



Flash Review 1, 3-6: Balancing Balanchines Plenty of the Same Vein from S.F. Ballet

By Aimée Ts'ao

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SAN FRANCISCO -- Due to scheduling conflicts I am seeing San Francisco Ballet's repertory program 3 first. As usual, just walking into the opulent War Memorial Opera House puts me in a mood of expectation. First out of the wings is Balanchine's "Allegro Brillante" (1956) to the first movement of Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 3, Op. 75. It has been in SFB's repertory since 1979, though it's been some time since it was last performed, in 1985. Vanessa Zahorian and Zachary Hench, as the lead couple, show a warm rapport, both emotionally and musically. The elegant Hench is an attentive partner and together they have moments of delicious abandon, marred only by occasional fleeting moments of slight apprehension. Zahorian seems a bit off her turns at times, though always managing to save them, and her arms are also inconsistent, going from being beautifully expressive to merely posed. I suspect that as she settles into her new position as principal dancer, Zahorian will become more reliable. The four couples who make up the corps de ballet background are all very good and it is nice to see the company looking strong. The choreography, which Balanchine claimed contained everything he knew about ballet in thirteen minutes, is typical of him. I do love the odd moments when he suddenly breaks the symmetry or leads you to expect a certain step will be repeated and then does another one in an entirely different manner.

Also on the program is Helgi Tomasson's "Concerto Grosso" (2003) to music of Geminiani after Corelli. It is a real showcase for five men, led by newcomer Pascal Molat, who commands my attention with his sharp attack and charismatic presence. Christopher Wheeldon's latest addition to SFB's repertory, "Polyphonia" (2001) for four couples, is not quite satisfying. The Ligeti music, various pieces for piano, is not well chosen or arranged in a logical order. While some of the steps are beautifully executed by the dancers, others are simply ugly and awkward. In the final ballet of the evening, Yuri Possokhov's 2002 "Damned" to Ravel's "Pavane pour une Infante defunte" and "Concerto in D Major for the left hand," Muriel Maffre, as Medea, is electrifying. I have never seen her dance so exquisitely, in an utterly seamless performance where technique and interpretation are completely in service to each other. (To read more about "Medea," see [my review](#) of last season's premiere.)

A few nights later I am back for program 1, again mostly for the Balanchine, this time "Ballo della Regina." This piece, to Verdi's ballet music from the opera "Don Carlo," has not been shown at SFB since 1996. Writing about the 1978 work in "Thirty Years/The New York City Ballet," Lincoln Kirstein said "it could not be considered a 'major' work, but occasioned a number of major performances by Merrill Ashley," for whom it was created. I have seen a video of Ashley dancing in the ballet and Mr. B definitely put her in her element, the quintessential allegro. Kristin Long, with Gonzalo Garcia as her partner, brings more to the role than just dazzling technique. For me, Long had always been a soubrette dancer, very spirited and charming. Now a new dimension is emerging, as she has developed a more elegant and serene side, a feeling of length and breadth that dancers of smaller stature almost never achieve. She still has that crisp attack when she needs it, but she has also found a regality, a quiet authority. Garcia dances extremely well, with a boyish exuberance. The four soloists, Elizabeth Miner, Amanda Schull, Nicole Starbuck, and Sarah Van Patten are also very good as they take their individual turns in the variations.

The rest of the program is Tomasson's "Chi-Lin" from last season, and James Kudelka's "Dreams of Harmony" (1987). The latter is danced beautifully, but the well-crafted choreography itself has so little contrast in texture or emotionality that it guarantees that I will dream very harmoniously later that night.

There is no doubt that George Balanchine was a genius, but not all of his choreographic works were created equal. That is generally the way it goes with any artist no matter what his field, poetry to painting, film to fiction. In addition, Balanchine's enormous catalogue of works (more than a hundred) encompasses everything from the most classical/neo-classical to the most modern, at least for the era in which it was created, and with kitsch and comedy thrown in for good measure in between. It is sometimes said of novelists and musical composers that they write the same piece over and over, with slightly different twists each time. Balanchine seems to have split himself into several different choreographers and then proceeded to do the same thing. When one is very familiar with much of his work, one can discern the small variations and their novelty takes on greater importance, but from the broader and less knowledgeable perspective, sometimes groups of pieces all look too much alike.

The real question I ask is why were these specific ballets, "Allegro Brillante" and "Ballo della Regina," chosen to run during the same month on different programs, especially when Balanchine's evening-length triptych "Jewels" will be presented later in the season. I find them too similar to the first and third sections of Jewels, which in itself provides plenty of contrast. The romanticism of the opening "Emeralds" and the closing classicism of "Diamonds" beautifully encase the sexy jazziness of "Rubies." Had I been able to choose which of his works to include this season I would have selected one from the "Agon"/"Four Temperaments" vein or a story ballet like "Midsummer Night's Dream" or "Firebird."