



OUT OF NOTHING

by Daniel Gilliam videostills by Valerie Sullivan Fuchs



After hearing a five-minute preview of *Between Stillness* by the composer Steve Rouse, with choreography by Artistic Director of the American Repertory Ballet, Graham Lustig, I was struck by how it felt both new and familiar at the same time. Knowing very little about this upcoming commission, a merging of dance and music based on the sculptures of Frederick Hart, just *why* what I was hearing was so familiar, yet at the same time fresh and new, still needed clarification.

It was no accident that most of my conversation with Rouse was spent discussing a mutual admiration: Igor Stravinsky. Indeed, it was Stravinsky who defined the role of a composer in relation to a choreographer, whether Vaslav Nijinsky, Sergei Diaghilev or George Balanchine. This marriage of composition to dance is unique to a few composers (John Cage and Merce Cunningham, for example) because the technical demands can be so overwhelming.

Typically a composer first creates a composition, and then expects musicians to execute what is on the page. Now throw into the mix dancers who not only cannot see a musical score, but also are dependent on the accuracy of the conductor and musicians and their respective abilities to stick to their metronomic guns for the entire performance. There can be no sudden urges to “hold back” or “move forward” in mid-performance, or a jeté may come too soon. In essence, the composer’s job is to create a score that considers the physicality of dancing (greater than the average human being), the overall goals or messages of the production, and various personal creative and musical gestures. In other words, this is a job for a professional.

The genesis for this project began when the University of Louisville joined forces with trustee and art collector George Fischer, and his wife Mary Lee, to bring over 100 works by Frederick Hart to various locations on the Belknap Campus the new Cressman Center for the Visual Arts on Main Street under the title *Frederick Hart: Giving Form to Spirit*. In December 2006, Christopher Doane, Dean of the School of Music at the University of Louisville, approached Rouse about a commission for a new ballet based on the work of Hart. In a joint effort, the Louisville Ballet commissioned Graham Lustig for the choreography.

Rouse certainly didn’t lack the experience to tackle this project. At an early age he showed a propensity towards improvisation, forming his own R&B group while playing bassoon in the Gulf Coast Symphony at the age of thirteen. He then spent three years as the Music Director of the East Michigan University Dance Division (1979-1982), which involved keyboard improvisation for six hours a day, three to four days a week. Sometimes the dances were lengthy (lasting up to thirty minutes), and required very precise accompaniment to changing characters and moods. While some exercises could be easily fit into four and eight counts, more often Rouse was required to create shifting meters, perhaps alternating between five, seven, four, and three counts. His

responsibilities also included mixing soundtracks of more standard repertoire for company performances.

To prepare for an upcoming commission, a composer will often revisit past works that are successful in that particular genre, be they symphonies, string quartets, or ballets. While composing *Between Stillness*, Rouse sought the advice of Tchaikovsky, studying his quintessentially Russian ballets. Igor Stravinsky, who carried on the musical bloodline of the *Ballet Russes*, and from whom we received the ballet revelations *The Firebird*, *Petrouchka*, *The Rite of Spring*, *Pulcinella*, *Apollo*, *The Fairy’s Kiss*, *Jeu de Cartes*, *Scenes de Ballet*, *Orpheus*, and *Agon*, was also looked upon. Indeed, the creative tension between the simultaneous familiarity and novelty in Rouse’s score is achieved through his deep understanding of that which has made the music of Tchaikovsky and Stravinsky so appealing.

Before a composer begins to put notes to paper, careful strategizing takes place to ensure that any guidelines or boundaries set by the choreographer and commissioner(s) are honored. In this case, the duration of 18 to 20 minutes was imposed. Next came the choice to cast the entire ballet in three parts, to represent a triptych of sculptures by Frederick Hart. With very tight deadlines and virtually no time for rewrites, Rouse had to be deadly accurate with his timings and intentions. Stravinsky is said to have been a slave to the stopwatch, and was capable of delivering a commission that finished within seconds of the desired length. In *Between Stillness*, Rouse has managed to achieve this same exactness.

The myth of inspiration bears heavily on any professional artist. The fairy tale that a sudden flood of notes and rhythms fall perfectly in place, overwhelming the composer, and that all at once the ideas are put onto paper in final form couldn’t be further from the truth. True professionals do not require inspiration (unless you consider money and a good recording inspiring), but rather a few boundaries, like those described above, and a date by which to turn in the score and parts. Once the process of composing begins, large portions of the musical ideas are already present in the composer’s mind—and fingers. Each composer has a certain vocabulary from which to draw, and regardless of the audience, his or her musical fingerprint will always be both present and unavoidable. That which occurs between this beginning phase and the completion of a score is as much a mystery to me (also a composer) as to anyone else. It is a private and se;cretive process that has been compared to childbirth: a gestational period that consumes both emotionally and physically.

Between Stillness is based on three of Frederick Hart's best-known sculptures: *The Creation of Day*, *Ex Nihilo*, and *The Creation of Night*. All three can be seen at the National Cathedral in Washington, D.C., immediately above its front doors. *Ex Nihilo* (meaning "Out of Nothing") found its way into pop culture in the 1997 film *The Devil's Advocate*, starring Al Pacino and Keanu Reeves. The piece served as the backdrop to one of the film's more sinister scenes, in which its still figures become animated as Pacino's true character is revealed. Contrary to this portrayal, *Ex Nihilo*, in fact, serves as an icon for a more innocent, though no less turbulent idea. Frederick Turner, Founders Professor of Arts and Humanities at the University of Texas at Dallas and co-author of *Frederick Hart: The Complete Works*, calls this centerpiece "the great galactic whirlpool" that begets life, form, and beauty, and indeed, it is these artistic ideals that Lustig and Rouse have pursued through their dance and musical compositions.

Lustig's choreography asks the dancers to transfigure between fluid motions and complex structures. The *between* of the title allows the dancers to mimic the "swirl" of chaos, mixing and matching with the others to suddenly become frozen—*stillness*—as in a Hart sculpture. Hart's impeccable ability to capture the human form as though pausing in real life, while at the same time allowing his figures to breathe and move while remaining transfixed, is evident in Lustig's choreography.

Steve Rouse's score for *Between Stillness* is full of intense, energetic passages that propel the listener through the swirling cosmos of creation. From the dawning of mankind in *The Creation of Day*, musical gestures include bowing across the edge of suspended cymbals to create gentle, metallic moans, along with bubbling strings as though in pursuit of a companion molecule or atom. Brisk, flickering orchestral brush strokes create bolts of sound that ignite the opening minutes. There are moments of sensuality emphasized by arching melodies, and bursts filled with primitive cadences and marches. Rouse's score calls for strings, harp and percussion—but no winds. Apart from the intentional percussion-filled blast, Rouse is conservative with the orchestra, never overdoing it and always allowing the listener time to take in the aural scenery. An arch frames the three sculptures on which *Between Stillness* is based, and Rouse's score envelopes the listener in a musical arch, with themes and melodies that return throughout.

Composers and choreographers are the rare artists that require a professional third-party to carry out their creative visions. It doesn't suffice to simply put intentions to paper. Someone (a musician or dancer) has to decipher the code and retransmit it for an audience to interpret. In this way, composers and choreographers are the most disadvantaged of artists, constantly hoping for an ensemble that will allow them to pull their heads out of the "classics" and take a risk on something new.

To accept a new creation is to have faith in the old. Just as Hart depicted the creation of the Universe in his triptych, in *Between Stillness* Rouse and Lustig have created and emulated that initial act. Whether theistic, agnostic, or atheistic, our desire to become a creator through expression is really a primitive wish to emulate that which has remained a mystery since the very beginning of time: life itself.

Omnia fint ex nihilo. ♀

American Vanguards with a World Premiere by Graham Lustig and original music by Steve Rouse, performed by the Louisville Ballet on February 29th & March 1st at the Kentucky Center, 501 W. Main Street, Louisville, box office tel 502 584 7777 / louisvilleballet.org

New Work by Valerie Sullivan Fuchs on March 7 at Gallery NuLu, 632 E. Market Street, 2nd floor, Louisville, tel 502 561 1162 / galerynulu.com



Valerie Sullivan Fuchs Untitled, 2007, video stills