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American Music, Abloom, Pollinated by Multiple Steps: New York City Ballet Season Gala, With Robbins and Balanchine

By Alastair Macaulay, May 9, 2013

“The star was Mr. Stoltzman... The spacious calm of his softly contemplative long notes, the effortless fluency with which he rode the cusp between jazz and classical styles: these opened up important areas of American music.”

American music! What’s its stylistic range, and what’s its dance potential? New York City Ballet’s spring gala on Wednesday — with no fanfares, no speeches and no onstage toasts — focused simply on this theme. Though too few of the principals danced, it was an entirely happy occasion to open the company’s season.

The music included pieces by John Philip Sousa, George Gershwin, Samuel Barber, Leonard Bernstein, André Previn (who was present) and Philip Glass. The choreography ranged chronologically from two premieres (both by Christopher Wheeldon) back to 1957 (the “Cool” number from Jerome Robbins’s “West Side Story Suite”) and 1958 (George Balanchine’s “Stars and Stripes”). Two guest musicians performed: the clarinetist Richard Stoltzman and the actress and singer Queen Latifah. Never in recent years has City Ballet seemed more like family than in the touchingly warm good manners with which its dancers welcomed these two at curtain calls.

This devotion to American music demonstrates courage and tenacity on the part of Peter Martins, the company’s ballet master in chief. Twenty-five years ago City Ballet’s original American Music Festival, featuring an unprecedented quantity of new ballets, was intensely controversial. Most of the creations — nine by Mr. Martins — were ghastly; the company, as Arlene Croce observed the next year in *The New Yorker*, received the worst block of reviews in its history.

Yet Mr. Martins, undaunted, has never let the American music theme drop. This gala justified his persistence. So has most of the current season’s repertory to date — especially the revival of Balanchine’s 1954 ballet “Ivesiana,” which so valuably honors Charles Ives, one of the most lastingly original of all American composers.

Mr. Wheeldon’s “Soirée Musicale” is described in the program as the company premiere of a work made for the 1998 School of American Ballet Workshop. It contains, however, a new pas de deux, danced by two of City Ballet’s most appealing young dancers, Lauren Lovette and Chase Finlay. The “Soirée Musicale” music by Samuel Barber was commissioned by Lincoln Kirstein in 1952 with City Ballet

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in mind. An orchestral arrangement of his piano suite “Souvenirs,” this was first staged as a ballet in 1955 to choreography by Todd Bolender. The music is so nearly French — the orchestration recalling Ravel, the melodies and dynamics evoking Satie and Poulenc — and yet we can’t miss a drive, an outgoing force that belongs to this side of the Atlantic.

Mr. Wheeldon’s 1998 dances show us how precociously gifted he was then, at 25. They also showcase young dancers beautifully. Ms. Lovette and Mr. Finlay share the lead roles with Sara Adams, Brittany Pollack, Harrison Ball and Taylor Stanley; these six open the ballet in a waltz — and I can’t help noticing that Mr. Wheeldon here responds to waltz tempo with a fullness of feeling and a variety of tactics that were never evident in the many waltzes in his new three-act Prokofiev “Cinderella,” which had its American premiere last weekend with San Francisco Ballet.

The “Soirée Musicale” costumes, by Holly Hynes, are along handsome, old-style ballet-ballroom lines. They give the dancers real glamour; so does the choreography. The women are gorgeously arrayed in full tulle dresses with various layers of fuchsia, purple, mauve and lilac to individualize each; the men wear dinner jackets over tights and handsome, elaborate ties.

In a Scottische, Kristen Segin and Indiana Woodward keep dancing, while first Ralph Ippolito and later Peter Walker join them and depart; the women, passing through different shades of competitive flirtation and shrugging resignation, maintain unflinching brio. Ms. Pollack shines in a tango with an ever-increasing flock of chaps.

In one delicious sequence, as she passes down their line, they burst forth in jumps in her wake. Mr. Stanley and Mr. Ball show presence and finesse. And the pas de deux is the most touching and well paced that Mr. Wheeldon has made in years: Ms. Lovette and Mr. Finlay, both so springlike in their good looks and dance bloom, only gradually enter each other’s orbit.

Mr. Wheeldon’s other creation, “A Place for Us,” is entirely new. Bearing the program dedication “For Jerome Robbins. A thank you,” it’s set to pieces for clarinet (Mr. Stoltzman) and piano (Nancy McDill) by Mr. Previn and Bernstein (an interlude from a Previn sonata for both instruments, then the entire Bernstein sonata for both), played without a break just because that’s how Mr. Wheeldon heard them played by Mr. Stoltzman in concert.

The dancers are Tiler Peck and Robert Fairchild, who have quickly risen in recent years to become among the company’s most beloved principals and central interpreters. Phrase by phrase, it’s charming, but all in all it’s inconsequential. Though Joseph Altuzarra’s costumes aren’t fancy, they each have one unnecessary item: a diagonal frill on Ms. Peck’s dress, a biblike pouch on Mr. Fairchild’s vest.

The star was Mr. Stoltzman — very finely abetted by Ms. McDill. **The spacious calm of his softly contemplative long notes, the effortless fluency with which he rode the cusp between jazz and classical styles: these opened up important areas of American music.**

Nothing was more eagerly awaited than Queen Latifah’s singing of Gershwin’s “Man I Love.” In full-length gown and hair bound high, she took the stage with quiet, good-humored dignity, gently cocking her head to one side just before starting to sing. At first the melody’s long lines seemed not to suit her; she interrupted the phrases for a couple of awkward breaths. But she served the song, placing the words with beautiful emphasis and in due course adding a few small but telling jazz embellishments. Meanwhile Sterling Hyltin and Amar Ramasar danced the pas de deux to this number from George

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Balanchine's "Who Cares?," Ms. Hyltin with an intimate rapture — as if Mr. Ramasar was only in her dream — in the single most marvelous performance of the evening.

Ashley Boudier and Andrew Veyette were engagingly stellar in their "Stars and Stripes" pas de deux; Mr. Veyette also led the "Cool" number, sliding stylishly around the notes as he sang. The corps de ballet won a deserved ovation for the final movement of Robbins's "Glass Pieces."

In all these items the sheer authority of the choreography by both Robbins and Balanchine was thrilling, with each master not just responding to American music but also revealing it.

Richard Stoltzman