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In a Starry Ballroom, To the World's Beat

By MINDY ALOFF

For the annual Midsummer Night Swing festival, which ingeniously presents world music in the context of an outdoor ballroom on the Lincoln Center Plaza each summer, Rebecca Weller, the founding producer, will fly halfway around the globe to hear bands recommended by her trusted network of connoisseurs. Once she finds the bands, however, she sometimes has to convince them that playing for dancers is worthwhile.

"I've had to educate a lot of musicians about doing this," she said, speaking as someone trained in classical piano. "When musicians get to a certain level, they sometimes don't want to play for dancers. It's below them. Yet I'm so passionate about it because it's music in a most exciting form. At a good dance, people are in each other's arms having a good time, and they want to stay there."

From the sights and sounds of things, the salsa evening during the opening week of the festival, which began on June 24, qualified as a good dance. Music was provided by the 21-piece Puerto Rican orchestra El Gran Combo, an outfit more than 40 years old that still drives dancers to plant little kisses on their partners every so often. This is while dancing in a style requiring so much body English in the neck, shoulders and hips that the kisses become a form of lip reading.

Last Friday night one could see vibrant interpretations of the salsa, a strutting dance with odd, syncopated waits that Stacey Lopez of the University of Puerto Rico had taught at a pre-performance lesson. There was an aerobic double-time version, where both dancers took two steps to each musical count. There was the Jell-O-on-springs version, where the large joints of the body rotated twice as fast as every step taken. There was the "I'm Princess Grace and he's Cary Grant" version, marked by balletic precision, head-snapping turns and a refrigerator's worth of distance between partners. There was a solo "I'm waiting for my girlfriend, who's late" version, where a guy (preferably in a Panama hat) loosens up alone in a fantastical vortex of competing rhythms throughout his body. There was the Palladium mambo version, with fireworks in the legs for the woman and existential hesitations for the man, who was so tightly sprung he seemed to be imploding in place.

Then there was the version practiced by a pair of 20-year-olds named Alejandro Sierra and Marguerita Stofan. The effect of this one depended in part on Ms. Stofan's costume: sandals with four-inch-high heels, a tailored suit with a miniskirt that bared her legs for about the length of a city block and a hip-length jacket that swung outward demurely. When Mr. Sierra went to partner Ms. Stofan, he placed his right hand on her waist in an orthodox salsa position. But to reach her waist, he had to insinuate his hand between her jacket and her blouse, so the look of the hold from a distance was so formal and so intimate, so cool and so hot, that within about 10 minutes Mr. Sierra had to cede Ms. Stofan to a bevy of new suitors.

Demanding Danceable Music

"The challenge of this festival," Ms. Weller said, "is to present high-caliber music that also fits the rules."

What are the rules?

"My guideline is that the music has to swing, an indefinable word, but still. And that goes for a merengue, a beguine or a two-step. For dancers, you can't have long horn solos to take you out of tempo, for example. A five-minute solo takes people out of tune."

Ms. Weller's rules create the climate for certain kinds of dance music, especially the kind conducive to steps and figures more demanding than sheer rhythmic improvisation. For young American clubgoers, who grew up with a rock-influenced dance called "nouvelle generation" compas in New York, the music of Haiti's L'Orchestre Septentrional, scheduled to play tonight, may be something rather new.

Septentrional, which is celebrating its golden anniversary as a dance band this year, specializes in the Haitian k'onpa, from which the word compas is derived. An ensemble of some 25 musicians, with a large complement of brass players, it offers complex and courtly arrangements of music to accompany a dance that will be taught before the performance by Nadia Dieudonne. The k'onpa is a swaying two-step, related like many Caribbean dances to marching, and capturing a bit of Haiti's complex history in its traces of African rhythms and European contredanse patterns.

Septentrional's appearance at the festival is special. The band, which still includes some of its founding musicians now in their 70's, doesn't travel easily in its entirety and when members have toured in the New York area, they have performed exclusively for Haitian communities. Last year, one of Ms. Weller's regular consultants, the disk jockey and radio interviewer Al Angeloro (who has written that his "love of Afro-Cuban and Caribbean rhythms borders on an obsession"), took her to Hempstead, N.Y., for a rare appearance by the full band.

The location was easy to find, he recalls, because of the many off-duty taxis, carrying Haitian drivers and their families in party clothes, making a beeline there. Ms. Weller, enchanted by the music, immediately made up her mind to take the band to the festival.

Mixing Bands for Effect

This year, Midsummer Night Swing features more orchestras than ever, many with well-known guest instrumentalists and vocalists. A few large ensembles, like the swing band of the tenor saxophonist Illinois Jacquet, who closes the festival on July 25, are working dance bands of long standing. Others are made up of veterans from historic or popular big bands, or, in the case of the American Theater Orchestra (playing on July 16), from Broadway pit orchestras.

The Chico O'Farrill Afro-Cuban Jazz Big Band is an all-star band. For the Midsummer festival and a few other appearances, it will play a special repertory of classic big-band swing, relying on period dance charts. The band is conducted by its founder, an arranger for Count Basie and Benny Goodman and one of the innovators of Latin jazz during the 1940's and 50's.

Despite the band's comparatively recent origins, however, Mr. Angeloro points out that it has "a lot to say," like Septentrional, which is why each has been given a full evening alone.

On 10 of the festival's 24 evenings, two (and in one case, three) bands have been paired. Ms. Weller derives particular delight from planning the mixed programming, which offers her a freedom to make connections similar to that enjoyed by disk jockeys.

Among her most imaginative groupings is the one on July 14, when Tanguardia, an American band well regarded among tango dancers for its Argentine tangos, milongas and waltzes, will share the bill with Orquesta la Moderna Tradicion, which specializes in the lovely, soft, yet structurally intricate Cuban dance form, danzon.

The tango, which emerged on the waterfront of Buenos Aires at the turn of the last century, and the danzon, which wended its way during the 1800's from Haiti to Cuba (and, in a varied offshoot, to Mexico), differ in their challenge to dancers. The tango is much more complex, but both traditions include a spectacular weave of influences from Europe and Africa, as well as from South America. (One section of the danzon, in fact, evolved into what is commonly known as the cha-cha.) To hear experts in both influential traditions on the same evening is an opportunity to sharpen the ear and appreciate the distinctive qualities of each.

Legacy of Immigration

Learning about the traditions of the musical styles presented at the Midsummer festival -- whether swing, country western or soul calypso -- is a way to see the dynamics of immigration. Today, these far-flung influences are called "multiculturalism." They could also be called, simply, music.

Even a strictly traditional acoustic band that specializes in a native musical repertory, like Moving Cloud (playing on July 23), virtuosos of historic Irish jigs, reels and hornpipes, range into related music from other continents; they also acknowledge diverse influences in their Irish tunes. Moving Cloud's founder, Paul Brock, is a master of several forms of the characteristically Irish accordion, which he learned to play as a child entirely by listening to recordings of older virtuosos.

The story of Irish music since the first wave of emigration during the great famine of the 1840's, he points out, is the story of Irish musicians traveling to distant lands, affecting and being in turn affected by the music they encountered there, then bringing the new music back to Ireland. In the 20th century, when many remarkable Irish instrumentalists landed in New York City, they sent back recordings. Growing up in the Irish Midlands during the 1950's, Mr. Brock listened intently to 78-r.p.m. records of Irish-American accordionists, brought to his home by a family friend.

Lincoln Center, which has sponsored the Midsummer festival since its first year in 1989, reports that roughly four-fifths of its audiences are listeners or dancers outside the bandstand. The remaining fifth are dancers who each pay \$10 to enter the set for an evening: 850 of them when the ballroom is filled to capacity, which can happen as early as 7 P.M. These dancers are given more than proximity to the often world-class musicians; they are treated to an excellent 80-foot-by-60-foot dance floor, and are invited to take pre-performance classes in basic elements of the featured dances, led by some of the finest teachers of social dancing in New York.

This year's roster of teachers includes staff or guest faculty members from several of New York's major dance studios, including world champions in competition dance like Pierre Dulaine and Yvonne Marceau, co-founders of American Ballroom Theater (teaching on July 16, before the American Theater Orchestra), Sandra Cameron (July 10, the orchestras of Steve Ross and Bob Hardwick), and Paul Grecki, who taught Ms. Weller to dance (July 25, Illinois Jacquet).

Mambo With Masters

There will be a class in mambo with the masters Eddie and Maria Torres (July 18, Azucar Negra) and in the hustle with Maria Torres (no relation), president of the annual Hustle U.S.A. Dance Championship, of which she was a co-founder (July 8, Loleatta Holloway and Rochelle Fleming). On July 14, the Argentine tango will be taught by the understated, Russian-born milonguero Tioma Maloratsky and his virtuosic Argentina-born partner, Viviana Parra; that same night the danzon will be demonstrated by the bravura percussionist Roberto Borrell, remarkable co-founder (with the violinist Tregar Otton) of Orquesta La Moderna Tradicion, who survived the Mariel boat lift from Cuba to resurrect his musical career in the United States.

Every evening, too, Midsummer dancers have a good view of the demonstrations by dance virtuosos that take place onstage during the band's break.

Last Saturday afternoon, a scowling sky notwithstanding, several hundred children, their parents in tow, presented themselves to Mr. Dulaine, the ballroom dancer and teacher extraordinaire, for an "Iced Tea Dance" lesson to recorded music. Mr. Dulaine, who has a thriving program of ballroom dance classes for students in 4th, 6th and 10th grades in the New York City public schools, expects to see results in an hour, and he takes a good-humored military approach to effect them.

"How do you spell tango?" he shouted into a microphone wrapped around his movie-star profile.

A thin voice piped up from the crowd: "T-A-N-G-O."

"That's right!" Mr. Dulaine said. "How old are you?"

"Ten," said the voice.

"Pretty good," Mr. Dulaine said. "Now. You're all going to take three walks forward on the first three letters: T-A-N. Then step on one foot and bring the other in to meet it slowly. That's G-O. The rhythm is slow, slow, uh-quick-quick, slow. Do it for me!"

Giving the crowd its marching orders, he cried at the top of his lungs: "T-A-N-G-O. Tango! Next step!"

By the end of an hour, children so small that their partnering parents had to hunch down to hold them properly in a ballroom "frame" had more or less gotten the idea. Then, just as the storm clouds were breaking, Mr. Dulaine gathered the audience before the bandstand for a demonstration by young ballroom dancers of eye-popping accomplishment: mamboing teenagers from the Eddie Torres Junior Company and a pair of junior amateur world-dance competitors from the Kaiser Dance Academy in Brooklyn, run by Victor Kanevsky. The couple -- 10-year-old Victorya Smushki and 11-year-old Artem Shukhat -- performed a medley of dances while the rain fell. The audience, drop-jawed, stayed put to watch.

"Be choreographers," one onlooker wished. "Bring back the musicals to make people want to dance like that."

A Beat for the Feet

What makes music danceable? All the Midsummer dance teachers and musicians asked mentioned a consistent tempo, but perhaps the most detailed answer was offered by the venerable master of Southwestern guitar styles, Clarence (Gatemouth) Brown, who appeared during the festival's first week with his Big Easy band.

"First," Mr. Brown said, "you've got to have the beat just right. Then you've got to stick to a theme. A song or tune should have a melody. Never play three slow tunes in a row. And don't play a tune so long that people forget what you're playing. A song with too many lyrics isn't good; short, sweet and snappy is best. The music shouldn't be too loud. I like to make every tune sound different, too. Even if two in a row have to be in the same key every now and then, you vary the structure of the sound."

Anything else?

"The music should say something."

It Takes Two

Here is the schedule of Midsummer Night Swing programs at the Fountain Plaza at Lincoln Center. Dance lessons are offered at 6:30 P.M. and dancing lasts from 8:15 to 11 P.M. Tickets are \$10, except where noted, and are available at the Lincoln Center box office or by calling (212) 721-6500.

TODAY, L'Orchestre Septentrional, a Haitian dance band, plays compas and rumba.

TOMORROW, "Saluting Armstrong and America," David Ostwald and His Gully Low Jazz Band, with Jon Faddis, plays 20's and 30's swing.

TUESDAY, the Loren Schoenberg Big Band and George Gee and His Make-Believe Ballroom Orchestra play swing.

WEDNESDAY, Loleatta Holloway and Rochelle Fleming do the hustle, as Coati Mundi traces the history of the dance in a musical narration.

THURSDAY, Miles Pena plays salsa with an ensemble conducted by Ralph Irizarry, and Johnny Almendra y Los Jovenes del Barrio plays charanga and son.

JULY 10, Steve Ross and His Deluxe Orchestra, featuring Paul Lindemeyer, and Bob Hardwick and His Orchestra, play 30's society music and swing.

JULY 11, the Chico O'Farrill Afro-Cuban Jazz Big Band plays big band swing, mambo and cha-cha.

JULY 14, Tanguardia, with Isabel de Sebastian, and Orquesta la Moderna Tradicion play Argentine tango and Cuban danzon.

JULY 15, the Derailers, Don Walser and the Pure Texas Band and Jesse Dayton play country and western.

JULY 16, "Broadway Swings," the American Theater Orchestra, conducted by Mike Berkowitz and featuring Debbie Gravitte, plays swing, fox trots and the waltz.

JULY 17, Ricardo Lemvo and Makina Loca, from the Democratic Republic of Congo, and Arrow play salsa, soca and rumba.

JULY 18, the American debut of the Cuban band Azucar Negra, playing salsa and son with the singer Haila.

JULY 21, Geno Delafosse and French Rockin' Boogie and Balfa Toujours play Cajun and zydeco.

JULY 22, "Fifth Annual Evening of International Dancing and Desserts," with Brave Combo, featuring Peter Ostroushko and Lewis Kahn, leading various dances, including the two-step, fox trot, polka, hora and charanga. Tickets: \$25 for desserts and dancing.

JULY 23, the Irish band Moving Cloud plays sets and ceilis.

JULY 24, Marce et Tumpak, from Martinique, and Joseito Mateo (El Rey del Merengue), from the Dominican Republic, play merengue, compas and zouk.

JULY 25, the saxophonist Illinois Jacquet plays swing with his big band.