2012

Rebekah & Aliya

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Recommended Citation

Hirsch, Mark, "Rebekah & Aliya" (2012). Lawrence University Honors Projects. 6.
https://lux.lawrence.edu/luhp/6

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Rebekah & Aliya

a ballet by Mark Hirsch

choreography by Madeline Bunke
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Scene I

$\frac{\text{Flute}}{\text{Clarinet in B}^\text{b}} \quad \text{Alto Saxophone} \quad \text{Vibraphone} \quad \text{Vibraphone} \quad \text{Piano} \quad \text{Violin I} \quad \text{Violin II} \quad \text{Viola} \quad \text{Violoncello}$

$\text{mp} \quad \text{q} = 70 \text{ unsettled, with hushed anxiety}$

$\text{mp} \quad \text{q} = 70 \text{ unsettled, with hushed anxiety}$

$\text{p} \quad \text{pp} \quad \text{p} \quad \text{con sord.}$

$\text{con sord.}$

$\text{pp}$

$\text{p} \quad \text{con sord.}$
Fl.

Cl.

Alto Sax.

Vib.

Vib.

Pno.

Vln. I

Vln. II

Vla.

Vc.
A general tempo should be followed throughout the piece, but individual entrances are at the discretion of the performer. All dynamics and articulations are soft.
Scene IV

\( \text{\textcopyright Mark Hirsch} \)

Flute \( J = 108 \)

Clarinet in B

Alto Saxophone

Vibraphone

Vibraphone

Piano \( mp \)

Violin 1 \( J = 108 \)

Violin 2

Viola

Violoncello

\( \text{with patience} \)

\( \text{free and out of time, meditative} \)

\( \text{like waking from a dream--gradually progress to pattern in mm. 5 (x3)} \)

\( \text{light pedal throughout scene} \)
Fl. 26

Cl.  

Alto Sax.

Vib.  

Vib.

Pno.

Vln. 1  

Vln. 2  

Vla.

Vc.

timeless, soloistic

sempre legato
Mark Hirsch

Rebekah & Aliya

Honors Project Supplement

Spring Term 2012
My composition *Rebekah & Aliya* is a product of my interest in the relationship between traditional and contemporary practice of both auditory and visual media. A crossroad of these media, ballet offers the benefit of a rich history as well as a lively presence in the contemporary art scene. From these two factors, I use ballet as a vehicle to re-image the role of each of its components—music, dance, narrative and, in this case, film—in a way that acknowledges the precedents of each medium but also maintains integrity within today’s artistic climate. In other words, in *Rebekah & Aliya*, I am not interested in re-inventing the wheel; I am interested in its malleability, how it might be manipulated, and how, through this manipulation, the original form of the wheel may still be perceived but in a new light.

When I first envisioned the work, I looked to my own experience in classical ballet. In my few years of classical ballet study, a number of aspects assumed by the art became clear to me—namely, the codified gender roles and the relationship between expressivity and technique. It was the questioning of these two aspects of ballet that sparked my desire to create my own project to address them. What would it mean for a classically trained dancer to work within a love story where both characters were of the same sex? In what ways would their technique be altered by this deviation from precedent? And would classical technique have the ability to express the complexity of the given story and emotional experience of the characters within it? These were the questions that, at the onset of my work, fueled the project’s development.
The other large underlying question at the root of this work is the nature and perception of time. Time is something with which we all—the creators, the performers, and the observers—must engage with. Within Rebekah & Aliya, I looked to address our relationship with time, from the story the narrative is based on, to the tempo of experience for both the performers and audience members. We, in the modern technological age, perceive time faster than ever before. Day-to-day events occur at rapid intervals and the technological developments allow for an unprecedented instantaneity of information. In light of this, dance, music, and film maintain the ability to distort our perception of time. I chose to capitalize on this ability and to present a work that stretches time in ways that go beyond our daily experience and that aptly reflects the depths of emotional experience that this story represents.

In preparation for this project, I strove to conduct research in a variety of modes and to engage with those that have extensive experience in the collaborative field of dance, music and film. My interactions began right here at Lawrence with President Beck. Her experience in dance and knowledge of the Lawrence community fostered conversations that were particularly illuminating in terms of limits, scope, and the various methods of undertaking a project of this complexity. For example, we discussed the dual role film could play. On the one hand, the film acts as a tool to create setting, while on the other, it is a way to create a dual reality. This duality became a central part of the work. Without it, the ability to show the past (scene I), a dream-state (scene III), and the suspension of time (scene IV) would be greatly hindered and many of the important aspects of the story lost. The decision to incorporate film as a prominent part of the
work—equal to the live-dance component—became one of the important ways I came to understand the various roles and relationships within multimedia art. In the beginning I anticipated that the film component would act as a substitute for my lack of stage set. In reality, the film ascended to a higher role and called into question the role of recorded and live experience.

My engaging conversations with experts in the multimedia field continued beyond the borders of campus. In the very early stages of thinking about this project, I traveled to Minneapolis to talk with active multi-media composer Mary Ellen Childs. Childs’ work incorporates music, movement, and film in exciting and innovative ways. At her house, we sat down and looked at recordings of some of her recent work as a way to spark conversation on what is currently being performed on the multimedia stage today in addition to the challenges the creator/composer/director faces when working in such broad fields simultaneously.

In a similar way that my conversation with President Beck made me question the role of each component within a multimedia work, my visit with Mary Ellen Childs caused me to reevaluate the abilities of each component to convey meaning within my project and my assumptions of their limitations. This became particularly relevant in the way that I cast the role of music within the ballet. While I knew that I would strive for integrity within the music itself, Childs helped me realize that I could achieve another level of integrity altogether—an integrity of cohesion within the entire work. Pursuing this cohesion meant composing the music in a way that gave it a much more active role in the story itself—the details of which I will include in my discussion of each individual scene.
Enrolling in THAR 216, “Great Moment in Choreography”, marked a third crucial element of the research process for *Rebekah & Aliya*. It was through work in this class that I was able to develop the language with which to communicate my thoughts and ideas to the choreographer and dancers and maintain an artistic dialogue throughout the creative process—a dialogue that I will elaborate on in my discussion of the creative process. The topics presented in this class allowed me to trace a lineage through generations of dance history and established a broad spectrum of the ways new artists confirmed or confronted tradition within their own work. Such examples include the careful and evocative modification of balletic technique in Kurt Jooss’ *The Green Table* as well as the seamless integration of film in ballet in Edouard Lock’s *Amelia*. In addition to these examples, I developed a much more informed perspective of collaborations—both between artists and art forms—that predate mine, as well as many that are contemporaneous to this work. Particularly relevant to my project was the study of the collaborations between Balanchine and Stravinsky, where the relationship between dance and music was one of equality and not mere accompaniment.

Within the body of course work, two essays I composed, one on the inherent characteristics of ballet and one on the relationship between technique and expressivity, were crucial in formulating my understanding of ballet and played an integral role in the process of creating *Rebekah & Aliya*. In these essays, I examined works such as Stravinsky and Folkine’s *Petrushka* and Yvonne Rainer’s *Trio A* to perceive the ways technique and expressivity can be understood as mutually exclusive and the ways they can be understood as existing symbiotically. It was these investigations into the nature of
ballet that sparked many of the deviations from and confrontations with tradition that are the most interesting and important part of my work.

Around the same time as my conversations with President Beck and Mary Ellen Childs, the creative process itself commenced, beginning with my decision of subject matter. In searching for a story to adapt, I felt a sense of resonance with the themes of Borges’ *The Secret Miracle.* I was drawn to the fact that within the story there is a great psychological complexity set within simple action—a relationship I found to be reversed in many more traditional ballets. In these more classical precedents, there are often familiar stories or ‘stock’ characters that allow meaning and the psyche of the dancers to be assumed and the focus to thus lie on their actions—on the movement itself. Borges’ story offered an apt vehicle for exploring the ability of ballet to express greater psychological complexity within the context of its historically informed technique.

With ideas derived from Borges’ work, I constructed a new story that would maintain psychological complexity while also engaging with some of the deeply rooted traditions in ballet, namely, the love story. In place of Borges’ character, who prays for time to stop in order to finish his work before his execution, I introduced two characters

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1 Synopsis: “Jaromir Hladik, scholar of linguistics and Judaism, dreams. He dreams that he is part of a generations-long chess game with unknown, but certainly severe consequences. He has come of age, and it is time for him to make his move. Shortly after Jaromir awakens from his slumber, he is taken away by the Germans, and is shortly to be executed. While in captivity, he images all the excruciatingly painful ways that he could possibly be executed; he is certain that if he imagines a method of death, it could not truly happen to him. Later, he realizes that his masterpiece is still incomplete, so he prays to God for one more year to finish his work. In a dream, God tells him that his wish has been granted. The next morning, Jeromir is led outside to be shot, and the guns are aimed at him. Minutes later, he realizes that the guns have not yet been fired. He opens his eyes and sees that everything is perfectly still. He comes to understand that his wish really has been granted his wish, and time is frozen for one year. While no record of his work can possibly be kept, Jaromir painstakingly edits and revises his play until it is perfect. At that exact moment, time unfreezes, and he is killed.” (see bibliography)

2 For example, Sleeping Beauty, Swan Lake, and Giselle all feature a young ballerina who is deceived and must be rescued—often by a young man.
who, in a similar predicament, long for the time to fully realize their love. The decision to cast both these characters as female dancers marked one of the first ways I sought to confront the precedents of ballet. The tradition of heterosexual courtship—where the male earns or wins the female’s love (like a prize)—transcends into the very core of classical technique. The repertoire of movement for a couple in classical ballet is one largely based on relationships of support and presentation. We see this in Adam and Ek’s Giselle, in the waltz of Giselle and Albrecht, and to the extreme in the four-part courtship of the Rose Adagio in Tchaikovsky and Petipa’s The Sleeping Beauty. The movement exemplified in these classical works pervades into more contemporary works like Stravinsky and Balanchine’s Agon, where, as in the Pas de Deux, the ballerina is still presented as an object of beauty and supported by the danseur.

Speaking to the problematic nature of communicating literary elements in dance, Doris Humphrey once commented that “you cannot say in dance, ‘This is my mother-in-law,’” meaning, the choreographic hurdles one would need to jump in order to show this complex of a relationship (and other complicated plots) through movement alone would be immense and unreliable. This, however, is the challenge that I took on in the decision to engage with the problematic relationship of two female dancers moving within the confines of classical balletic technique.

In order to meet this challenge, Madeline (choreographer) and I maintained an honest and constructively critical artistic dialogue. With her strong roots in classical

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3 These duets are characterized by technical virtuosity of the female and the ability of the male to support her turns and lifts.

4 In an interview, Arthur Mitchell describes the way Balanchine would coach him to “present, present [her], and show off the woman”. (see bibliography)

ballet, we began a process of generating movement fully immersed in the ballet tradition to establish a benchmark of what could be communicated through the traditional form alone, which we then began to manipulate—to mold the wheel—into a form that was able to convey the complexity of the story.

What became most strikingly obvious during this process was the inverse relationship between the complexity of the balletic movement and the clarity of the story. In moments where both dancers were performing technically demanding movements, the sense of their relationship to one another was lost. We addressed this fact in two primary ways. The first, at a micro level, was the inclusion of subtle non-balletic idioms to aid in conveying the romantic relationship we sought to create. This often included a simplification of the balletic technique or the addition of ‘non-technical’ movement—such as a soft gaze or embrace. These non-technical gestures became the glue that held the story together and, in constantly returning to them, we were able to explore classical balletic form while maintaining the complexity of their relationship.

At the macro level, we employed a progression of choreographic language to address the inverse relationship between technique and clarity of story. In the earlier part of the work, namely scene II, we utilized more of these micro, non-technical gestures to derive the language of the dancers. The expressivity of this language allowed us to establish the characters’ relationship early on, thus giving us more freedom in the later part of the work to develop the language. We utilized this freedom to address another precedent of balletic form: the superhuman quality of ballet. This quality has a long tradition in ballet and accounts for one of the difficulties in expressing complicated plots or themes—the abstraction of the form from human movement hinders its ability to
express the complexity of many human themes. However, by establishing the emotional content and relationship of the characters early on through the non-technical language, the progression to more technical, balletic language in the later part of the work provided a transcendence that mirrored the story. Rebekah and Aliya, who’s names in Hebrew literally mean “to come together” and “to ascend”, fall in love and, in the suspension of time and their execution, transcend human confines of space and time—just as ballet transcends the confines of normal human movement.

In composing the music for Rebekah & Aliya, as with the choreography, I sought to achieve cohesiveness throughout the work while simultaneously covering a variety of ground compositionally. In the dance, I explored the pliability of ballet within the context of a complicated subject. Composing the music was an exploration of the way different styles and compositional techniques effectively engage the complex subject matter while maintaining integrity as a large-scale work.

In the first scene of the ballet, Rebekah and Aliya are arrested and imprisoned in the cell where they will eventually meet. In this scene, I present music of a quiet unease. The hushed dissonances within a thin texture establish a sense of tension without calling in the drama of orchestral bombast. This is, in part, an effort to create a matter-of-fact sense about the character’s predicament. In doing so, I hope to promote the idea that the reasons for Rebekah and Aliya’s arrest and imprisonment are unimportant to the story—that the focus of the work rests on the love and development of the two characters as well as the confrontation of traditional aspects of ballet and classical technique. I, of course, recognize that in modern times, devoid of any explicit reason for their arrest, there will be assumptions that it is due to their sexuality. My point is simply that this is merely a
biased and unfounded assumption. Rebekah and Aliya could have just as easily been arrested for tax fraud—it does not impact the events of this story. The simplicity of the texture and phrasing of the music in scene I work to reinforce this fact.

I also knew that I would use the first scene as a way to establish setting. Accordingly, I decided to compose ideas in short, separated phrases which, in turn, allows the film to introduce and collage the multiple pieces at play in the story. This works to further establish the idea of an uncertain backstory. Due to the abstraction of introductory events, by scene II, all the observer really knows is that two people were arrested and the same two people are now in front of them, imprisoned.

Scene II is set in the prison cells where Rebekah and Aliya meet and develop and explore their feelings for one another. Here, I introduce a pairing between Rebekah and Aliya and the melodic context of the music that will develop and return in scene IV. More than programmatic, this pairing in the second scene is an embodiment of Rebekah and Aliya in their cells. This symbolic embodiment reaches to the most base level of my compositional process—to the organization of pitch and rhythm. Using the Hebrew system of numerology known as gematria, I converted the names of each character into the series of numbers each letter represents. In each symmetrical half of this scene there is one wandering melody—first in the piano and later, in the second half, in the vibraphone—and one sustained voice that is a musical representation of each character.

In the first half, Rebekah is paired with the piano melody and the sustain voice is paired with Aliya—this is reversed in the second half. The rhythmic groupings of the wandering melody and the durations of the sustained line are a product of the gematria. In figure 1, I demonstrate the way I used the calculated gematria values to inform the phrase grouping
of eight-notes in the piano, and duration of sustained pitches (measured in quarter-notes) in the violin. In a very spiritual sense, this music embodies the spirit of Rebekah and Aliya.

Figure 1.

Rebekah
18 5 2 5 11 1 8

Aliya
1 12 9 25 1

In a more apparent way, the wandering melodies act as musical counterpoint to the dancers’ steps through space and time. To suggest that the time we are experiencing visually from the dancers is not literal “real-time”—or in other words, that the scene represents a time period longer than the actual duration of the scene—I surrounded the melodies with poly-rhythmic tuplet gestures in the other voices to generate a sense of a-rhythmicity. This creates an overall sonic space that feels free of meter, and thus time, in contrast to the regular footsteps of the melody and dancers.

Scene II also demonstrates an example of the way that the artistic dialogue between the choreography and musical composition was indeed two-way. In early versions of this scene, the music lacked a sense of audible dissonance. Though the melody was chromatic, the sustained line was long enough as to not evoke a sense of tension. In developing the movement, it became clear that the dance—and thus the
story—required a degree of tension that the music could supply. One result of this is the prolonged half-step suspensions, rubbing together in the middle section of the scene.

Scene III represents each character’s longing for the other within the fantasy of a dream. In this scene, I developed music with hints of timelessness that would reflect the perceived timelessness of dreaming. This was achieved primarily through the use of musical indeterminacy, a technique developed in the 20th century by composers such as Morton Feldman and John Cage. This technique allows the performers some degree of freedom, often in regards to pitch, rhythm, and duration. In the music of scene III, I allow a relative freedom to the majority of the ensemble in choosing the timing of articulation and duration of each pitch. (Figure 2a) Like a dream, which occurs in real-time whether we perceive it that way or not, in each of the three musical sections of this scene, two voices in the ensemble uphold a strict but subtle pattern of entrances—trading whole-notes in tempo and cycling through a full chromatic set (all twelve pitches). (Figure 2b) Each other the other instrument keep pace with this progression but articulate their own pitches at any point, and for any duration, within the strict alternations of the two trading voices. This process creates an overall illusion of free-form, but within this illusion is the regularity of metric time, as in a dream.

Figure 2a.

With each pitch, the performer is allowed the freedom to choose the timing of articulation and the duration of the sound within the guideline that “each notehead is approx. one whole note”
Where scene III depicts the illusion of timelessness, the music in scene IV creates a sonic space that works to establish the very literal timelessness of the story. As in the Borges’ story, scene IV begins just before the moment of execution, and at this moment time stops and Rebekah and Aliya’s desire for time to realize their love is granted. The musical agent of this timelessness is the repetitive structures that persist throughout the scene. I reserved the use of repetitive structures for this unique moment in the work in an effort to highlight the importance it has within the story. Most other material in the ballet is fluid, wandering and every changing, while scene IV is comprised of short, exact repetitions. While the clockwork regularity of these repetitions might normally suggest an awareness of time, their juxtaposition with the freedom of the previous music suggests an endlessness, an infinite cycle created by the suspension of time.

Within this timeless soundscape, the musical representation of Rebekah and Aliya returns, but it is transformed. Scene II presented each character in an isolated existence within a setting of quiet tension. When they return in scene IV, when the time to fulfill their love is granted to them, the music presents characters in counterpoint—linked and playing off one another. This counterpoint continues, unwavering until the repetitions cease, the timelessness ends, and they plunge into the silence of forever.
On a larger scale, the music of the entire work is linked with the progression of the dance—from human motion to the transcendence of ballet. The focal point for the musical progression, however, lies within the transition from dissonance to consonance. In scene I, the chromatic melody is underpinned by a sequence of dissonant tritone double-stops that never fully resolve in the way our western ears would expect. Scene II continues the chromatic irregularity of the melody, but the dissonances—which are now spread through more voices and in larger harmonic intervals—sound more removed than those of scene I. In scene III, I employ the differences in timbre and register to give any dissonance a sense of distance and space, a distance congruent with the idea of thoughts and images being distant in dreams. In scene IV, I complete the transition to consonance. A modal character pervades the melodic content of the scene and is accentuated by the Renaissance style of the counterpoint. The repetitive structures do incorporate some dissonant pitches outside of this mode, but due to the repetition they lose focus and seem to exist on a different, distant plane as the melody, like Rebekah and Aliya, transcends beyond.

Transcendence is at the core of Rebekah and Aliya’s story, as well as my process of creating it. In staying true to my desire to explore the malleability of each of the ballet’s component parts, I was able to transcend the fixed language of tradition and speak with one that utilizes both the old and the new. Built from the tools of multimedia, this language proved agile enough to communicate the complexity of a story with contemporary themes as well as the classical beauty that has been a hallmark of each medium’s tradition. From non-technical humanistic gesture to pure balletic technique, from compositional methods of indeterminacy to those of the Renaissance, Rebekah &
Aliya transcends, like the two characters, to a new place—a place where traditional and contemporary practice coexists and express something larger than each.

Bibliography
