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## A Classic Union of Music and Movement

By *Lisa Traiger*  
Special to The Washington Post  
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"The more you listen to the music, the more you hear things in it, and that lends itself to a different way of doing the choreography." So says Suzanne Farrell, one of the most musically gifted ballerinas of the 20th century. Farrell was muse to George Balanchine, the great innovator and propagator of an unabashedly American style of ballet that has changed how generations of dancers dance and musicians hear music.

From the time she was a teenager from Cincinnati until she took her final bow in 1989, Farrell captivated audiences and choreographers alike. Balanchine created more than 30 ballets for her. Her musicality, daring technical gifts and formidable stage presence left their mark on dancers and audiences over a nearly 30-year career. Today Farrell, 61, lives near the Kennedy Center (she walks to work), exerting her presence in the ballet world with her Kennedy Center-based company, the Suzanne Farrell Ballet, which begins a five-day run there Wednesday.

Although the eight-year-old company is together for only 11 weeks this season, its repertory includes Balanchine standards -- "Scotch Symphony" to music by Mendelssohn and the sizzling "Slaughter on Tenth Avenue," drawn from the 1936 Richard Rodgers Broadway score for "On Your Toes" -- as well as some surprises. Among them are local premieres of works Farrell reconstructed under the auspices of the Balanchine Preservation Initiative: "Concierto de Mozart" and "Divertimento Brillante" to music by Mozart and Mikhail Glinka, respectively.

"Balanchine was such a musician," says Ron Matson, the company's music director. "Musicians know this when they look at a Balanchine ballet, and they realize just

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Suzanne Farrell, right, instructs Katelyn Prominski in preparation for a series of performances at the Kennedy Center. Behind them are Jared Redick, left, and Lisa Reneau. (Photos By Nikki Kahn -- The Washington Post)

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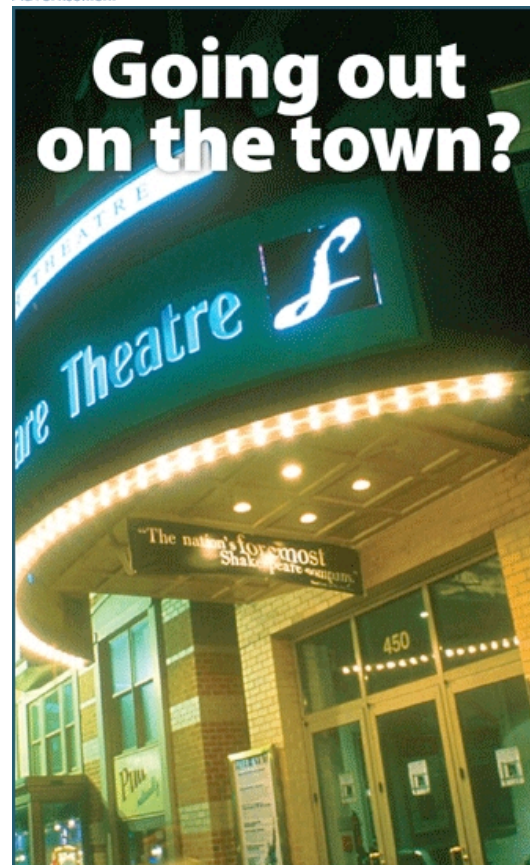
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ballet, and they say it's just perfect. How can it be anything but that? When you hear the music, you always see that picture in your eye."

Matson, who also conducts for the Richmond Ballet, plays most rehearsals when a pianist is required. For him, music and movement unite in Balanchine works.

Balanchine, through his partnership with Farrell and generations of ballerinas at the New York City Ballet, understood that musicality, the way a dancer expresses the music through his or her body, is a gift that can't be taught. It's innate.

After a recent rehearsal of "Mozartiana," a work Balanchine choreographed to Tchaikovsky's Suite No. 4, Op. 61, based on themes by Mozart, Farrell explained: "In rehearsals we have certain counts, but if you listen to the music it seems as though the impetus for a certain movement should be at another point in the music because it builds up that way. I wasn't changing anything; that's the way my spirit moved me. And the spirit of the ballet should be alive like that."

But a ballet like "Mozartiana" is far more than the sum of its counts. Balanchine was seemingly captivated by the Tchaikovsky music; he first choreographed to it in 1933. In 1981 he returned to the piece a third time with new choreography, including its prayerful opening solo, "Preghiera," created expressly for Farrell.

Last week, in a plain cinder-block rehearsal room above the Kennedy Center Opera House, Farrell stood quietly, back pressed against the mirror, hands clasped at her waist, eyes dissecting every move, lips silently counting, willing the dancers before her to remain connected to the music Matson spooled from the grand piano in the corner. Softly, nearly imperceptibly, she gestured to Bonnie Pickard with her arm to suggest that the dancer extend a gradual slowing in the solo. Later, Farrell lifted her chin as Pickard sustained a rise on her toes, each woman absorbing the musical cue.

The steps are secondary by now; it's the spiritual connection to the music that interests Farrell.

She recalls that when she first taught "Mozartiana," among the last ballets that Balanchine choreographed, she "learned all the other sections, then I went back and put the music on to make sure I still remembered my own choreography." She danced it in her living room from music playing from a video. "I was doing something different than the video because I heard the music differently. Even I couldn't be who I was at the time of the video. Every performance is alive, so you have to live at that moment; you live in the spirit of the way music is being played that night."

Matson adds: "It's a perfect example of why I like to play piano rehearsals myself: If I can sit and play at the piano and watch the dancers . . . then I can get all the small differences in the variations that work well with each dancer. When I get to the orchestra, I have a better chance of transferring those subtleties to the musicians."

Farrell says she would always dance to the tempo the pianist played, unlike other dancers, who would request slower or faster tempos.

"You never know what you're going to get onstage," she says.

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"That gives you an arsenal of other information that you can bring to the stage. Whether it happens to be one tempo or another, I always found that exciting. I want the dancers to feel the same. Even though you practice one thing, the air you breathe that night might be different. Life doesn't ever repeat."

*Suzanne Farrell Ballet Kennedy Center Opera House 202-467-4600 Wednesday through June 10*

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