



Notes on the Program

By James M. Keller, Program Annotator

Dance Figures: Nine Choreographic Scenes for Orchestra

George Benjamin

After 18 years teaching at the Royal College of Music, George Benjamin was named the Henry Purcell Professor of Composition at King's College, London, in 2001, succeeding Harrison Birtwistle in that position. Recognized as one of the foremost British composers of his time, Benjamin has been widely acknowledged in his native country and abroad. He was named Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres by the French government in 1996, elected to the Bavarian Academy of Fine Arts in 2000, and awarded the Deutsche Symphonie-Orchester's first-ever Schoenberg Prize for composition in 2001.

Benjamin's formation as a composer was international in nature. Following early work in piano and composition in England, he moved to France to study composition with Olivier Messiaen and piano with Yvonne Loriod; he then returned to England to become a pupil of Alexander Goehr at King's College, Cambridge. Both nations provided platforms for his early successes in the 1980s. Since then his

music has been warmly embraced in the United States as well: his symphonic pieces have been commissioned by the orchestras of San Francisco, Los Angeles, Cleveland, Chicago, and Boston, and he has become a frequent faculty member at the Berkshire Music Festival at Tanglewood. Retrospectives of his work have been undertaken by the London Symphony Orchestra, as well as by ensembles in Brussels, Tokyo, Berlin, Strasbourg, and Madrid. He also provided compositions for the opening festivities of two important concert halls: Manchester's Bridgewater Hall and Tokyo's Opera City Concert Hall.

In addition to being a composer, Benjamin has often appeared as a pianist and a conductor, more often as the latter. On the podium he typically champions the music of 20th- and 21st-century composers, and he has led the premieres of compositions by György Ligeti, Gérard Grisey, Unsuk Chin, and Wolfgang Rihm, among other notable figures.

In Short

Born: January 31, 1960, in London, England

Resides: in London

Work composed: 2004, on a joint commission from the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie/Koninklijke Muntchouwborg (Brussels); the Chicago Symphony Orchestra for its MusicNOW series; and Strasbourg Musica. Dedicated: "For Sam, Rosie, Alex, and Francesca"

World premiere: as a concert work, on May 19, 2005, at Orchestra Hall, Chicago, Daniel Barenboim conducting the Chicago Symphony Orchestra; as a ballet, on May 17, 2006, conducted by Kazushi Ono at the Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie in Brussels with the Rosas Dance Company, choreographed by Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker

New York Philharmonic premiere: these concerts, which mark the work's New York premiere

Estimated duration: ca. 17 minutes

Although his writing displays the sort of meticulous attention to detail we may associate with many French composers, Benjamin's own evolving style has not usually seemed particularly French, unless we would consider his fascination with some of the interests of the *musique spectrale* composers in the 1980s as such. At least in their fastidious-

ness, some of his works may more directly suggest his interest in the compositional rigor of Webern and, by extension, the canonic processes of Renaissance composers. Indeed, a prominent canon is to be heard in the eighth section of *Dance Figures*.

Benjamin's works often take an inordinately long time — years, even — to germinate,

The Work at a Glance

George Benjamin has provided this listening guide in the published score of *Dance Figures*:

Nine short movements, several interlinked, all defined by strong contrasts in character, form, and color.

- I. A simple introduction, exclusively for divided high strings, leading through a suspended chord to:
- II. An ornate melody shared amongst the winds, underpinned by a sonorous harmonic texture. Its calm conclusion is joined to:
- III. A brief polyphonic movement, divided into two halves — the first *legato* and plaintive, the second more energetic and pointed.
- IV. Various musical materials cross-cut and superimpose in this volatile movement: virtuoso woodwind flourishes, heavy chords in the lowest regions of the orchestra, a fierce quartet of horns, a hesitant oboe solo ... On its third appearance a distant, slow chorale links to:
- V. A flowing song, sharing the main line between a viola solo and muted trumpets. An abrupt change of atmosphere marks the coda, where an E-flat clarinet takes the foreground.
- VI. The full orchestra, employed as a single mass, placed almost entirely in a high register. Monolithic pulses are disrupted by abrupt changes in pace while blaring melodic fragments hocket across the brass.
- VII. After a pause, a complete contrast — a veiled texture, subdued and low in tessitura. A deep major third in muted trombones leads to:



George Benjamin

VIII. A longer movement, reflective in mood and scored for chamber-like resources. A dark-hued canon between bass clarinets and cellos prefaces three statements of the same simple melody. At each recurrence the tempo slows considerably while the melody is harmonized and embellished in different ways.

IX. A very short but energetic *Presto*, exploiting a play of perspectives across the full orchestra as a melodic line, mainly in the first violins, spins its way through a mass of other materials.

but when they reach the point he's seeking, he knows it. He observes:

There may be millions of notes in a work, but when you really find the right notes, and they resonate in the right way, something mysterious happens. It's that moment when things suddenly lock into each other, and you realize: I've got a piece!

In this context, the work played here was an exception:

Dance Figures really is different, not least because it took me only three months to write from beginning to end. I had seen Balanchine's wonderful choreography to Stravinsky's *Agon*, with its little forms that leave space and air for dancers to work in, and it seemed to me that writing for dance demands a succession of small forms rather than narrative, symphonic discourse.

In fact, Benjamin had something of a head start on this work, since he describes *Dance Figures* as "a much expanded orchestral transcription of *Piano Figures*, a series of short piano pieces intended for children to play."

Whether many children are actually playing *Piano Figures* is not known; the ten-movement suite (composed in 2004) was premiered in 2006 by Pierre-Laurent Aimard, and Benjamin sometimes performs it himself.

In the solo-piano setting (*Piano Figures*), the sections are identified by subtitles, which are omitted from the published orchestral score (*Dance Figures*). The first six numbers are performed without a break, as are the final three, yielding a two-part structure that stops for a breather only about two-thirds of the way through the piece. *Dance Figures* was imagined from the outset as both a score to be choreographed and as a stand-alone orchestral work.

Instrumentation: three flutes (two doubling piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets (one doubling E-flat clarinet, one doubling bass clarinet) plus an E-flat clarinet, two bassoons and contrabassoon, four horns, two trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, temple blocks, guiros, ratchets, tam-tam, bass drum, orchestra bells, cymbals, anvils, fishing-rod reel (or very quiet ratchet), cowbells, vibraphone, whip, vibra-slap, snare drums, tambourine, log drums, alarm bell, harp, celesta, and strings.