

Sensing the Dancer's Impulse

by Ernestine Stodelle

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During the first third of our century, a new kind of composer came into being at the request of a new species of dancer. In a dramatic reversal of roles, the dance as an American art form considered itself the “handmaiden” of music, seeking rhythmic identity with a musician’s personal choice of timing or with melodies of an emotionally inspiring nature. In contrast, musical accompaniment would have to relate to the dynamic thrust of the choreographer’s ideas...ideas that renounced the popular concept of dance as superficial entertainment and sought instead to create a movement vocabulary out of the rougher, more angular textures of modern life.

It was a period of aesthetic ferment throughout the arts. Musicians, too, were seeking new ways of reflecting the times: to introduce dissonance and unpredictable changes of pace and rhythm more in keeping with the jagged tempo of the day; and to investigate sound itself as a separate entity from the classical musical scale.

It was also a period of economic shock. The depression was of earthquake size, especially in the large cities where dancers and musicians found survival to be a precarious thing. Grants were non-existent. The new pioneers in modern dance—Martha Graham, Doris Humphrey, Charles Weidman, and later, the Wigman-trained Hanya Holm—had to subsidize their own concerts. Even paying \$1 to \$1.50 an hour for an accompanist was a burden; but the radical new ideas demanded radical approaches in playing for classes...in short, musicians with a gift for improvising fresh themes and fresh rhythms.

Martha Graham and Louis Horst, her musical director and mentor for the first twenty-two years of her independent career; Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman had Pauline Lawrence, their manager and costume designer whose musicianship was likewise of concert stature. Soon, however, appeared a young musician-composer who would first accompany the Humphrey-Weidman concerts, and then create musical scores for all the aforementioned pioneers. Her name was Vivian Fine. She is now known throughout the country as one of America’s outstanding women composers, the creator of chamber, orchestral and operatic works.

In Fine’s own words, “Music and dance are two languages with a common source. They come out of the same stuff...as Shakespeare wrote, ‘dreams are made on’...In writing for the dance, the musical ideas are stimulated by ideas the dancer has conceived.”

The success of the early collaboration therefore depended on the validity of the choreographic idea, first, as a dramatic, lyrical, or abstract statement, and then as a dance movement capable of evoking sonic imagery of exciting texture in the mind of the composer. The fact that the dance was created first and the musician had to compose according to pre-established counts might have seemed a thankless musical task. But to Vivian Fine, working with Doris Humphrey and Charles Weidman was overwhelmingly

gratifying: “I realize now how rich their dances were. They had a remarkable sense of line. They moved so beautifully...with effortless nuance. Everything was infused with a sense of what movement could be...”

Fine was impressed with Doris Humphrey’s lyricism and musicality; with Weidman’s “fantastic” sense of timing, and with their protégé, Jose Limón (for whom she later wrote a score): “He had the nobility of a Spanish courtier—the grace and dignity—and he was very musical. He had obviously studied the piano seriously. I remember him playing the first few bars of Bach’s Italian Concerto.”

The climax of Fine’s long association with the Humphrey-Weidman Dance Company came in 1938 when she was commissioned to write a score for Doris’s Thurber-inspired, “The Race of Life” and for Charles’s *commedia dell-arte*-styled “Opus 51,” the latter to be premiered at Bennington College Summer School, where Fine was also in residence.

Working on “Opus 51” with the Chaplinesque Weidman (Charles’s comic gifts were frequently compared to those of the immortal tramp) ignited Fine’s own playful instincts. The choreographic canvas, as conceived by Weidman, was a three-part suite. Between the formal, but warmly gracious opening dance (still performed by the Deborah Carr Theatre Dance Ensemble) and the closing “swift-moving, technically difficult” finale, a middle section emerged, overshadowing all by the sheer vitality of its irrepressible comedy. According to Fine, “No attempt was made to create situations leading to a comic ‘point.’ Instead, we were shown unrelated actions strung together, the ultimate expression of the absurd.”

Weidman’s brand of comedy was inimitably his. Using recognizably descriptive gestures in illogical sequences, he created a unique collage, which he called Kinetic Pantomime. For example, at one moment, the dancer would be squatting in the presumable act of milking a cow, and then suddenly strike the pompous stance of a country preacher. “Anything went,” wrote the *Christian Science Monitor* dance critic, Margaret Lloyd. “There was hoeing and weeding at the farm, sewing costumes, stumbling over an obstacle that wasn’t there, sweeping a floor, and a bit of hair-pulling that could have been anybody’s quarrel, but wasn’t.”

Vivian Fine’s music caught the full flavor of Weidman’s humorous jabs at chores and human behavior with no let-up of energy. “I was able to do this by not composing for individual movement or patterns, but by sensing the impulse that moved the dancer.”

By 1960, when Martha Graham invited Fine to compose a score for her “Alcestis,” the dancer-choreographer had settled into the habit of first commissioning music for a new work and then composing her dance afterwards...a long cry from the use of counts as the main instructive to the composer.

As presented to Fine, Graham’s original choreographic idea was strangely unresolved. She had in mind, not Euripides’ classic drama but a short modern play entitled “The

Dream of Alceſtis,” which ſhe deſcribed to the compoſer as a projection of a woman in a criſis of emotional cross-purpoſes.

To Fine’s ſurpriſe, no ſuch portrait emerged. But the ſcore ſerved nevertheless the dramatic purpoſes of the choreographer. A ſplendid ſpectacle, with its ſculptured d cor by Noguchi and Fine’s vibrant ſcore, “Alceſtis” was conſidered by *New York Times* critic John Martin to be one of Graham’s “moſt ravishing creations.”

By this time in her career, Vivian Fine had practically withdrawn from her role as creative collaborator of dance works. It was becoming increasingly clear to her that her own creative drive ſhould be in the direction of chamber and orchestral music. She regretted the ſhift, eſpecially in Graham, from ſtarkly expreſſive movement themes to ſtraight drama and the elaborate theatricalization of her ideas. Fine’s own inſpiration in compoſing for the dance had always come from the exciting originality of a dancer’s inventiveness. “It was the movement itſelf that was marvelous...not the ſituation.”

A choreographer who ſtands out today in Fine’s mind as a ſeeker not only of fresh ideas but of freshly conceived movement is Paul Taylor. Perhaps, Taylor will lead the way to new heights of creative collaboration...