



## REVIEW: Ravel & Rioult Slay @ PlayhouseSquare

### Repetition Rules

**In Ravel's *Bolero* a small body of musical material is repeated** over and over again with growing intensity until it reaches a shattering climax. Widely considered the outstanding example of musical crescendo, *Bolero* as musical background to dance can render the most mundane choreographic process gripping; the challenge to the choreographer is to find dance metaphors that bear multiple repetitions and match *Bolero*'s growing intensity without overtaxing the dancers.

One week ago Saturday we went to see the modern dance company of Pascal Rioult (pronounced rhee YOU). We had seen several Rioult pieces performed via the Case dance program – Rioult's *Bolero*, nicely staged on Case dance program students in 2003, and in 2007 Case students performed *Wien*, another of Rioult's pieces. Both works were on the Saturday program. As a result, we felt that we had a good idea of what to expect.

**If our previous experience of Rioult** showed him embracing the challenge of musical repetition but finding engaging choreographic possibilities, another piece on Saturday's program saw him going further down that same path with more mixed success.

Saturday's concert opened with Rioult's *Views of the Fleeting World* (2008), a work for eight dancers set in nine sections to J. S. Bach's *Art of the Fugue* (as arranged for chamber orchestra by Wolfgang Graeser in 1927). In addition to *Art of the Fugue* — which we nominate as Bach's least danceable piece — each of the nine sections was accompanied by sounds from nature and beautiful projections. Wind sounds preceding section 2 suggested the section's title, "Gathering Storm;" the sound of peepers suggested a rural wetland at "Dusk;" rain sounds suggested a "Sudden Rain."

These programmatic clues notwithstanding, *Views* made for heavy going (don't take our word for it; go to [Rioul Video](#) and see for yourself.) For us, it was not until the fifth section, "Sudden Rain," that dancer Jane Sato brought the stage to life. She convincingly "slipped and fell on the rain-washed ground," then alternated quick aerial movements with supple lunges in a solo that kept us watching.

**In the seventh section, "Summer Wind,"** cicada sounds and warm, bright colors on the backdrop suggested a summer day. Dancers Charis Haines and Jere Hunt created considerable erotic heat using dynamic reclining versions of the same movement vocabulary we'd been yawning through in earlier sections. Penelope Gonzalez and Brian Flynn achieved much the same effect in "Moonlight."

If we felt *Views* presented many attractive elements that were often dragged down by their music, the second piece on Saturday's program, *Wien* (1995), provided an electrifying demonstration of Rioul's ability to illuminate a musical score.

*Wien* is set to Ravel's *La valse*, a piece which Vic's younger self had mistakenly dismissed after a few listenings. "Why those ominous undertones? Why does the composer refuse to delight us in this piece?" But, as Rioul's program notes point out, *La valse* comes with a potent back-story.

**To wit:** Ravel began work on *La valse*, originally titled "Wien" or "Vienna," in 1906 as a tribute to Johann Strauss Jr., seeing the Viennese waltz as a metaphor for "the fantastic whirl of destiny." But by the time the piece was finished in 1920, the post-WWI connotations of "destiny" had taken on a decidedly bitter tone, particularly in Vienna, where famine and epidemic reigned.

Accordingly, in the completed version of *La valse*, Ravel achieved what program notes for Chicago Symphony Orchestra describe as "a masterful evocation of the evasions and collisions between a brilliant surface and dangerous undercurrents." Intentionally or not, the composer had created in *La valse* a perfect musical metaphor for the socio-political situation in Vienna in 1920, and that is, in an abstracted way, the subject of Rioul's *Wien*.

Like Ravel, Rioul introduced a few core phrases, a rather small body of movement material, and reworked it throughout the ballet. As in a traditional waltz, the dancers periodically circled the floor, but the smooth progress of the circle was punctuated by dancers falling and body smacking into the ground. The dancers periodically held each other in a traditional ballroom embrace, but the embrace was interrupted by vicious assaults — head-butting and strangle holds. Grandiose poses with the arms held high were punctuated by ugly grappling. Late in *Wien*, a congruence of bright music and lighting was quickly undercut by starkly front-lit figures casting shadows on the cyclorama, as if a momentary euphoria were followed by crushing disillusion.

**Thus, in *Wien* we see,** as Rioul says in a program note, "The Viennese waltz, the very image of social refinement, becomes the symbol of a disintegrating society taken into a whirlpool of violence and humiliation." Or, as Jack Anderson said in a 1/19/95 review ([ReView](#)) that segued into high praise, "*Wien* showed a whole urban class system falling apart; this was choreography on a grand scale, yet he used only six dancers."

Strong stuff. *Wien* ended to loud, whooping applause, as though the collective audience were all saying “that’s more like it.”

Rioul’s *Bolero* (2002) is not as strong as *Wien*, but it inevitably appeared last in Saturday’s program. Here, as in *Wien*, the choreographer’s plan closely resembled that of the composer, taking a small body of choreographic material and finding interesting ways to repeat it. Many of the movements and movement patterns we’d seen in *Views* and *Wien* occurred again in *Bolero*, but with a totally different effect.

*Bolero* began with seven of the eight dancers engaged in quick, mechanical arm movements while the 8th dancer typically engaged in flowing, sustained extensions of the legs and trunk. The dancers periodically circled the stage, often dancing around one or two dancers in the center.

**It is perhaps inevitable for Cleveland audiences** to compare any danced version of *Bolero* with Heinz Poll’s *Bolero*. Many of us old timers remember Ohio Ballet dancing that, while more recently it has been performed by Verb Ballets. We have a great affection for Poll’s mesmerizing choreographic economy, and cannot help but compare the two versions, though that is as if comparing apples to oranges.

Our impression is that Rioul stays closer to Ravel’s original mechanical inspiration, but that Poll’s imaginative costuming and choreographic choices take the viewer on a more fascinating journey. Movement in Poll’s *Bolero* is limited and controlled while Rioul’s movement choices are freer while retaining rhythmic precision.

The backdrop for Rioul’s *Bolero*, credited to Harry Feiner, depicted repetitive architectural forms. During the crescendo, the brown and black wash was suddenly highlighted in red.

The company’s website, <http://Rioul.org>, lists 13 other pieces by Rioul. We hope to see more of that work, performed either by the Rioul dancers or restaged at Case.

**Rioul performed at the Ohio Theatre on Sat 4/2/11.**



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