



When dance and music fell back in love



Choreographer Jonathan Burrows and composer Matteo Fargion talk to Ismene Brown about their ingenious, entertaining duets

• **Perfect partnerships between two arts**

Matisse's stupendous paintings *La Danse* and *La Musique* hang on opposite walls in St Petersburg's Hermitage Gallery.

The musicians sit hunched like primitive orange boulders over their instruments, the naked, peachy dancers are ecstatically on the move. These arts, Matisse declares, are intimately related, but you suspect that he does not find them inextricable.

That dance may exist without music will be implicit when *La Danse* comes to the Royal Academy in its imminent Hermitage exhibition, leaving *La Musique* at home. But the canniest people who attend the RA opening day on January 26 will rush up to Sadler's Wells in the evening and watch a very different declaration of the relationship between dance and music: the last night of performances by Jonathan Burrows and Matteo Fargion, uniting three extraordinary pieces that have won acclaim all round the world.

Burrows and Fargion are a choreographer and a composer who, through ingenious and enormously entertaining experiments, refute the deferential "master-servant" convention of choreography and score. They don't dress up, they don't have special lights, they just turn up. They think about music and dance as different versions of

rhythm, a hugely entertaining brainteaser - Burrows makes noises (if not what you'd call singing), while Fargion makes moves (if not quite what you'd call dancing). Yet they are masters, without question, and watching any of their three peculiar duets is a delight.

Superficially, the dances do what their titles say - Both *Sitting Duet* has them sitting side by side on chairs, *The Quiet Dance* sees them pacing the stage, *Speaking Dance* involves a nonsense patter of words. How the three will marry up as an evening is yet to be known, but the pair's sense of timing is their killer weapon.

Timing being the secret of comedy, and them both having an acute sense of humour, their creation is as much like very clever vaudeville as high art, a brilliantly precise device constructed to amuse and satisfy, performed by a double act as cherishable as Laurel and Hardy or Morecambe and Wise.

Now in their mid-forties, the men have known each other half their lives. Burrows, a Geordie, is still remembered for his brilliant character performances at the Royal Ballet in the '80s, while Italian-born Fargion is a prolific composer for Burrows and another master of the art, Siobhan Davies - he memorably beat out riffs on cardboard boxes for a Davies creation.

Burrows frequently gets it in the neck, even from admiring critics, for having so totally abandoned his Royal Ballet roots. And yet it is his profound love of ballet that turned him into an experimentalist.

"A guiding model for me is the solos for the six fairies in the prologue of *The Sleeping Beauty*," he says. "The choreography is extraordinary - to include the idea of electricity not long after its invention, for instance, in that variation with the pointed finger. The co-ordination of ballet, even in a fairly simple form, is extraordinary to watch and try to unravel, as a member of the audience.

"Ballet has an incredible density to it. But also I wanted to try to work with rhythm, because I felt that a lot of dance I was seeing had moved away from rhythm in order to assert dance as a form with its own identity separate from music, a lot of flow but not much pulse."

Rhythm first drew him to Fargion, when he heard Fargion's *Ten Frugal Pieces* for string quartet at the Donmar Warehouse. Fargion, who trained with experimentalist Howard Skempton, says, "All the pieces were one minute long exactly, which Jonathan liked. The material was very personal, but squeezed or forced into this structure." Burrows at first had Fargion record scores for his wonderful dances (*Stoics*, *Very*, *Our*, *The Stop Quartet*, *Things I Don't Know*), but then Fargion said he too would like to perform live next time.

The mounting complexity of what they found themselves devising made both of them nervous. For one thing, Fargion had no training in choreography, and with such peculiar, counter-intuitive material it is phenomenally easy to get lost - they both remember performances of *The Quiet Dance* when they lost five minutes, or found themselves back to front on stage, and had to reorientate through nothing more than panicky facial signals.

Burrows also worried about the dance public's preconceptions: "I didn't want people to react badly to Matteo's presence on stage. Audiences can be cruel, critics can be cruel. I feel that I struggled to get people to accept his central role in the work." Yet he could not, he says, do these pieces with trained dancers, who cannot help absorbing his movement instructions into paths of familiar training that blur his precise and original requirements.

"It's like finding a piece of driftwood and sandpapering it - the driftwood's character starts to disappear. With Matteo, a movement is completely visible, and working with him has reminded me what I love about movement." Indeed, Fargion's mobile, fleshy face and the Italian clarity of the gestures he makes with his thick musician's hands complement Burrows's bird-like alertness, proving the point that their collaboration is about two different arts that love each other, rather than bruising or ignoring each other.

The uniting of the three duets in one evening signals the beginning of the end for these jewel-like entertainments: after London's four performances, and a flurry of European ones, Burrows - cruelly for English dance-lovers - is off to Brussels's Kaaitheater to take up a two-year residency to research his next creations.

The two say that, sadly, Britain isn't where cutting-edge people such as them find appreciative commissioners; new music and experimental choreography are almost dead in conventional, isolated Britain.

Fargion says pessimistically that he will probably open a restaurant after this tour ends. On the other hand, a European dance company has offered him a job as a dancer.

- 'Both Sitting Duet', 'The Quiet Dance' and 'Speaking Dance' are at Sadler's Wells Lilian Baylis Theatre, London EC1 (0844 412 4300), Jan 11, 18, 25 and 26.



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