A perfect partner in Scarlatti

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DANCE
Siobhan Davies Dance Company
Touring

DOMENICO Scarlatti (1685-1757) spent his final years composing 555 sonatas for the harpsichord, masterpieces of wit, pleasure and sweetness. Siobhan Davies has accustomed us to a more allusive sound world, by commissioning composers who share the oblique, slightly unsettled tonalities and rhythms that complement her enigmatic pieces.

Yet something extraordinary seems to have clicked between Davies and Scarlatti in her new piece, *The Art of Touch*. Sensationally beautiful, full of courtly elegance and sly merriment, the dance has an almost lustful physicality that is quite a surprise.

Perhaps it is Italy working its sensual ways on a reticent Englishwoman; certainly, Baroque Italy infuses the lovely designs, with marbled bronze walls and glimmering shafts of light bouncing off sophisticated black shiny bodices and long skirts.

Davies is, unexpectedly, a perfect dancing partner for Scarlatti: responding to his formality and to his inventiveness, making up a series of quick steps and then sweeping them away with a high, slow, arching leg, or some hearty thumps of the foot to match the harpsichord's bass line.

What is her own, though, is her witty play with the physical qualities of the harpsichord. The opening solo has the soft percussiveness of the fingers playing the keys; a staccato dance echoes the plucking of the quill upon the string.

Most wonderful of all, a sad couple waltz, as much at the mercy of their feelings as a string vibrating with its note. It's as if Scarlatti's intensely personal music has unlocked some answering fearlessness in Davies. And then, halfway through, Davies lost me.

She has allowed the young Matteo Fargion (born 1961) to take over from old Scarlatti, and he turns the harpsichord into an anxious, fretting instrument, while the clarity of all that went before slips and dissolves into an oddly shadowy, even confrontational mood. I find Fargion's sounds too earnest, too unsurprising. I wish Davies had danced on with her new Baroque partner, and on first viewing I can't fathom why she didn't.

A second look at a Davies piece used to be impossible, so determinedly "contemporary" was she. Now she is kinder and revives past work. *Wild Translations*, with its huge, whirling steel fan, outdoor African village sounds, and languid dancers pushing the humid air away, is an even deeper pleasure than last year. Davies repays many viewings, so discreetly rich is her imagination.

Touring to Swindon, Edinburgh, Canterbury and London. Details: 0171 250 3600.

ISMENE BROWN