

# ‘How Am I Going to Dance to This?’ Ratmansky’s New Music Frontier

At New York City Ballet, the choreographer Alexei Ratmansky is branching out with an idiosyncratic score by the experimental composer Peter Ablinger.



Rehearsing “Voices,” Alexei Ratmansky’s new ballet. Devin Yalkin for The New York Times



Alexei Ratmansky walked into the studio and got out his phone. It was the first rehearsal of his latest work for New York City Ballet, and the dancers were waiting eagerly to find out what he had in mind. He pressed play, and a woman’s voice and a piano, mimicking her vocal intonations, filled the room. “This is the music,” he told the assembled dancers.

“We were like, *what?!,*” the dancer Sara Mearns said. “How am I going to dance to this?”

“He also said, ‘There is no musicality, just your own,’” Ms. Mearns continued after a recent rehearsal. “In working with him on a whole bunch of ballets, all super connected to the music, it was the first time I had ever heard him say that. I thought, who is this person?”

“Voices,” set to [Peter Ablinger’s “Voices and Piano,”](#) which will premiere at [City Ballet’s New Combinations evening](#) on Thursday, is a new frontier, musically, for Mr. Ratmansky — known for witty, poetic physical responses to more conventional scores and sensitive reconstructions of 19th-century classics.



The choreographer Alexei Ratmansky said, “I looked for sounds that would fit each dancer.” Devin Yalkin for The New York Times



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Like most ballet choreographers over the past few hundred years, he has taken musical melody, theme and structure as the impetus for the creation of movement. In this, he follows squarely in the footsteps of George Balanchine, the co-founder of City Ballet, whose saying, “[see the music, hear the dance](#)” is still an in-house mantra.





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Mr. Ratmansky, 51, has created ballets to Shostakovich, Stravinsky, Prokofiev and other Russian composers, as well as Scarlatti, Strauss and Bernstein. He has previously worked with only one living composer, the Ukraine-born [Leonid Desyatnikov](#), whose melodic, often folk-inspired music Mr. Ratmansky has used for six ballets.

But Mr. Desyatnikov’s music is far from experimental or especially challenging. Mr. Ablinger’s “Voices and Piano,” on the other hand, is not what you would think of as dance-friendly. The short pieces consist of a single recorded voice and a piano that (mostly) imitates the tonalities and vocal patterns of the speaker, forming a rhythmically idiosyncratic, unpredictable soundscape. (In a few sections, Mr. Ablinger takes another route and sets the piano between the spoken utterances.)

Why did Mr. Ratmansky suddenly move onto experimental new-music terrain? “I felt like I needed a shake-up,” he said in an interview after a long rehearsal of “Voices.” “In the last couple of years, I have done ‘[Harlequinade](#),’ ‘Bayadere,’ ‘[Giselle](#),’ all set to those well-known, traditional scores. For this particular project, I wanted something totally different.”



Davide Riccardo, left, and Megan LeCrone in the front, rehearsing “Voices.” Devin Yalkin for The New York Times



Devin Yalkin for The New York Times



He asked his son, Vassily, a music composition student, to suggest some possibilities. “Voices and Piano” was among them; it immediately resonated. “Because of the sound of the voice, and how the composer reflects that in the piano,” Mr. Ratmansky said, “it’s not abstract, it’s full of color and warmth and emotion.”

Mr. Ablinger, 60, is an Austrian-born, Berlin-based composer, who to date has written 60 short pieces in the “Voices and Piano” series, which he describes as his song cycle. (The most recent, “Diamanda Galás,” [premiered in Chicago](#) on Jan. 23). The voice extracts he has used come from a wide range of personalities (Marina Abramovic, Mao Zedong, Gertrude Stein, Mother Teresa, Jean-Paul Sartre) as well as unknown figures. “The voice has to have a relation to me of some sort,” Mr. Ablinger said in a telephone interview. “It could be because I have read their books or listened to their music, or just a voice that touches me.”

Mr. Ratmansky said he listened to what he could of Mr. Ablinger’s output, and decided to stick to female voices because he could see a clearer structure for the work that way. (There are “remarkable men’s sections,” he said. “I may have to do something with those later.”) He chose six extracts, in English, Swedish, Farsi and Japanese: [Bonnie Barnett](#), [Gjendine Slalien](#), [Forough Farrokhzad](#), [Nina Simone](#), [Setsuko Hara](#), [Agnes Martin](#).



“I knew there were certain dancers I wanted to use, and that the solos needed to be different in character,” Mr. Ratmansky said. “I looked for sounds that would fit each dancer.”

The pianist Stephen Gosling, who will perform the work live — playing along with the recorded voices — said he was fascinated by how each piano section has its own style and connection with the voice. “In the Nina Simone one, it’s like a crazy version of stride piano, something that jazz pianists know how to do,” he said. “And in the Agnes Martin section, there are a bunch of chords that sound evenly spaced, but are so complex — perhaps a nod to [her paintings which look simple but have complex underpinnings](#).”

As for structure, Mr. Ratmansky said, “My idea was that it could be something like the fairies’ pas de six in the first act of ‘Sleeping Beauty,’” he said. “A prologue, then solos.”

His structural inspiration may come from “The Sleeping Beauty,” but “Voices” looks very unlike the ordered classicism of that ballet. In a run-through, five women and five men moved in angular formations, stomping around the studio with interlinked arms, pairing up for surprising off-balance lifts, and dissolving away for each of the distinctive, idiosyncratic female solos, which often moved far from conventional ballet steps into more ungainly, quirky territory.

“When I am in the studio with him, I am always reminded there are a million more dynamics than in ballet class, and the body can do anything,” said Tyler Angle, one of the male dancers in the work.





The pianist Stephen Gosling, left, rehearsing with the dancers. “I have never listened so hard,” the dancer Megan Fairchild said. Devin Yalkin for The New York Times

“It looks too safe; they need to fly over,” Mr. Ratmansky called out as the women jumped into the mens’s arms in the hair-raising head-to-floor position known as a fish dive. “Fall forward as you turn in the pirouette! Relax your muscles, use your weight for momentum!”

The dancers worked intently, often consulting with Mr. Ratmansky and Mr. Gosling about timing. “I have never listened so hard; it’s like using a different part of your brain,” said the dancer Megan Fairchild, whose solo incorporates a quirky twisty torso, heel-to-toe steps, slaps of the thigh and rag doll flops forward. “Usually a choreographer creates the steps, and the ballet master puts it to counts. Here there is no fancy way to do it. If the piano plinks, or she’s laughing, I’m on the music.” (The “she” in Ms. Fairchild’s solo is Gjendine Slalien.)

There is a lot that is new for Mr. Ratmansky, too. “I am discovering the possibility of the choreography coexisting with sound, maybe not being as dependent as I usually am,” he said. “That opens a field I haven’t really explored. But I don’t have the courage to fully go there; it’s just testing how it feels. In some places the choreography is parallel, not connected, to the music.”







Ask la Cour. Devin Yalkin for The New York Times



Devin Yalkin for The New York Times

Mr. Ratmansky said he started composing the ballet by mapping exits and entrances. Then he created some choreographic leitmotifs, and worked out the participation of the men — who usher the women on- and offstage in ingenious ways between each solo and, in the interstices, have small solo turns in silence.

“Each solo is inflected by different aspects of these personalities, institutions, histories, or just the specific coolness of a voice or the unusual intonations and musicality of the sentences,” he said. Each of the female dancers, he added, needs “to create a very specific atmosphere, and they can decide what that is.”

Although the ballet does have Mr. Ratmansky’s aesthetic, it hasn’t been tied to “a meter and melodic line,” Mr. Angle said. “He has let himself be very free with how it’s put together. It feels very different.”

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