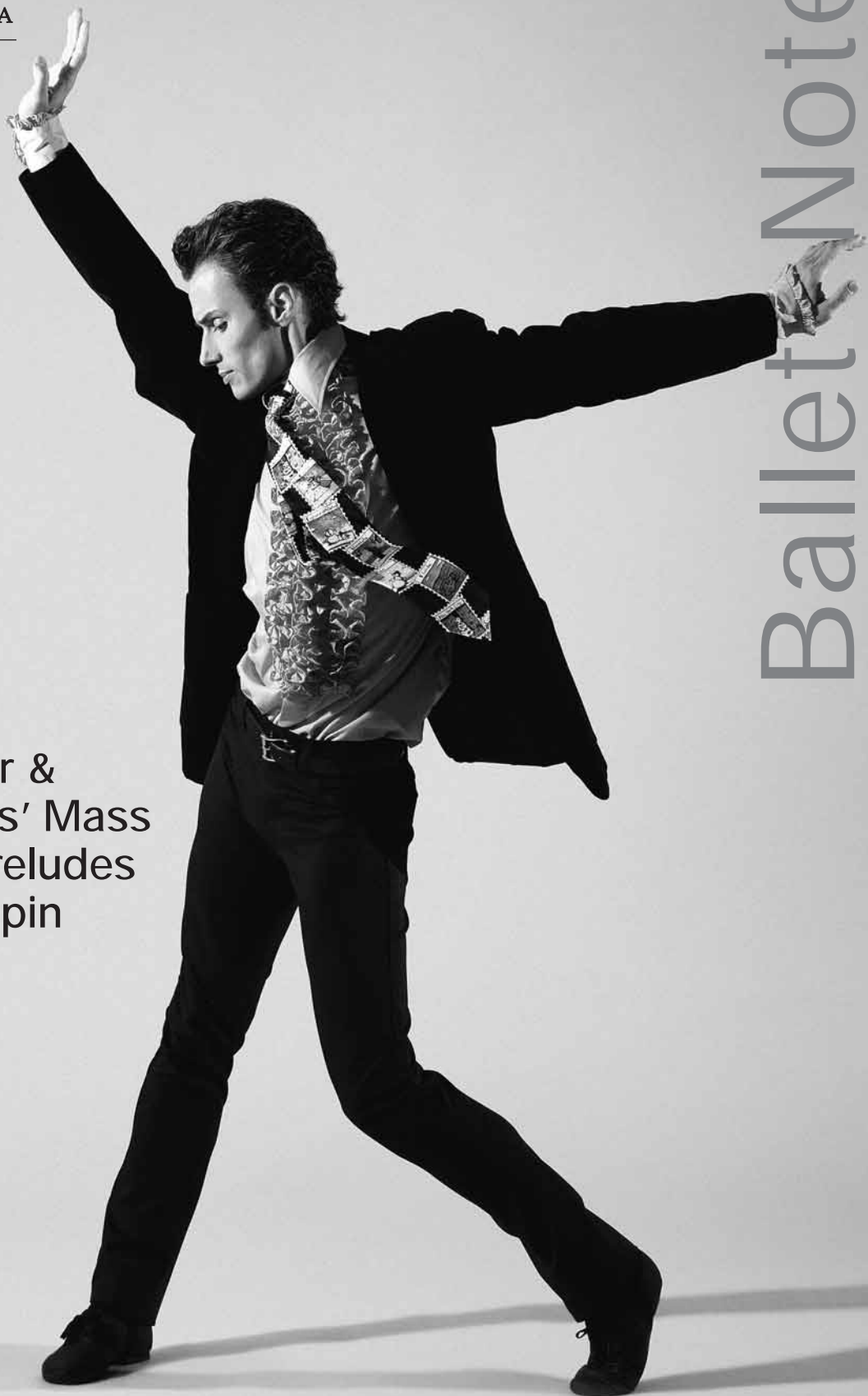


THE
NATIONAL
Ballet
OF CANADA

Karen Kain
Artistic Director

Rooster &
Soldiers' Mass
& 24 Preludes
by Chopin

March 2008



BalletNotes

March 8 to 16, 2008

24 Preludes by Chopin & Soldiers' Mass & Rooster are presented by:



24 Preludes by Chopin

Choreography: Marie Chouinard

Staged by Martha Carter and assisted by Lucie Mongrain

Music: Frédéric Chopin

Costume Design: Vandal

Make-up Design: Jacques-Lee Pelletier

Lighting Design: Axel Morgenthaler

Piano Soloists: Jean-François Latour, Edward Connell

24 Preludes by Chopin is a gift from

THE VOLUNTEER COMMITTEE, THE NATIONAL BALLET OF CANADA.

Soldiers' Mass

Choreography: Jiří Kylián

Staged by: Roslyn Anderson

Music: Bohuslav Martinů, *Field Mass*

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Set and Costume Design: Jiří Kylián

Lighting Design: Joop Caboort

Baritone Soloist: Joseph Song Chi

Chorus: Members of Toronto Mendelssohn Choir

– Noel Edison, Artistic Director

Soldiers' Mass is a gift from THE VOLUNTEER COMMITTEE,

THE NATIONAL BALLET OF CANADA, in memory of Howard Meadows
and Gregory Osborne.

Rooster

Choreography: Christopher Bruce

Assistant to the Choreographer: Hope Muir

Music: The Rolling Stones, *Little Red Rooster*, *Lady Jane*,
Not Fade Away, *As Tears Go By*, *Paint it Black*, *Ruby Tuesday*,
Play with Fire, *Sympathy for the Devil*

Costume Design: Marian Bruce

Lighting Design: Tina MacHugh

Rooster is generously supported by Rosamond Ivey, Robert & Judith
Lawrie, Gretchen & Donald Ross and Sir Neil & Lady Elizabeth Shaw.



Cover: Aleksandar Antonijevic
in *Rooster*. Top: Jonathan
Renna rehearsing *24 Preludes
by Chopin*. Middle: Artists
of the Ballet in *Soldiers' Mass*.
Bottom: Amber Munro
rehearsing *Rooster*.

24 Preludes by Chopin

Company Premiere

Like those great founders of modern dance, Isadora Duncan and Martha Graham, and like Québec's other great innovator, Edouard Lock, Marie Chouinard came to dance late. Perhaps postponing until well past childhood one's submission to the arduous discipline of dance frees the imagination and broadens one's choreographic vocabulary. In any case, Chouinard started performing at 23, quickly discovered she could be as *avant garde* an artist in Montréal as in New York, and began in 1978 to make solo dances, forming her own small company in 1990.

Strikingly contemporary as Chouinard's work may seem, it has significant links to the past. Her *oeuvre* might well take as its intellectual centre the 19th-century American poet Walt Whitman's famous words "I sing the body electric," for despite the shock value of some of her work – has anyone else ever drunk a glass of water on stage, only to squat over a bucket and urinate? – she celebrates, albeit rather perversely to some tastes, all aspects of human physicality, even the physically challenged (see her *Body Remix/Goldberg Variations*, in which the dancing body is constrained by pointe shoes, crutches and wheeled chairs). As visual precedent, there's also her inspiration by the staggeringly original works of Vaslav Nijinsky for Diaghilev, most importantly his *Afternoon of a Faun* and *Rite of Spring*, scores – and ballets – Chouinard has reinterpreted. It's probably not coincidental that Whitman, Nijinsky and Chouinard have all been accused of indecency – most particularly, for both Chouinard and Nijinsky, in the guise of on-stage masturbation. As Village Voice critic Deborah Jowitt puts it, "Chouinard builds powerful art from the tension between transgressiveness and artful structures."

24 Preludes by Chopin (1999) is not particularly transgressive, but it does combine musical structure with grotesque but oddly beautiful movements and punk-goth costumes that are about as far from traditional Chopin ballets as they can be. Archetypal romantic piano compositions, Chopin's works seem naturally to evoke translucent visions of sylphides, though they are also apt for dramatic interpretation (see James Kudelka's *The Actress*, made for Karen Kain) and even for comedy (Jerome Robbins' *The Concert*, also in the National's repertoire). Chouinard's contrarian approach to Chopin involves 10 dancers in semi-transparent leotards with strategically placed bits of shiny black tape, and she deploys her cast in mercurial style with whip-lashing torsos, twitching hands and windmill arms. Yet there is always perfect, if sometimes offbeat,



logic in Chouinard's marriage of music and movement, and the steps, non-balletic and unpredictable as they may be, clearly illuminate possibilities inherent in the score. Her choreography has that "Aha!" factor as the square pegs of her dances fit magically into the round holes of the score, with the ballet as a whole allowing us to perceive things in both music and dance that we wouldn't otherwise have imagined.

Musicologists reference the Chopin preludes by number and key, but Chouinard is less abstract, more visual, and far wittier, in her descriptive unofficial working titles for each section. (Because they're unofficial, you won't see them in the program.) Prelude 3 is "Conductor solo and soccer," and it indeed presents a gesticulating, high-leaping maestro surrounded by oblivious dancers booting a legitimate soccer ball. Prelude 9 is "Cathedral," with two women joining hands to form a pointed Gothic arch while adopting aggressive gargoyle-like postures as passersby pay no attention whatsoever.

One expects in-jokes and bizarre complications in Chouinard's work, and so too here. Don't try to keep count of the numbers. Lest following the normal score, 1 to 24, prove too obvious, Chouinard begins with an unnumbered silent pre-prelude and later interpolates #14 1/2, entitled "La Si Do with Bisons." This variation has no music but it does have sound – one distraught and intermittently hijacked dancer tries desperately to deliver a passionate monologue consisting of the common French names for musical notes – do, re, mi, etc. Chopin's Prelude 17 is completely omitted, and instead Chopin's #18 gives us a hair-pulling duet, in which a woman manipulates her man with sadistic glee, rather like Delilah's foreplay with Samson – and when she strides off at the end, he follows eagerly, panting for more.

The ballet ends with Chouinard's #23, Finale, set to Chopin's #24. This finale recapitulates many of the work's movement themes, but they're performed chaotically, seemingly at random. Thus, the work has either 23 preludes (set to Chopin) or 24½ (performance sections). Confusing, mesmerizing, audacious, witty, endlessly surprising – this isn't pretty, but it's vintage Chouinard.

Soldiers' Mass

Czechoslovakian choreographer/former Nederlands Dans Theater Artistic Director Jiří Kylián has redefined ballet's vocabulary by combining passionately fluent movement with a striking expansion of traditional steps, so that dancers pirouette on their knees and partner each other intricately by manipulating elbows, knees, and other body parts that aren't normally pivots of action in ballet. Women generally don't wear pointe shoes – that would slow down the movement's lush adrenaline rush – and instead of using that full pointe level for visual variety, he makes extensive use of floor work. So varied, sensuous, and lyrical is his style that it's not surprising that more than 40 companies around the world now dance his works. The National Ballet of Canada has performed a number of Kylián's ballets, including *Transfigured Night* (1986), *Forgotten Land* (1988), and *Dream Dances* (1989). A fourth Kylián work, *Soldiers' Mass*, created in 1980, entered the repertoire on February 15, 1995 and is revived in the current season as a showcase for the company's men.

For this powerful cast of 12 male dancers, Kylián turned to a 1939 choral work by his prolific countryman, Bohuslav Martinů (1890-1959). Martinů, who spent the 1920s and 1930s in Paris, managed to escape to the United States during World War II, where he was sponsored by Koussevitzky and wrote five symphonies that are belatedly receiving recognition as among the very greatest of the 20th century. Highly prolific, Martinů wrote ballets (e.g. *Spalicek*), operas (the well-received *Juliette*, or *The Key to Dreams*), choral works, and a great deal of chamber music. Glen Tetley's *Sphinx*, also in the National Ballet's repertoire, is set to Martinů's *Double Concerto for Two String Orchestras, Piano, and Timpani*. Several choreographers, including Tudor and MacMillan, have drawn on his sixth symphony, *Fantasies symphoniques*, attracted by his profound gift for evoking the terror, despair, and dissonance of wartime, only to resolve these emotions, ever so fleetingly, with an affirmative transition from minor to major. Martinů's compositions share the driving rhythmic energy, lyrical passion, folk influence, and wit manifested in Kylián's choreography. Not an actual setting of the mass but rather a cantata for male chorus and baritone soloist, intended to be performed in the open air, the score for *Soldiers' Mass*, better known in English as the *Field Mass*, was dedicated to Czech volunteers fighting the Nazis in France after the occupation of Czechoslovakia. The variously dissonant, folk-like, and military bugle call score calls for a small 20-person band – brass and winds, augmented by



piano, harmonium, and a wide range of percussion. Texts chosen by Martinů and his collaborator, Czech poet Jiří Mucha, include the Lord's Prayer, a few Latin phrases meaning "Lord, Have Mercy" from the Mass ("Kyrie eleison," "Agnus Dei, miserere nobis"), quotations from the Psalms and, most important, war poems by Czech poet Jiří Mucha.

The dancers represent young soldiers everywhere who are called to fight in a just war they did not provoke. Usually they move in unison, from the initial subtle foot-snap to attention to sometimes disciplined, sometimes asymmetrical formations as they crouch or twist or lie in a heap as if dead. Often the men face upstage, so that we, the audience, feel as though we're lining up behind them, a second wave facing an invisible enemy as ordained by an equally invisible commander. Now and then, one dancer breaks loose from the formation for a despairing solo, or two or three group together in lifts suggesting a wounded man being carried off by his buddies, or the 12 men dance in lines, hands on each others' shoulders, recalling the folk dances of their childhood.

An excerpt from Mucha's poetry (translated by Geraldine Thomsen) is as timely now as in 1939, when he wrote it, or in 1980, when the ballet was created, or, alas, in 2008:

*O Lord, forgive us our poverty,
Pardon our looks – the mud of trenches on
our faces...
Who knows if Death will find us brave and strong?*

*See me, a sentry standing in the field,
Eyes groping in the silence, tired,
Wide awake, though time has stopped for me.
Hear, people, the drums of our march.
Our death will be your life.*

Left: Marie Chouinard in rehearsal for *24 Preludes* by Chopin.
Above: Artists of the Ballet in *Soldiers' Mass*.



Rooster

Company Premiere

British choreographer Christopher Bruce, former Artistic Director of Ballet Rambert/Rambert Dance Company, is internationally known for dance that combines impressive artistry and stagecraft with allusions to human rights issues. *Cruel Garden*, one of his most admired early works, is set in a bloodstained bullring and celebrates poet-playwright Federico Garcia-Lorca, murdered by the Spanish fascists. *Ghost Dances*, available on video, takes as its subject political oppression in South America. *for those who die as cattle*, a title borrowed from Wilfred Owen, observes the pointlessness and cruelty of war.

But Bruce has a very different side, and a much lighter touch. His dance vocabulary includes not only classical and Graham/Tetley influences, but also folk and popular dance steps. He has set works to the music of Billie Holiday, John Lennon, and – in *Rooster* (1991) – The Rolling Stones.

A nostalgic yet satirical take on 10 young people immersed in the gender wars and sheer exuberance of Swinging London's Carnaby Street mods and rockers, *Rooster* is set to eight 1960s hits by that most enduring of bad boy bands, The Rolling Stones. As Bruce told writer Susan Reiter, "Listening to them again after many years, I found that the element that struck me was the chauvinism of the man, that it was very much from a male point of view from the '60s. I put the idea of that rather dreadful attitude towards women with the movement ideas for a preening cockerel with fine feathers." Hence the title, *Rooster*, and the recurring movement motifs of the cock of the walk – a straight-legged slouching-stalking walk, fastidiously showy footwork, the sharp jerking of the head back and forth, and of course self-conscious preening – adjusting the jacket sleeves, straightening the tie, smoothing the hair, picking lint and dandruff off the shoulder. As in the bird kingdom, it's the men who most indulge their vanity.

The barnyard metaphor is established with the Stones' cover of Willie Dixon's *Little Red Rooster*, an example of the Stones' American dirty blues inheritance. *Lady Jane*, in contrast, is a send-up of English pop ballads, full of florid bows and hand-kissings that turn into lecherous caresses and inspire cutting female rejection – the women in this ballet typically play along with the men for a while before slapping them down (sometimes quite literally) in numbers like *Not Fade Away*, *Paint it Black*,



and *Play With Fire*. But the men are resilient – they check their ties, dust off their shoulders, and swagger on to the next (presumably adoring) blonde.

Only Ruby Tuesday seems to be above the game, an independent-minded flower child who “comes and goes” in a flowing red dress that could come straight out of a Martha Graham dance. And even Ruby attracts a gang of male followers, choreographed as a boy-band back-up group.

One of the high points is *As Tears Go By*, originally written for Marianne Faithful. Here, we see a group of kids playing in the street, the boys rough-housing with each other and teasing the girls, who are too busy excluding a small interloper from their mean-girl clique to pay much attention.

The ballet ends with *Sympathy for the Devil*, pulling together movement motifs from earlier sections. Naturally there’s a strutting, flamboyant Mick Jagger stand-in who closes the ballet as it opens – in silence, doing that awkward chicken walk, turning sharply to face the audience, dusting himself off, and jerking his head towards us in instinctive aggression.

In the hands of a less reflective choreographer, *Rooster* could easily have become an empty-headed light-hearted celebration of what many of us consider “our” music. But Bruce demonstrates such choreographic craftsmanship and introduces so thoughtful yet unobtrusive an overlay of retrospective social analysis that the ballet rises above sheer nostalgic fun (of which there’s plenty) to question the relationship between the sexes in the grand era of rock. The men in this ballet do indeed resemble irritable self-absorbed chickens, limited by superficial contemporary concepts of masculinity. The women play their roles – go-go dancer, cheerleader, sex object – for a while, but generally they have the last word.

—Penelope Reed Doob



In rehearsal for *Rooster*.
Top left: Xiao Nan Yu.
Bottom left: Greta Hodgkinson.
Top right: Rebekah Rimsay.
Bottom right: Heather Ogden.



Above: Tiffany Mosher and Rebekah Rimsay in rehearsal for *24 Preludes* by Chopin.

Photography: D. Brian Campbell, Lydia Pawelak and Sian Richards.

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