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THE JOY OF DANCE

JAN 24 – FEB 4

PERFORMANCE DATES

Tuesday	01/24	7:30pm
Wednesday	01/25	7:30pm
Friday	01/27	8:00pm
Sunday	01/29	2:00pm
Thursday	02/02	7:30pm
Saturday	02/04	2:00pm
Saturday	02/04	8:00pm

HAFFNER SYMPHONY

COMPOSER: WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART
 CHOREOGRAPHER: HELGI TOMASSON
 SCENIC AND COSTUME DESIGN: SANTO LOQUASTO
 LIGHTING DESIGN: THOMAS R. SKELTON

World Premiere: June 25, 1991—San Francisco Ballet, Mozart & His Time Bicentennial Celebration, War Memorial Opera House; San Francisco, California

FRAGILE VESSELS

WP WORLD PREMIERE

COMPOSER: SERGEI RACHMANINOV
 CHOREOGRAPHER: JIŘÍ BUBENÍČEK
 SCENIC DESIGN: OTTO BUBENÍČEK
 COSTUME DESIGN: UROŠ BELANTIČ
 LIGHTING DESIGN: JIM FRENCH

World Premiere: January 24, 2017—San Francisco Ballet, War Memorial Opera House; San Francisco, California

The 2017 world premiere of *Fragile Vessels* is made possible by Lead Sponsor Gaia Fund, with additional support from the Osher New Work Fund of the San Francisco Ballet Endowment Foundation.

IN THE COUNTENANCE OF KINGS

COMPOSER AND ORIGINAL ORCHESTRATIONS: SUFJAN STEVENS
 ORCHESTRATION FOR SAN FRANCISCO BALLET: MICHAEL P. ATKINSON
 CHOREOGRAPHER: JUSTIN PECK
 COSTUME DESIGN: ELLEN WARREN
 LIGHTING DESIGN: BRANDON STIRLING BAKER

World Premiere: April 7, 2016—San Francisco Ballet, War Memorial Opera House; San Francisco, California

The 2016 world premiere of *In the Countenance of Kings* was made possible by Lead Sponsors Mr. Richard C. Barker, Gaia Fund, David and Kelsey Lamond, Yurie and Carl Pascarella, and The Seiger Family Foundation, with additional support from the Byron R. Meyer Choreographers Fund and Osher New Work Fund of the San Francisco Ballet Endowment Foundation.

PROGRAM NOTES

By Cheryl A. Ossola

HAFFNER SYMPHONY

HAFFNER SYMPHONY PRODUCTION CREDITS

Music: *Symphony No. 35 in D Major, K. 385 (Haffner Symphony)*. Costumes constructed by Barbara Matera, Ltd., New York, New York. Scenery constructed by San Francisco Opera and Ballet Scene Shop.

Haffner Symphony blends classical elegance with the lightheartedness of a garden party. This buoyant ballet, created by San Francisco Ballet Artistic Director and Principal Choreographer Helgi Tomasson, is a celebration, as if the principal couple invited their best friends to an afternoon of dance and everyone is having a grand time.

Tomasson created *Haffner Symphony* in 1991, for the Mozart & His Time Bicentennial Celebration in San Francisco. In fact, he made two ballets for the occasion, so he searched for contrasting music. For *Haffner* he chose Mozart's *Symphony No. 35 in D Major* (also called the *Haffner Symphony*) because of its jubilatory feeling; for the second ballet, *Meistens Mozart*, he selected songs by Mozart and others. Choreographing two ballets in the same time frame was a new experience for Tomasson that he says was "very refreshing—and interesting to discover that you could really do two different things [at once]." Though the process of choreographing is "never relaxing," he says, he liked being able to change gears, returning to each ballet-in-progress feeling fresh.

"Fresh" is a fitting description of *Haffner Symphony*. The music contains no adagio movement, which is typically where a grand pas de deux (a duet that also includes solos for both dancers) occurs in classical ballet. For that reason, Tomasson skipped the duet and used the second and third musical movements for back-to-back quartets, one for a woman and three men, one for a man and three women. "It was an interesting structure," he says. "Why not put three women with a guy and have them complement him? Visually, that was more interesting for me than giving her a long solo."

The second-movement quartet is something that Soloist Sasha De Sola says she particularly enjoys dancing. "Not only do you have the connection with your partner in the first and final movements, but you're courted through the second movement," she says. "You end up dancing with everyone. [*Haffner*] has a nice, communal kind of feel, which is rare in tutu ballets."

In translating Mozart's music into movement, Tomasson has created a dance with vigor and complexity, nuance and sensitivity. An overhead sweep of the arms, echoing a musical embellishment, might finish with a small burst; lifts eat up floor space, lingering in the air. De Sola calls the choreography a nod to classicism, adding that "there's a lot of pure classical technique."

But physicality isn't everything—a big part of the onstage picture is how the dancers relate. At one point, when the three men lift De Sola, they present her like a gift-wrapped treasure. (She peeks out sweetly from beneath her upheld arm.) And when Corps de Ballet member Max Cauthorn walks out and matches Principal Dancer Maria Kochetkova's stance in a deep lunge, it's like he's starting a conversation. You can almost hear the garden-party chatter around them.

In rehearsal, Music Director and Principal Conductor Martin West coaches Company Pianist Nina Pinzarrone on interpretation: "It's an aria; everything is singing." Tomasson uses the same word, often, asking the dancers to move more. "I really like when people use the space and don't rein [themselves] in. When I say to sing it, with Mozart it's so easy—just let the music carry you."

FRAGILE VESSELS WP WORLD PREMIERE

When you commission a ballet from Czech choreographer Jiří Bubeníček, you get a package deal: Jiří and his twin brother, Otto, collaborate when they create works for companies in North America, Europe, and Asia. In choreographing *Fragile Vessels* for San Francisco Ballet, Jiří had Otto at his side, as designer, assistant, and advisor. What this prolific choreographer has created is a ballet that carries tremendous emotional weight for him, in both music and concept.

You can track the evolution of *Fragile Vessels* back to a day in 1993 when Bubeníček, newly hired as a dancer by Hamburg Ballet, went to a music store while on tour in Tokyo. Coming from a communist country, he was stunned by the freedom to buy whatever he wanted. What he

wanted that day was a CD of Sergei Rachmaninov playing his own music, including *Piano Concerto No. 2*. "I just loved it," Bubeníček says, and thought he might make a ballet to this concerto someday. Eight years later he entered a competition for choreographers in Hamburg, creating a pas de trois (trio), a love triangle that mirrored events in his personal life, set to the concerto's second movement. He realized he wanted to choreograph to the complete concerto, and he got his chance when Helgi Tomasson called.

Tomasson, SF Ballet's artistic director and principal choreographer, says he was "aware of [Bubeníček] choreographing in Europe and had heard some very good things." He asked to see some of his work. One

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FRAGILE VESSELS CONTINUED

piece was “very contemporary,” Tomasson says. “Another was neoclassical dancing that moved beautifully, very musical. I thought it would be wonderful to have him do something for us.”

At SF Ballet, Bubeníček wanted to take risks. “I wanted to make something demanding,” he says. “I had strong dancers; this is what I want to do for them—use their ability.” Once he started choreographing, he found that he wanted “to make them move even more and enhance the classical vocabulary.” He says he likes to be “very musical, but I also think that the dance and the music [are] in the same level. I’m not trying to always follow the music; sometimes the choreography is leading the music, so there’s this dynamic as well.”

According to Music Director and Principal Conductor Martin West, the Rachmaninov concerto gives Bubeníček plenty to work with. “It’s a great piece,” West says, “a true concerto in the sense that the orchestra and piano have big voices. Everybody loves playing Rachmaninov. He reminds me of Gershwin in that he was a completely unique voice.” His music is “so deep, it’s so clever, it’s so unique—like Gershwin, all those melodies he wrote. You think, ‘Oh, anybody could do that.’ No, they couldn’t. He was a genius, and so was Rachmaninov.”

Rachmaninov’s big voice demands movement that equals it. “He’s a Russian composer, so I want Bolshoi [movement]; that means huge, big,” Bubeníček tells the dancers, demonstrating a downward sweep of his arms that seems to use every muscle. “You have to lick the floor.” Working with Principal Dancer Dores André and Soloist Francisco Mungamba in a pas de deux, he says, “The body can move in so many ways. I want to see three-dimensional bodies, not two-dimensional.” His choreography, filled with counterbalances, unconventional lifts, and imaginative partnering, unfolds in a complex structure peppered with geometric formations. Describing Bubeníček’s movement quality as full would be an understatement; it is lush, fluid, lugubrious—as the choreographer puts it, juicy. “I like to see the body moving as it is built, not to give it any limitations,” he says.

“His movement is his own,” Tomasson says. “It’s very much based in the classical idiom, and both brothers were exceptionally good dancers. They’re also good partners, and both of them are very strong. I think that comes into the choreography.” SF Ballet dancers “learned a different take on partnering or movement. Bubeníček’s style is not like anybody else’s.”

Fragile Vessels has three themes, most visible in the second movement pas de trois but present throughout: love, separation, and forgiveness. Working from a concept, not from specific movement ideas, is a skill he had to develop,

Bubeníček says. “When I was a young choreographer I was more shy, so I would prepare every step.” But, he discovered, the movement he created on himself didn’t necessarily fit the dancers. “I don’t prepare any steps anymore; I prefer to work with people, to be creative,” he says. “Also I think the dancers feel better when it’s something made on them, and they can inspire me as well.”

When *Fragile Vessels* begins, a chaotic rush of movement quickly becomes ordered. Bubeníček knows how to pace a ballet, allowing dense passages of embellished movement to transition into quiet moments. The corps de ballet dances many of the same steps as the principal dancers, echoing and building on them. There’s depth in the relationships too—a pas de deux for Principal Dancers Sofiane Sylve and Joseph Walsh involves romance but also a sense of discovery, as if they’re sharing a new experience. It’s an equal partnership, not a man presenting a woman in the traditional classical way. Many moments reveal an emphasis on human dynamics and communication; often the dancers move in response to someone else. For example, in a pas de deux for André and Soloist Wei Wang, he pushes her flexed leg into extension, as if to show how intimately they are connected.

Bubeníček often finds inspiration in fine art, so look closely—you might see poses that reference Auguste Rodin’s *The Thinker* and 18th-century Italian sculptor Antonio Canova’s *Orfeo ed Euridice*. For Bubeníček, inspiration also comes from the not-so-distant past, and from people you might not expect, like 1920s supermodel Audrey Munson. If you’ve ever admired the statue of a woman that towers above San Francisco’s Union Square or stands in many places in New York City (including atop Grand Central Station), “a kind of heroic woman, [with a] beautiful Greek face,” Bubeníček says, you’ve seen Audrey Munson. Fleeting, Sylve and Walsh imitate the pose she struck in modeling for Adolph Alexander Weinman’s sculpture *Descending Night*.

Interesting as these nods to art are, they’re not essential to the viewing experience. More important, Bubeníček says, is for audiences to decide for themselves what story is being told, and for dancers to create magic with this ballet, to “give it soul,” he says. As Otto explains to André, Walsh, and Wang about a point when they run downstage in a triangle formation, “You’re not human anymore; you’re something bigger, the world.”

Sometimes dancers “just want to dance the best,” Jiří Bubeníček says, and we viewers come to the theater expecting top-notch technique. “Somehow we forget what it is about—the feeling and the love.” He puts his hand over his heart. In order for dance to become art, he says, “it should always come first from here.”

FRAGILE VESSELS PRODUCTION CREDITS

Music: *Piano Concerto No. 2*, Op. 18 by Sergei Rachmaninov, Costumes constructed by Žolna šport, Ljubljana, Slovenia. Scenic construction and painting by San Francisco Ballet Carpentry and Scenic Departments.

Left: Dores André and Francisco Mungamba rehearse Bubeníček’s *Fragile Vessels* // © Erik Tomasson
Right: Dores André and Joseph Walsh in Peck’s in the Countenance of Kings // © Erik Tomasson



IN THE COUNTENANCE OF KINGS

In the Countenance of Kings, the first work created for San Francisco Ballet by Justin Peck, takes its name from part of its score, *The BQE* by Sufjan Stevens. Like the music, the ballet is big, cinematic, energetic, and joyful. That might seem surprising to anyone who thinks of the BQE (Brooklyn-Queens Expressway) as a symbol of urban blight. But as Peck says, for Sufjan the BQE “inspired great composition. Sometimes what’s not necessarily the most obviously beautiful thing will inspire something beautiful.”

Twenty-nine-year-old Peck, a soloist and, since 2014, resident choreographer at New York City Ballet, has choreographed more than 30 ballets. When SF Ballet Artistic Director and Principal Choreographer Helgi Tomasson saw Peck’s work, he immediately thought it “was not the average or the ordinary. There was a major talent there.”

Peck’s interest in choreography arose early. “When I first came to SAB [the School of American Ballet in New York City] I didn’t know a lot about ballet as an art form,” he says. “It wasn’t until I was exposed to the works by [George] Balanchine, [Jerome] Robbins, and some new choreographers too that I saw how movement and music could interrelate and that there can be something just in that relationship.”

Athleticism is a quality that appealed to Peck as a dance student, and it’s a predominant quality in his choreography. *In the Countenance of Kings* has breath and suspension, complexity and contrast: stillness and speed, quick changes of direction. Peck describes his aesthetic as not only athletic but also “a musically sensitive one, and a bright, punctuated way of moving. All the while still using a classical vocabulary when I can.”

In this ballet, everything he does comes from the music. “Sufjan wrote such a huge piece of music, with so much

energy and speed and athleticism and changes in rhythm that it would be impossible not to create something similar in scale. I’m riding the wave of the music.”

The score, part of a mixed-media project that premiered as an original film with live orchestra accompaniment, has been shortened and re-orchestrated to fit the San Francisco Ballet Orchestra. It’s “very multilayered,” says Music Director and Principal Conductor Martin West. “I find it almost a throwback to the ’60s psychedelic stuff—lots of things going on all at once; you don’t quite know what’s next. It’s like the BQE, I suppose, coming from all directions.”

For this ballet, Peck visualized a protagonist, and that idea led him to name the rest of the cast. (The corps de ballet, for example, is “The School of Thought.”) He says he was working conceptually with “how we perceive the world around us. It’s not a narrative, but it’s like a semi-story.” Motifs of awakening and seeing infiltrate the ballet, and relationships are evident everywhere—these people know one another, and they play, tease, tend, challenge, and run. The dancers seem to explore a new world, and in setting them to this task Peck makes great use of the stage: movements bursting with opposing energy, suspension, and expansiveness; freeze-frame “Kodak moments;” and languid movements he calls “gooey.” And that athleticism he loves? It colors much of the ballet. “Take it up a notch,” he calls to one dancer in rehearsal. “Like your limbs are going to separate from your body.” Yet beneath this contemporary, jazzy, exuberant dancing, ballet’s classical foundation is there, and Peck calls for it over and over. “We want to start from a classical position,” he tells the dancers, “then slowly decompose.”

The result, says Tomasson, is that Peck “captured the energy this company has. He did beautiful things for us.”

IN THE COUNTENANCE OF KINGS

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Music: “The BQE” by Sufjan Stevens used by arrangement with New Jerusalem Music Publishing, publisher and copyright owner. Music of Sufjan Stevens orchestrated for San Francisco Ballet by Michael P. Atkinson. Costumes constructed by Ellen Warren, Portland, Oregon.