

Weekend

The New York Times

Review/City Ballet, Friday January 31 1992

A Premiere

Having Fun With Mozart

By ANNA KISSELGOFF

DELIGHT OF THE MUSES, the New York City Ballet's long-awaited premiere choreographed by Peter Martins to a commissioned score by Charles Wuorinen, is a joke. No, not a mistake, although some might disagree. What Mr. Wuorinen — one of the most decorated figures in contemporary American music — had in mind is a deliberate musical joke, incorporating a presumably serious tribute to Mozart.

Mr. Martins has responded in kind with a ballet that has to be seen to be believed. It is one that is not averse to crossing the highest technical virtuosity with the most unexpected faux-naif, imagery of milkmaids and bumpkins at play. The choreographer was very visibly the composer's co-conspirator at the ballet's premiere on Wednesday night at the New York State Theater. They triumphed before a delighted audience through sheer nerve, even some brilliance.

Mr. Wuorinen, who served as guest conductor at this performance, was awarded the 1970 Pulitzer Prize in music and a MacArthur Foundation fellowship in 1986. A few years ago, he was also commissioned to write this score and conceptually, at least, the ballet has been in the works for some time.

But paradoxically, everything about "Delight of the Muses," including its title, which was announced merely two weeks ago, is a surprise.

Only the hidebound might be unhappy with Mr. Wuorinen's mind-blowing mood, typically bringing down a Mozartean motif with a resounding blast from the brass or racing, through a finale at suspense-thriller speed. Some audience members laughed outright. They got the point.

True to form, and following in its own perverse tradition of celebrating anniversaries a year late, the City Ballet is organizing tribute programs in 1992, just past everyone else's Mozart bicentennial celebrations.

In the nick of time, Mr. Wuorinen came up with the idea of working around excerpts from two piano sonatas written by Mozart at the age of 18 (K. 281, 283) and the stage music in "Don Giovanni." Mr. Wuorinen speaks of his score as "a continuum of styles rather than the violent juxtaposition of styles favored by many composers who base new works on old music."

The result is an irreverence that is refreshing. Visibly, it is Mr. Martins's springboard. Just when one anticipated the well-bred ensembles and formal codes of behavior that govern his genuine Mozart ballets, the choreographer introduces some rather rude-looking types who distort the academic idiom, in tune with Mr. Wuorinen's own dissonance.

Does it work? There is a school of thought that says Mozart wrote the music he did because he lived in a society secure in its values. But the truth is that Mozart was very much an independent artist, totally at odds with most of those values. This is the spirit that Mr. Martins and Mr. Wuorinen have captured so perfectly.

As such, the ensuing tone differs markedly from other works in the City Ballet repertory that have scores inspired by other composers. Three of George Balanchine's ballets come to mind: "Mozartiana," named after the score in which Tchaikovsky pays tribute to Mozart; "Divertimento From 'Le Baiser de la Fee,'" in which Stravinsky incorporates themes from Tchaikovsky, and "Monumentum Pro Gesualdo," essentially Stravinsky's arrangement of the Italian composer's madrigals.