

A scene from the Pergolesi *Stabat Mater*

Modern dance to the baroque

MOZART AND the Violent Femmes, Stravinsky and folk music, Indian music, Schoenberg, John Adams and Johann Sebastian Bach... Mark Morris has choreographed to all of these; and his taste in music and musicians is among the most interesting facets of his work.

Deeply musical, he seldom tries to create any period sense in his response to old music; and in this respect, as in many others, he is a thoroughly American artist. His *Dido* (Purcell), though archaic, was not baroque. His Brahms waltzes didn't whiff of 19th-century Vienna. He choreographs as if Purcell or Brahms or whoever was turning out the stuff right now. Isn't this what the director Peter Sellars is trying also to achieve in opera? Morris has collaborated with Sellars on both *Le Nozze di Figaro* and *Nixon in China*. But he is a far greater artist in works that are all his own.

What music does he return to most? Baroque. Last season's two big premières were set to English master-scores - Handel's *L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato* and Purcell's *Dido and Aeneas*. In late December, he brought to the Théâtre de la Monnaie, Brussels a programme of choreography that he had made in America between 1984 and '86, set to Bach, Vivaldi and Pergolesi. The music was played on original instruments and in lower, authentic keys, by the Orchestra of the Collegium Vocale, Ghent. Spruce sound, shaped by the firm, alert conducting of Philippe Herreweghe.

The soprano Julianne Baird sang in both Vivaldi's *Amor, hai vinto* (R.V. 651) and Pergolesi's *Stabat Mater*. To call her America's Emma Kirkby would be too crude, but she cultivates a similarly white sound, and similarly avoids chest register or vibrato; this is not a style I adore. Yet there was much subtle, expressive singing - from the brio of her Vivaldi to, in the Pergolesi, her soft, diminishing to softer, utterance of the slow syllables of "Dum emit spiritum," her way with which has haunted me ever since. She was joined in *Stabat*

Mater by the American counter-tenor Drew Minter, who, though not always comfortable with the exposed vocal line here, is an eloquent artist.

The athletic modern freshness of Morris's movement in this triple bill recalls two senior American dance masterpieces - Balanchine's *Concerto Barocco* and Paul Taylor's *Esplanade* (both to Bach). No accident, this; Morris's historical sense is evidently acute. The opening of his Bach work, *Marble Halls*, nods to both *Concerto Barocco* (the two vertical lines of the corps de ballet) and *Esplanade* (the lilac-and-rust vests and shorts). And much of *Marble Halls* uses *Concerto Barocco*'s structure - the two soloists, the corps of eight.

But, deliberately unlike Balanchine, *Marble Halls* is equal-opportunities cho-

the virtuoso pursuit of sheer form. But, thank heavens, the sheer pleasure of Morris's dance language keeps you busy with sheer enjoyment. A lot of it has a goofy, rough look. The stance is weighted, the legs turn in or out, the arms make heavy gestures up and down. Even in a step as formal as a relevé passé, arms held *en couronne*, the head that the arms frame is cocked on one side. And so old steps become new.

Love, You Have Won, to the Vivaldi cantata, is a male duet that Morris himself and Guillermo Resto danced at The Place in 1984. Five years on, Morris himself - aged 33 - is no longer in such radiant form, but he and Resto know better now, it seems, what this work says and how. This, too, brilliantly illustrates musical procedure -

dancers, never in groups smaller than four. You see no real "mater" and not much "stabat."

Yet what an extraordinary work. Its intricate formal processes work at the various meanings of the *Stabat Mater* like a prism refracting light - as the music does. You see hints of the Crucifixion, the Deposition, the Pieta, you see them multiplied, fragmented, given with gender-reversals, and all the while you are taken, with gathering intensity and concentration, from grief through supplication to exaltation - as in the words. There are three sets, each with a different view of the Cross, each view more distant but also more clear. In the last scene the Cross takes on different colours - red for "Inflammatu," dawn-pink for "Quando corpus morietur" and like a window into a white sky for "Amen."

Few artists could be further from Wagner in tone than Morris, and yet Morris's development of the changing meanings of the Cross recalls Wagner's treatment of the several sides of Good Friday in *Parsifal*. Like Wagner, too, is the way Morris loves - in so many works - to elaborate motifs during the course of a work and then to have them winging their way home to roost as the work draws to a close. Each motif is itself plainly expressive - the tense crouch, the urgent jump, the sudden collapse (to a sudden silence in the music), the sobbing contraction. But each is so worked into long, taut phrases that you can't neatly label it.

The programme was greeted with respectful applause. No boos, but no fervour. It is widely said in Brussels that the Belgians are traditionalist and loyal to Béjart ballet, which alarms me no less than if a movie buff told me that his purism made him loyal to Ken Russell. "Disconcerting," "disarming"; these are natural words to apply to Morris. But just keep on looking. These are works that teach you about choreography as a formal art and about music; and then what they express is complex and moving. They show a spirit that matches the composers he uses.

Choreographer Mark Morris makes the best possible use of the music. Alastair Macaulay reviews his latest programme in Brussels

reography (one of the soloists is male, the corps is not all-female). This is so in most of Morris's work. It is not unisex, certainly not androgynous. But it is never based on the premise of an absolute male-female divide, the sexist premise which classical ballet has often made so profound. Note, too, that some of Morris's dancers are black and that the female soloist here is tall and strongly built, the male medium-height and slight - Tina Fehlandt and Keith Sabado, both superb.

How disconcerting that all this is placed within a strictly formal organisation. ("I'm a real structure queen," Morris once said in a *Meet the Choreographer* session in London.) In *Marble Halls* you see baroque music's delight in canon, counterpoint, polyphony, solo-tutti or concerto-ripieno structure. You see it.

So, yes, dance scholars could analyse his work one way as an object-lesson in the modern dissolution of old cultural stereotypes, another way as to illustrate

recitative, aria, da capo. You laugh at the deadpan melodramatic gestures used for such words as "abbandonata," "in ogni vena," "palpita," and the smart way in which Morris sets gesture to recitative, dance to aria, and shows the overlap between the two.

You no sooner laugh, however, than you're touched. The relish Morris finds in Vivaldi's rhetorical flourishes gets under your skin; and the rich footwork and legwork of the dances has an astounding brio. One series of quick single turns, perfectly set to the words "in questa e in quell' altr' onda," stays with me above all - the kind of step you want to practise in private for fun.

Lastly, the Pergolesi *Stabat Mater* - another to keep the analysts busy. It is probably the hardest work Morris has made to comprehend, especially at a first viewing, and its language, though studded with many glorious images, is not so consistently loveable as in many of his other works. And then, what is it saying? The choreography is for 12