

thINKingDANCE

Upping the ante on dance coverage and conversation



Photo: Arnaud Falchier

Chamber Ballet: In Conversation

by Lynn Matluck Brooks

I'm an omnivorous consumer of chamber music, trekking all over southeastern Pennsylvania to hear the remarkable string quartets, piano duos, and other small-scale ensembles that make our era a highpoint of chamber music: ancient, old, sort-of-old, modern, and cutting-edge. Historically informed, technically brilliant, and often young and international, the musicians give me hope that the music I treasure can contribute vibrantly to the current and future arts world. Has the dance scene any parallels?

[Miro Magloire](#), founder and artistic director of the [New Chamber Ballet](#), is bidding for such a place, creating intimate, ballet-based works to live music. Like [George Balanchine](#) and [Mark Morris](#), Magloire's serious musical training allows him deep access and meaningful conversation with the music he chooses. *Stray Bird*, performed in the embracing wood- and book-lined spaces of the [German Society of Pennsylvania](#), brings Magloire's dancers together with the music of German-American composer [Ursula Mamlok](#) (1923–2016). The musicians—Pascal Archer (clarinet), Roberta Michel (flute), Cree Carrico (soprano), and [Momenta Quartet](#) members Emilie-Anne Gendron (violin), Stephanie Griffin (viola), Michael Haas (cello), and Alex Shiozaki (violin)—performed with sensitivity and sparkling ensemble.

The performance opened with music alone as Griffin played the lovely, short piece, “From my Garden,” in the downstairs auditorium of the hall. The atmospheric plucks, sighs, and spatiality of this [Messiaen](#)-like work set me up for more stillness, introspection, and widely-leaping melodies and rhythms, and I was not disappointed in this expectation as we moved to the upstairs library for the dancing-to-music portion of the program. It began with the five company dancers (Sarah Atkins, Elizabeth Brown, Kristy Butler, Traci Finch, and Amber Neff) in lacy skirts and pants, clustered in the center of the floor, audience on all four sides of the intimate space. This intimacy was problematic: were the dancers in the same space I occupied as an audience member, or was I to see them as occupying a world apart? They never acknowledged us seated around them, but we were close enough to note their every freckle, fold of skin, and floor-creaking step.

The most effective collaborations of dance and music in the seven-part program were, “Stray Birds,” and “String Quartet No. 2,” both choreographed by Magloire (two other sections had choreography by Mara Driscoll and Rebecca Walden). “Stray Birds,” which gave the program its name, featured the remarkable Cree Carrico, whose powerful, liquid voice played the space brilliantly, resonating from the domed ceiling and audible even when—in her duet with dancer Traci Finch—she bent forward to the floor, or bore the flailing Finch on her back. Mamlok set these songs to the poetry of [Rabindranath Tagore](#); Carrico sang out the nuances of his imagistic language as Finch embodied it in her treads, arm-thrusts, and flailing of limbs. The “String Quartet” was the only work performed *en pointe* (the rest were danced barefoot), and while I might have expected this choice to jar with Mamlok’s modernist vocabulary, I found the pointework, instead, the most effective choreographic response to her music. The powerful connection in focus—bodily as well as visual—between dancers Kristy Butler and Amber Neff accentuated their symmetries, intertwining balances, and weighted pulls. Magloire’s theme-and-variation structure for the quartet’s middle *larghetto* movement drew me into the subtleties of the dancers’ falls, nudges, rises, balances, and predatory circling, like a repeated but ever-renewed musical tone row. The piece closed with vibrant *bourrée* skitters and *attitude* turns as the dancers approached one another and retreated, riding the crest of the music’s energetic third movement.

Mamlok’s musical range includes stillness, single notes, big chords, flying and flitting instrumental encounters. The dancing sometimes distracted me from the complex musical statements, moods, and rhythms. More music-only, as we were set up to expect with the solo viola opening, would have been welcome and, perhaps, the dancers could have had their own say without music to buoy them. Then, the music-dance conversations would have brought clearly independent voices effectively together. That’s a suggestion for next time; I’m glad I heard and saw this iteration of the conversation, though, and look forward to future collaborative gems Magloire will craft with New Chamber Ballet.

[Stray Bird](#): Dances to Music by Ursula Mamlok, New Chamber Ballet, German Society of Pennsylvania, March 9–10

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