

San Francisco Ballet – Haffner Symphony, Fragile Vessels (premiere), In the Countenance of Kings – San Francisco



San Francisco Ballet

Program 1: *Haffner Symphony, Fragile Vessels (premiere), In the Countenance of Kings*

★★★★☆

San Francisco, War Memorial Opera House

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www.sfballet.org

San Francisco Ballet is presenting six world premieres and four new-to-

them choreographers this season. If opening night is any indication, the local audience is hungry for these new ideas and auteurs.

The world premiere in Program 1, which opened on Tuesday 24 January, was the contemporary ballet *Fragile Vessels*. The company's first regular-season commission from Czech choreographer Jiří Bubeníček, *Fragile* is a 40-minute meditation on love, loss and reconciliation.

Bubeníček was a star principal at Hamburg Ballet before moving on to Dresden Semperoper Ballet (he retired in November 2015), and his work is imbued with the expressionistic influence of John Neumeier, Hamburg's artistic director. Arabesques and entrechats are his ambassadors of technique, but Bubeníček's approach is wholly unprecious about classicism. Dynamic torsos and arms, deep pliés and pas de trois entanglements added wonderful elements of surprise.



Dores André, Wei Wang and Joseph Walsh in Bubeníček's *Fragile Vessels*.
© Erik Tomasson. (Click image for larger version)

Bubeníček created the work on the first cast, all bold performers: principals Sofiane Sylve, Joseph Walsh, Carlo Di Lanno (who could work on his upper-body suppleness) and Dores André as the prime mover, plus soloists Koto Ishihara and Francisco Mungamba.

Neumeier's style echoed through a trio for André, Walsh and Wang, who started and ended on the floor, raising their backs into arched poses and

pausing in myriad formations. The clean-lines stage design by Otto Bubeníček, Jiří's identical twin brother and fellow Hamburg Ballet principal, conjured a futuristic art-deco scenario.

Fragile could have benefitted from some bonsai trimming. The work's length was dictated by the music, Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto, wonderfully played by pianist Mungunchimeg Buriad. The concerto is very familiar in the States from many movie soundtracks (it's hard not to think of Marilyn Monroe falling off the piano bench in "The Seven Year Itch"), making it accessible and baggage-laden at the same time.



Koto Ishihara, Francisco Mungamba and Wei Wang in Bubeníček's *Fragile Vessels*.

© Erik Tomasson. (Click image for larger version)

The ideas Bubeníček set forth in *Fragile* seemed to run their course about halfway through each of the three movements, and the 16-dancer corps was crowded chaos; beige costuming only blurred them further. With judicious

editing, and ideally an original score tailored to Bubeníček's vision, the work would be a humdinger. But the audience appreciated *Fragile's* many beauties, and stood to applaud its arrival.

The evening opened with *Haffner Symphony*, a 1991 work by artistic director Helgi Tomasson. With music by Mozart, sparkling tutus and a teal-green painted backdrop that evokes a manicured garden maze, *Haffner* is a refreshing sorbet of a ballet in the mode of Balanchine.



Maria Kochetkova and Angelo Greco in Tomasson's *Haffner Symphony*.
© Erik Tomasson. (Click image for larger version)

Maria Kochetkova dances every ballet as a masterpiece, and she lent regal bearing and scrupulous technique to the pleasant pas de deux and variations. Her feather-light footwork, and the tenderness of her execution, are pure pleasure to watch. Soloist Angelo Greco, a recent hire from La Scala, is a lively dancer and a well-proportioned match for the petite Kochetkova. His turns are superb – Tomasson threw in some tricky

combinations for the male lead – and his jump is muscular, lofty and controlled.

The corps de ballet fell behind the music and out of unison, with distracting effect. In one of *Haffner*'s three supporting soloist couples, however, corps dancer Max Cauthorn continued to show his promising talent.

The evening closed with a reprise of Justin Peck's "In the Countenance of Kings," commissioned for the 2016 season. The original cast returned – André, Walsh, Frances Chung, Jennifer Stahl and Luke Ingham – with Daniel Deivison-Oliveira in the role created by Gennadi Nedvigin, who is now artistic director at Atlanta Ballet.



San Francisco Ballet in Peck's *In The Countenance Of Kings*.

© Erik Tomasson. (Click image for larger version)

"Countenance" is as insouciant and enjoyable a year later, and the dancers

seemed just as jubilant performing it. Their quirky, collapsing duets were a Beatnik's dance dream, in an alternating mix with ebullient syncopations and introspective solos by Walsh. The tight corps of 12 dancers was laser focused as they crisscrossed the stage in stealthy formations.

Sufjan Stevens' inventive score is a whirlwind of flutes, brass, drums and cowbell written for the film "The BQE," about New York's Brooklyn-Queens Expressway. (To have an orchestra, under Martin West, that plays this range of scores so well is truly a gift.) The New York reference is especially appropriate because "Countenance" strongly recalls Jerome Robbins' "NY Export: Opus Jazz," which Peck has performed as a member of New York City Ballet, with a dash of charm contributed by "Dances at a Gathering." Those works are half a century old; in "Countenance," Peck makes their ideas feel brand new again.