

Space and Song...

Substack : 5-7 minutes

Will you come in my cab?"

"No, thank you very much, Mr Bingham," said Grant heartily. "I think I will go and have a chat with the professor in the garden."

The conversation between Chadd and Grant appeared to be personal and friendly. They were still dancing when I left.

G.K. Chesterton. The Noticeable Conduct of Professor Chadd.

Instead of paying Mr. Bodendorfer for viola instruction my desperate parents should have signed me up for dance lessons. **Arthur Murray** would have taught me more about life and artistic manners than a regiment of studio viola teachers ever could. Playing the inner voices of operas, oratorios, symphonies, quadrilles, quartets, and quodlibets (these last three are just the beginning of the "q" list) has provided over many decades a diversion from the hurly-burly of suburban life and even helped put kasha on the table. But aren't there better ways to hit the aesthetic jack-pot? Had I gotten out on the dance-floor back in 1965 and moved to new rhythms instead of trying to play them on the viola, the chances are good that *Mount Parnassus* (or a reasonable facsimile of it) would now sit behind my house. But that mountain is still far away.

I missed the train.

This sudden self-awareness of how incompetently directed the journey has been came as recently as two days ago; far too late in the gig calendar to offer a change of course. The revelation, hitting my stodgy comprehension like a beer truck with defective brakes (and carrying 1000 cases of *Riverwest Stein* to boot) happened this past week-end. The experience responsible for this sad, new knowledge was hearing (from one of the best seats in the house) a stunning performance of G.F. Handel's prodigious *Dixit Dominus*. The show, led by the stylistically insightful and clear musical direction of **Paul Thompson** was the collaborative work of two distinguished Milwaukee arts ensembles: the early-music choir **Aperi Animam** and the dance collective **Danceworks**.

The idea of dancing to Handel's music is not the least bit outlandish. Much of the individual movements in his instrumental suites wear dance titles: *allemandes*, *bourrées gigues*, *minuets*, *gavottes* (especially *gavottes*) and an occasional *passepied* to keep things classy. If you see someone dancing a hornpipe in response to hearing a Handelian hornpipe, how can you argue? It may even be proposed that not dancing a hornpipe when hearing a Handelian hornpipe is to miss out on the music's primality. That would be a pity.

But to choreograph dance to one of the composer's liturgical choral pieces (in this case a setting of Psalm 110) is more unusual. The audacious idea started with *Aperi Animam's* performance designer, alto, and co-founder of the choir, **Jackie Willis**. She asked *Danceworks* to perform it with the choreography of the group's inspired artistic director **Christal Wagner**. The result was and is worthy of an entry in *The Guinness Book of World Records* (placed in that encyclopaedia's "audacious musical conceits" section). Even if the publisher left it out due to editorial incompetence, the idea can be honored for, among other advantages, its *chutzpah*. That advantage is only one of many offered by this occasion. But this is not a concert review. Also it is a reflection on the second part of the concert only. (The first part of

the program, *Cantos* by various composers, I was regretfully not able to hear as I was back-stage otherwise occupied in fretting about measures 81-133 of the *Dominus a dextris tuis*.

The question can no longer be postponed: was this fest more of a dance recital with musical accompaniment or more of a music recital ornamented by dance? That the question is difficult to answer is a sign of richness. Coming away from such an occasion with firm opinions is not the goal. What you want is to go home from hearing music and seeing dance more perplexed than ever about where you stand and where you are. Yet being a proponent of the middle voice, I can't help but to throw in a compromising idea: the singing raised up the dance to a level equal with the spheres, and the dance raised up the singing to that same height. In the process of this elevation, the roof of that old red church on Wisconsin Avenue was torn off by the splendid vibrations to show stars, an occasional confused comet (that had meant to fly over Lancaster, Pennsylvania) and the edge of things. Once arrived in at the highest place, both ensembles basked in ethereality.

The query posed is unanswerable.

Whose side are you on?

I'll leave this by describing an instant of choreography from the performance: a visual fragment that will stay with me for the duration of my own train ride: a line of white-robed dancers gathered from crooked and seemingly aleatoric ramblings into an organised line; straight and true. At the far end, a dancer tapped the shoulder of the next neighbour to the left in consanguinity with the triple meter of the music, rousing the friend from reverie. This tapped-shoulder gesture, now changed into a sacred alarm, was passed down the line with the grace and gentleness of a minuet. Each artist woke up in turn. With the awakening came a smile of joyous recognition that presumptuously could be articulated thusly:

"I wake from sleep to find myself in a large and serene space with old music, gut strings, and learned voices. What a fine place to be. What a good space to dance.
