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Oakland Ballet's 2016 Season

2016-04-16

The voice has a body ...

The garden is an often-used motif in the songs of the medieval German visionary and saint, Hildegard von Bingen. So it is no wonder that "Divining", which had its world premiere this past weekend at Oakland Ballet, opened with the saint's *O viriditas digit dei*, "O fresh viridity of God's creative finger." Sung by six of the excellent singers of Vajra Voices, an exquisitely voiced ensemble that glories in the monophonic singing style of von Bingen's work, the repository served as one of the five songs that was the musical background to the new ballet.



The ballet company's full ensemble, clothed in sensuous costumes of sheer black fabric – long sleek gowns for the women, baggy trousers for the men – danced to Janice Garrett and Charles Moulton's modern balletic interpretation of the songs, which like many inspired visionary texts are tinged with eroticism. Gestures revealed the sacred nature of the text: hands in prayer, a kneeling one-by-one on the floor to touch the ground in a circular motion, a figure carried, arms flung out.

Alysia Chang danced poignantly to "*O eterne deus*," O eternal God/ may you be pleased to blaze once more in love," beginning and ending her solo bowed on the center of the stage at the Malonga Center for the Arts. And Emily Kerr and Vincent Chavez danced a duet to "*O fondens virga*," "O blooming branch," a celebration to Mary.

Kathryn R. Clark, who has a gorgeous warm contralto, led the singers. The songs were often characterized by a drone provided by several of the singers over which floated a melodic solo.

and the body has a voice ...

It could be imagined that von Bingen was the tutelary spirit of the concert. Titled *A Cappella: Our Bodies Sing*, the dance concert presented three series of unaccompanied songs, which provided the music for the choreographers. And love – human and divine – was the textual topic. The body, crafted by the gods, if you will, was the vehicle for this love, expressed through the melodies of speech.

The program opened with *Beautiful Dreamer*, a ballet choreographed by Val Canaparoli to songs by the great 19th-century songwriter, Stephen Foster. The singing was provided by the Berkeley Community Chamber Singers, under the direction of Derek Tam. The songs provided opportunities for varieties of dance: a male duet to "Oh! Susanna," two couple duets to "Jeanie with the Light Brown Hair" and "Beautiful Dreamer," a solo to "Why no one to love" and several ensemble works.

The choreographer used a ballet vocabulary along with more folk riffs, a little brush, heel, stomp that spoke of both tap and country dance. Maintaining the tempos was a challenge, for the voice singing, even in multiple, is often unclear in its rhythms. The dancers were energetic and committed, well-trained and expressive throughout the concert.

The program closed with *Stone of Hope*, a piece choreographed by Graham Lustig, the company's artistic director, to gospel works sung by Nona Brown and the Inspirational Music Collective. For this work, the chorus was onstage with the dancers, moving in contrapuntal formation with the dancers and interacting in the transitions between songs. The work closed with a recitation by Nelvin Moss of Martin Luther King's "I had a dream" speech, while the dancers moved around him. The chorus in the background hummed the anthem of the times, "We shall overcome." The raw vigor of the singing and the clear rhythms of the gospel songs added energy and momentum to the dance, moving the concert from the abstract to the impassioned.

This was a fascinating concept for music and dance, and followed the company's well-deserved Izzie Award last year celebrating its 50th anniversary. Hats off to all involved!

The company will be travelling to two other Bay Area venues in the next few weeks. To San Francisco on April 21, and

Hayward on April 23. For information and tickets, visit oaklandballet.org.

- Jaime Robles

Photo: Coral Martin, Chloe Slade, Evelyn Turner in "Divining". Photo by John Hefti

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