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a virtual journal and essential blog of the classical music scene in greater Boston

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IN : REVIEWS

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Classics Arranged and Inverted

by [DAVID SCHULENBERG](#)

A Far Cry, Boston's conductorless chamber orchestra, teamed up with Urbanity Dance in "Chemistry" Saturday night at New England Conservatory's Jordan Hall. The short program—roughly an hour of music—comprised just two works: *Dancing with Bach*, a set of transcriptions by composer Eric Nathan; and Stravinsky's *Apollon musagète*. Both were choreographed by Betsi Graves, founder and director of the Boston-based Urbanity.

As Graham Wright observed, previewing the performance on WBUR's Radio Boston [[here](#)], it is unusual these days for a relatively small contemporary dance company to perform with live orchestral accompaniment. Actually, "accompaniment" was interviewer Anthony Brooks's word, and it would be difficult to say that either group accompanied the other. This was a true collaboration, although I'm not sure that "Chemistry" adequately characterizes what we heard and saw. The program's unusually successful integration of dance and music was a product of its inventive staging and choreography. But surely in any effective production "good chemistry" occurs among performers, and between performers and audience.

Jordan Hall has not been much of a dance theater since its articulating wings were locked in the closed position 50 or more years ago, but the bare stage with spare but effective lighting and costumes sufficed to create a memorable dance environment, thanks to the clever juxtaposition of dancers and players. For both works, the 19 players or "Criers," as they call themselves, mostly stood toward the rear of the stage but occasionally walked about, their movements part of the choreography (the two or three cellists and bassists sat as usual—no marching cello à la Woody Allen's *Take the Money and Run*). The dancers, as many as 16 of them in the final movement, occasionally stepped, jumped, and crawled among the players, some of whom who were required at one point to fall backwards into the arms of a supporting dancer—this while continuing to play the violin or viola, an act requiring considerable concentration, not to mention the type of physical trust that members of a dance company place in one another.

From a technical standpoint this was a most impressive production, and I could not say I heard a single musical glitch that could be attributed to either the choreographic machinations or the absence of a conductor. A Far Cry is hardly the first orchestral ensemble to perform without a baton-waving director, of course. Such was the norm until the early 19th century, and since 1972 the Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, based in New York, has been performing in this fashion. The latter's programming, however, tends to be somewhat more mainstream. A number of the Criers are routinely involved in both early and new music, and although they perform on conventional "modern" instruments, the products of their wide-ranging experience are evident in both their repertory and their interpretations.

The first work's six dances were each set to one or two keyboard compositions by J. S. Bach which were arranged for strings by American composer Eric Nathan, a composition Fellow of the American Academy in Rome. Commissioned by Michael Sporn, the program was dedicated to the memory of his late wife Catherine. These are fairly conventional arrangements avoid the extended string techniques and atonal harmony that can be heard, for example, in Nathan's quartets *Multitude*, *Solitude* and *Omaggio a Gesualdo* [[here](#)].

The choices and ordering of the Bach pieces were surprising: six gavottes, plus a courante with two variations, all framed by two non-dance movements. The first of these, the Capriccio from the Second Partita, is originally a closing movement. But it started the program off with a bang, as the Criers executed Bach's lively fugue with virtuoso panache. The gavottes were played with similar precision. The gavotte was originally a rather gentle French Baroque dance, but Bach's examples tend to be livelier and more energetic. The fairly aggressive "modern" approach taken by A Far Cry was therefore not entirely



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inapt, and it softened in the musettes that alternate with the gavottes from the Third and Sixth English Suites. The second of these was played elegantly by violinist Jesse Irons, alongside choreography in which the soloist struck poses that reminded me of those famous pictures of Nijinsky dancing *Afternoon of a Faun*—appropriate, perhaps, in a dance inspired by a pastoral type of bagpipe. Equally charming was the melody of Gavotte II from the B-Minor Partita, assigned to bassist Erik Higgins in one of arranger Nathan’s rare instances of quirky but still entirely effective scoring.

Only Courante II from the First English Suite struck me as less than satisfactory, from a musical point of view. It is not one of Bach’s more engaging dances to begin with, and the metronomic performance gave the running figuration of the two variations or doubles a stiff, driven character. On the other hand, the concluding number, the Andante from the Sonata BWV 964, was played very beautifully. Taken from Bach’s own keyboard arrangement of his Third Violin Solo, it received a lush instrumentation from Nathan, with particularly lovely solo playing from cellist Michael Unterman, who doubtless enjoyed the opportunity to play a line originally composed for violin.

Although using “modern” instruments, neither this performance nor Nathan’s arrangements could have been imagined 20 or 30 years ago, before the widespread adoption of historical performance techniques. The lovely, nearly vibrato-free sound of the first musette (Gavotte II from the Third English Suite) is something that mainstream players have had to learn from early music specialists. Clearly, however, it was a deliberate choice on the part of choreographer Graves not to incorporate any references to Baroque dance—at least none that I could recognize. Her choreography could easily be described as eclectic, mixing elements from traditions ranging from classical ballet to modern and jazz dance. Often she takes what might be called a sculptural approach to arranging dancers onstage, as in the work of a group such as Pilobulus.

More impressive than the architecture of individual dancers or small groups, however, is the contrapuntal character of Graves’s choreography, which, reflecting that of the Bach works, might involve half a dozen distinct sorts of attitudes and movements occurring simultaneously across the stage. Humorous touches, including vaguely gestural wiggles of head, hands, or limbs, amused the spectators and were by and large in keeping with the witty character of Bach’s music. Yet, at least in the slow final number, the constant activity, inventive though it always was, might have been relieved by something a little less busy or restless.

Polyphony and repose, two potentially contradictory tendencies, are both characteristic of Stravinsky’s 1927 ballet *Apollon musagète* (Apollo, leader of the muses). Arguably the most classic of the composer’s neo-classic works, it is scored for string orchestra, with an important part for solo violin. Its instrumentation is therefore perfect for A Far Cry. The composer’s score suggests using 34 players, but nothing was lacking in this performance by barely half that number.

Far more than the Bach dances, this is a work that presents pitfalls for a conductorless ensemble, thanks to its numerous changes of tempo and frequent syncopated rhythms. I heard nothing amiss, however, and I suspect that being onstage with the dancers helped the musicians keep together both with the latter and with one another. Conductorless does not mean leaderless, and much credit for holding things together is surely due to the principal first violinist, who eloquently executed the solo violin part, representing the god Apollo. I *think* this was played by Omar Guey, but the hierarchy-free approach taken by A Far Cry extends to the printed concert program. This, although imaginatively designed, with some striking black-and-white images, also avoids identifying individual players (or dancers) in particular numbers.

Anyone staging this work does so in the wake of George Balanchine, whose choreography for the first European performance in 1928 remains in the repertory of many companies as a defining classic of modern dance. Graves’s version features four soloists, just as Stravinsky and Balanchine envisioned the work. But in place of one male dancer (Apollo) and three female Muses, we have one woman and three men, joined in the concluding number by the rest of the company. Although opening with the Birth of Apollo and concluding with an Apotheosis, as conceived by Stravinsky, the work merely hints at a story line or narrative. Whether the inversion of gender roles was meant to signify anything was unclear, but I don’t think this matters.

Certainly this was a virtuoso demonstration of inventive responses to Stravinsky’s music. It included a comical solo for Terpsichore and some very artful arrangements of the two dancers in the latter’s duet with Apollo—which also included a game of hide-and-seek as the two slithered around the musicians in the cute middle section of this *pas de deux*. Only in the final number did I sense disharmony between dance and music. It was clever to have all the dancers, and most of the musicians, swirling slowly about the stage in symmetrically intertwining figures. Yet the Apotheosis emerged in this performance as an anticlimax after the blackout at the end of the preceding Coda section. Sonically the end was as beautiful as anything, but crowding the stage in this manner struck me as the antithesis of Stravinsky’s gradual paring down of the texture to a sublime simplicity—though perhaps this was the intention.

See related article [HERE](#).



A Far Cry and Urbanity Dancers Rehearse

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A quick trip to A Far Cry's web site confirms that it was Omar Chen Guey who soloed in the Stravinsky.

<http://www.afarcry.org/omar-chen-guey/>

Comment by John Emery – January 12, 2014 at 3:17 pm

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