

Dance Now Winter 2006/7

IgorFest

Stravinsky and choreography by Ismene Brown

VISUALS: BRB's Willis and Mackay in Apollo ; RB's Benjamin & Kobborg in Stravinsky Violin Concerto ; Hollingsworth in Clark's Mmm... ; RB's Bussell & Cope in Apollo ; Stravinsky Violin Concerto

What do we think of Igor Stravinsky? Something spiky and dissonant to be endured while we're watching a Balanchine ballet? Or lyrical, colourful music, charged with mystery, pregnant with atmosphere? I suspect that for most it may be the former thought that sneaks guiltily into the mind when you hear that there's a Stravinsky project on - and yet it's the second that more truly describes the greatest works of a man whose music spent a couple of decades being superior to almost any choreography made to it, and then another four decades struggling to keep up with the choreography made to it.

We do not find Stravinsky in concert halls much - he is not up there with his countrymen Shostakovich and Prokofiev. He is not, indeed, very popular. So it is rather astonishing to discover through an invaluable new Roehampton University web page that more than 1,300 ballets have been made to Stravinsky scores since his genius burst upon the stage in 1910 in the magical flames of 'The Firebird'. In 1982, long after his death in 1971, 69 choreographers around the world set themselves to work on Stravinsky - that's one every five days. In 1972 Balanchine's 'Stravinsky Violin Concerto' was just one of 48 Stravinsky choreographies. Steadily, between 15 and 30 Stravinsky dances are added every year to this incredible pile. Most popular of all is his most notoriously rebarbative score, 'The Rite of Spring', the huge piece that smashed the sound barrier between classical and modern in 1913 - 182 'Rites', and counting. And of course, the civic ballet of New York is dedicated almost entirely to Stravinsky.

Something electric, therefore, still hangs in the air about him. Yet does it all quite justify the amount of attention he's getting right now? We have Michael Clark midway through a trilogy of 'Apollo', 'Rite of Spring' and 'Les Noces' for the Barbican Centre, and, on an even grander scale, Birmingham doing an IgorFest that will perform virtually everything he ever wrote for stage or concert hall over some four years, and climax with all his ballets being performed in autumn 2008.

We probably carry few pieces of Stravinsky around in our heads; 'Firebird' and 'Petrouchka', of course, their scintillating magic clings to the imagination like static, and perhaps you hum 'Apollo' in the shower or an air from the violin concerto. No, it's not for humming that we love Stravinsky - it's for rhythm, and rhythm is the soul of dancing.

I asked choreographers David Bintley, Michael Clark, Mark Baldwin and Javier de Frutos, and conductors Andrea Quinn and Michael Tilson-Thomas about Stravinsky - and the consensus was that (a) they couldn't believe how popular Stravinsky was, and (b) - somewhat cancelling out (a) - Stravinsky's music is irresistible to dance to.

De Frutos, with four 'Rites of Spring' under his belt, goes into his new job as Phoenix Dance Company director this season with a plan for his second 'Les Noces'. He wasn't surprised by the figure: 'God, yes, of course, there would be that number of Stravinsky ballets. As a choreographer you HAVE to experience Stravinsky, and you have to experience the hard ones - you have to lose your fear. For some reason, the majority of us have gone there. It's like GCSEs!'

Stravinsky, who was quite keen to collect his fees, would surely be delighted - if all the choreography matched his own rigour. He had, in his own words, 'profound admiration for classical ballet, which in its very essence, by the beauty of its ordonnance and the aristocratic austerity of its forms, so closely corresponds with my conception of art. For here, in classical dancing, I see the triumph of studied conception over vagueness, of the rule over the arbitrary, of order over the haphazard. I am thus brought face to face with the eternal conflict in art between the Apollonian and Dionysian principles. [...] If I appreciate so highly the value of classical ballet, it is not simply a matter of taste on my part, but because I see exactly in it the perfect expression of the Apollonian principle.'

By inclination, his perfect Apollonian partner was his compatriot George Balanchine. The American academic Tim Scholl writes of Balanchine's insistence on form and composition, with his strict St Petersburg classical schooling in the tradition of Petipa, yet his lively 'reappraisal of the creative process' that focused on material and form. One can see their similarities of approach. But in my opinion the two ballets that shine most glory on Stravinsky's brilliance as a composer do not contain a Balanchine: 'Apollo' is a wonder, but its lustrous music is not difficult to sell. Stravinsky's two finest presents so far, I'd say, are Nijinska's 'Les Noces' (1923) and Ashton's 'Scènes de Ballet' (1948).

There are just four Ashton ballets to Stravinsky, and only one is a major claimant to stage time nowadays, 'Scènes de ballet', recently performed at both the Birmingham and Covent Garden companies. The other three, 'Le Baiser de la fée' (1935), 'Perséphone' (1961) and the 'Le Rossignol' pas de deux (1981) remain to be rediscovered. De Valois's music director Constant Lambert disliked Stravinsky, which was influential in the early days of English ballet, and yet though de Valois herself made no Stravinsky ballets, she admirably introduced his music to young Kenneth MacMillan, whose first commission was the accomplished 'Danses Concertantes' in 1955. Stravinsky knew de Valois from her Ballets Russes days, and he liked Ashton's company for dinner (they would talk French). But Ashton's musicality came from instinct, not training - he could not read music, as

Balanchine could, and for that both Balanchine and Stravinsky looked askance at him.

The upcoming generation, though, were powerfully attracted to the acerbic Russian modernist - MacMillan made eight Stravinsky ballets, several in the late 50s and 60s, most notably his 1962 'Rite of Spring', and John Cranko notched up nine, including the comic, deceptive 'Jeu de Cartes'. MacMillan's adventurous musicality tends to be much less discussed than his sense of drama - let's hope Jann Parry's forthcoming biography will right this. Cranko's biographer John Percival commented that Cranko 'lacked the deeper insight into musical structure that enabled his lifelong idol, George Balanchine, a skilled and trained musician, to develop a form of plotless classic dancing that provided [...] its own dramaturgy.' This touches on the heart of working with Stravinsky music.

It's axiomatic in musical circles that dancers aren't musical, they can only count beats. Although conductor Michael Tilson-Thomas, who studied with Stravinsky, insists that you can sing every note of 'Rite of Spring', and Alicia Markova famously revealed that as a child she learned from Stravinsky never to count, always to sing in her head as she danced, the truth is that the music emerges from the fascinating rhythmic textures and cross-textures that Stravinsky created.

On an illuminating DVD from Roehampton University, 'Ashton and Stravinsky', in which the music specialist Stephanie Jordan parses Ashton's extraordinary empathy with Stravinsky music, she teases out like fine hairs the intricate multiple layers of rhythm created not only by Stravinsky but by Ashton too, playing his own fluid and instinctual musical games.

Andrea Quinn, chief conductor at the Royal Ballet for three years and then New York City Ballet for five, told me that with Stravinsky musicians learned humility from the dancers. 'We are restricted by the visible barlines, but they learn in phrases. Often dancers' counts and phrases can enhance the musicians' understanding - when a new ballet is being choreographed, choreographers won't go by what's physically on the score, but by what they hear. They go on different paths from us musicians, and because they're reacting to what they hear, the counting of their phrases can often be remarkably musical.'

However, she added, dancers too have a lot to learn - Stravinsky's music is too good, too challenging, to be treated capriciously tempo-wise: 'A lot of Stravinsky music is very brilliant and cutting-edge, and dancers need to be on the edge of it. I think it should be possible, with these Balanchine-Stravinsky ballets, to go in and conduct the music without looking at the stage at all, except for specific breathing spaces. In 'Agon', for instance, the Bransle Gay - the castanet dance - they need to live a little dangerously, and I'm always afraid that side will be reduced if you play too much into the dancer's need for comfort.'

But perhaps there's also a danger in playing too much into the received icon of the Balanchine image for Stravinsky: the cool, clipped elegance, the sassy off-kilter hip-swings, the billowing American-flag arms. The most memorable Stravinsky scores remain those big early ones, which Balanchine mostly left alone, and the memorable choreographies to those scores are rarely of classical timbre.

For 'Rite of Spring', Pina Bausch's version probably wins the consensus among today's choreographers (and Michael Tilson-Thomas's vote too) - but it's not packed with steps, as Nijinsky's was. Clark, de Frutos and Baldwin have all done their 'Rites', and all pointed out that it isn't the sheer number of steps you need for some 45 minutes of music, it's richness, texture and concept to match.

Baldwin, now Rambert's director, told me: 'Madam Rambert said that Nijinsky tried to bang out every note, and she thought that was the right approach for that sort of music. Often you see versions that come up with a great concept to match the ferocity of the music, but it remains a concept washing over the top of the music, and doesn't challenge itself to find out where all the changes of gear are. The one that works in a concept way is Bausch's, where they hand around that red cloth. I've only seen it on video and thought it was very powerful, but when you watch it again, is she really hanging onto the musical cliff or just having some good ideas to go with the phrases?'

Clark, with his Barbican trilogy due to climax next autumn with a new 'Les Noces', told me his preoccupation with 'Rite' (entitled 'Mmm...') and 'Noces' has been finding a 'language' to match not only Stravinsky but the seismic expectations and even the myths of that time. 'Whenever I've heard the music I've been sitting there imagining my own. Couldn't help it. Reworking steps in my head. I imagine when it was written, think what a difficult job Nijinsky had - what sounds lyrical to us now must have been so entirely different in impact then. What choreographer could match that music? Of course the rhythmic bits are what you remember, because they're so powerful. But what I loved about 'Rite' was that the necessity to dance is built into the subject-matter of the piece. Finding that sense of purpose is an ongoing thing in any choreography - why do we bother? There has to be a purpose. But Stravinsky chose to build the subject-matter into the music, and that was kind of exciting.

'Also the idea of sacrifice is such a familiar one to any artist, and dancers, I think, can really relate to it. When I did it first, there weren't any suicide bombers around, and it seemed like such an alien thing to make any kind of sacrifice for something larger than oneself, you know what I mean? But it was just before the First World War, when Stravinsky did this, wasn't it? 'Les Noces' is going to be terrifying. First, because of the version existing by Nijinska, but also the voice in the music. I love the voice in music that I normally use with bands, but the voice in, for want of a better word, classical music is quite challenging. All that stuff about braids and the hair, a slightly pervy area that is interesting, though not totally fascinating, what those braids mean to somebody who's about to be married. I think the key thing for that will be finding the language.'

For David Bintley, too, 'Les Noces' is the natural climax for the grand Birmingham festival of Stravinsky ballets and music that Birmingham Royal Ballet, Birmingham Symphony Orchestra, Birmingham Contemporary Music Group and Birmingham Opera have been doing - for no particular reason other than sheer Igor

enthusiasm. 'The initial impetus came from Sakari Oramo, chief of the CBSO, the idea was to do the ballets together. We were looking for ideas to do when we became City of Culture, which we didn't become. But being bullish, we said - hang it, let's make it even bigger and do everything he ever wrote, this is an idea too good to dump. So it became a huge collaboration, and we're doing 95 if not 100 percent of what he wrote.'

How much it will be a discovery of forgotten or unappreciated genius is hard to predict. Stephen Walsh's recent biography of Stravinsky endorses the view that the composer tragically outlived his own gift - that, an unquestionable genius when young, when he went to America he turned into something of a musical doodler, breaking down in the desert in 1952 and weeping at losing his talent. And yet this 'decline' was the great Balanchine period. Of the 1,300+ Stravinsky ballets Balanchine contributed the largest proportion - 36, almost all written in the US on the so-called down slope of Stravinsky's career.

Several of his masterpieces thread like diamonds through the BRB rep - next up in spring is the company premiere of 'Stravinsky Violin Concerto', a glorious piece of music with a good ballet attached, according to Bintley (and I agree with him). Composed as an apology from an adulterous husband to his wife, the music exudes emotion as rawly as anything Stravinsky wrote, captured by Balanchine in two striking pas de deux.

'I like the violin concerto more than I like Balanchine's ballet to it, but if it's the only way you can hear it played, well, great,' says Bintley. 'I think the danger is that the more you associate a piece like the violin concerto with the ballet, that is a shame, because it is a magnificent piece. I caught it on the Proms this year, which was the only time I'd ever heard it in concert, actually. But that's not to say that Balanchine's isn't a terrific ballet.'

Lèse-majesté to Americans perhaps, Balanchine isn't the only image of Stravinsky we should accept. One thing that this splurge - and the Roehampton web site - makes clear is that Stravinsky's music takes many choreographic faces, from Keystone Cops to purest, whitest neo-classicism.

As de Frutos puts it, choreographers can't retreat to familiarity zones with Stravinsky: 'My mentor in New York, Sarah Rudner, said there is nothing more terrifying than taking a mythical piece of music and trying to make it your own, forgetting where it came from. That's the challenge I took on. It was like bungee-jumping - I felt, you do it once and you survive, you do it again.'

Birmingham Royal Ballet's Stravinsky celebration continues in Feb 2007 with Agon, Stravinsky Violin Concerto and Symphony in Three Movements; Michael Clark's 'Mmm...' is on UK tour; Roehampton University's 'Ashton and Stravinsky' DVD is published by Dance Books

Appearing in Dance Now for the first time is Ismene Brown, who has been writing on dance for the Daily Telegraph since 1994

ENDs