

Finding the Elgar We Know and One We Don't

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ANNANDALE-ON-HUDSON, N.Y., July 8 — Edward Elgar is not a composer associated with dance. Yet two dance classics have been set to scores by the English composer whose music is the theme of this year's ambitious Summerscape Festival at [Bard College](#): Frederick Ashton's autumnal "Enigma Variations," to music of the same name, and [Paul Taylor](#)'s melancholic "Sunset," danced to Elgar's Serenade, Op. 20, and Elegy, Op. 58.

Photo by Stephanie Berger

Natalie Desch performing in Doug Varone's "Victorious," danced to an Elgar cello concerto in Summerscape at Bard College.

Both celebrate the Elgar most familiar to audiences today, whose music had in it "something broad, noble, chivalrous, healthy and above all, an out-of-door sort of spirit," as the composer himself wrote of his vision of English music.

Doug Varone, commissioned by the festival with Susan Marshall to create works set to Elgar's music, goes against the grain of our expectations with "Victorious," a dark, jagged dance set to the Cello Concerto in E minor, Op. 85, and performed by Mr. Varone's company on Sunday afternoon at Bard's Sosnoff Theater. Composed in 1919, the work is imbued with the darkness and disorder of the just-ended World War I and by a career in decline, though not musically. The concerto chosen by Mr. Varone, initially seen as a failure, is now considered one of the great works for cello.

Its failure might have been in part because the concerto so confounds one's expectations of Elgar, just as Mr. Varone's choreography to the music feels very far from the general sense of his work. Represented on the Bard program by last year's "Lux," so joyously expansive on this big stage, and by "Castles," those pieces are intricately plotted dance scrums, streams whose coursing motion eddies around outcroppings of emotional coloring and characterization and of odd bits of abstract gesturing. They are also tests for Mr. Varone's fine dancers, seasoned performers who move, too, like pushing, pooling water.

But both the choreography and the score for "Victorious" represent the two creators in a winter mindset. The cello and piano lines often war against each other, perhaps more obviously in this

reduction of the score for the two instruments. They come into relative, then perfect, melodic harmony and pull away again continually. And that is somewhat the effect of the dancing, which pours out onto a stage framed by the musicians, Zuill Bailey on cello and Robert Koenig on piano, with quietly shifting blocks of rectangular dark and light providing smaller frames for the solos, duet, trio and full-company section that make up the piece.

The solo that opens “Victorious” establishes the mood, turning the body of Natalie Desch into the human equivalent of a pile of children’s pickup sticks. Ms. Desch is one of those wonderful movers who can simultaneously and clearly communicate both the wide sweep and the fine detail of a choreographed sequence. Here her dancing echoes and looks drawn through the changing relationship of cello and piano, as she rises at times in harmony with the space around her and then crumples into disharmony or dissonance with itself and the space in which she dances.

A duet follows that similarly confounds expectations, danced by Stephanie Liapis and John Beasant III, two huggermugger bodies that join and part and then roll off softly at the end. A man in a white suit, danced by the unfettered Eddie Taketa, his dark hair flying, crosses the stage behind a pale scrim that rises to introduce a male trio. The three — Mr. Taketa, Daniel Charon and Ryan Corriston — are a unit, frequently grappling into clusters of draped bodies that, flung loose, move with nearly the abandon of their flapping suit jackets. The dance ends on a unified, nearly harmonious note, but it is the harmony of darkness.

It will be interesting to see how “Victorious” fares in the Varone repertory. Ms. Marshall’s “Sawdust Palace” will probably be performed again and again. It is a portable piece, a familiar suite of 20 mostly brief “featured acts” that have nothing to do with Elgar and were perhaps created more for casual summer theater and for the festival’s agreeably funky Spiegeltent, where the piece was performed on Sunday night, and its small, round drumlike stage.

For the record, four skits are set to Elgar piano music, performed by Stephen Gosling. Two involve women (Kristen Hollinsworth and Petra van Noort) straddling the pianist as he plays. Ms. Marshall uses the space inventively, sending dancers out into the audience to circle at one point like the outer edge of a carousel. Reflected images gleam and tumble across the mirrored walls.

In the wittiest number, “Chicken Flicker,” set to pell-mell music by Mikos Theodorakis, Ms. Hollinsworth is a sassy chicken whose feathers are plucked with hilarious comic timing by Joseph Poulson. Humor trumps the sexual creepiness of this and several other skits, like the recycled “Tea for Two,” that hover on the edge of sensuality but never quite take the plunge. The jury is still out on what Ms. Marshall and her dancers, who also included Luke Miller and Darrin M. Wright, might have added to considerations of Elgar’s music.