

A Collection of New Work: Brief,

Music That's Uplifting for Some Is a

By JOSEPH CARMAN

GEORGE BALANCHINE said that Verdi's music could be danced from beginning to end. But Mahler, he warned, was not for choreographers. What may sound enchanting to one choreographer may be as grating as car alarms to another. While most choreographers might agree on a few desirable elements in a musical score, disagreements abound about which musical choices are truly inspiring or, conversely, wholly unacceptable.

The neoclassicist Christopher Wheeldon made an unorthodox choice recently in selecting the often atonal music of György Ligeti for a triptych of ballets, "Continuum," "Polyphonia" and "Morphoses." Choreographers have seldom tackled Ligeti's compositions because of their dense polyphony and irregular rhythms. Mr. Wheeldon said he chose them precisely because of their rhythms, as well as their offbeat poetic nature and their ability to conjure strong images. "I have this sadistic streak that makes me want to pick the most difficult music and make it work," he said.

Helgi Tomasson, the director of the San Francisco Ballet, which will present "Continuum" in New York in October, said, "I would probably never have thought of using that music."

And Mark Morris said: "Right on! Ligeti is a fabulous composer and is actually very danceable."

Choreographers' musical choices not only reflect their artistic sensibilities but also influence the shape a dance may ultimately take, whether in steps, temperament, formations or phrasing. So what makes a score danceable?

Lar Lubovitch and James Kudelka, who are each choreographing new works for American Ballet Theatre this season, have



Paul Kolnik/New York City Ballet

Wendy Whelan and Jock Soto of New York City Ballet in Christopher Wheeldon's "Morphoses," set to the music of György Ligeti.

gravitated to the waltzes and lush melodies of Brahms. For both artists, the emotional resonance of such works underscores the nonlinear narratives of their choreography.

Stephen Petronio, known for his gritty, post-punk work, shuns music more than 10 years old. He bases his choices on intuition. "I can tell within 30 seconds of hearing something if it's going to move me," he said. "It has to speak to my animal." He is currently choreographing work to a vocal score that he commissioned from Laurie Anderson.

Judith Jamison and Eliot Feld take opposite approaches. Ms. Jamison, the successor to the modern dance pioneer Alvin Ailey, looks for, as she put it, "showers of color,

which change into chord structures, which change into sensitivity and hopefully movement," which she finds in the music of her frequent collaborator, Wynton Marsalis.

Mr. Feld, whose pieces are a hybrid of ballet and modern dance, has a more intellectual approach. He says the intricate counterpoint and multiple tempos in the player-piano works of the obscure 20th-century composer Conlon Nancarrow stimulate him to create new combinations of steps in his dances. "His music pushes me to a new syntax," Mr. Feld said. "It forces me to go places to complement it in some way that feels appropriate to me."

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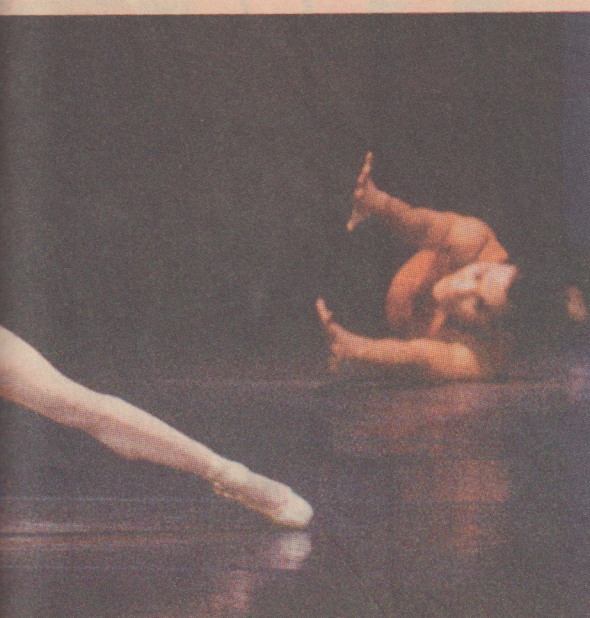
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Work: Brief, Brisk and Bravura

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entrances and exits and ingenious geometry of his ensemble works. In addition to rhythm and proportion, what he insists on in his music, he said, "is that I can bear listening to it many hundreds of times." Not surprisingly, he likes the music of Handel.

Choreographers are equally idiosyncratic in the kinds of music they avoid. Pop and rock music have proved their lasting choreographic value in works like those of Twyla Tharp. Mr. Petronio's gnarly punk, however, is a bane to Mr. Kudelka's classical dance vocabulary, as are rap and hip-hop. Mr. Morris will use popular music only if it's more than 40 years old because it was primarily for social dancing. And despite his fondness for some pop and rock artists, Peter Martins, the director of the New York City Ballet, usually passes on them because he prefers live music, which is often too expensive when it comes to those genres.

Improvisational jazz doesn't have many takers because it can be far too hard to pin down. "The structure is both too elusive and too descriptive," said the postmodernist Doug Varone, adding, "It doesn't allow me to be improvisational." He favors the work of Rossini because of its regular meter and humor.

Similarly, Mr. Martins avoids Impressionist composers, whose works he likens to "water music." "Debussy has never appealed to me," he said. "I can't find the thread in his music." Mr. Martins prefers the propulsive rhythms of the minimalist composer John Adams because they provide a grounding for Mr. Martins's speedy neoclassical dances.

Classical warhorses like Beethoven and Chopin have their champions, but Mr. Feld is not one of them. "I've done 115 ballets, but I've never done a Tchaikovsky ballet," he said. "Shame on me."

On the overuse issue, Mr. Kudelka feels that the tango ballet has filled too many dance cards. "We don't need another ballet to Piazzola," he said. And Mr. Morris thinks

Philip Glass has been overexploited.

Commissioned scores have historically been important in dance, from the partnership of Petipa and Tchaikovsky to that of Merce Cunningham and John Cage, who treated music and dance as separate but equal elements of their compositions. But opinion is divided on the subject among other choreographers.

Mr. Lubovitch, who is working with a musical director to arrange the songs of

**Choreographers choose
composers warily. In the
end, despite much talk,
they obey their instincts.**

Richard Rodgers into an orchestral ballet score, finds collaborations deeply satisfying. "That way I can be a part of shaping the way the music spends its time," he said.

But Mr. Martins sees logistical problems in commissioning scores. "There's the element of surprise when you take a chance on a composer, but you never know what you're going to get," he said, adding: "You always need it way before it arrives, and that's a big obstacle."

Mr. Feld says he would never commission a score. "I'm not sure I would have an idea for a ballet to a commissioned score," he said. "For me the music always precedes the idea."

Of course, there is always the option of using no music whatsoever. Elizabeth Streb has no need for Tchaikovsky, Ligeti or any other composer. Instead, she prefers the natural sound of her dancers' bodies smacking a mattress as they fall 20 feet from a platform.

"Music," she said. "It's such a bossy phenomenon." □