

Making Music Dance

A choreographer gives us lessons in counterpoint

by Deborah Jowitt

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Only a choreographer who's also a composer with adventurous tastes in music could come up with a program like Christopher Caines's *Worklight*. Under everyday-harsh illumination in a huge studio, with the audience seated on three sides, 11 dancers, seven singers, a cellist, a pianist, and a conductor provide a feast of fugues, interspersed with non-fugal treats by Bach, Mozart, and contemporary composers.

Christopher Caines Dance Company
City Center Studio 4
June 2 through 8

For those unsure what a fugue is and how it differs from a canon, Caines caps a suite of Bach preludes (finely played by Marija Ilic) with Glenn Gould's witty "So you want to write a fugue?" (from a show the pianist created for the Canadian Broadcasting Company). Four singers, accompanied by Ilic on piano and Tania Simoncelli on cello, intone the text, while five dancers assist one another through a series of relevant maneuvers that include a kick line. Gould's wordplay may not completely clarify the complex weave and manipulations of a fugue's several voices, as opposed to your basic *Frère-Jacques* canon, but it's a delicious spur to understanding.

Caines's vocabulary includes ballet steps and partnering devices as well as freer, more contemporary moves. His strength lies less in movement invention than in how skillfully he selects and puts steps together. And in the many ways his choreography honors the structure, flavor, and emotional texture of the scores he uses. In the second of Bach's *Six Little Preludes for Beginners at the Keyboard*, Indre Vengris and Michelle Vargo wind around each other, often holding hands, to capture the music's serene pace and curling flow. Dancing to the first of three Mozart songs, "To Joy," tall Sabra Perry—a magnificent dancer—flings gargouillades and flirtatious little steps at Caines (he, less technically polished, looks slightly anxious, but thrilled to be partnering her). When splendid mezzo-soprano Silvie Jensen's tones darken at the end of "Evening Sentiment, for Laura," with its premonitions of death, the two lie down together, spoon-fashion; Perry leaves, and Caines stays there, inert, until the other dancers enter and absorb him into their reprise of Thomas Tallis's gorgeously plaintive *Miserere Nostri* for a cappella voices. Caines turns this 16th-century double canon with cantus firmus into a slowly moving, rising and sinking, three-dimensional tableau through which your eye can wander, following one dancer's "melody," or catching simultaneous similarities and differences.

Gaspar Cassadó's 1925 *Suite for Solo Cello* reflects his Catalan heritage—including a version of the region's reigning folk dance, the *sardana*, and requiring the cellist at one point to pluck the instrument as if it were a guitar. Caines responds by giving his pas de trois a Spanish

tang. While Simoncelli plays the music with verve, Vargo—terrifically vivid in this, a flower in her hair, pointe shoes on her feet, her arms supple, her gaze proud—graciously allows her attentive partners, Edgar Peterson and Christopher Woodrell, to turn and balance her. When she leaves after a fine solo, the two guys indulge in a few of the *sardana*'s springy steps.

It's unusual to go to a dance concert and hear rarely performed pieces by composers of stature. Ernst Krenek's witty 1971 *Three Lessons* (presented as a musical interlude), blends soprano, alto, tenor, and bass in modern madrigals, whose compositional intricacy contrasts with prosaic if eccentric texts ("Geography Lesson" begins, "Visiting the La Brea tar pits, we were told that you must never say La Brea tar pits, for in Spanish, La Brea already means tar"). Ernst Toch's "Geographical Fugue," with its deliciously fevered spoken litany of place names, is familiar, but Caines also tracked down the first two sections of Toch's *Gesprochen Musik*—all but lost when the composer fled Nazi Germany and not heard since their premiere in 1930. During these excursions into gibberish and the ensuing fugue (conducted by Kristina Boerger), it's often hard deciding what to watch: the dancers' patterns or the animated musicians.

When it comes to musical risk-taking, Caines dives right in. He interpolates *Valse*, a later (1960) vocal game by Toch, into the suite, adds some percussion and makes a few mischievous changes in the text (did I hear "anti-post-postmodernism"?). He also inserts a "prelude" accompanied only by wood block in the middle of the Bach suite. The lovely interplay of dancers walking in lines and circles, which he parlays into variations, demonstrates how assuredly he can make patterns in space gather in and spread out and coalesce in new ways. In one of the Bach preludes, people running in a circle split off singly, then feed in again . . . only now they're running backwards and the circle is closing in; at the last minute they cluster to lift Katrina Cydylo high—a musical exclamation point.

It's a pleasure to watch a choreographer play with forms and dynamics as if that were the best game in town.