Mark Morris frolicking with Mozart

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Ismene Brown reviews the Mark Morris Dance Group's Mozart Dances at the Barbican

IT is almost commonplace to describe the contemporary choreographer Mark Morris as Mozartian, thanks to his instinct for irreverent humour and reverence for form, but

to be Mozartian to Mozart is the test.

Mozart's crystal surfaces impede choreography and narrative through their formality and rejection of overt emotionalism, and choreographers usually go for drowning some of the familiar sad tunes in lakes of sentimentality.

Morris calls his piece Mozart Dances, and indeed Mozart dances, a feast for eyes as tender, witty and piercing as it is for the ears. Morris has leapt straight to the greatest difficulty, trebled it, and solved the problem. You might think that if you took three pieces (two piano concertos, the Double Piano Sonata), each of which has three movements - fast, slow, fast - you would be obliged to end with three repetitions of happy-sad-happy, a sort of musical Sudoku.

But the American designs them into a blithe three-act human comedy, almost a Mozart opera, using the bare-footed, peasanty men and women of his dance company in a vivid pastorale where Leporello, Tamino, Pamina and the doubting lovers of Così fan tutte seem to crowd into the stage along with dance observations about the relationship of piano to orchestra here, or major key to minor there, or private experience to public statement, the whole blowing lightly from thought to emotion to dramatic incident like the feathery down suggested by Howard Hodgkin's three gorgeous backdrops.

The 11th and 27th Piano Concertos are played with ideal simplicity by the distinguished Emanuel Ax, conducted by Jane Glover. The choices avoid any strident emotion, freeing Morris to set his own passionate agenda, make his own jokes.

My heart sank when Mozart Dances opened with a camp line-up of bare-chested men hoofing like Greek waiters, but their tomfoolery serves to underline the entrance of a lone girl, the way pretence contrasts with truth.

It becomes a delicate concerto for girl and women, in which bubble-haired Lauren Grant, like the piano, is essentially apart from the others. Echoes of Balanchine's Serenade and of Giselle's Wilis colour the girlish romanticism with a grave, strange atmosphere.

An anguished gesture of arms like snapped wings recurs on a diminished chord, Morris and Mozart emitting a cry together. Life is lonely, and then we die.

After the fragmented women, it's the men's turn in the Double Piano Sonata, men in contrasted brotherhood, holding arms firmly in a passionate circle, tilting with unseen winds but always supporting a youth who, like Tamino in The Magic Flute, seems to seek entry into a world of belonging where all is in balance, even for an outsider.

Our Tamino is left alone, asking questions of a frock-coated man, then wafted into a mythical afterlife by a soft host of girls in long tutus (Serenade again). Death can be gentle, too.

Mozart's final concerto marries the sexes in a deceptive lovers' frolic in which they hardly touch each other. The absence of eroticism in their merriment suddenly struck me during the rapturously sexy incident when a man jumps on to another in ecstasy. From that moment, the dynamism of these folksy pairs was more about hope than fulfilment.

Life is lonely, the piece ends, but life is still a bloody good thing. Mozart dances, Morris entrances.

- Until tomorrow. Tickets: 0845 120 7550

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