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Chaconne



Photo © Paul Kolnik

Music Ballet music from the opera Orfeo ed Euridice (Vienna, 1762 and Paris, 1774) by Christoph Willibald Gluck



Choreography George Balanchine © The George Balanchine Trust

Premiere January 22, 1976, New York City Ballet, New York State Theater

Original Cast Suzanne Farrell, Peter Martins

Average Length 28 min.

A chaconne is a dance, built on a short phrase in the bass, that was often used by composers of the 17th and 18th centuries to end an opera in a festive mood. This choreography, first performed in the 1963 Hamburg State Opera production of Orfeo ed Euridice, was somewhat altered for presentation as the ballet Chaconne particularly in the sections for the principal dancers. Balanchine's first Orfeo was made for the Metropolitan Opera in 1936. His novel approach — the singers remained in the pit while the action was danced on stage — was not well received, and the production had only two performances. In addition to the Hamburg production, he choreographed other versions of the opera for the Théâtre National de l'Opéra, Paris in 1973 and the Chicago Lyric Opera in 1975. While having roots in earlier opera productions, Chaconne is pure dance. The opening pas de deux and following ensemble are lyrical and flowing. The second part has the spirit of a court entertainment, with formal divertissements, bravura roles for the principal dancers, and, of course, a concluding chaconne. Christoph Willibald Gluck (1714-1787) wrote

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— Peter Martins

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more than one hundred operas. His most important contribution was as a reformer of the florid, ornate, baroque style of the conventional opera of his time. In 1773 Gluck wrote, "Always as simple and natural as I can make it, my music strives toward the utmost expressiveness and seeks to reinforce the meaning of the underlying poetry. It is for this reason that I do not use those trills, coloraturas, and cadences that Italians employ so abundantly." (Harold Schonberg, *The Lives of the Great Composers*)

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