

Music for an American Dance

Doris Humphrey

American Composer's Alliance Bulletin, vol 8 no. 1, 1958

Vivian Fine wrote a score for me some twenty years ago:—it was quite a score and quite an experience. She was a true collaborator in a field, that of composing for dance, which is so different from other kinds of program music that it calls for unique qualifications. The dance is an art which, through a part of the theater, has its roots in physical and psychological sources which differ from those of the opera, the film or the musical to a marked degree. All these forms, except programmatic concert music, depend on the word for explicit meaning; consequently music does not bear the full burden of the dramatic idea. Not so in dance, where words are rarely used and movements and music carry all the responsibility of communication. This means, among other things, that the theme must be suitable and intelligible in these terms—not everything can be danced about. So the first task in a collaboration of this sort is the choice of the idea by the choreographer.

My enthusiasm for James Thurber led me to select one of his series of drawings, at the time brand new, concerning the adventures of a middle class American family called *The Race of Life*. Vivian and I both loved his dry and improbable humor, and the episodes met all the requirements for dance: plenty of action, contrast, independence from words. The scenes were all quite short, six of them, and had subject matter with a challenging range; *The Beautiful Stranger*, *Night Creatures*, *Indians*, *Spring Song*, culminating in the achievement of the goal, a mountain top covered with the heart's desire—gold, jewels and money.

Vivian Fine met all these moods with imagination and a full awareness of their Thurberian gaucherie and humor. Even his *Beautiful Stranger* is no chic adolescent, but plainly bears the germ of the full-grown Thurber female, rather hard, aggressive and blowzy. To catch such a conception in music was a difficult feat. She treated the *Indians* with a very funny version of an authentic pseudo-Indian popular song. Both in the music and the dance our *Indians* were phony, gaudy cigar-store fixtures. *Night Creatures* was handled with grotesquerie, but still with a dreamlike delicacy. At this point she added to the all-piano score a *Flexatone* whose sliding eeriness exactly met the requirements of the weird scene. In its entirety it was a notable score—bright, humorous, expert.

Among many other pieces written for the dance by Vivian Fine, *Opus 51*, composed for Charles Weidman, stands out, but in all her undertakings in the dance field she has an uncanny sense of what to choose as sound and that *sine qua non* for dance composers, a complete understanding of body rhythms and dramatic timing.