

Shirley Wynne's Baroque Dance Ensemble performing in "Castor and Pollux" written by Rameau in 1737

By George Gelles
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PITTSBURGH — I find few things as thrilling in dance these days as the work being done by Shirley Wynne and the members of her Baroque Dance Ensemble. She's a choreographer of exquisite sensibilities. Her work has a perceptive affinity for 18th century style that's altogether remarkable. She's transcended mere scholarship by such an enormous distance that you have to remind yourself that the remaking of Baroque dances is still for most people an academic pursuit.

HER WORKS have wings. They show a perfect understanding of the musical manners and dramatic dynamics of the time, and they're gorgeous to look at for their movement alone. Her style is one of subtle tensions, and though her gestural palette is far more

restricted than that of an artist working from a more modern perspective, emotionally her dances are infallibly true.

It was Miss Wynne who staged and choreographed the production of Jean-Philippe Rameau's 1754 opera "The Birth of Osiris" which was seen at the Smithsonian last spring, and last weekend in the Carnegie Music Hall, the Music Department of the University of Pittsburgh presented her production of the Prologue to "Castor and Pollux" which Rameau wrote in 1737.

Thematically the piece is an upbeat to the story of the Dioscuri, Sparta's best-known brothers. It sets the tone with an allegorical celebration of the Peace of Vienna—the "... *Paix charmante* ..." in the words of librettist Gentil-Bernard — which ended the Polish war of succession in 1736. Venus is implored to revivify the arts and pleasures and to

shackle the discordant Mars, which indeed she promptly does.

This is a very pretty conceit when seen in context, and Miss Wynne's dances help make it move. There are perhaps two types of pieces, one in which the

DANCE

choreography complements the solo singer, and another in which the movement's structurally self-sufficient. Both sorts are made with impeccable taste, and every piece has moments that are magical.

IN THE LITTLE aria, for instance, "Ranimez-vous, Plaisirs," the dancers are arched in a half-moon with Amour, the tenor soloist, at their apex. They face us in the audience with their arms held expectantly aloft, gently bent at the elbows. As soon as the words of the title are heard ("Come Alive Again, You Pleasures") the dancer downstage at our left turns lighting-like to her neighbor with a quick flick of the wrists, and this tiny spark of movement is passed like an electric shock around the semi-circle and shot back again.

Later in the Prologue there's a mime sequence of stunning invention set to music from Act One proper, to the first and third Airs for the Athletes. The opening section is full of mock-serious swordplay for Flora and Zephir. The torso itself becomes a weapon, aggressively lunging forward and then feinting back to attack again, while quicksilver wrists and hands define the instants of bodily contact. But in the end it's seen to be all a game, and the episode's

most wonderful moment comes at the close, where the combattants swiftly modulate their temperaments and melt into amorous trust.

There's an enchanting interlude after this where the women dancers play a brief game of tag and a bit of badminton too, courtly sports that royalty would favor. You see a great refined beauty in the way the women tap each other with restrained and gentle force, and also in the delicate pats, the little spurts of energy, they give their imaginary shuttlecock, and in both amusements the group moves with a disposition that seems altogether spontaneous.

MISS WYNNE'S work consistently captures the visual essence of the musical impulse and the sense of the literary affect, and this I find marvellously impressive. Impressive, too, is the way she's trained her dancers and the devotion they show to her and to their art.

Sue Wanveer, who danced Flora, has always shown an instinctive flair for the style, but it's only lately that she's come to move like a woman and not like a girl. Having made the transition, she now has a far richer presence and authority. Robert Fenwick, who was Zephir and is customarily her partner, is an uncommonly gifted musician and a dancer of great sophistication. It's also a pleasure to watch the rest of the ensemble — Georgia Burns, Kristin Draudt, Elaine Biagi, Deb Seigel, Cathy Turocy, and Ann Jacoby — for they work together with understanding sympathy, yet each preserves her personal distinction.

Miss Wynne and the Ensemble return to the Smithsonian in March. Whatever their program, you can't afford to miss it.

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