

New York

Pat Gatterson

Repetition, a staple of postmodern choreography, can create intensity, lead to deeper insight or altered perception, or leave one feeling deprived, left with little to love. Belgian choreographer Anna Teresa De Keersmaeker's American premiere for the 2004 Mostly Mozart Festival of her 1992 *Mozart/Concert Arias, un moto di gioia* contains, within its two hours and ten minutes (without intermission), oodles of repetition.

In this production, De Keersmaeker attempts to integrate her ensemble of dancers (Rosas) with three sopranos (Patrizia Biccire, Olga Pasichnyk, and Anke Hermann) and musicians (the Orchestra of St. Luke's conducted by Gregory Vajda) by seamlessly interweaving twenty-four Mozart selections with a few silent interludes, and all the players, into the architecture of the dance. Singers move, dancers make sounds, musicians in the pit physically interact with those onstage, and all try to embody the music. In the end, however, the choreography cannot match the weight of the music, or the dancing the excellence of the singers.

The decor, a strong unifying element by Herman Sorgeloos, suggests a large courtly parlor. The oval parquet floor covering the stage has a slight split-level, created by a rift, like a tear in a paper heart, running from up left to the center. The arcs and diagonal line of this design are nicely reflected and utilized in the choreography, spatial organization being one of De Keersmaeker's strengths. Tucked below the step, at top, are three white-filigreed wrought-iron chairs where the singers sometimes sit. Seven panels hang upstage, indicating windows, and small bright lights speckle the upstage arc, as if from a candelabra.

Variou states of undress are displayed at all times, perhaps to indicate intimate encounters or to symbolize what is missing when one is separated from one's beloved. The costumes by Rudy Sabounghi refer to Mozart's time, but are worn with a twenty-first-century sensibility. Kneepads are visibly donned by some dancers, Louis XVI heeled slippers are worn with bare legs and men's waistcoats by women, and, in one scene, a woman's dress by a man. Nonetheless this piece is all about heterosexual romantic love, its enchantments and perils, as depicted in the music and text of

Mozart's arias and interpreted by De Keersmaeker.

Flirtations, preening, cavorting, attention-getting struts and stunts, crying tantrums, self-righteous standoffs, pining, trusttesting, stripping, competing, swooning, falling in heartache and despair, jealousy, courting – it is all there, often delivered in a mocking or cartoonish tone, as if no one takes romance seriously anymore. Yet it is sweet or humorous at times because we do recognize the feelings, adolescent as they are. The most tender and adult expression of love is the duet in “Ch'io mi scordi di te.” It is also one of the most satisfying musically. Here, as the dancers (Jakub Truszkowski and Taka Shamoto) continually fall to fold in and out of one another's body parts and rise to waist-embraced walks, their own phrasing parallels, but is independent of the music, the woman occasionally meeting its rhythmic patterns with leg flicks or prances.

Clearly, De Keersmaeker loves and respects music. She wisely chooses sometimes not to crowd it with choreography, and here and there she creates beautiful phrasing and carefully modulated accents, as in “Vado ma dove?” or in “Un moto di gioia.” At other times though there is too much synchronicity – on the accented high notes the dancers reach up, on the low ones they fall down.

De Keersmaeker's vocabulary is limited to gesture, falls, quotes from other dance styles, and an odd peppering of reptilian or doglike motifs. Her simplicity of gesture can be incredibly effective. In “Vado ma dove?” the spare tangolike leg flicks, heel drops, and ball changes of a still pool of barelegged women in their heeled slippers and the subtle sways and leans of a line of men in waistcoats define their mannered flirtations. In “Vorei spiegarvi, oh Dio”, the unison quasi sign language of the female dancers behind Biccire's impassioned singing capture the emotional subtext of her words. Yet, eventually, one yearns for the gestures to evolve into fuller movement that sweeps through the space or develops in an expressively more meaningful way.

Falling down in heartache or ecstasy befits the theme of love, but is overused. The canon of sighing, swooning girls on a diagonal in “Per pietà, bell'idol mio” and the intense unrelenting falling by two men in “Bella mia fiamma addio – resta, oh cara” are potent – perhaps because the emotional textures are clearer and more layered here – but in other scenes the same five or six falls done over and over with the same energy and design are tedious. When Samantha van Wissen rocks out in her panniers, trying to grab the attention of an oblivious pining male center stage, it is humorous, but later, when a male dancer knocks off a string of ballet steps amid everyone else falling down, it feels arbitrary, like a stale postmodern joke. In “Cassation in B Flat Major,” women on all fours in their white pinaforelike tops arch up and shake their rears, as the men walk among them and peer at them. Does De Keersmaeker consider this chauvinism appropriate to Mozart's era or to our MTV time?

How a choreographer metes out the relationship between sameness and change in a work defines its form. De Keersmaeker is very adept at structure, at using a small amount of movement material over and over again, foreshadowing it, reiterating, cutting and pasting its parts, distributing it over different numbers of dancers. For sure, repeating and resequencing movement materials are today's excuse for development in choreography.

All is well if this repetition reveals more – the ever more daring flirtation portrayed between soprano and dancer (Vincent Dunoyer) using the same rearranged movement in the three versions of “Un moto di gioia.” – or if it helps to define the realm of the dance, for example the repeated use of the down right focus to indicate yearning or fantasizing, or the jumping motif to epitomize male competition, or the arc and line patterns reflecting the decor design and the male-female motifs.

But when the repetition becomes a mere display of possibilities or, worse, filler until the music ends, the dance comes to a standstill. The processional step-touch pattern in “Rondo in A Minor,” although tracing differ-

ent arcing and line floor designs, never varies and it grows tiresome, while the music never does. The tango-strutting women and swaying line of men of “Vado ma dove?” recur exactly the same later, except for facing upstage. Nothing is really gained dramatically or revealed by this maneuver. There are two group dance scenes sans singing, “Cassation in B Flat Major” and the final part of “Serenade in C Minor,” in which nothing happens at all but reiteration of movement phrases.

One postmodern tactic de Keersmaeker does use to great expressive effect is the layering of four to five simultaneous movement events in a landscape of fragmentary interactions we take in all together. In one such scene a pining boy is center stage, a “crying” girl emerges from a trio of crawling women to try her best in subtle ways to turn his head; falling, running, and jumping motifs are replayed here and there, a couple upstage left is beginning a journey along the downstage arc in which he is like her “training wheels,” holding her hands gently and occasionally letting go so she can try to navigate on her own. It is something we are used to today: image, sound bite, fragment, suggestion.

In this work, De Keersmaeker wants to express notions of love in connection with and inspired by the music. But expression of feelings for a postmodernist is perilous, for the choreographic tactics are by nature largely unsuitable. Irony and mockery can undermine depth, and movement manipulation, separated from reference, can neutralize expressive value.

De Keersmaeker's twelve dancers are distinctly individual performers, charming and committed at every moment, but the material they are given seems barely to challenge their talents as dancers. The music and singing are as elegant and intricate in structure as is her dance, but they are immediate in effect. One feels them directly. More than the choreography, the music and singing sustain the two-hour length of this work. De Keersmaeker has created a well-crafted unified structure. It is – almost – enough.