Thrills of the unexpected

Dance

Mark Baldwin
THE SWAN, HIGH WYCOMBE

VERY few people have the guts in the impecunious world of modern dance to think big and commission a new orchestral score from a thoroughgoing modernist composer. But Mark Baldwin did, and his daring makes for an exceptionally rewarding evening.

The Bird Sings With Its Fingers, composed by Julian Anderson and inspired by the Orpheus myth, is an exquisite piece and a thrilling expansion of music for dance. Its sensual texture, almost cinematic sound-pictures and eddying pulse provide firm foundations for dancing, but also a fluid floor on which to play out Baldwin's abstractly emotional choreography.

The piece, premiered in High Wycombe, was the centrepiece of a satisfying triple bill. *Danses Concertantes*, choreographed to Stravinsky's music, makes a perky opening allegro, the Anderson is a grave, intimate and poetic reverie, and the epic *The State* uses a score by the Dutch minimalist Louis Andriessen for a massive, mega-decibel ensemble closer. Expect to be challenged — this is an evening of high musical stimulation, boldly modern, and superbly played by the 35-strong Sinfonia 21.

Baldwin is not, though, a ferociously modern sort of choreographer. His dancers come all shapes and sizes but move in long, spare lines through their legs and bodies, with a mercurial sensibility of the torso, shoulders and, above all, hands. They almost never pose; when they do — as when Kate Coyne does a sudden six-o'clock arabesque at the beginning of *Danses Concertantes* — it seems to be mocking us: *this* is what you expect of a dance, eh? The humorous texture of this piece is sadly dampened by costumes that make the dancers look like lumpy pink sausages.

The Bird Sings With Its Fingers, thankfully, has plain white pyjamas and ghostly lighting, for a dreamlike, minimal telling of Orpheus and Eurydice's doomed love, glancingly inspired by Jean Cocteau's film *Orphée*. You would need to know that film very well to spot the references; this is a cool, liquid dance of much beauty and some mystery, out of which clear episodes emerge to brush your emotions into play.

When Eurydice dies, Sarah Warsop suddenly stands on her head, diving for the underworld. Orpheus's duet with her leaving Hades has a piercing literalness about it. She dances pillion behind him until they allow mutual passion to override the decree not to look at each other, splaying in fatal need for each other. It is moving, admirable, a lovely piece of work.

Because of touring costs, Andriessen's colossal, brazen music for *The State* can only by played live at London's Peacock Theatre next week. Having to hear it on tape here definitely cramped the style of this dense, militaristic ensemble work. In dark, forbidding clothes, the dancers make strict lines and forceful groups, individualism apparently being given firm correction. All this dynamism seems to be building up to a crowd climax that doesn't happen, frustratingly.

In the end the music feels too long for the choreography. All the dancers are magisterial, but Catherine James and Vivien Wood are exceptionally vivid.

Touring until April 5 (Oxford, London and Manchester). Information: 020 7379 7474

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PICTURE Richard Dean

Laurent Cavanna, Sarah Warsop: *The Bird Sings With Its Fingers*