

Mark Morris Dance Group hits a lot of low points

By R.M. Campbell
P-I Dance Critic

The Mark Morris Dance Group has returned to Seattle for a series of performances at Meany Theater, the first of which was last night.

It is always a pleasure to see these diverse, talented dancers

who move with such lucid grace, smooth muscularity and obvious commitment and empathy for Morris' choreography.

And it is always interesting to see what Morris has been up to over the past year, busy as a bee, dancing and choreographing in a vast array of places.

This summer season he brought to Meany five dances: "Canonic 3/4 Studies," "The Fantasy," "Sonata for Clarinet and Piano," "Bijoux" and "New Love Song Waltzes."

The program opened and closed with a series of waltzes — not ordinary little waltzes, but sophisticated waltzes. "Canonic 3/4 Studies" are a set of piano waltzes arranged and performed by Harriet Cavalli; "New Love Song Waltzes" are set to Brahms'

Review

The Mark Morris Dance Group last night at Meany Theater in an all-Morris program: "Canonic 3/4 Studies," "The Fantasy," "Sonata for Clarinet and Piano," "Bijoux" and "New Love Song Waltzes." The program will be repeated tonight and tomorrow night at 8.

"Neue Liebeslieder" for vocal quartet and piano duet.

"Canonic" is unquestionably clever, as Morris is frequently clever. It is playful at times; irreverent, sarcastic, witty, too. But not often enough, for the good dissolves quickly and easily into the silly and the campy, begging the audience to laugh.

The piece is the virtual catalog of Morris' arch gestures and ingenu expressions, which he used as padding when his muse was not in top form.

Cavalli's selection of bright and moody waltzes is superb; so was her playing. The pianist, a well-known figure in the Seattle

dance world, is now with the Zurich Ballet.

"New Love Song Waltzes" is Morris' brave attempt to make a strong statement with the same music George Balanchine used for his justly celebrated "Liebesheld Walzer," although the latter used both sets of Brahms' vocal quartets, Opp. 52 and 65. No one ever said Morris lacked ego.

The young choreographer's set is attractive in its own way, but lacks meat — real dramatic tension, sweeping power or genuine sense of joy.

What one sees is some of Morris' favorite devices — constant running, in and out of the wings, across the stage; repeated emphasis on the asymmetrical and the off-beat; the drops to the floor; arms open to the sky.

There are effective and even touching moments, of course, for Morris possesses a keen ear for music and a sharp, inventive mind, but they do not suffice.

"The Fantasy" is set to Mozart's C Minor Fantasia (K. 475). In it, five dancers first appear upstage right and proceed at a diagonal until they disappear downstage left.

There is much agitation and sadness in this work; its key, C Minor, is a tragic key — Beethoven's favorite key for such emotions.

Perhaps Morris had all this in mind. Certainly the Kafkaesque tension of the dancers as they

proceed down the stage suggests such an approach, but in the end the opposite was achieved.

Instead of pathos, there was bathos; instead of drama, there was melodrama. Whereas Mozart kept a rein on his emotional expression, Morris indulged in extravagance for its own sake.

The tape used was awful in every regard — the volume especially.

Morris likes Poulenc. Last night, it was the "Sonata for Clarinet and Piano." Choreographed for the full company, the dance visualizes the music, often rather acutely. But in mirroring the music so closely, Morris lost some of his own creative instincts. His steps seem unduly predictable and ordinary after awhile.

One of the best things on the program was "Bijoux," a work for solo dancer set to two song cycles Erik Satie composed in the 1920s — "Quatre Petites Melodies" and "Ludions." The nine songs are extremely brief but alive and full of expression. So was dancer Teri Weksler.

The printed program was disappointing in that it did not bother to list dates for any of the works — new or old — and did not include the texts for either the Satie or Brahms.

The house was not full last night. There were empty seats everywhere. Meany officials said plenty of tickets remained for tonight and tomorrow night's performances.