

SUNDAY, July 20, 1997

Dance with live music is the way it ought to be done

Encouraging signs about the future relationship between music and dance have been popping up around the state in the past couple of weeks.

As most dance fans know, in the past 10 years or so it has become the fashion even with some of the nation's top companies to dance exclusively to canned music piped (usually too loudly) through speakers. Only a few die-hard companies, mostly ballet, have avoided succumbing to the financial temptation to abandon expensive live musicians in favor of cheap electronic musical reproduction.

Even at the N.C. School of the Arts, which houses one of the country's most important dance schools but also has a conservatory full of instrumentalists, canned music seems to have been accepted as suitable inspiration for dancers in performance. Yes, the arts school's annual *Nutcracker* productions have a real orchestra (notably not the school's own), and occasionally an enterprising faculty member will enlist a musician or two when presenting a new work. But an evening of dance with live music is distressingly rare at what otherwise functions as a hotbed of American dance training.

(The standard complaint of arts-school officials, of course, is that coordinating music-school and dance-school schedules to bring dancers and musicians together onstage is only rarely possible. To which one might well ask, "But if not here, where?")

What's perhaps most important about having live music to feed dancers in performance is that static, unchanging, two-dimensional musical performances on tape or compact disc give dancers nothing new to react to in performance. If music is supposed to be the source of a dancer's movement, tired familiarity with a predictable tape or CD — from rehearsal to performance — inevitably will make a dancer focus only on technical matters.

But about those encouraging signs. Robert Weiss, a former dancer with the New York City Ballet, has been named the artistic director of the Carolina Ballet in Raleigh (more on this at a future date). Weiss' mandate from a newly formed board, led by Ward Purrington, a Raleigh lawyer, is to build a nationally significant ballet company from scratch, a company that will put North Carolina on the cultural map the way Edward Villella's Miami City Ballet did for Miami.

Weiss said recently that he is committed to having his ballet company, which is to debut in March 1998, dance to a live orchestra. In fact, he said, he can't imagine *real* ballet being performed to anything but.

Nor should audiences.

On a smaller scale, violinist Gil Morgenstern and dancer Mary Cochran's NCNY Dance project at An Appalachian Summer in Boone just finished its second annual installment of that festival's continuing experi-

mental look at how dancers and musicians can affect each other in performance.

Morgenstern and Cochran's high-powered roster of musicians and dancers — the musicians form the core of the Broyhill Chamber Ensemble, the dancers and choreographers have histories with such companies as Paul Taylor's, Martha Graham's and Pearl Lang's — put together an evening of dances paired with live performances of solo and chamber works by Ravel, Prokofiev, Bach, Mendelssohn, Brahms and Szymanowski. The musicians prominently shared the stage with the dancers, giving the choreographers the opportunity to have their dancers play off not only the music's sound, but also its visual component, in a way that George Balanchine famously did in his dance setting of Stravinsky's *Duo Concertante*.

This past week, at the American Dance Festival, a similar audio-visual pairing of dancer and musician took place with the official premiere of choreographer/dancer Mark Haim's completed setting of Bach's "Goldberg" Variations. Haim performed his solo dance as pianist Andre Gribou rattled off the variations on piano nearby on stage. And even though these evenings of dance and music left something to be desired, they gave their audiences much more than the usual dose of live-performance thrills.

These are experiments in process. Good ones, surely with important eventual results for the future of dance.