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Ballet Review

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Two English Operas

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Mark Morris brought two opera productions to the Howard Gilman Opera House at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. This generous double bill of Britten's *Curlew River* and Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas* was first presented at Tanglewood during the summer of 2013. Morris' approach to these two operatic tragedies, composed almost three centuries apart, is as different as their music. The program's range of sound, sights, and artistic conceptualization created an incredibly diverse and full musical and theatrical dance experience. Nevertheless, tragedy is tragedy and Morris manages to locate their commonality – that of solemn and powerful ritual enactment.

Britten composed and premiered *Curlew River* in 1964, transforming the fifteenth-century noh play *Sumidagawa* (which he had seen in Japan almost a decade earlier) into a Christian parable. In *Sumidagawa*, a madwoman, appearing at a ferry dock, wants to cross the Sumida River in search of her lost child. During the ferry crossing, the boatman sings the tragic tale of how a year earlier a kidnapped boy from Kyoto had fallen ill and died in a state of abandonment. The bereft woman realizes the boatman has revealed the fate of her own lost son and the boatman takes her and the other passenger to the child's grave. Transfixed by the dramatic power of the story and noh presentation, Britten and his librettist William Plomer aspired to capture its ritual austerity and economy of action in a heightened theatrical experience intended for Christian audiences.

Plomer reframed the story placing it in a medieval English monastery using an all-male cast of singers (similar to noh's all-male performance idiom) accompanied by seven instrumentalists. The singers play an abbot and monks who enact the drama of the Madwoman and the Ferryman for their congregants. The monks enter and, in the end, exit in procession chanting the Latin hymn *"Te lucis ante terminum,"* which imbues the work with an atmosphere of religious ritual. Remaining onstage throughout the opera's entirety, the singers and instrumentalists, without a conductor, perform an occult-sounding wash of music that has no tempo. It effectively creates a sonic state of limbo reflecting the characters' in-between state of transit as they cross the river and the Madwoman's unmoored emotional state from fear over the unknown fate of her child. Britten called this type of music "controlled floating."

To this layered creation Morris adds his definitive staging. One of the first things we realize is that the onstage performers in this production are the singers and instrumentalists of the Mark Morris Dance Group (MMDG) Music Ensemble – not dancers. This immediately removes the expectation of a technical dance performance and allows the choreography to be a more natural and universal physical expression of the story and music.

Morris uses a light touch in offering suggestions of the drama's Japanese origin, which works quite well. The performers are all costumed in plain white pants and button-down shirts. They perform the piece barefooted after removing their white flip-flops at the side of the stage just as Japanese typically remove their *zori* (sandals) upon entering an indoor space. Morris has found meaningful movement and expressive gesture that is suited to the skill of the musician movers. He uses processions around and across the stage to position the chorus for the various scenes. This allusion to ritualized movement might have been used to fuller effect had the pace been slower and more deliberate – as contemplatives actually do move when chanting prayers.

Once the performers take their places, we are immediately absorbed with the performances of the Traveller (Conor McDonald), the Ferryman (Douglas Williams), and the Madwoman (Isaiah Bell) – all movingly rendered.

Curlew River. (Photo: Nan Melville, Mark Morris Dance Group)

Early in the Madwoman's appearance, her melodic lines are characterized by a curious gliding up and gliding down over several notes – somewhere between a screech and a wail – evoking plaintive grief. Mr. Bell sings and moves most affectingly in the lead role. The paper parasol, which he carries and manipulates, is an eloquent prop. At times, he places it fully opened on the ground and hides behind it, disappearing without leaving the stage. At other times, he pumps it partially open like the spasms of a whimper.

We experience a limbo-like quality during the river crossing scene in which Morris' choreography meets Britten's evocative score head on. Britten uses a series of glissandi to insinuate a state of transit. These musical, wave-like surges are embodied by the monks seated together on a bench, swaying forward and back as if in a boat, while a lone performer stands off to the side wielding a large, white sail on a mast. For a full eight-and-a-half minutes, he lunges, sways, and whips the giant sail in a full-bodied exertion against the imaginary wind and currents. The dreamy music and visual images lull us into the listless, in-between state inhabited by the Madwoman as she journeys between life and the acknowledgment of death.

At the end of the river crossing, the Madwoman questions the Ferryman as to the details of the child's death. Her climactic realization of the ultimate truth of her son's demise is portrayed in a mesmerizing scene in which the flutist stands up from her seated position and faces the Madwoman. They circle the stage intently facing each other as they perform a flute and voice duet together. The

flutist leads the Madwoman to her child's grave marker and retreats to her seated position upstage with the other musicians.

The Madwoman kneels before the white grave marker in the downstage left corner. The Ferryman and the Traveller kneel behind her. The mother rocks back and forth in her grief as the chorus members come forward, one by one, to place origami paper offerings by the grave. By the end of this continual parade of offerings, we hear the high-pitched voice of the child (though we do not see his spirit as we do in *Sumidagawa*). This indication of the spirit's presence causes the monks to prostrate themselves. Pacified by the blessing and assurances uttered by the spirit of her child, the Madwoman chants, "Amen." The Abbot summarizes the miracle of the play, after which the monks and the musicians reprise, "*Te lucis ante terminum*," as they move in procession to the sides of the stage to shod themselves and exit. The mother remains kneeling at the gravesite in a state of acceptance and peace.

With *Dido and Aeneas*, we are back on more familiar turf – choreographically and musically. The company has been performing the piece since the 1989 world premiere in Brussels when MMDG was the dance company in residence at Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie. Purcell's opera with libretto by Nahum Tate, composed in 1689 for performance by an all-girls school, is reassuring with its baroque sound progressions and recognizable harmonies.

The work abounds with dance music; in fact, Edward J. Dent (1876-1957), a British musicologist and expert on *Dido*, wrote, "The whole opera may well be treated in the spirit of ballet." Josias Priest, the proprietor of the girls' school for which the opera was composed, was himself a professional dancer and choreographer and probably choreographed all of the dances for the original production. In some ways it calls to mind José Limón's *The Moor's Pavane*, in which another tragic drama unfolds while the players continue to perform court dances (the ongoing dance of life) to strains of Purcell.

The tragic story of *Dido and Aeneas* is taken from Virgil's Latin epic the *Aeneid* and takes place just after the end of the Trojan War. The Trojan hero Aeneas and his army have been blown off course as they voyage onward to found Rome. They have landed in Carthage, and Aeneas is smitten by Dido, the Queen. At first, Dido resists Aeneas' advances as she is still in mourning for her dead husband. The chorus finally convinces their queen to accept Aeneas' suit by framing it as a diplomatic alliance – a fulfillment of her queenly duty to country. An evil Sorceress, who has it in for Dido, plots to spoil the romance. She employs her minions of witches to conjure up a sea storm to trick Aeneas into a hasty departure from Carthage. Aeneas, driven by his sense of duty to fulfill his destiny (to found Rome), readies his entourage to depart Carthage. When he apprises Dido of the situation, she loses all desire to live and kills herself.

The sublime and simple set design by Robert Bordo is a giant backdrop (which fades onto the dance floor) of a map of a beckoning aquamarine sea and the golden lands of antiquity that surround it. Morris' choreographic use of profile positions atop the sculptural, white upstage balustrade and downstage bench reference Greco-Roman frieze designs. These elements help to place us in a mythic geography that is ruled by duty and destiny as opposed to the yearnings of the individual.

Morris originally performed the double role of Queen Dido and the Sorceress, which some found to be a provocative statement back in 1989 – although men playing female roles has long been common in theater and dance forms from other eras and places. Since Morris stopped performing, he has cast both men and women in the lead roles. Now one frequently finds Morris in the orchestra pit conducting the singers and instrumentalists. Only the dancers perform onstage and they are each cast to pair with the sung roles from the opera. *Dido*, in contrast to *Curlew River*, is a completely danced opera; it adheres to Morris' penchant for rigorous visualization of the music.

Laurel Lynch and Domingo Estrada, Jr., in *Dido and Aeneas*. (Photo: Nan Melville, MMDG)

The opera alternates between idyllic scenes in Queen Dido's court and the depraved realm of the evil Sorceress with her coven of witches. The dance cast for one usually doubles as the cast for the other, which is common to many productions of this opera. Morris maintains the exact same costuming for both except for the fact that Queen Dido's hair is partially tied back with a stick and the Sorceress wears her locks full and loose. The entire company wears simple, black sarongs with matching, black, sleeveless tops (except for Aeneas, who is shirtless). So, the switch in character identity is a completely embodied affair. This is achieved through the choreography as well as improvised by the performers with verve and vitality.

Morris uses a combination of mimetic gesture and adapted American Sign Language to form a gestural vocabulary that is used to articulate each word of the libretto. The dancers' bodies literally "speak" the opera word-for-word much like the narrative storytelling traditions danced in India and Southeast Asia. Things really get intricate when Morris has the upper torso performing the dramatic narrative while the legwork and dance steps reflect what is going on in the instrumentation – a technique used in the Indian bharatana - tyam form. This is pulled off exquisitely in the Grove scene when the Second Woman, enacting the foreboding story of Diana and Actaeon, dances a solo entertainment for the happy couple. Her arms narrate the tale while her feet stomp out the musical motif of the ground bass. Although I personally prefer a little more space in the relationship between the dance and the music (or text), one must marvel at Morris' creative genius here.

The chaotic, spastic, lewd Sorceress scenes are the antithesis of the formality, grace, and structure of those in the court. Whereas Dido

embodies the qualities of "good" and "sad," the Sorceress is all about "evil" and "happy." So, too, the dancing in the court scenes elaborates on the details of the music, evoking social harmony; whereas in the Sorceress scenes, the choreography disregards the rhythmic structure of the music and relies on dramatic improvisation to create a sense of degenerate disorder. This is demonstrated in the final Witch Chorus, "Destruction's Our Delight," during which the dancers act out all manner of murder and suicide. This sequence further develops into the Witches Dance, in which an initial couple enacts the Dido and Aeneas tragedy – meeting, romance, demise. While the Sorceress entertains herself in a downstage masturbatory simulation, the dancers provide her a perfect erotic fantasy. They reenact the couple's tragedy at will – over and over, faster and faster – in a frenzied, orgasmic explosion.

Although the solos and witchy orgies are intriguing, the chorus dances are the high point of the work. Morris choreographed them before the solos and duets and they comprise more than half of the dancing. Nothing can compare to the collective, contagious energy of the chorus dances with their compelling gestures; joyous jumps; and captivating, rhythmic footwork. In "Fear No Danger," the chorus echoes what is initially a duet for Belinda and the Second Woman – a stirring invitation to Dido to yield to her romantic inclinations. The syncopation of the footwork in relation to the soaring vocal line (and gestures) is pure Mark Morris magic.

And then Morris ends the enactment of this story with sublime simplicity. "Dido's Lament," in which she sings, "When I am laid in earth, may my wrongs create no trouble in thy breast," is an operatic aria of incomparable melancholic beauty. Morris has choreographed it as a duet for Dido with her sister/confidant Belinda, who remains seated on the downstage bench. Belinda clutches Dido's hand and resists her pull as Dido circles the bench – pulling away from life itself. After the wrenching aria, the chorus gathers around Dido, lifts up the bench, and accompanies her as she backs away, moving upstage. Their recessional steps gently rise and dip, as if they are being carried off into the sea. Dido's dead body is draped over the small bench while the members of the chorus disappear one by one through a slit in the center of the map. Dido surrenders to her fate and the others proceed on to their destiny in a solemn ritual of inevitability.