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# Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

## Bending Over Backwards for Bach and Bernstein

Ann Haskins · Tuesday, March 15th, 2022

Germany's master storyteller just happens to be an American and he's visiting LA with two tales to tell. Born in Wisconsin, John Neumeier has helmed Germany's internationally celebrated **Hamburg Ballet** for close to 50 years. As a choreographer, Neumeier is famous for his ability to interweave seemingly unrelated elements to bring new insights to familiar tales. His *Les Dames de Camellias* (*Lady of the Camellias*) juxtaposes the title courtesan with similar characters and elements in *Manon*, and his version of *The Little Mermaid* splices the author Hans Christian Andersen into the action as a narrator as well as a character with his own tale to tell.



John Neumeier. Photo courtesy of the artist

Hamburg Ballet has visited SoCal before but this marks the company's debut at the Music Center. The choreographer and 60 **Hamburg Ballet** dancers arrive for three weeks of performances, some with the **LA Opera** and some shows on their own. Neumeier's *Bernstein Dances* is presented as part of the Music Center's **Gloria Kaufman Presents Dance** series with a live orchestra conducted by Garrett Keast. That ballet offers familiar hits from composer Leonard Bernstein's like *Westside Story* and *Candide* along with less familiar compositions to consider how the music reflects the composer's life and charisma. The 1998 work drew on Neumeier's friendship with Bernstein and is dedicated to the composer.

With the LA Opera, **Hamburg Ballet** dancers fill the stage to tackle J.S. Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* with music director James Conlon conducting the singers and orchestra. Premiered in 1980, Neumeier's *St. Matthew Passion* is set to Johann Sebastian Bach's 1727 sacred oratorio for solo voices, choir and orchestra. When the music alone is presented, it sometimes is performed over two days. In John Neumeier's ballet both parts are in one performance which is how it will be presented in Los Angeles with the opera's music director James Conlon conducting.



Hamburg Ballet's "St. Matthew Passion." Photo by Kiran West

Interviewed by telephone, two of the company's principal dancers, Anna Laudere and Alexandr Trusch, shared their perspectives on the two ballets, the roles they dance, how they became part of **Hamburg Ballet**, and their distinctive experience working with Neumeier.

**Q:** With *St. Matthew Passion*, you will be working with LA Opera's music director James Conlon for the first time. Does that happen often?

**Alexandr:** This will be only the second time *St. Matthew Passion* will be conducted by anyone other than Günter Jena so LA Opera's music director James Conlon conducting, that is very significant. When it was choreographed, John worked closely with Günter Jena, the choral director at Hamburg's largest church. Apart from one performance with live music in Moscow in 2017, Jena conducted the orchestra and singers in all of the performances with live music. Jena also conducted for the film of the ballet and the recording used for performances without a live orchestra.

**Anna:** Every time the music starts, it always moves me and I have to hold the tears back. It is so powerful. We have 41 dancers onstage and most do not leave the stage for the entire work. Once I'm inside the music, I am reacting to what is going on, imagining how I would react to a horrible situation and what I would do. *St. Matthew Passion* is an incredible journey. It's one of my most favorite ballets.



Hamburg Ballet's Anna Laudere with Edvin Revazov. Photo by Kiran West

(Asked about *Bernstein Dances*, Anna advises it is not a ballet she dances. Not only is it one Alexandr does dance, he often dances the “Bernstein” role and is likely to be cast to dance it in Los Angeles.)

**Q:** Please tell me about *Bernstein Dances* and your role in it.

**Alexandr:** *Bernstein Dances* has a lot of Bernstein's greatest hits, but it would have been boring if John had created a normal biography. Instead, *Bernstein Dances* captures different parts of Leonard Bernstein's life and connects that life with the music he wrote. It is put in an abstract way although the first act introduces the composer, his Broadway successes like *Westside Story*, his rise as a conductor, and as a television personality introducing classical music to a wider public. The second act is remarkable because it looks at a time later on when Bernstein was older and the conflict with people around him when he became openly homosexual while still married to a woman. Again, it is a ballet that doesn't answer any questions, but when I dance the Bernstein role, it always makes me wonder about his life and how this man with amazing charisma and amazing knowledge about music became the person he was. After dancing the role, I hear his music differently. John and Leonard Bernstein were friends and I've come to know where John inserted their private jokes into the ballet. I've done some research on his life and while I am not impersonating or acting Leonard Bernstein, I try to capture a certain essence, that special allure that he had.



Hamburg Ballet's Alexandr Trusch in "Bernstein Dances." Photo by Kiran West

**Q:** Is there a portion he especially looks forward to when he dances the Leonard Bernstein figure?

**Alexandre:** There is a piece of music in the second act, the violin solo *Serenade IV. Agathon* that is always thrilling. It's one of the most beautiful violin pieces. Yes, I always look forward to that. It is interesting because many times what John has created is not just a dance or a pas de deux, but a character study of a human being. That is what gives depth to his work and what helps develop us as dancers and human beings. The older you get, the more interesting the person you dance becomes and the less interesting the amount of pirouettes you can turn. It is the very human aspect of a role that you dance that is the most challenging.



Hamburg Ballet's Anna Laudere with Carsten Jung. Photo courtesy of the artists

**Q:** What does it mean to be in Hamburg Ballet and working with John Neumeier?

**Anna:** I feel privileged. My career has been with the company from the beginning, and working with John I have grown as a person, not just a dancer.

**Alexandr:** Performing works like *St. Matthew Passion* is distinctive. Not many companies around the world are doing these kinds of pieces anymore. John gives us a clear vision and direction. The dancers at Hamburg Ballet are trying to do one man's vision. Sometimes it may not be to the taste of one person or another, but we believe in works that question your morals, questions everything, but doesn't have answers. I think that is what we should strive for as humans, being comfortable in not always having the right answers straight away, as long as we keep questioning our own morals and don't put walls around us.



Hamburg Ballet's "Bernstein Dances." Photo by Kiran West

**Q:** How did you come to be part of they came to Hamburg Ballet?

**Anna:** I grew up in an artistic environment and family: my father is a jewelry designer, my mother was a painter and my grandmother was one of the organizers of a big singing and folkdance festival in Latvia. So it was clear to me at an early age that I also wanted to do something artistic. I started dancing at a ballet school in Riga. When my father had some work in Germany, a friend of him suggested that I should audition for the school of the Hamburg Ballet. I came to Germany on my own auditioned for the school and was accepted. After two years, I joined the company and became a first soloist in 2011.

**Alexandr:** I came from Ukraine. My grandfather was Jewish and a law permitted Jewish descendants from the former Soviet Union to come to Germany as refugees. We came in 2001 because my parents wanted a better life for my brother and me. As a kid, I was in a Ukrainian folk dance troupe. In Germany, I still wanted to dance. There wasn't a folk dance troupe in Germany so I started ballet in 2002 at Hamburg Ballet. So ballet for me started as a runner up to folk dance.



Hamburg Ballet's "St. Matthew Passion." Photo by Kiran West

**Note about the interview:** The phone interview took place just before the company left Germany to fly to Los Angeles. Although the interview was on artistic, not political matters, Russia's invasion of Ukraine unavoidably seeped into the conversation. Nearly half of the Hamburg Ballet's dancers come from other countries, many like Anna and Alexandr, from countries near or directly involved in the unfolding events, making the trip an emotional time for those dancers with families or friends trying to evacuate or among those trying to help. Yet another reason to extend a warm welcome.

**Hamburg Ballet at the Music Center Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, 135 N. Grand Ave., downtown; *Bernstein Dances*-Fri., March 11, 7:30pm, Sun., March 13, 2pm, Sat., March 19, 7:30pm, \$39-\$138. Music Center. *St. Matthew Passion* – Sat., March 12, 7:30pm, Thurs, March 17, 7:30pm, Sun., March 20 & 27, 2pm, Sat., March 26, 7:30pm, \$23-\$292. LA Opera.**

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