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Concert Report: Joffrey Ballet and Cleveland Orchestra share a magical evening at Blossom

Published August 24, 2009

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The Pavilion at Blossom Music Center was transformed into a ballet theater on August 22 & 23 as the Chicago-based Joffrey Ballet returned for the first time in thirty years.

Well, if not transformed, at least cleverly adapted for the task at hand. The Blossom stage has no proscenium and no curtain, so the dance floor became a warmup studio for the company as the audience gathered. No stage house means no flies for scenery, so lighting arranged on temporary towers and projections set the mood. And the Cleveland Orchestra moved down two floors to a pit which hadn't been opened up in some twenty-five years.

All of which should remind us that you really don't need anything more than fine dancers and fine musicians to create a magical evening, and both of these elements were present in abundance.

Abundance included sheer numbers: the Joffrey carries more than forty dancers on their artist roster, and the company brought the whole complement along for its two-night run in Cuyahoga Falls. And from what we could tell, nearly the entire membership of the Cleveland Orchestra was on subterranean duty on Saturday night under the leadership of assistant conductor Tito Muñoz, and the super-capacious Blossom pit could have held even more musicians than that!

The Joffrey brought five pieces along last weekend, three of them dating from the late 60's to early 70's (Tomm Ruud's 'Mobile' from 1969, Jerald Arpino's 'Kettentanz' from 1971 and Paul Taylor's 'Cloven Kingdom' from 1976) plus more recent choreography: Arpino's 'Round of Angels', premiered by the Joffrey in 1983, and Christopher Wheeldon's 'Carousel A Dance', first produced by the New York City Ballet in 2002.

The large Pavilion crowd and a good-sized, intrepid lawn population of picnickers (it was cool and rainy on Saturday) were obviously eager to see ballet here again, and their anticipation was rewarded with stunningly elegant and energetic dancing and superb musical support.

'Kettentanz', danced to a variety of Viennese gallops, polkas, waltzes and other ballroom dance pieces by Johann Strauss Sr. (plus one lone intermezzo by Johann Mayer featuring solo strings and harp), featured both large groups, duets, trios and other combinations of dancers showing off a variety of masterful classic ballet moves and footwork. Tito Muñoz, who was making his ballet debut tonight, paced the music with consummate skill, drawing spacious and relaxed playing from an ensemble which already knows all of its own moves in this repertory.

Khachaturian's uniquely soulful 'Gayne's Adagio' will be familiar to fans of 2001: A Space Odyssey. Here, it reinforced another kind of otherworldly scene as the lights came up on 'Mobile', revealing one male and two female dancers melded into a modern sculpture which revolved and transformed itself into a variety of fluid and gravity-defying shapes. This was an amazing feat of muscular control, and a tiny bobble toward the end did nothing to break the spell.

'Cloven Kingdom' was packaged with a serious-sounding description. Launched by a quote from Spinoza and promising a look at the animal nature hiding under the veneer of human civilization, Paul Taylor's piece turned out instead to be wacky and fun, as was the bipolar score 'combined' by John Herbert McDowell out of music by Corelli, Henry Cowell and Malloy Miller. Sometimes violent outbursts of modern music interrupted plummy performances of Corelli concertos as four women in mirrored headgear (a ball, a box, a disc, two discs) interacted — or didn't — with four twitchy men in formal evening wear, and other female dancers suddenly went crazy with awkward flailing gestures. Did we mention that ballet shoes were left behind for this virtuosic and amusing work?

After intermission, Muñoz and the orchestra provided a lush and expressive performance of the Adagietto from Mahler 5 as the musical environment for Arpino's elegiac 'Round of Angels', created to memorialize James Howell, Arpino's assistant of more than twenty years. The work lived up to its description as 'lovely' and 'atmospheric', even if details of the dancing and the music sometimes seemed unrelated to each other — as though two equally riveting things were merely

happening simultaneously.

The evening ended with 'Carousel a Dance', signaled by gorgeous chords from the low brass with the intentionally out-of-tune woodwinds imitating Richard Rodgers' carousel calliope. Involving the whole company (at one point in a very clever human representation of a merry-go-round), the piece was the perfect ending to a semi-al fresco summer evening. William David Brohn's orchestration did Rodger's long-time orchestrator Robert Russell Bennett one better in its exploitation of the symphonic, and the Cleveland Orchestra sounded terrific.

We hope that ballet will return to Blossom as often as is fiscally possible. On Saturday evening, the audience voted for that by collectively leaping to its feet and giving a long ovation to the Joffrey, Tito Muñoz and the Cleveland Orchestra.