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Older works surpass Morris' new 'Rock of Ages'

- Steven Winn

For audiences who cherish his work -- as well as those who may not -- a prevailing aspect of Mark Morris' choreography is its rigorous attention to music. What many value as a gratifying translation from organized sound to patterned movement others can find stifling and literal-minded.

Both camps could marshal evidence from the company's second program of this month's annual Cal Performances run in Berkeley. In it, Morris spans the centuries and, in the process, the decades of his own work. The evening opens with "I Don't Want to Love" (1996), a suite of loosely stylized court dances set to 17th century madrigals by Monteverdi. That's followed by the choreographer's early, joyful homage to Balanchine and Bach, the 1985 "Marble Halls."

The program's ostensible headliner -- the world premiere of "Rock of Ages," on a brief Schubert piano trio -- comes after intermission. "V," a 2001 setting of Schumann's Quintet in E-Flat for Piano and Strings, Op. 44, rounds out this broad survey. The final performance is tonight at Zellerbach Hall.

The most sustained case for Morris' sense of musical purpose plays out in "V," the evening's exhilarating closer. Almost every musical event in Schumann's broad four-movement quintet, it seems, is registered in the dance. From the work's overall grand design, which is built from two V-shaped corps of seven contrastingly costumed dancers, to key and tempo changes, the onset of development sections and false cadences, correspondences are vividly, pictorially expressed.

Consider the striking praying-mantis posture that surfaces briefly in the opening Allegro and then dominates the dirgelike march movement that follows. It seems, at first, a kind of sight gag, as one dancer after another assumes a four-point stance and creeps forward across the stage precisely to the beat, head held rigidly alert.

But as the movement unfolds, so do the complexity, internal rhythm and emotional temperament. Creeping and pausing, pausing and creeping in deliberate yet teasingly unpredictable ways, these insect-dancers seem driven by a force at once random and sublimely ordered. One by one, and finally in a fragile, achingly beautiful pattern, they are empowered to rise from four feet to two and continue on, into the wings, into the future. It's like watching evolution happen.

"V," which belongs in the highest rank of Morris' output, continually finds the liberating pulse in its carefully wrought schemes. In the limber and discursive opening movement, groups of three dancers keep assembling and releasing one another when their hands touch. Exultant diagonals



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