

Martha Graham: Sacred and Profane

April 13, 2018 by Deborah Jowitt [Leave a Comment](#)

The Martha Graham Dance Company at New York City Center, April 11 through 14



The Martha Graham Company in Lar Lubovitch's *The Legend of Ten*. (L to R): Lorenzo Pagano, Ben Schultz, Laurel Dalley Smith, Anne Souder, Abdiel Jacobsen, Charlotte Landreau and Ari Mayzick. Photo: Melissa Sherwood

At City Center on opening night, Lar Lubovitch's 2010 *The Legend of Ten* was preceded by a ceremony. The Graham company's artistic director Janet Eilber presented Lubovitch with an award honoring his remarkable fifty-year choreographic career. As she told the audience, he has made dances not just for his own company, but for ballet companies worldwide, as well as contributing to operas, musicals, and ice skating productions and competitions. He's daring musically too: *The Legend of Ten* is set to the first and fourth movements of Johannes Brahms's *Quintet for Piano and Strings in F minor, Op. 34*, as recorded by a young Glenn Gould and the Montreal String Quartet. Lubovitch says in a program note that he used the "ten dancers as the legend mapping the musical and emotional textures of the music."

The piece (staged by Katarzyna Skarpetowska and Reid Bartelme) starts with the dancers—one or a few at a time—rushing onto the stage and stopping dead, almost aggressively, but almost immediately they erupt into a flurry of movement—expressing themselves individually and/or falling into unison with others. You feel, as you often do

with Lubovitch's works, currents that rise and fall as the dancing flows on. But within that, there's a sense of breath, an upward arc of movement that the dancers suspend before falling softly away from it. Often as they do this, they hold one curving arm overhead, a gesture that emphasizes the suspension.



Charlotte Landreau (center) and members of the Martha Graham Dance Company in Lar Lubovitch's *The Legend of Ten*. Photo: Melissa Sherwood

Lubovitch wants us, I think, to be aware of individual agency. Now and then, amid a moving cluster of dancers, one drops out of the pattern and acknowledges the audience and her colleagues with the smallest of bows before being reabsorbed into the group. At first, there are only nine people onstage (So Young An, Abdiel Jacobsen, and Charlotte Landreau are the only ones not already mentioned). They run smoothly into patterns: parallel lines, circles, curves within curves.

Souder appears as a loner, and everyone watches as Jacobsen takes her in his arms and lifts her. Is she returning to a village she knows? You can imagine that. She fits right in. After a while, with Jack Mehler's lighting quieting down and the music calm (although played at gratingly loud volume), the two of them drop to the floor to begin a duet. Their arms and legs entangle in unusual ways; the feeling is tender—and they indulge in it lavishly, sensuously—yet not erotic in any obvious way.

As they leave the stage, the others re-enter from an upstage corner and travel slowly along a diagonal. They're bent over, flinging out one hand rhythmically, as if sowing seeds. This last movement has the air of a peasant celebration. The performers thrust their fists into the air, dance with their legs wide apart, hold hands in a ring. As impeccably as the choreography is structured, it still has a sense of folks roistering, with the two "lovers" periodically affirming their unity within the community.

I am eager to see this dance again. The Martha Graham Dance Company will perform it this coming week during the Lar Lubovitch Company's season at the Joyce Theater. The dancers, splendid as they are, don't yet look fully at home as they make the transitions from one fluid, surging pattern to another. That romance-infused torrent that Brahms created in the 19th century takes no prisoners.

April is an important month in the life of the Martha Graham Company. In that month in 1926, Graham and her trio of young women made their debut on a New York stage. In that month in 1991, she died at the age of 98. Long may she live.

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