Masterpieces by Doris Humphrey and Aaron Copland

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Doris Humphrey's Day on Earth, set to Aaron Copland's Piano Sonata, is available on an excellent film. The performance, filmed in color by Dwight Godwin at the Juilliard School in 1972, was under the direction of Jose Limon and Letitia Ide, both members of the original cast. The dancers on the film are Peter Sparling, Janet Eilber, Ann de Gange, and Elizabeth Haight.

The availability of this film makes it possible, at last, for audiences everywhere to experience, and for students to explore, this profoundly beautiful--but rather infrequently performed--dance work.

The dance work

Day on Earth, in critic Margaret Lloyd's words, is an "exquisite pastorale," an objectified telling of man's brief, but self-perpetuating, passage on earth. Shown are life's joys and its trials--the warmth of love and family dependence, the anguish of leave-taking and of death. And throughout there is the theme of work--work as challenge, as necessity, as opportunity, and as solace for grief. Only four dancers are used to relate this saga and it is told in the space of 20 minutes. No more dancers, no more time, it seems clear at the end, are necessary.

All four dancers are posed on stage as the curtain rises and the first to move is the man. In a progression down the diagonal from upstage left, he expresses the work theme--gestures suggesting plowing, planting, and his wonder as the crops grow. However he is soon diverted by the young girl, his first love. At first there is a gestural dialogue and their movements are quite the opposite: his firm and toward the ground, hers flighty and effervescent. Finally he joins in her carefree hops and skittering jumps. But then she leaves, abruptly, and in bewilderment and grief he returns distractedly to work, exiting finally to the wings. The woman now moves forward and, with gestures more secure and mature than those of the young girl, seems almost to conjure the man out of the wings. Their courtship is brief, their gestures complementary, and they lock hands as the first movement ends.

The second movement portrays the family. The man and woman walk upstage and gently raise a sheet under which a child has been lying. Nurturing gestures by the woman urge the child into motion and the three play joyful games. The work theme returns, the man's gestures complemented now by those of the woman, while the child scampers around the two. (The child is a real one, a 10- or 11-year old girl who frolics and skips with attractive, unvarnished awkwardness.) At one point the woman leaves and the other two console themselves with games, and are huddled affectionately when she returns. Near the end of the movement the child seems to mature or to be responding to a distant call. She confronts her parents in a manner suggesting equality and evades their playful efforts to create barriers for her with their arms. Then she gently departs, leaving them along on the stage.

The third movement opens with a lament for the woman over the loss of the child. The man tries to comfort her, but she collapses in grief. In refuge, he returns forcefully, anguished, to the work theme. Then as he watches, she rises and, with gestures of great finality, folds the sheet. She places it on a box resting upstage and lies down on it--dies. He runs toward her and then returns to the work theme, but more weakly--his gestures become softer and less specific. There is a quiet processional for the other three dancers. The dance work ends as the three adults lie on the floor in a symmetrical formation pulling the sheet out to cover themselves as they do so, while the child seats herself on the box, in the position occupied by the woman at the beginning.

The music

One of the great strengths of Day on Earth is the remarkable way music and dance are blended to make a combined impact.

Humphrey was always deeply affected by music. In her book, The Art of Making Dances, she observes, "music was my first love and I was led to dance through that...but I came to love dancing very much, almost as much as music." In the course of her choreographic career, Humphrey worked with music in many different ways. Some works had specific music composed for them (Variations and Conclusion of New Dance, Invention); some had music composed after the work was choreographed (the first part of New Dance); some even dispensed with music entirely (Water Study). But most of her works were set to pre-composed music--both classical (Bach especially) and contemporary.

In dealing with pre-composed music, she sometimes explored rather general themes (Passacaglia seems to be about "man's affirmation of faith in his own ideals"), images (she likened Air for the G-String to "a golden ray of light moving from place to place"), didactic explorations (Two Ecstatic Themes is about circular and angular movement--while serving as well, I think, as an erotic poem to her lover), or effects (in Dance Overture she seems to join composer Paul Creston in a cloudless celebration and generates an ebullient curtain-raiser to introduce the Limon company).

But many of the dances to pre-composed music superimposed a rather specific drama on the music--although, as her biographer, Selma Jeanne Cohen, notes, Humphrey never really composed a "story" dance. In Surinach's Ritmo Jondo she found a Lorcaesque view of Spanish passion and sexual inequality. In Rainier's Quartet she found a nightmarish contest for Night Spell. In quartets by Britten she found a saga of war, possessiveness, and theatrical artifice that emerged as Ruins and Visions.

The craft with which Humphrey was able to blend two independent arts is never more evident than in Day on Earth. The dance work, a saga at once cosmic and intimate, has been set to Aaron Copland's Piano Sonata which was completed in 1941, six years before Day on Earth was choreographed.

Copland himself has referred to his Sonata as "absolute music," a term one music writer has defined as "music that tells its own story and defies translation into pictures or words." The way Humphrey has been able to defy this definition is one of the many things that makes Day on Earth so remarkable. "The problem," Humphrey wrote at the time of composition, is "how to surmount or fuse the design of the composer with the superstructure of the dance and drama, and not do damage to either."

As a composer, Copland is often praised for his economy, his ability to take the barest musical materials and to construct impressive structures out of them. Nothing ever seems to be wasted, nothing seems excessive, everything seems essential. (Such features also characterize Humphrey's approach to her craft.)

The Piano Sonata opens with a brief motto developed out of some assertive descending chords. This motif seems to reappear frequently throughout the Sonata in various guises and figurations. Indeed, the first movement, though rather free in form, can almost be seen to be a set of variations on this theme. Music suggestive of this central motto appears also in the second movement where it is surrounded by, and contrasted with, figures of a more playful sort. The third movement presents a kind of final development, a summing up, and a transfiguration of these ideas. It opens with a slow passage in which the assertive motto predominates, though with passing suggestions of the playful themes of the second movement. Then emerge some serene, widely spaced chords, bell-like in quality. The

.us Sonata* ends with what seems almost a contest between the assertive motif that opened the work and the bell-like chords. The assertive motif becomes almost grandiose when "challenged" but the bell-like sonorities seem finally to win out. Quietly and gradually the assertive motif is mellowed and dominated and the work ends in a mood of contentment and utter serenity.

Humphrey's use of the music

Although there is great variety in the texture of the Copland Sonata, then, in many respects it can be seen mostly to be derived from only three ideas: the opening assertive motto, the playful figures of the second movement, and the bell-like sonorities introduced in the last movement. In Day on Earth Humphrey associates these three ideas with three themes of her own: the first seems to suggest the progress of life and, in its most forceful utterances, the idea of work; the second suggests the family and, most particularly, the child; and the third theme that dominates the ending of the work seems to suggest destiny, death, eternity.

That Humphrey is not unique in finding such drama in this piece of "absolute" music is suggested by the comments of Robert Silverman, the brilliant pianist who has recorded the work for Orion Records. In his liner notes Silverman discusses his reaction to the Sonata. What is remarkable is how his comments could apply, as well, to Day on Earth: "As to the magnificent third movement, no amount of analysis can begin to explain the magic Copland creates. One can say it is a free sort of rondo; one can point to the interplay of motives from all three movements; one can discuss the gentle, wide-spaced chords which conclude the work. But how does one

explain the strange subjective and somewhat metaphysical reaction which several persons, including myself, have experienced? How has Copland evoked the illusion that the final notes mark only the end of our perception of the work, but that the sonata has a life of its own and will continue, unheard, forever?"

In the first movement of Day on Earth, Humphrey follows the shifting moods of the music closely. The work-life theme is pronounced clearly four times in the music where it is associated with the four major events of the movement: the man's establishment of the work theme at the opening, his alliance with the young girl, his loss of her, and, at the end, his union with the woman.

The second movement, which portrays the family, provides contrast between the work theme and playful figures associated with the child. The work-life theme appears most notably about one-third of the way through the movement where it is associated, of course, with the parents' work. There is something of a musical joke in the choreography here: the theme is inverted musically and so, to a degree, is the choreography as the parent's planting and harvesting takes them down the diagonal from upstage right rather than from upstage left. The work-life theme is also suggested at the end of the moment, when the child leaves.

The first part of the last movement is a mixture of the work-life theme and subdued glimmerings of the playful second movement associated with the child. It is accordingly a perfect musical "accompaniment" for the woman's lament at the loss of the child. Soon the bell-like sonorities, suggesting the theme of destiny-eternity, are heard. At this point the woman is in arabesque gesturing yearningly toward the side of the stage that the child exited; the man is kneeling in front of her, blocking her implied progress toward the wing. At that point, though still in grief, the woman seems to become reconciled to the loss of the child. In the brief duet that follows, as the music gets forceful and dramatic, she no longer gestures toward the wing so much. She turns inward instead, almost frantic, until finally collapsing upstage.

The man rushes toward her, then backs away, moving gradually but firmly to the upstage left corner where he was at the beginning of the work. At that point the music turns forcefully to the work-life theme and, moving down the diagonal as at the beginning, he repeats the working gestures with great emphasis as he seeks refuge in work from his grief. The music becomes quieter and the bell-like chords return. He is distracted from his planting gestures to look at the woman who is now rising and folding the sheet. As she dies he runs toward her again, reacts in anguish again, begins to return to the work theme--but this time he is accompanied not by the music associated with work, but rather by the eternity theme played stridently commandingly. The music gets quieter and he is subdued, reconciled to his fate. Now the work theme music returns, but is played softly, a faint echo of its former assertiveness. He is on the "work" diagonal at that point and reacts by inching hesitantly up the diagonal. The remaining music is a serene, gentle interplay of the work and eternity themes; all stridency is gone and the music becomes increasingly consonant. The dancers complete their quiet, inevitable processional; the man softly repeats some of the work gestures, and then joins them in the final symmetrical pose.

The film performance

The dance work receives a solid, intelligent performance by the four dancers on the film. A comparison with another film of the dance--an archival work film shot without sound in 1959 featuring Limon and Ide in the cast, plus Ruth Currier and Abigail English--shows few differences. The performance of Limon and Ide is a bit more sharply etched than that of Sparling and Eilber. This is mostly a matter of small degree except in the last movement where Limon projects a considerably greater sense of tragedy. Sparling, by contrast is rather more distant, passive. He rages against his fate less, and submits to it in a (comparatively) dream-like state of resigned fatalism. But this can be seen as a legitimate difference in interpretation. Eilber's performance is somewhat softer than Ide's--rather more womanly in some respects, a bit less archetypal.

There are, however, two specific differences in choreography that should be mentioned. At the end of the Limon-Ide performance the sheet is allowed to billow slightly before being pulled taut to cover the three adults. In the Sparling-Eilber film the beautiful billowing touch is missing. Also, when the woman leaves in the middle of the second movement, there is supposed to be a brief gestural dialogue between the child and the man. "Where's mama?" the child says. "I don't know," the man shrugs in some anguish. Then, after a bewildered pause, the child mimes, "Let's play." (The noted quotes are in Humphrey's marked musical score in the Dance Collection.) This little byplay is quite clear in the Limon-Ide performance, but is rather obscured by the performers in the Sparling-Eilber film.

The film

The recording of Day on Earth on this film, one of a series of record films made by Dwight Godwin, is beautifully successful. A single camera with a zoom lens, placed in the center of a low balcony, is used. The work is filmed in one long take and the dancers are performing full-out and continuously, as for an audience. Godwin's approach is simply to stay as close in as possible, but without losing any of the choreography. To be sure there are places where it would have been better to have been able to cut to another camera perspective. And there are a couple of spots where Godwin had to zoom abruptly from a tight shot to a wider one (to cover an entrance) that are a bit distracting. But these are minor problems and the skill with which Godwin, on an extremely limited film budget, was able to capture this fine performance of this delicate dance masterpiece is truly remarkable.

The film was under the production of Martha Hill of the Juilliard School and was made as a joint project of the School and of the Dance Collection. The Copland Sonata is beautifully rendered by pianist David Wasser.