

The New York Times

August 19, 2006

DANCE REVIEW

Mozart's Machinery Is Choreographed by Mark Morris in 'Dances'

By JOHN ROCKWELL

The response was friendly but muted on Thursday night at the New York State Theater after the first performance of Mark Morris's new, full-evening "Mozart Dances." I can only assume that that was because people need to see this work again to appreciate fully its enormous riches. I certainly do. But after only a first viewing, I feel safe in pronouncing it a masterpiece, a triumph for the Mostly Mozart Festival, which commissioned it, and one of Mr. Morris's grandest achievements.

The dance is set to two Mozart piano concertos, No. 11 in F (K. 413) and No. 27 in B flat (K. 595), flanking his Sonata in D for Two Pianos (K. 448). That's nine movements of Mozart, risking the danger of too much music in a similar idiom and, even with two intermissions, a real workout for Emanuel Ax, who played throughout, along with Louis Langrée and the Mostly Mozart Festival Orchestra. The concertos sounded gorgeous, lyrical yet purposeful. The sonata, in which Mr. Ax was joined by his wife, Yoko Nozaki, had its ragged moments but provided some contrast.

Mozart's music is supposed to be difficult to choreograph. George Balanchine said so, and Mr. Morris has indicated that the music is "too fragile, too sophisticated." That hasn't stopped him, though. Is the "dances" in his title a noun or a verb? Both, most likely, even if none of Mozart's actual dance music is used. It's possible that people felt that too much of the dancing on Thursday was the same — too many recurrent movement motifs, too much Mozart — although Mozartians, and most of us are that, would argue that there can be no such thing.

I wanted more. This is Mr. Morris at his most formally ingenious. Everything looks planned to the last, Swiss-watch second, however spontaneous his invention might have been in the studio. All those recurrent motifs — the courtly folk dances, the arms pointed on high, the sagging circles, the twisting lines of dancers, the parodistically bold striding onstage and off, the balletic lifts, even the little hitches and quivers on the floor — were knitted into a constantly evolving structure that forestalled any complaints about repetitiveness. It was like one of those marvelous pieces of cosmic machinery, a moving model of the solar system, that the 18th-century rationalists so enjoyed.

The obvious comparison is with Mr. Morris's greatest work thus far, his setting of Handel's "Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato" from 1988. The big difference, apart from Handel's jollity versus Mozart's ineffable grace, lies in the Mozart's lack of a narrative text. Milton's poetry provided Mr. Morris with images he could visualize, quite apart from his lifelong penchant to animate musical phrasing.

The magic of "Mozart Dances" is that Mr. Morris now trusts textless music on the grandest of scales. He hasn't so much constructed a parallel narrative, although, as ever in

dance, personalities and relations are implied. Costuming and folk dances of the period are evoked without slavish replication; the same is true of his musical mimesis, which never looks rote. The 18th century's elevation of folk dance into art suits Mr. Morris, with his love of transfigured folk dance. Here he makes an entire evening out of dance abstraction, an affirmation of dance classicism almost on the level of Mozart's own. The first section, "Eleven," starts with eight men who quickly depart. The rest is all women, with Lauren Grant as a perky leader in what looks like an elegant black slip, and the statuesque Julie Worden as leader of the seven-woman "corps." They are dressed in sheer tulle over black bottoms and tops. Martin Pakledinaz did the subtly varied costumes; James F. Ingalls, the lighting; and Howard Hodgkin, a British painter, the three different backdrops, each a variant of large smears of paint, somewhere between hair and fingerprints, and to my taste the least distinctive element of the evening.

"Double," the middle dance, is nearly all men, led by the ebullient Joe Bowie in an 18th-century jacket, and Noah Vinson as chorus leader.

"Twenty-seven," the closing piece, is the real double, with the dancers in white, often divided into mirrored groups of eight, mixing the sexes until the end, when the boys face off against the girls. Here the focus is on couples and shifting solo turns, although the four principals from the first two dances form their own unit of four, with a dizzying mélange of allusions to the previous movement motifs. In all three dances, it is the slow movements that strike deepest, as music and as dance.

For me the whole thing — all three dances, all nine movements — was magical. Right beneath that courtly, folkish surface lay the mind of a Great Architect, as they called God three centuries ago. Not that Mr. Morris is divine, except in the campy sense. Or even that he is Mozart reborn, though he does sometimes recall the Mozart character in "Amadeus," brilliant and bratty. Here he's made something as serious and profound as dance gets. Maybe "Mozart Dances," which after tonight can be seen in Vienna and London, won't crop up as often as the extroverted "Allegro"; it's too introverted, maybe too fragile and sophisticated. But it's a wonder.