 85th Birthday Concert
Ted Rosenthal and Lee Musiker – Music Director and Piano
with John Pizzarelli and Jessica Molaskey, Susan Graham, Sheldon Harnick, and Josh Groban

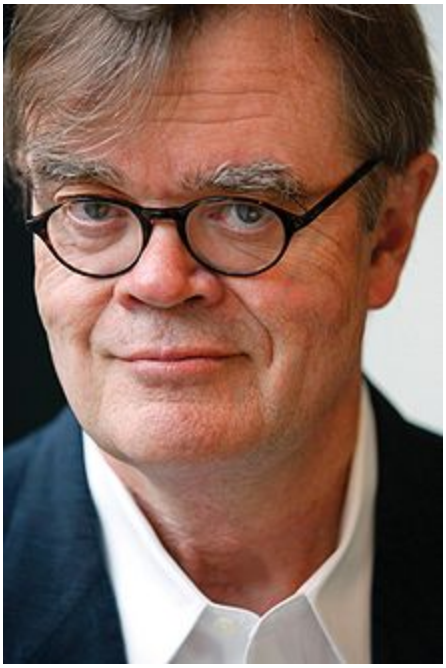
Barbara Cook as Barbie Hallem in Alfred Hitchcock Presents' 'A Little Sleep' (1957).

It isn't often that two luminaries of the entertainment world publicly mark major milestones in the same week and city. Yet such was the case last week in New York: on Tuesday, Garrison Keillor reflected upon seven decades of life in a special appearance with the New York Philharmonic, and on Thursday, Barbara Cook celebrated her eighty-fifth birthday in Carnegie Hall, exactly one week in anticipation of the actual day.

Keillor, writer, humorist, storyteller and host of the legendary public radio program, "A Prairie Home Companion," celebrated his 70th birthday in August of this year. He described his evening with the New York Philharmonic as "a personal narrative of 70 years of music in a man's head, featuring Brethren hymns, nonsense, rousers, show tunes, blues, ribaldry, Pomp and Circumstance, "My Girl," as well as music by Chopin, Tchaikovsky, Haydn, Brian Wilson, Ligeti, and Jerry Garcia. Plus: "Hot Bananas Poetry and Piano Ping-Pong." The

program contained the same eclectic mix of sacred and profane, high- and low-brow, serious and silly, sentimental and irreverent that has come to be the hallmark of “A Prairie Home Companion,” the quintessential postmodern variety show.

The orchestra was in a festive “pops” mood, with a few of the male principal players in red bow-ties, and the occasional female member decked out in a colorful evening gown. The musicians were donating their services for the concert to benefit the pension fund of the New York Philharmonic, and their relaxed, collegial performance under the baton of musical theatre conductor Rob Fisher reflected this fact, presenting a sharp contrast to the impeccable, disciplined rigor of the subscription concerts from the previous week.



Garrison Keillor.

Following Reznicek’s rousing overture to “Donna Diana,” Keillor, bedecked in a red bow-tie and matching tennis shoes, came out on stage, greeting what he called “an orchestra of distinguished men and glamorous women.” He proceeded to commiserate with concertmaster Glenn Dicterow on the subject of his upcoming retirement: “70 is a great age, because it’s preceded by so much dread; then, when it comes, it’s nothing.”

Referring to Dicterow’s intention of retiring to LA, Keillor quipped about life after 70 in a city where, “when you don’t drive, life ends,” and where one spends one’s time in a senior center, forced to see people one has been avoiding successfully for decades. In his usual disarming, pseudo-self-deprecatory manner, he recited a limerick composed in honor of the occasion, contrasting the eminent violinist Dicterow with himself, a humble cornpicker from the Midwest who had just “picked a row.”

Keillor then set the stage for his “Seven Love Sonnets” by recalling the sonnets that he and his fellow students had to memorize in high school. He lamented the fact that, while the other students were assigned the romantic sonnets of Shakespeare, he was given “When in disgrace with fortune and men’s eyes,/I all alone beweep my outcast state.” Reflecting on the vagaries of memory as one ages, he noted that, having forgotten mathematics, physics, and all of the other subjects learned in school, this sonnet remained the solitary “monument in the desert” of his education.

Keillor’s mastery of programming is so refined and subtle that it may have escaped the notice of the public, but the “outcast” theme of Shakespeare’s Sonnet XXIX proved to be the leitmotiv of the entire evening. Part of Keillor’s universal appeal is his identification with the Everyman in society, and his reminiscences of the last seven decades poignantly revealed his pervading sense of “not belonging,” without ever becoming maudlin.

“Seven Love Sonnets,” written by Keillor in collaboration with longtime colleagues Richard Dworsky and Andy Stein, deal with all the varieties of love: “platonic, erotic, and otherwise,” as the program stated. Beginning with an existential plea for God’s existence (“Lord, please be there”), the cycle of sonnets includes memories of Keillor’s high school sweetheart, a romantic lunch followed by a siesta, a crush on Julie Christie, the fantasy of a man waiting at a bus stop about a lovers’ tryst high above him in a Manhattan hotel, a rhapsody about 26 nubile women in bikinis poolside at the Hotel Biltmore, and a tender love song/lullaby: “may the angels smile upon you as you take your rest.” Dworsky’s incidental music to the poetry is alternately humorous and dramatic, punctuating and underscoring the panoply of emotions expressed in the verses.

“Hot Bananas” followed: “a game of poetry/piano/orchestra ping-pong.” In this case, orchestral and piano arrangements of judiciously chosen musical excerpts from Debussy, Joplin, Sousa, and other composers accompanied a seemingly random selection of poems by Keillor about myriad subjects: the travails of “post-parents” seeing their children graduate and leave home; Mozart’s extravagant living habits, which drove him into debt and forced him to compose (“Thank you, Mozart, for being so prolific/And, by the way, your hair looks terrific.”); the indiscretions of exposing the gluteal cleft; cicada courtship (“Cicada love does not involve poetry or song; ‘Was it good for you? Good! Well, so long!’”); sex (“I need you, I confess; let us coalesce”); the Episcopal church (a hilarious spoof of “Ain’t Misbehavin’”); smoking; human sperm; Billy the Kid; opera; “Dark Skies” (a spoof of “Blue Skies”); newlyweds (“a luminous night at the Broadway Hotel/ Then a lifetime of cold cereal.”); and death by electrocution (“In the eulogy, they spoke of love, honor, and ambition; But nobody said, ‘Why didn’t he call an electrician?’”).

Stravinsky’s “Circus Polka” opened the second half of the program, reinforcing the burlesque atmosphere with its sophisticated send-up of Schubert’s “Marche Militaire No.1.” Keillor then returned to the stage with Christine DiGiallonardo, a vocalist who often appears as a guest on “A Prairie Home Companion.” Voices melding in a mellifluous harmony, together they crooned their way through “Over & Over & Ever Again,” described in the program as “An improvisation with orchestra, singers, and piano of images and musical themes in the mind of a person of a certain age.” In other words, as Keillor prefaced the medley of songs and instrumental interludes (ranging from Tchaikovsky, Dvořák, Chopin, Haydn and Beethoven to Jerry Garcia), “when history bunches up around you, the water that passes by you is full of music from long, long ago, when you were a child.” Ranging from profound to trivial, Keillor’s musical reminiscences began with hymns learned in childhood (“Come, Thou Font of Every Blessing,” “Jesus, Lover of My Soul,” “Jesus Wants Me For a Sunbeam,” “O Love That Will Not Let Me Go”) and continued with old radio and television jingles (“Texaco,” “State Farm,” “Coca Cola,” “Oscar Mayer,” “Winston,” “Folgers,” “Chevrolet”) and popular songs spanning nearly a century (“Just A Song at Twilight,” “The Road to Mandalay,” “It’s You in the Sunrise,” “In the Attic of My Life,” “All My Love’s In Vain”). The songs were interspersed with Keillor’s reflections on significant moments of his life (witnessing a river baptism, first love, high school graduation, college, his mother’s recent death). Humor and pathos were so skillfully

interwoven that one had the sense of laughing through tears. Keillor's "outsider" sensibility came through in nearly every anecdote about his life, and the song that perhaps expressed this sentiment most poignantly was "Blind Man Stood in the Road and Cried," which had several reprises throughout the narrative.

"Over & Over & Ever Again" came full circle, ending where it had begun, with a moving hymn and the childhood memory of being scolded by his father for laughing at a river baptism while the rest of the community was in tears. Hearing Keillor recount the tale, one was struck by the sense that he still smarts to this day from the injustice of the rebuke; the little boy had only laughed because, just at the most solemn moment of the baptism (which happened to be taking place exactly in the spot where a boy had recently drowned), a cow on the opposite riverbank decided suddenly to open its bowels. This anecdote says it all about Garrison Keillor: he has the great humorist's innate gift of noticing the incongruity of the profane in the midst of the sacred, of comedy in the midst of tragedy. At 70, he remains boyishly mischievous and uncannily observant, and his universal appeal is as fresh and timeless as it ever was.

Timeless, too, was the impression that Barbara Cook conveyed to a packed house at Carnegie Hall on Thursday night. Her loyal and adoring fans welcomed her dramatic entrance with a rousing ovation. Glamorously attired in arresting blue and black with sparkling diamonds, the only indication of the former ingénue's age was the cane with which she crossed the stage. Settling into a chair with an air of informality, Cook launched into "Let's Fall in Love," revealing a voice which remarkably has held its own, despite the passage of time.

The classic combination of flute/clarinet/saxophone, bass, drums, and piano that accompanied Ms. Cook was adequate for the occasion, but not remarkable in its performance. The only disappointment of the evening was the banality of the instrumental arrangements, which more than occasionally bordered on kitsch and testified all too clearly to the indiscriminate trivialization of popular music in our time.

Perhaps the most impressive aspect of the concert was Cook's adventuresome spirit in performing an enormous variety of genres, some even out of her comfort zone. Each number, whether a torch song, ballad, upbeat "list" song, patter song, or a tune traditionally sung, as she put it, by "jazzers" and "folk singers" (e.g., the soulful "House of the Rising Sun" and "Bye, Bye, Blackbird") was handled not only with complete understanding and respect for both style and content, but also with the appropriate nuances that it required. Her versatility was remarkable, and she was able to move the audience from laughter to tears and back again with the same embodiment of character and mastery of expression that made her a legend on Broadway. The dramatic lighting effects, which bathed the stage in bright yellow for upbeat songs and dark blue for ballads, were superfluous for creating a sense of mood and atmosphere, as Cook could evoke it effortlessly and much more effectively simply with the colors of her voice.

In between musical numbers, the near-85-year-old showed herself still to be an ingénue at heart, giggling at a piano solo, making silly jokes, and telling anecdotes from her life with a childlike straightforwardness and sense of fun. After a soulful rendition of “Georgia On My Mind,” the Atlanta-born-and-raised Cook confessed with a laugh that it was “kind of a lie,” as she “couldn’t wait to get out of there.” She reveled in recounting various humorous titles of singer/songwriter Dan Hicks, such as “If my nose was running, I’d blow it all on you,” quipping that she decided not to sing the song after all because the lyrics simply ended, “… but it’s not.”

“I Got Rhythm,” in which Cook indulged in some scat singing (cleverly including a musical quote from “An American in Paris”) served as the vehicle to feature instrumental solos from each of the musicians and round out the set. Cook expressed her gratitude to them for their collaboration in the final line of the song, “Who could ask for anything more?” She then rose from her chair to acknowledge the resounding ovation of her ardent audience. When the hubbub subsided, she walked slowly downstage and sang a heartfelt version of “Imagine” without amplification, which functioned as both encore and benediction.

It would have been enough — the perfect ending to a perfect concert, but a number of local celebrities wanted to present a special birthday tribute. John Pizzarelli was the first surprise guest, reading a letter from Mayor Bloomberg, that dubbed Barbara Cook a “living New York landmark.” Pizzarelli was then joined by his wife, Jessica Molaskey, in an unremarkable vocal medley, which she introduced (more aptly than she knew) by saying, “Now I know the meaning of the phrase, ‘from the sublime to the ridiculous.’”

A much more acceptable musical offering came from Susan Graham, who swept onstage in a flowing orange robe and dramatically told the story of a little girl in the 60s in New Mexico who grew up in front of the hi-fi, listening to “The Music Man.” “Yours was the first beautiful voice I heard,” she confessed to Cook. She then gave a highly operatic, but nonetheless moving performance of “Till There Was You,” emphasizing the final line by pointing a finger at her role model. “When I was a little girl, I wanted to be you when I grew up, and I still do,” she admitted.

Barbara Cook was serenaded next by master lyricist and longtime friend, Sheldon Harnick, in a reprise of the song he wrote for her a year ago on the occasion of New York theatre’s tribute. In a clever reversal, he set his own lyrics, “I love you,” to the tune, “She Loves Me.” The near nonagenarian was followed by young idol Josh Groban, who gallantly sang to Cook that nothing would harm her, “Not While I’m Around.” A final chorus of “Happy Birthday” from performers and audience alike brought the evening to a close, and a deafening ovation accompanied the great singer offstage.

Postscript: Barbara Cook requested that all of her fans and supporters everywhere remember to “raise a glass” to her health this Thursday, the 25th, which is her actual 85th birthday.

NEW YORK ARTS

New York Arts

Inextinguishable Fire – An Evening of Nielsen and Tchaikovsky at the New York Philharmonic, Alan Gilbert, conductor, Robert Langevin, Flute, Nikolaj Znaider Violin

newyorkarts.net/2012/10/nielsen-tchaikovsky-new-york-philharmonic-alan-glibert-robert-langevin-nikolaj-znaider/

Grieg's Composing Hut at Troldhaugen.

Avery Fisher Hall
Wednesday, October 10, 2012, 7:30 p.m.
Friday, October 12, 2012, 8:00 p.m.

Alan Gilbert, conductor
Robert Langevin, flute
Nikolaj Znaider, violin

Nielsen – Flute Concerto
Nielsen – Violin Concerto
Tchaikovsky – Symphony No. 2, *Little Russian*

Last week, the New York Philharmonic, under its director Alan Gilbert, presented the latest installment of the “Nielsen Project,” an ambitious undertaking to perform and record the complete symphonies and concerti by the Danish composer in time for his 150th birthday in 2015. The program paired Nielsen’s well-known flute concerto and rarely heard violin concerto in the first half, followed by Tchaikovsky’s 2nd Symphony (“Little Russian”). At first glance it seemed that Gilbert’s choice of the tuneful, crowd-pleasing symphony might have been intended as a form of insurance that the concerts would draw an adequate public, given the fact that Nielsen, despite Leonard Bernstein’s valiant championing of the composer in the 1960s, remains an acquired taste for New York (and, in general, American) concertgoers. Yet careful listening revealed a profound and unexpected connection between the two composers, once again confirming Gilbert’s reputation for unusually thoughtful and intelligent programming.

The coupling of Nielsen’s flute and violin concerti was equally felicitous, as there is much to be gained by comparing the two compositions. Both owe a great debt to Nielsen’s background as a band player in the army, with their preponderance of winds, brass and timpani in the scoring. The solo instrument in each case performs cadenzas over extended drum rolls, and each concerto concludes with a flourish of brass and timpani, as the soloist embarks upon a madly frenetic moto perpetuo coda. On the lyrical side, in both concerti the solo instrument rises in a meandering scale, lingering poignantly on a leading-tone suspension, until finally resolving on the tonic. The slow movements of both works feature exquisite dialogues with the solo winds of the orchestra; Nielsen never leaves his soloists to “face the music” alone, but integrates them fully into the rich orchestral fabric.

This aspect of the composer’s style made it particularly satisfying to hear the New York Philharmonic’s principal, Robert Langevin, as the soloist in the flute concerto. His colleagues, especially the wind players, blended seamlessly and sympathetically with the solo line. The various orchestral solos (clarinet, bassoon, French horn, viola, and trombone (the latter with its humorous, grunting slides!) were executed so expertly that the traditional hierarchy of soloist and ensemble was blurred, validating Nielsen’s almost “chamber” conception of the concerto. Throughout, Langevin’s elegant lines and clear, dulcet purity of tone wove the disparate elements and ideas together into a cohesive whole.

Nielsen’s flute concerto represents the composer at his most searchingly modernistic; in fact, its world premiere in Paris arguably influenced an entire school of French compositions for the flute, having been attended by Maurice Ravel, Albert Roussel, and Arthur Honegger. The quick, mercurial mood changes, from violent to ironic to playful to lyrical, are reflected in abrupt stylistic and harmonic shifts, from tonal to nearly atonal, Romantic to proto-modern.

In contrast, the earlier violin concerto sounded particularly Romantic in the wake of the flute concerto. This effect was increased by heart-rending, exquisitely poignant moments rendered by violinist Nikolaj Znaider, whose voluptuous tone and passionate execution consistently drew the most out of the legendary “Kreisler” Guarnerius del Gesù on extended loan to him from The Royal Danish Theater. With his imposing stage presence, sovereign

command of the instrument, and human warmth, Znaider proved himself to be Fritz Kreisler's rightful heir. (He also clearly owes a great debt to his musical mentor, celebrated Russian violinist Boris Kushnir.)

Nielsen's first instrument of study was the violin, and he played professionally for many years before dedicating himself exclusively to composition. His thorough knowledge of the instrument is evident in the expert writing for the solo part, in which virtuosity and technical brilliance abound. He wrote his violin concerto during a sojourn in Grieg's composing hut at Troldhaugen near Bergen. The quirky, rollicking humor, open chords, fiddling passage work and "folkelig" (Nielsen's favorite term for the folk quality of his music) elements that distinguish the final rondo reveal the great Norwegian composer's spirit as the muse behind the work. A marked use of open string drones, particularly in the cadenzas, calls to mind the Hardanger fiddles used in Norwegian folk music. Znaider brought out these rustic features with great relish and panache, while never indulging in caricature, a temptation to which other violinists too often succumb. Indeed, Znaider's interpretation manifested a mature understanding of the concerto's complexities. In Nielsen's own words, the work is "rich in content, popular, and dazzling without becoming superficial. These are contraries that must and will meet and be combined in a higher unity." The composer wrote to his wife that the task of writing the violin concerto was "actually difficult, and therefore amusing." He was particularly amused by the challenging contrasts in the piece, and he undoubtedly would have taken great delight in Znaider's outstanding performance.

Gilbert was exemplary in listening sensitively and responding to the soloists in the two concerti; in the Tchaikovsky symphony, he showed his commanding, directorial side at its most impressive. Conducting without a score, he was able to connect more intimately with the orchestra, leaving no flourish or nuance of expression to chance, but sculpting each detail through a gesture.

The juxtaposition of Nielsen and Tchaikovsky proved to be a revelation, because it brought out commonalities between two composers who are not normally associated with each other. Like Nielsen with his violin concerto, Tchaikovsky composed "The Little Russian" symphony during a sojourn in the countryside – in this case, his sister's estate near Kiev. The work owes its name to the use of traditional Ukrainian folk songs in its various movements; most notably, the haunting opening horn and bassoon solos of the tune, "Down by Mother Volga," "Spin, O My Spinner," played by the clarinet and flute in the second movement, and the "The Crane" as the principal theme for the finale. Songs that Tchaikovsky heard while he was working on the symphony found their way into the piece.

Another parallel between the two composers is the predominant use of winds, brass, and timpani in the orchestration, not only to underscore the dramatic energy and impulse of the music, but also to convey the colorful folk elements more vividly. Both composers indulge in abrupt changes of mood and expression, shifting unexpectedly from bombast to lyricism. In

Tchaikovsky's "Little Russian" symphony, this tendency is nowhere more evident than in the finale, in which bursts of timpani and percussion are followed in quick succession by tender effusion in the strings.

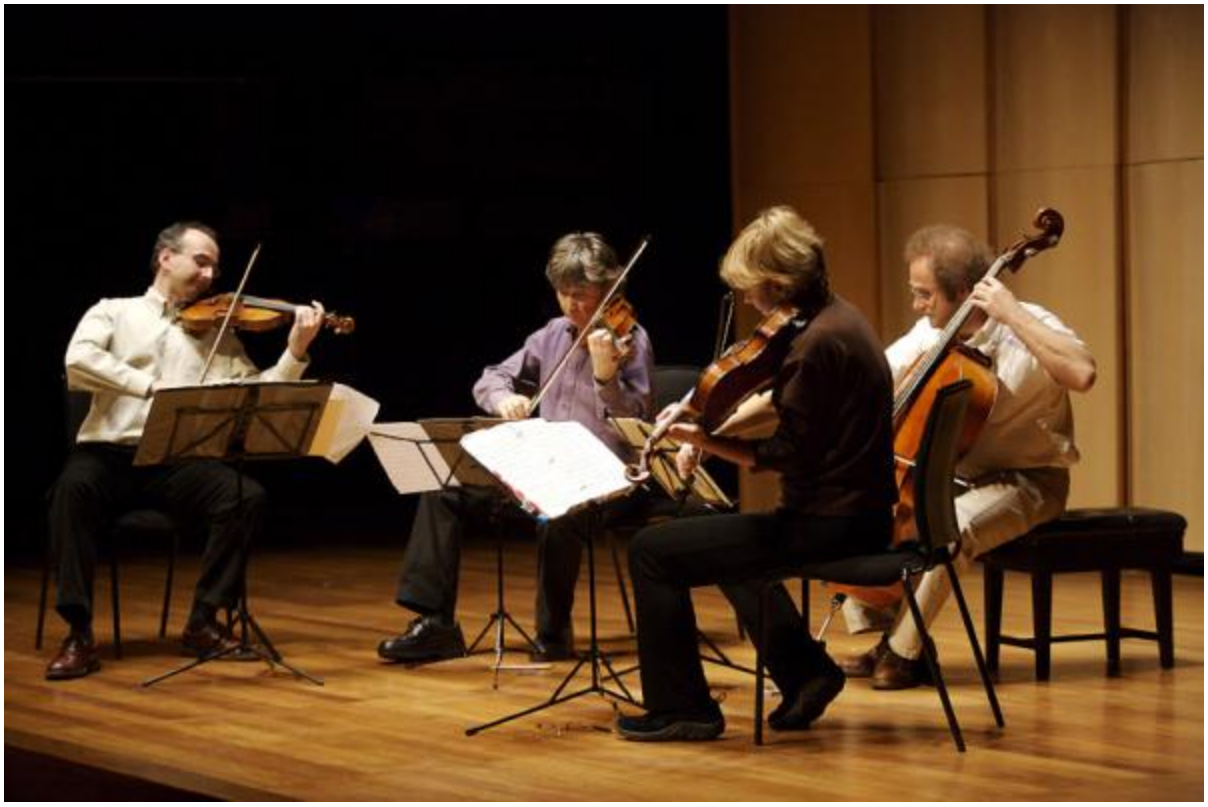
The explosive exuberance of gongs, cymbals and brass brought the symphony, and the evening, to an exhilarating, fiery conclusion. One could not help but think of Nielsen's observation that "music is life, and, like it – inextinguishable."

NEW YORK ARTS

New York Arts

Looking Back and Looking Forward: Takács String Quartet in Lincoln Center's Great Performers Series

newyorkarts.net/2012/11/takcs-string-quartet-lincoln-center/



The Takács Quartet. Photo by Richard Houghton.

Lincoln Center: October 25 2012

Haydn – String Quartet Op. 76 No. 5
Britten – String Quartet No. 2
Shostakovich – Piano Quintet
Marc-André Hamelin – piano

The Takács Quartet
Edward Dusinberre – violin
Károly Schranz – violin
Geraldine Walther – viola
András Fejér – cello

The recent Lincoln Center Great Performers concert of the Takács String Quartet in Alice Tully Hall featured a stimulating program that hearkened back to the 17th century, fully embraced the late 18th century, and focused upon the 20th century. The concert began conventionally enough with a Haydn Quartet, the mature Op. 76, No. 5 in D major. First violinist Edward Dusinberre gave a very convincing impression of extemporary improvisation in the opening Allegretto-Allegro, joyously and freely executing Haydn's elaborate ornamentation of the melodic line as if he were inventing it on the spot. His vitality was infectious, and the entire quartet played with great vigor.

The sublime Largo, which, in its profound simplicity, inevitably calls to mind Haydn's earlier masterpiece, The Seven Last Words of Christ (itself comprising seven Largos in a row), was both delicate and declamatory, a dialogue and discourse between the four musicians. One would have wished to linger forever in such a celestial sphere, but Haydn himself would allow no such thing, propelling performers and listeners alike into a truly earthy Menuetto that dispelled the reverent and pious mood with dispatch. Cellist Andras Fejer emphasized the rustic nature of the movement with his growling spiccato passagework in the trio. The bouncing frolics of the trio led naturally to the rollicking finale, with its challenging unison passages, executed with complete aplomb by the seasoned quartet.

The second work on the program was the rarely heard String Quartet No. 2 by Benjamin Britten. It was written in the horrific aftermath of World War II, which the composer witnessed firsthand on a recital tour with Yehudi Menuhin of the liberated concentration camps in Germany. The Second Quartet was commissioned in 1945 by British arts patron, Mary Behrend, for a concert commemorating the 250th anniversary of the death of Henry Purcell. The first movement begins with a unison theme in the violins over a pedal tone in the viola that evokes Purcell's Fantasy on One Note. It continues with agitated, insistent rhythms, eerie slides and glissandi, and a recurrence of tenths. A pervading sense of isolation and loneliness is reminiscent of Britten's opera *Peter Grimes*, an immediate predecessor of the quartet.

The second movement, Vivace, recalls Bartók in its furious, folk-inspired folk rhythms and dissonances: in the words of Dusinberre, "nightmarish and humorous."

The entire movement is played with mutes, giving it a ghoulish quality. Yet the homage to Purcell is still evident here in the masque-like dance elements underlying the rhythmic structure. While the members of the quartet adroitly conveyed the mood of the movement, there were occasional lapses of intonation, particularly in the octave passages of the first violin and between the two violins.

The final Chacony is an obvious tribute to Purcell, in which Britten consciously appropriated not only the form and structure of Purcell's composition, but also his archaic spelling of the name. In this movement, harmonic, rhythmic, and contrapuntal sets of variations are separated by solo cadenzas, each conveying the sense of a lonely, alienated individual surrounded by impassive commentators. Most noteworthy in the Chacony were the sonorous

cello cadenza and the heartbreakingly plaintive melody of the second violin, the only instrument not assigned a cadenza. All in all, the work left a haunting impression of desolation, hollowly redeemed in the final bars by insistently repeated chords in C major.

Pianist Marc-Andre Hamelin joined the members of the Takács Quartet for the final work on the program: Shostakovich's massive Piano Quintet. Composed only five years before Britten's Second String Quartet, the Piano Quintet reflects the same apocalyptic Zeitgeist. It is an appropriate partner to the Britten, not only in terms of mood and atmosphere, but also in its homage to earlier musical forms. The opening Prelude and Fugue are overt tributes to Bach, whom Shostakovich particularly revered. In contrast, the Scherzo manifests the characteristically ironic burlesque humor of the composer, so often to be found in his work. The dark, wistful mood of the Intermezzo, introduced by the first violin's solo lament, reflects the opening of the Quintet.

The Finale is cool and classical, conveying an elegant detachment. It is perhaps the ultimate statement of irony, in its effective erasure and denial of the wrenching emotions of the previous movement. Tellingly, Hamelin, who did not seem entirely invested in the emotional and musical substance of the Piano Quintet from the outset, shone to finest effect in this final movement, as his predominant virtues of clarity and precision came to the fore.

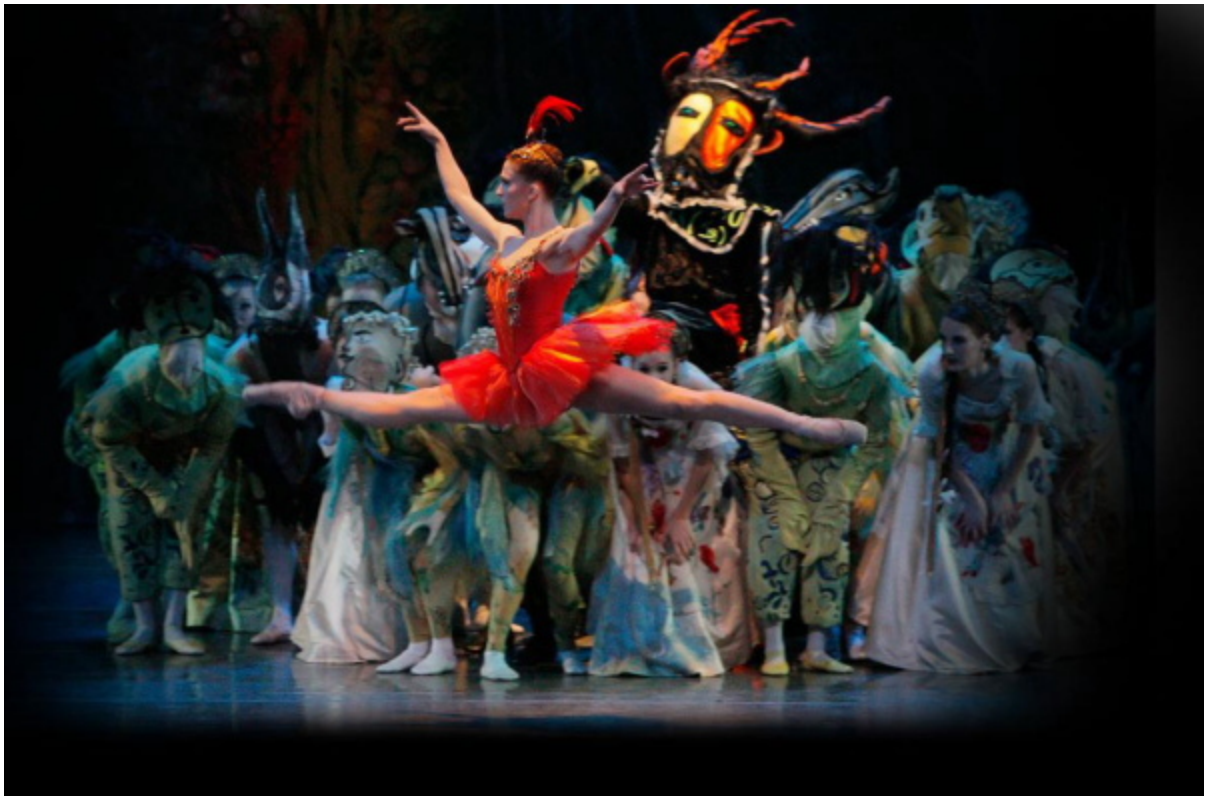
All things considered, the match of the Takács Quartet and Hamelin was not the most satisfying. The quartet, despite the diminishing of its legendary Hungarian passion over the years due to the gradual replacement of some of the original members, still retains a certain warmth that Hamelin lacks. One cannot help but to look forward to the return of the Takács Quartet to Alice Tully Hall in the spring, when it will be joined by Garrick Ohlsson.

NEW YORK ARTS

New York Arts

The New York City Ballet's All Balanchine and Stravinsky Festival

newyorkarts.net/2012/10/york-city-ballet-balanchine-stravinsky/



From Balachine's Firebird. Photo by Paul Kolnik.

Lincoln Center

Friday 28 September
Scherzo à la Russe
Music – Igor Stravinsky
Choreography – George Balanchine
Students from the School of American Ballet
Guest Conductor – Ogren

Divertimento from 'Le Baiser de la Fée'
Music – Igor Stravinsky
Choreography – George Balanchine

T. Peck, Garcia, Arthurs, Dronova
Guest Conductor – Ogren

Danses Concertantes
Music – Igor Stravinsky
Choreography – George Balanchine
M. Fairchild, Veyette
Conductor – Otranto

Firebird
Music – Igor Stravinsky
Choreography – George Balanchine and Jerome Robbins
Reichlen, la Cour, Lowery, Scordato
Guest Conductor – Ogren

Saturday 29 September
Stravinsky Violin Concerto
Music – Igor Stravinsky
Choreography – George Balanchine
Taylor, R. Fairchild (replaced la Cour), Krohn, Marcovici (replaced Ramasar)
Conductor – Capps
Solo Violin – Nikkanen

Monumentum pro Gesualdo
Music – Igor Stravinsky
Choreography – George Balanchine
Kowroski, la Cour
Conductor – Capps

Movements for Piano and Orchestra
Music – Igor Stravinsky
Choreography – George Balanchine
Kowroski, Marcovici
Conductor – Capps
Solo Piano – Moverman

Duo Concertant
Music – Igor Stravinsky
Choreography – George Balanchine
M. Fairchild (replaced Hyltin), Finlay (replaced R. Fairchild)
Solo Piano – Walters
Solo Violin – Delmoni

Symphony in Three Movements
Music – Igor Stravinsky
Choreography – George Balanchine
Hyltin (replaced A. Stafford), T. Peck, Lowery, Ramasar (replaced J. Angle), Ulbricht, Danchig-Waring
Conductor – Sill

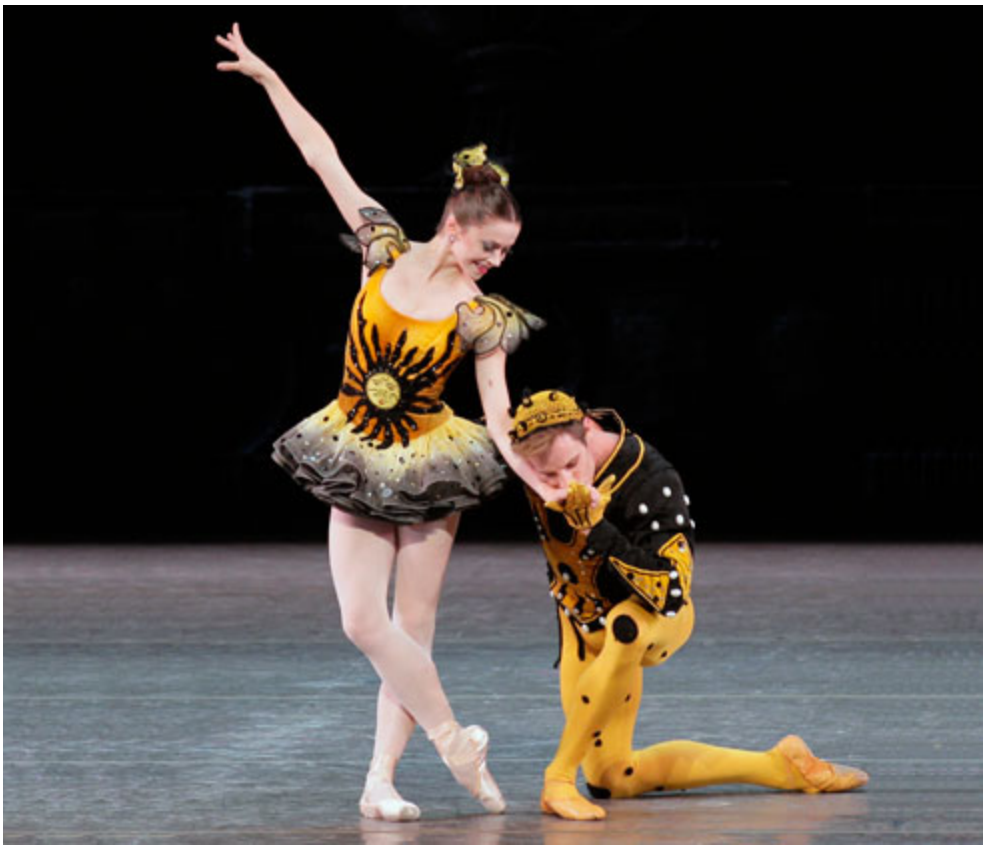
The New York City Ballet began its fall season at the David H. Koch Theater with a three-program tribute to the legendary choreographer/composer duo of Balanchine and Stravinsky. The first installment (which this reviewer unfortunately did not see) featured the classic Greek trilogy of Orpheus, Apollo, and Agon. The second program comprised the most overtly Russian collaborations of the two artists, drawing upon their common background in rich folk and fairy tale traditions.

Friday evening began with the ebullient “Scherzo à la Russe” from 1972, performed by students from the School of American Ballet and two apprentices. Dressed in fresh and innocent white, with long flowing colored ribbons, the young dancers were ideally suited to embody the joyful and energetic character of the work, in which the predominance of brass reminds one of a band at a village wedding.

Next on the program was the Divertimento from “Le Baiser de la Fée.” Having already created a full-length ballet in 1937 to Stravinsky’s original score, Balanchine later followed the composer’s precedent of extracting a concert suite from the ballet, choreographing a new work for the 1972 Stravinsky Festival. As a result, the Divertimento no longer retains the narrative content of the original ballet, but nevertheless preserves its prevailing moods of poignancy and tragedy.

Stravinsky’s score was based upon a number of works by Tchaikovsky, including the famous song known to English speakers as “None But the Lonely Heart.” Balanchine’s choreography sympathetically reflects the composer’s tribute to an earlier period, and much of the interaction between corps and principals is reminiscent of the golden age of Russian ballet. Illustrating the theme of unattainable love, the two solo dancers are repeatedly separated from each other by the corps, and dramatic lighting effects, dimming gradually to darkness at the end of the piece, heighten the poetic sense of isolation and abandonment.

Guest conductor Jayce Ogren’s sensitive reading of the score brought out its pathos and rich timbral palette. The flute duet and clarinet solo were particularly lustrous in color and effect, and the exuberant French horn solo matched the lithe virtuosity of Gonzalo Garcia’s turning jumps and leaps.



Megan Fairchild and Andrew Veyette in Danses Concertantes. Photo by Paul Kolnik.

Homage to the past dominated in the final two works of the evening: “Danses Concertantes” and “Firebird.” In both cases, the exquisite original scenery and costumes (by Eugene Berman and Marc Chagall, respectively) provided such a delight to the eye that one felt transported back to the days of the Ballets Russes. Notable in the “Danses Concertantes” was the combination of wit, perkiness and elegant sophistication expressed by the four pas de trois ensembles (one male and two female dancers), each of which convincingly conveyed the particular whim and caprice of its combination. The different expression and character of each pas de trois was further underscored by Berman’s choice of color (red, blue, purple, and green).

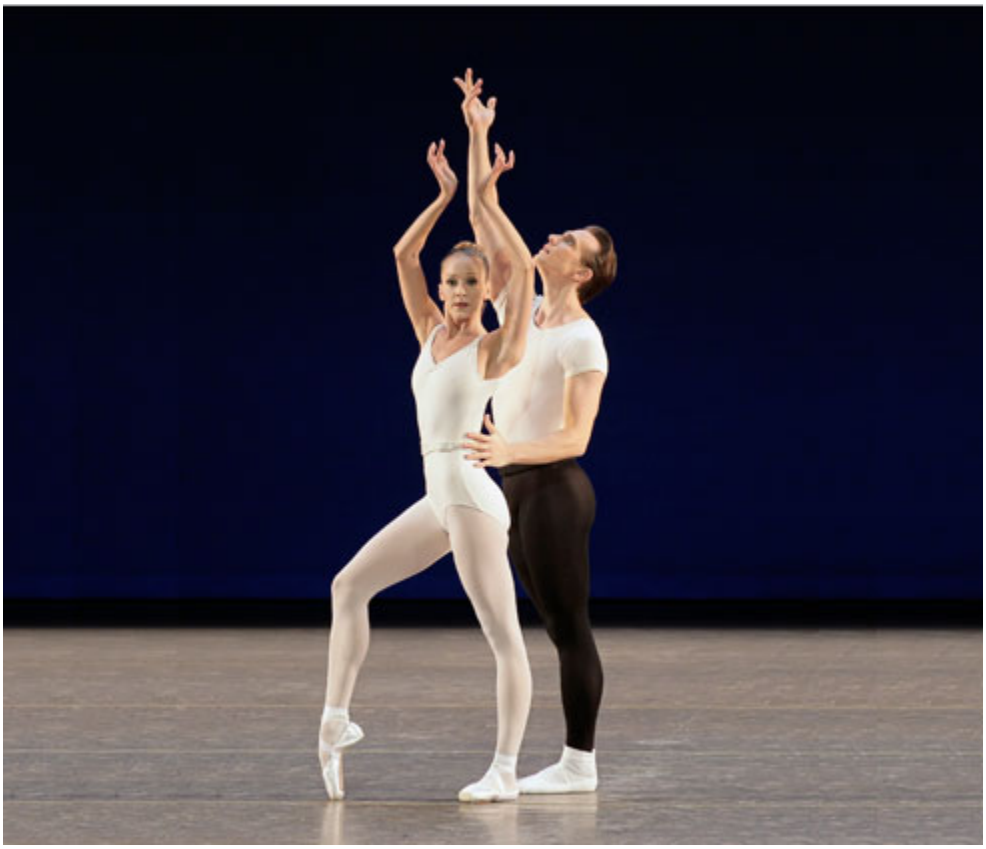
According to ballet lore, Balanchine was so captivated by Chagall’s designs for “Firebird” that, in a reversal of customary procedure, he adapted his choreography in response to the scenery and costumes. Indeed, when watching “Firebird” in its original setting, one is so completely immersed in the exotic, fairy tale atmosphere that it is nearly impossible to regard the dancing critically. Nevertheless, the outstanding performance of Teresa Reichlen in the title role was so compelling, both technically and dramatically, that it remains etched in memory. Ms. Reichlen inhabited the role of the Firebird with a brilliant blend of otherworldly sovereignty and tender vulnerability. Her impressive jumps and attenuated lines communicated the power and majesty of a supernatural being, while her carefully nuanced gestures of head, arms, and upper torso conveyed the delicate fragility of a bird. The pas de

deux of the Firebird and Prince Ivan (the latter role masterfully danced by Ask la Cour) evoked the full range of supplication, attraction, elusiveness, negotiation, and tenuous resolution that is implicit in Balanchine's complex choreography.

Opulent color and lavish sets and costumes gave way to the austere purity of black and white against an azure background in Saturday's Balanchine/Stravinsky program, which featured some of the composer's most challenging works. The evening opened with the monumental violin concerto, performed with great sensitivity and intelligence by concertmaster Kurt Nikkanen. An extremely familiar work to concertgoers, the concerto revealed new intricacies and sensuality when juxtaposed with Balanchine's expressive choreography. No body part or gesture seemed too insignificant or diminutive to underscore the polyrhythmic nature of the composition, while at the same time conveying a maximum of emotion. The difficult Toccata was well executed by principals and corps, and the two pas de deux in the middle movements (Arias I and II) of the concerto were danced with clarity and grace by Maria Kowroski and Sebastien Marcovici, and Janie Taylor and Robert Fairchild, respectively. The supporting corps came into its own in the final Capriccio, displaying a vibrant energy that amply reflected the brio of the music.

Following the concerto were two shorter works from an earlier period in Balanchine's oeuvre: "Monumentum Pro Gesualdo" and "Movements for Piano and Orchestra," dated 1960 and 1963, respectively. These rare jewels of the ballet repertoire exemplify the perfect marriage of choreography and composition. In "Monumentum," Stravinsky's ample appropriation of polyphony and nascent chromaticism in his tribute to the 16th century master was mirrored beautifully in the intricate and stately movements of the dancers. The performance proved to be the gem of the entire evening — an experience of pure perfection in its lyricism and elegant restraint.

"Movements for Piano and Orchestra" is a work from Stravinsky's serial period, and Balanchine's choreography matches its thorny complexity in every respect. Contrasting sharply with "Monumentum" in its angularity and clarity, it has been habitually paired with the former work since 1966, according to Balanchine's preference. As in "Firebird" the previous evening, Teresa Reichlen carried the performances of both works with a blend of technical precision and expressive musicality.



Maria Kowroski and Sébastien Marcovici in Movements for Piano and Orchestra. Photo by Paul Kolnik.

“Duo Concertant,” on the other hand, proved to be a disappointment for a variety of reasons. Balanchine’s unusual incorporation of the violinist and pianist onstage, with the two dancers alternately listening and dancing to the music, requires an utterly uncontrived interpretation and stellar performance by all of the protagonists in order to be convincing. Unfortunately, the musical aspect of the work suffered greatly from the diffident, lack-luster rendition by concertmaster Arturo Delmoni and pianist Susan Walters. It left the listener with the idea that the piece was simply a score for a dance, rather than one of the landmark virtuoso masterpieces of 20th century chamber music. Unlike his colleague Kurt Nikkanen, who rose effortlessly to soloistic heights in his performance of the violin concerto, Delmoni had a weak sound that betrayed a fundamentally orchestral approach to playing the violin, and his interpretation lacked both intensity and flair. Although he clearly seemed to be enjoying his appearance onstage and in the limelight (particularly at the conclusion of the piece) — and who can blame him, when he normally has the thankless task of playing invisibly in a pit? — it was at the expense of the musical performance.

Megan Fairchild and Chase Finlay seemed supremely ill at ease and awkward in their moments at the piano, attempting to listen rapturously to the music, but conveying more the impression of reluctant teenagers at a recital. When the choreography finally allowed him to dance, however, Chase Finlay redeemed himself completely by his breathtaking virtuosity and graceful elegance, bringing verve and vitality to the music. Megan Fairchild gave a less credible performance, with movements more jerky than perky. In light of what appeared to be

a lack of understanding of the musical score, her histrionic responses to the music in the intervals between dancing seemed particularly ironic. Ms. Fairchild's lack of conviction throughout painfully reinforced the sense of contrived artificiality that is always a potential risk in rendering Balanchine's unique vision of the piece.

Fortunately, the evening ended on a high note, with an exemplary performance of the majestic and grandiose "Symphony in Three Movements." As in the violin concerto earlier, the ensemble dancing in the outer movements of the piece was riveting and compelling, overshadowing the well-executed, but less gripping pas de deux of Sterling Hyltin and Amar Ramasar in the second movement. The corps masterfully executed the complex and snappy rhythmic moves required by Balanchine's demanding choreography. This work in particular showcases the choreographer at his most consummate: the eye is dazzled by constantly transforming geometric patterns which exactly match the motoric rhythms of the music. "Symphony in Three Movements" provided a fitting climax to the Balanchine/Stravinsky celebration, and one left the performance feeling that the NY City Ballet well deserves the conservatorship of its extraordinary artistic heritage.

NEW YORK ARTS

New York Arts

Valery Gergiev and the London Symphony Orchestra Open the Symphonic Masters Series at Lincoln Center

newyorkarts.net/2012/11/gergiev-lso-brahms-symphonic-masters/

Lincoln Center's acclaimed Great Performers series began its 2012/13 Symphonic Masters lineup with two outstanding performances by the London Symphony Orchestra, under the direction of its principal conductor, Valery Gergiev. Each of the all-Brahms programs featured a concerto and a symphony by the composer.

Johannes Brahms.

The first concert took the audience on a transformative journey from dramatic darkness into radiant light, beginning with the Tragic Overture, continuing with the Violin Concerto, and ending with the sunny Second Symphony. Conceived by the composer as the pendant to his rousing Academic Festival Overture, the Tragic Overture has a powerful, brooding energy, and it was the perfect opener for the evening's program. Gergiev was in his element, sculpting sound with sensitive, expressive gestures that could convey his intentions to the responsive orchestra merely with the fingers of his left hand.

The orchestra was joined by James Ehnes for Brahms' magnificent violin concerto, which stands alongside that of Beethoven at the musical summit of the instrument's repertoire. Symphonic in scope and substance, the concerto nevertheless presents the soloist with ample opportunities for the display of technical brilliance, thanks to the compositional interventions of Brahms' close friend and dedicatee Joseph Joachim, the greatest violin

virtuoso of his day. Ehnes proved himself equal to the task of rendering the fiendishly difficult passages flawless and impeccable; yet, he seemed incapable of making music with the orchestra. His playing had a tenseness and breathlessness that made it scarcely possible for Gergiev to keep the ensemble together. The unfortunate fact that there had only been one afternoon rehearsal of soloist and orchestra immediately prior to the concert was regrettably evident in the performance. The members of the orchestra played each phrase with deep conviction and profound musicality, yet Ehnes remained impassive, seemingly unaware of the inspired musical ideas with which he was meant to be in dialogue. This was especially apparent in the slow movement, in which the solo oboe states the theme, and continues to dominate throughout. Guest principal oboist Emanuel Abbuehl invoked tears with his plaintive, soulful melody, but found no echo in the responses of the solo violin. Like many of his contemporaries, Ehnes frequently indulged in swooping portamenti, ostensibly in an effort to play expressively and romantically, but these ill-advised mannerisms were unconvincing, and no substitute for true musicality. They only served to disrupt an otherwise clean performance.

Following the intermission, Gergiev returned to the podium to conduct Brahms' majestic Second Symphony. This work not only shares tonality with the violin concerto (D major), but was also composed during a summer sojourn on the Woerthersee in the Austrian province of Carinthia. Brahms was always at his most inspired and bucolic during these summer periods of refreshment and rejuvenation, and both the violin concerto and the second symphony carry within them the traces of his contentment, while nevertheless retaining a certain inherent melancholy characteristic of the composer.

Written a summer before the violin concerto, the Second Symphony is densely packed with musical ideas and melodies. In fact, Brahms wrote to a friend that summer that "the melodies fly so fast and thick that one must be careful not to step on them." Under Gergiev's inspired direction, the London Symphony Orchestra filled the hall with expansive, sumptuous sound and spine-tingling rhythmic precision, ranging from lush, rich, full resonances to crisp staccato winds and string pizzicati. Gergiev masterfully brought out every nuance of the composition's complex rhythmic structures, allowing the phrases to speak with declamatory clarity. His interpretation brought out the work's monumentality and majesty, and one was led inevitably to think of Mahler, who undoubtedly owed a great debt to the Brahms symphonies in the creation of his own.

One of Gergiev's greatest attributes is his element of surprise. Neither he nor his audience can ever settle into complacency, but must hear each note (or rest) as if for the very first time. A particularly effective example was in the pregnant pause between the trio of the third movement and the da capo of the scherzo — one could have heard a pin drop in the hall, such was the palpability of the silence. Then, following the reprise of the scherzo, Gergiev plunged into the finale without a second of hesitation, leading one to experience in full the musical concept of "attacca." With the triumphant flourishes of the coda, the symphony came

to a close and the ensuing thunderous applause nearly brought the house down. As the audience left the hall, many were heard to remark that this performance of the Second Symphony was the finest in memory.

The second Brahms program by Gergiev and the London Symphony Orchestra was at once more challenging and more satisfying. The choice of repertoire was less popularly appealing, more demanding, and much darker in palette. The choice of soloist — Russian pianist Denis Matsuev — in the titanic first piano concerto was much more felicitous, insofar as there was a greater sense of coherence and unity of interpretation between solo and orchestra than had been the case with the violin concerto.

Matsuev, who is fondly known as the “Siberian bear,” is a man of enormous stature and strength. Watching him attack the keys with his huge hands, one could not help but think of Brahms himself, who was known to be a powerful pianist, also due to the size of his hands. The D minor concerto was the perfect vehicle for Matsuev, as he was able effortlessly to convey the sense of commanding authority called for by the work, while at the same time melding in complete synchrony with Gergiev and the orchestra. Indeed, one could not help but think of the performance as a kind of “family affair,” so attuned was the soloist to the maestro’s every gesture. Both Matsuev and Gergiev took a slow and heavy approach to the first movement, effectively bringing out its dark timbre and ponderous sense of foreboding and drama. Both could freely indulge in mercurial mood changes and huge contrasts of dynamics, from exquisite pianissimi to thunderous fortissimi, without needing to be concerned about balance. In Brahms’ own cadenza for the first movement, Matsuev almost seemed to be channeling the composer himself, masterfully creating the illusion of an extemporary, spontaneous dialogue between left and right hands. The colors that he achieved in the long, slowly descending chromatic line leading to the coda were truly extraordinary.

Reflective and thoughtful in the second movement, Matsuev meandered through the phrases in an almost fragmentary way, occasionally floating with bell-like sonorities above the ostinato of celli and basses. His musings gave way to a fiery and tempestuous finale, which bore all the hallmarks of a virtuoso tour de force, yet never lost its playful quality. A particularly endearing moment was Matsuev’s expression of almost childlike delight in the fugato variation of the rondo; unlike Ehnes in the violin concerto, he seemed to be completely invested in the musical substance of the work.

Received by a standing ovation and shouts of “Bravo,” Matsuev could not resist performing an encore: Rachmaninoff’s pensive, lyrical Prelude in E flat major, Op. 23, No. 6. It was somewhat of a shock to hear Rachmaninoff in the midst of an all-Brahms program, but Matsuev has come to be universally recognized as a Rachmaninoff specialist (having even made a recording, “Unknown Rachmaninoff,” on the composer’s own piano), and he played the flowing prelude with such expressive musicality that one was happy to hear it.

The final work on the evening's program was Brahms' monumental and noble Fourth Symphony, the composer's final and ultimate statement in the symphonic vein. Gergiev brought out the piece's grandeur and gravity, giving the same careful attention to delicate, poignant passages as to arching, architectural phrases. The driving dotted rhythms of the first movement positively crackled under the baton of the conductor, and one felt swept along by the compelling, inexorable sequence of musical ideas.

Gergiev was at his most sensitive ("innig," to use Brahms' language) in the slow second movement. He carefully laid a carpet of sound with the pizzicati of the strings, on top of which the choir of winds expressed the plaintive theme. Despite the huge size of the orchestra, this movement sounded like chamber music, with extraordinary dynamic control and range, from almost inaudible pianissimi to vibrant fortissimi, the melodies being passed from winds to strings and back again. Gergiev allowed the music to breathe organically, with rubati that came naturally out of the phrases themselves. Wielding the baton like a sorcerer, his incantations brought life to the score.

The ebullience of the unusual duple meter scherzo was followed without pause (attacca) by the finale, a Baroque chaconne in form. Gergiev masterfully maintained the dramatic tension, building from the statement of the tragic theme in the lower register of the strings, through the reiteration of dotted rhythms (recalling the first movement), and on into the subsequent variations. Most notable, perhaps, was the poignant dialogue of the solo flute with the clarinet and oboe. Gergiev's expansive, architectonic interpretation of the finale inevitably brought to mind the movement's ultimate prototype: the Bach Chaconne from the second partita for solo violin. Brahms surely would have been completely gratified by the performance, as it revealed his extraordinary achievement of casting an ancient form in a new and innovative harmonic guise.

With this triumphant two-program offering of Brahms, Gergiev and the London Symphony Orchestra set an extremely high standard for the 2012/2013 Symphonic Masters series, and theirs will be a difficult act to follow.