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Dancers and musicians in step at SummerFest finale

By Valerie Scher

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Dancers and musicians taking bows together, hand-in-hand, is not something you usually see at the San Diego debut of a New York modern dance company.

But it happened on Friday at "Dancing at SummerFest: Rioult" at the Birch North Park Theatre.

Two of the four pieces choreographed by company founder Pascal Rioult were accompanied by musicians from La Jolla Music Society SummerFest (as opposed to recordings). The musicians added an exciting immediacy that helped make the performance a highlight of the festival, which closed its 23rd season yesterday.

Nowhere were the results more spectacular than in "Wien," Rioult's 1995 work about Europe between the world wars. For the first time, the Rioult dance company used a live performance of Ravel's "La Valse."

The six dancers could hardly have asked for a better interpretation of the two-piano version than the one provided by pianists Shai Wosner and Orion Weiss. Combining virtuosity and cohesiveness, they conveyed an almost frenzied energy in the waltz-crazed score, which was originally titled "Wien" ("Vienna").

Thanks to Rioult's inventive choreography, the dancers responded to the music in ways you probably never imagined. Clustered together, with heads down and shoulders hunched, they shuffled in circles, like prisoners of angst. They also fought, flailed, twitched and twirled before collapsing during the music's final cataclysmic chords.

Rioult's "Wien" was a darkly fascinating take on Ravel, an interpretation that turned the waltz into a symbol of social disarray and decay. It was also a powerful addition to SummerFest's 2008 season, which was successful artistically as well as at the box office.

Five of the 15 programs sold out: "Opening Night: Fire and Passion" (Aug. 1), "French Connections" (Aug. 2), "Brahms III: Intimacy and Grandeur" (Aug. 19), "An Evening With Leon Fleisher" (Aug. 20) and "SummerFest Finale" (yesterday). The rest were near sellouts, including Friday's dance concert. And "SummerFest Under the Stars" (Aug. 14), the festival's first free outdoor program, attracted approximately 1,000 people.

"The attendance at this year's SummerFest makes me feel that we're making real progress and expanding our audience," said Christopher Beach, the La Jolla Music Society's president and artistic director.

By bringing in a company such as Rioult, SummerFest did its part to satisfy the hunger for visiting dance troupes.

"Black Diamond" brought together two dancers (Penelope Gonzalez and Marianna Tsartolia) and two SummerFest Fellowship Artists (violinist Shih-Kai Lin and pianist Jeewon Lee) for Rioult's 2003 duet based on Stravinsky's "Duo Concertant." Though ballet great George Balanchine was also inspired by the music, Rioult went beyond Balanchine's angular intensity to create an abstract work that played with perceptions.

Sometimes the dancers moved in unison; other times, they were intentionally out of sync. At still other points, they mirrored each other's movements with almost balletic gracefulness. Whatever they did, they received strong support from the musicians, who ably conveyed the neoclassical complexities of Stravinsky's score.

By comparison, the ensemble dance "If By Chance" wasn't merely lighter in spirit, it was lite. Despite the lovely, airy lifts and sometimes unconventional partnering, the frothy choreography risked trivializing Mozart's Piano Concerto in A Major, K. 488, heard in the jazzy recording by the Jacques Loussier Trio (which appeared in its own SummerFest concert

on Aug. 15).


But "Bolero," Rioult's Ravel-based signature piece, was enough to bowl the audience over. Accompanied by conductor Claudio Abbado's recording with the London Symphony, the 2002 dance showed how far the choreographer has come since his years as a performer in Martha Graham's company. "Bolero" had eight dancers in silvery jumpsuits responding to the music's repetitions with the astonishing precision of aesthetically programmed robots.

Such creativity made viewers eager for more. So mark your calendars. SummerFest 2009 is slated for July 31 to Aug. 23.

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