



Review

Balanchine's Vision: Ballet Arizona's Gift

by Kenneth LaFave

Genius is having a vision and sticking to it. Choreographer George Balanchine's vision fused his love of the human body in motion with a deep understanding of music's power to create subjective truth, and from his earliest ballets in the 1920s to the final closing works of the early 1980s, he persisted in that vision.

Ballet Arizona's annual celebration of Balanchine opened Thursday night at Phoenix Symphony Hall, featuring three ballets from over the expanse of his career: *Serenade*, from the 1930s, *The Four Temperaments* from the 1940s, and *Monumentum pro Gesualdo/Movements for Piano and Orchestra* from the 1960s. As always, the program highlighted the ever-growing strengths of this vibrant company, and as always, it was attended by a far smaller audience than were productions this season of big, familiar story ballets like *Romeo and Juliet*. When Phoenix audiences catch on to the elevated eroticism and sophistication of Balanchine ballets, perhaps that will change.

Serenade was the first ballet made by the Russian-born Balanchine in his adopted country of the United States. It endures as one of his signature pieces for its perfect realization of Tchaikovsky's *Serenade for Strings*. The opening, with its seventeen girls like icy blue flowers in the moonlight, reaching skyward, links effortlessly to the imagery of the finale, with one girl held aloft and carried off into the distance by a cortege of men. The subject of time and love and the fleeting beauty of experience has rarely been explored so poignantly.

Ballet Arizona's girls moved in effortless unison and phrased as one body. From out of the group came one, Natalia Magnicaballi, to be both raised up and cut down, a flower picked from the rest. Magnicaballi's strengths are many. Here, partnered by Michal Wozniak, she captivated by virtue of a deft musicality, a way of timing danced phrases to match the musical ones.

Monumentum pro Gesualdo/Movements for Piano and Orchestra traded moonlight for the glare of objectivity, with a score from late Stravinsky as angular and as edgy as any modern architecture, and Magnicaballi traded pathos for hauteur. She and partner Joseph Cavanaugh skillfully danced out the music of the piano solo in the second part of this two-chaptered ballet, as six girls played out the orchestral accompaniment. One of Balanchine's most literal imagings of musical form was vividly realized in the studied staging by Ballet Arizona artistic head, Ib Andersen.

The Four Temperaments provided a showcase for a range of Ballet Arizona talent. The title comes from the medieval belief that human personalities mix four temperaments or sensibilities: the Melancholic (sad), the Sanguinic (happy), the Phlegmatic (laid back, for lack of a better term) and the Choleric (aggressive). To music of Hindemith, the choreography juggles these four in a series of variations.

Nayon Iovino, one of the company's latest additions, was mesmerizing in the lyrical convulsions of Melancholic. Braced by a pair of women, Raychel Weiner and Kanako Imayoshi, Iovino led the eye from one movement to the next with clarity and precision. Jillian Barrell and Astrit Zejnati dazzled as the Sanguinic couple, Shea Johnson brought an unexpected empathy to Phlegmatic, and Kenna Draxton riveted the punchy steps of the Choleric solo.

The Phoenix Symphony, conducted by Timothy Russell, delivered stellar performances of the three demanding musical scores. The outstanding solo pianists were Lawrence Loeber in the Stravinsky and William Wolfram in the Hindemith.

Photos by Rosalie O'Connor.

Top: *The Four Temperaments*.

Below, left: *Movements For Piano And Orchestra*.

Below, right: *Serenade*.



Ballet Arizona Presents
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At Phoenix Symphony Hall
Friday, May 3 at 7:30pm
Saturday, May 4 at 2:00pm & 7:30pm
Sunday, May 5 at 1:00pm
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