

Star-Telegram

Flawed sound takes center stage at 'The Russian Masters'

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BY PUNCH SHAW

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FORT WORTH — The dancing was what should have mattered most.

Texas Ballet Theater presented a richly varied evening of dance called "The Russian Masters" at Bass Hall on Friday. The footwork was of a high quality throughout the program, and that would have normally been the point of greatest importance.

But on this night, it was impossible to ignore the elephant in the room: the issue of live vs. taped musical accompaniment. The troupe performed without its usual support from Fort Worth Symphony players, a move that the company made this season for financial reasons.

Pianist John Owings performed onstage in one segment, theater artistic director Ben Stevenson's gorgeous *Three Preludes*, but everything else was performed to recorded scores, and that created some controversy.

Pickets were seen outside the hall before the performance with placards protesting the move ("Press the Eject Button" read one). And inside the hall, the Texas Ballet Theater responded with a program insert defending the move and explaining how painful the change was for all concerned.

The performance opened in stunning fashion with a stage full of statue-still ballerinas in sheer white skirts posed before a shocking blue background. The audience gasped at the beauty of this tableau, which began George Balanchine's *Serenade*, a surprisingly traditional work set to the lush and lyrical *Serenade for Strings* by Tchaikovsky.

The second portion of the three-part performance offered a trio of works: the quick and lively *Flames of Paris*; Stevenson's languid *Three Preludes*; and the famous *Le Corsaire Pas de Deux*.

But after Owings' lovely live accompaniment, the recorded music used in the remaining pieces suddenly sounded brutally loud and metallically harsh.

So it was a fine night of ballet to see. But I think it is safe to assume that everybody involved wishes it had been better to hear.

Texas Ballet Theater's 'The Russian Masters' 8 p.m. today, 2 p.m. Sunday
Bass Hall

Fort Worth

\$19-\$99

877-828-9200

www.texasballettheater.org