

SANTA FE NEW MEXICAN

PASA REVIEW

Stripped down: Aspen Santa Fe Ballet, accompanied by pianist Joyce Yang

Michael Wade Simpson 6 hrs ago (...)

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Bravo to Aspen Santa Fe Ballet for taking a risk. In offering an entire evening of dances with only piano accompaniment, they chose to set aside their most theatrical, crowd-pleasing tendencies (despite a rain of golden glitter at the end of the evening) to focus on just piano music and movement. There were no sets to move around, not a single recording by Sigur Rós, no video cameras, stage grins, mambos, or voice-overs. There was simply the music of a piano, with dancers and light.

Joyce Yang, the concert pianist, played from various parts of the stage for the three pieces on the program. There was a degree of intimacy and quiet to all the music. This relative austerity offered the chance to really examine the company dancers, who, placed under a technical magnifying glass, rose beautifully to the occasion. The evening's premiere, "Half/Cut/Split," created from a collaboration

between Yang, ASFB, and the choreographer Jorma Elo, was a witty, brilliant exploration of Robert Schumann's *Carnaval*.

Yang apparently became intrigued with the idea of someday collaborating with a dance company when, as a student at Juilliard, she began to attend performances in New York. After seeing ASFB at the Joyce Theater three years ago, and approaching the directors, she finally got her chance.

Last summer found Yang in Aspen, at six-hour-a-day rehearsals. "I played my heart out," she said. She had an opportunity to bond with Elo and the dancers. "It was one of the most terrifying, unfamiliar, and exhilarating times of my life!" she wrote in her blog. "If you had asked me earlier in the year, I would've told you that I knew *Carnaval* very well. Well, everything I thought I knew about the piece went out the window in the first rehearsal!"

"Half/Cut/Split" presents the 21 parts of the Schumann work as a playful music visualization along the lines of what the choreographer Mark Morris might dream up; but Elo's work with big ballet companies like Boston, New York City Ballet, San Francisco, and ABT, along with his background as a dancer with Nederlands Dance Theater, seems clear in the Balanchinian organization of groups, as well as the use of more classical shapes and structures. The piece's humor, coming directly from the music, was organic and easy. On Saturday, dancers Jenelle Figgins, Anthony Tiedeman, and Evan Supple each seemed to have grown into more confident versions of themselves onstage. All six dancers were able to straddle the technical demands of the choreography along with an ability to go subtle. It is in the details where Elo shines.

Yang had her chance to tackle Philip Glass' familiar pieces, *Mad Rush* and *Metamorphosis 2*, in the 2011 ASFB-commissioned dance "Where We Left Off," by Nicolo Fonte. Here, a choreographic palette of walking and moving in slow motion was contrasted with quicker, more virtuosic solos and duets. Still, the mood created by the music was one of calm rather than dynamism — it was mainly a meditative rather than a virtuosic exercise for the pianist and the dancers.

Jirí Kylián choreographed "Return to a Strange Land" in 1975 for the Stuttgart Ballet after the sudden death of his mentor, John Cranko, and the piece has been in ASFB's repertoire since 2013. The dance has an appropriately funereal tone, although the piano music, by Czech composer Leoš Janáček, offers up a fair amount of *sturm und drang*. Kylián's choreography featured entwined duets and trios; the three sections each ended with a cleverly constructed death. The dancers, particularly Katherine Bolaños and Anna Gerberich, both en pointe, offered clear, committed dancing. Supple, Tiedeman, Pete Leo Walker, and Joseph Watson II were strong, classically secure partners.