

& Bach & Ballet



Toni Pimble brings Bach's music to life.

By Brett Campbell

When Oregon Bach Festival Executive Director Royce Saltzman proposed to Eugene Ballet Artistic Director Toni Pimble that she create dances from two Bach masterpieces for this summer's festival, some might have expected her to react with skepticism. After all, if most people were to free associate on the name "Bach," some of the first words that might tumble out might include "cerebral," "restrained," even "church." Even listeners who know about the great composer's passionate life — conceiving a whole horde of children, erupting in anger at princes and incompetent musicians, etc. — might still have trouble thinking of the chubby, stern-looking Johann Sebastian as a dancin' fool.

Yet Pimble — a classical music lover as well as an internationally acclaimed choreographer — knew that she could dance with Johann Sebastian. After all, even though Bach never wrote a ballet, dance masters from Balanchine to Mark Morris (*Falling Down Stairs*, set to one of the cello suites) have created classic dances based on the master's music. Her own company's Eloy Barragan had gracefully set Bach's third orchestral suite for the Eugene Ballet earlier this year.

When properly performed, the spirit of the dance animates much of Bach's music. His celebrated *Orchestral Suites*, for example, are nothing less than a collection of dance forms — gavottes, minuets, gigue, etc. — gathered from across

Europe (especially — oo-la-la! — France) and rendered into rhythmically vital and melodically memorable mini-symphonies. And very danceable.

"The way Bach wrote is in this layering of phrases that gives you a great deal of freedom choreographically," says Pimble. "Because it's layered like that, you don't feel bound to one specific way as to how you interpret a piece." And with all the counterpoint — interweaving melodies — that winds through Bach's music, she has plenty of musical layers to choose from.

Following the Lines

So for the first piece, Bach's *Concerto for Three Violins*, Pimble is looking to the music itself for inspiration, as she's done in many other works, most recently Dvorak's *Bagatelles*, in which each dancer followed a distinct musical line. This time, she's thinking of assigning her three leading women to each of the solo violin lines in the opening movement. In the majestic second movement, she takes advantage of a primary quality of 18th century music's emotional essence.

"Baroque music has a restraint to it," Pimble explains. "It's not like Mahler. There's something very poignant about that. For a choreographer, it enhances the work, because when you're working with a fully scored piece that can be overbearing, it's very hard to represent that without having dozens of people onstage. Whereas when you're working with music that's more restrained, you're not competing with the music."

Beyond that, the only other thing Pimble really knows about this dance so far (most of her work develops only after the eight dancers go into the rehearsal studio — three weeks before this concert) is the costume colors. "I just love the look of blue and brown," she says. Men will wear blue tops and brown pants, women blue skirts with brown leotards.

Baroque Portraits

For the second piece, Bach's *Orchestral Suite #1*, Pimble wants to give the audience a strong contrast with the concerto — a challenge when setting two works by the same composer. And since neither piece came equipped with a built-in narrative (like Stravinsky's *The Firebird* or Tchaikovsky's *The Nutcracker*), she couldn't turn to a story for a setting. Nor was Pimble interested in using the era's stylized, rigid authentic dance steps for the dances comprising the suite's seven movements, even though she'd studied a bit of Baroque dance while in school in her native England. So she's turned to another frequent source of inspiration: art.

"What I've been working on — and again, it's still in the formative stages — is the idea of taking images from paintings of that period and turning them into vignettes," one for each movement, she says — not replicating the paintings in dance, but using them to represent the real life of the people of the period.

Consulting the modern oracle — the Internet — Pimble pulled up scores of images of Baroque-era paintings, avoiding the numerous formal portraits or religious scenes in favor of depictions of daily living. Some that have caught her eye include a Fragonard portraying a woman in a swing, several by

William Hogarth (the English painter whose satirical depictions of English street life formed the basis of John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* and its successor, Kurt Weill and Berthold Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera*), and two by Daniele Crespi: *The Searcher for Fleas* (perhaps some onstage scratching?) and *The Tooth Puller* (uh oh). She's also considering a painting by Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin that depicts a child blowing soap bubbles through a reed. Given Pimble's history of creative use of simple props (as in her delightful setting of the Renaissance dances of *Silk & Steel*), I'm looking



Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, *Soap Bubble*, Metropolitan Museum of Art

forward to what she does with that soap bubble.

Since this is a music — not dance — festival, in both pieces, the Bach Festival Orchestra will be on stage, not in the pit (a relief in the acoustically challenged Silva Hall), separated from the dancers by a black scrim. The concert's first half boasts two other Bach orchestral masterpieces, sans dancers: the second orchestral suite and the dramatic *Concerto for Oboe and Violin in C Minor*.

Even if Pimble weren't involved, this concert would be a top recommendation for this year's festival because of the quality of the compositions — some of the most profound and spirited instrumental music of the Baroque era. But having dancers cavorting to Bach on the Silva stage, even in 21st century choreography, adds an extra dimension — or rather restores to Bach's music, and makes visible the dancing spirit that helped inspire it. ♣



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