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Les Ballets de Monte Carlo, Joyce Theater, New York

By Apollinaire Scherr

This contemporary-ballet company presented choreography that was beautiful but lacked the sensuality of passion



Jean-Christophe Maillot's 'Opus 40'

On its first visit to New York since 2003, this handsome 48-person contemporary-ballet company offered work that was perfectly likable without ever seeming necessary. Though artistic director Jean-Christophe Maillot has created several story ballets – later this month the troupe brings his *Midsummer Night's Dream* to Hong Kong and *Cinderella* to Tokyo – *Altro Canto I* and *Opus 40* (at the Joyce until Sunday) are plotless, and uneasy about it.

The choreography does not submerge us in rivers of motion, as American movement mavericks such as Trisha Brown do. It does not arrest us with imagery, like dance dramatists Alexei Ratmansky and Mark Morris. It favours architecture over momentum – with the shapes, though often beautiful, unyoked to human gesture and thus to memory or drama.

To Monteverdi's sacred music, *Altro Canto* conjured spires, domes, apses, ancient aqueducts and suspension bridges, but made of coupled arms and legs. One dancer cupped another's beautifully arched foot in his palm. Company star Bernice Coppieters – lean, precise and elegant – pistoned up and down a line of men, her arms winging like an upright mechanical bird. The men arched her like a sheet ballooning in the air, then collapsed with her on to the floor like a house reduced by a hurricane to a scatter of boards. *Altro Canto* could certainly be evocative.

But it did not soften the striving rigour of its form with the sensuality of passion, as the Monteverdi does. The dance's architecture might be reduced to its parts, but never the opposite: it never expanded into the metaphysical.

The music for the concertedly lighthearted *Opus 40* also pointed up the choreography's weaknesses. In one section of this episodic dance, 11 women clad in a bouquet of brightly coloured dresses converged on stage to fling their legs high. Tossing one's limbs is fun, but for viewers to experience that pleasure, Maillot needed to do more than present the move. Meredith Monk's accompanying ululations, for example, startled a rough joy out of us not by sounding typically joyful but by their animal strangeness.

Longtime company member Jerome Marchand also allured by unlikeliness. He attacked the movement with a hunger that began deep in his large body and spiralled outward. Dance blessedly allows a man voluptuousness – and Marchand claimed it.



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