

# Ballet San Jose hits milestone with Balanchine

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for the Mercury News

Article Launched: 03/29/2008 01:32:21 AM PDT

Visitors to George Balanchine's grave in Sag Harbor on Long Island see his name, lifespan and preferred title, "Ballet Master," there. The man who was perhaps the 20th century's greatest choreographer always referred to himself by that humble description. He considered it his job to create dancers, and designed his choreography to make them better and better over time.

I think he would have been pleased with Ballet San Jose's "Just Balanchine" program, which opened Thursday and continues through Sunday at the San Jose Center for the Performing Arts.

Under the tutelage of the Balanchine Foundation's Victoria Simon, the dancers have reached a remarkable new milestone. On Thursday, they gave convincing, uncommonly warm interpretations to three of the master's totally different, very difficult works - "Serenade," "The Four Temperaments" and "Theme and Variations."

Not that there was no room for improvement; moments of insecurity served as reminders that these ballets are hard.

Balanchine's 1934 "Serenade," created for his students, charmingly incorporates rehearsal incidents into the choreography: A girl comes in late and needs to find a spot; another falls.

The steps for "Serenade" are not that difficult, but the ballet demands impeccable ensemble work and the most delicate of touches.

After a tentative beginning, Ballet San Jose's women performed with a lovely mix of reticence and exuberance. Buoyed by clouds of tulle and Tchaikovsky's strings, their arms framed their faces and created connections.

Though there is no complete story, narrative touches abound. The "Russian Girl," danced by the powerful Akua Parker, repeatedly flew through the ensemble like a passing thought. Maximo Califano and Aleksandra Meijer's waltz expanded and contracted like a courtship. The quintet of women descending into splits acknowledged each other as if in a ballroom.

The most dramatic scenario, the Angel of Death episode in the "Elegy," partnered a solicitous Easton Smith with Meijer and a regal Haley Henderson. In its most poignant moment, Meijer melted into a deep backbend over Smith's supporting arm, and Henderson lowered her arm in defeat.

In "Theme," which opens the resolutely modern "The Four Temperaments," set to music by Hindemith, Maria Jacobs and Rudy Candia set the tone beautifully: clean, crisp and sharply focused. Then Henderson and Smith inserted a languidly leaning note.

"Temperaments" still amazes balletgoers for its radical inventiveness. Its speed and thrusting angularity must have been truly shocking when it was unveiled in 1946.

Ramon Moreno's internalized "Melancholic" had a velvety softness, put in stark relief by the high-kicking women. Meijer and Travis Walker's virtuosic "Sanguinic," however, lacked an essential tension. The duet should ride on an undercurrent of assertiveness, even aggression, that I didn't see.

Quietly impressive was Hao Bo's "Phlegmatic," particularly in the way he conveyed puzzlement about his body and the world through which he moved. Unrelenting and fierce, Parker's "Choleric" had the all-consuming force of obsession, a major achievement for this dancer.

"Theme and Variations" (with costumes and decor by David Guthrie), also set to a Tchaikovsky score, closed the tribute to Balanchine in imperial-Russian mode. Its kinetic punch, however, would have surprised Balanchine's mentor, Marius ("Papa") Petipa. It's a ballet you can admire for the fluid skill with which the master shaped it, but not necessarily one you'd dream about, like "Serenade" or "Temperaments."

In its unusual opening with the ballerinas in the spotlight, "Theme" featured a radiant Karen Gabay in *pas de chat* and pirouettes. She is a strong, gracious performer, but the speed of the footwork at times proved challenging. She was partnered by a tense Jeremy Kovitch, who turns well but whose partnering skills need practice.

The final Polonaise is a grand machine for generating applause, and the dancers stepped into it with panache.

The evening's most glaring trouble spot was musical. For financial reasons, the company had to make do with recorded music. But the sound system gave dancers and audience only rough approximations of what was, after all, the source of Balanchine's inspiration.

Ballet San Jose  
Presenting 'Just Balanchine'

**Where:** San Jose Center for the Performing Arts,  
255 Almaden Blvd.

**When:** 8 tonight, 1:30 p.m. Sunday