Things that go thump in the night

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Ismene Brown reviews Henri Oguike at the Bury St Edmunds Festival

When people go to see dance, noise is an issue. With flamenco or Michael Flatley you expect lots of it, but ballet-goers are often distressed that ballerina ethereality is accompanied by thumps as pointes hit the floor.

In British contemporary dance, noise is no less embarrassing, judging from the physical timidity of much choreography. Hurtling about makes sounds: hence the refreshing appeal of Henri Oguike.

This young Welsh-Nigerian choreographer is turned on by the percussion of driving bare feet hard into the ground - though equally switched on by the springiness of the elastic, well-trained foot to launch light leaps or to curl sensually into an S shape. But away from theatres' solid floors, Oguike runs big risks. On a temporary stage in an echoey Suffolk cathedral, his latest dances might as well have been performed on a drum, with the orchestra inside a duvet.

For Bury St Edmunds Festival, Oguike collaborated with the fine Britten Sinfonia premièring dances to a Steve Martland world première score for the Sinfonia, Tiger Dancing, and to Michael Tippett's 1939 Concerto for Double String Orchestra.

A sparky initiative, but set inside St Edmundsbury Cathedral, with the orchestra's grassy textures coming from the choir behind a stage on which every footstep sounded like the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, the premières were given sabotaging conditions.

However, the Tippett looks pretty good. It is a blithe, lush score, with echoes of fresh-air Copland and melancholic Mahler. Oguike picks up the dewiness with a verdant first movement - couples in white and lime clothes chain-dancing sweetly like an Attic frieze. What dialogue their splattering feet were making with Tippett, though, was impossible to tell in the acoustical imbalance.

Suddenly silence, low blue light and a lone man walking out through the orchestra - the tremendous Nuno Silva, with a ravishing solo that starts casually like something from Oklahoma! (thanks to the gospel gentleness of the music there) but turns wonderfully deep and soft, full of aching, arching movements and fast plunges, as if he were seizing on memories.

The other dancers drift into the pillars, and occasional lights pass, like car headlights (Guy Hoare's lighting). The final movement builds impressively on Tippett's double idea, the spirited group invisibly separated from the watching Silva, with Oguike's poetic instinct in lively flow. The work begs to be staged properly.

Martland's première, Tiger Dancing, inspired by William Blake's Tiger poem, is vivid and well-sprung, real dance music, but for once Oguike's imaginative claws didn't feel dug in. The dancers, in shredded brown leotards like ornamental tree bark, were locked into a fussy little tittup and some prowling on all fours that needs development to lose its zoo look.

But then, it was following his masterly 2002 sextet Front Line - the evening's front line, indeed. Very few dances premièred in the past decade equal this exacting and exciting creation to Shostakovich's manic-depressive ninth string quartet - the one work where the added floor noise actually increased the thrill of it, though perhaps not for the valiant musicians.

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