

A Swiss Orchestra Dances Beyond the Boundaries of Classical Music

The Geneva Camerata has won over audiences in Europe with a genre-blurring mix of music and movement. Next stop: an American debut in New York.

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Mr. Greilsammer, the orchestra's artistic director, conducts "Dance of the Sun" while also fully participating in its dramatic choreography. At one point during the Lully, the solo dancer – Martí Corbera, a 22-year-old Spaniard taking over the role for the orchestra's tour – attempts to mingle with the players, who have rebuffed him with suspicion so far. Agitated, he lunges at Mr. Greilsammer. The musicians encircle their leader to ward off what could be an attack. But in time, Mr. Corbera's dancer disarms them with his allure and seeming innocence.

In another episode, Mr. Corbera and Mr. Greilsammer engage in an erotic duet: They cradle each other's heads, stroke each other's faces and entwine their arms and legs, until finally Mr. Corbera lifts Mr. Greilsammer onto his shoulders, from which height the conductor goes back to leading the orchestra.

Although Mr. Greilsammer, 42, didn't grow up thinking he would one day perform a seductive duo with a dancer, he argued in an interview that the Camerata's programs – far from being gimmicky – take the kinds of risks he thinks are long overdue in classical music.

With the old subscription-ticketing format looking wobblier than ever, many major orchestras have

acknowledged that institutions must shake things up and make each program distinctive, something not to be missed. In this regard, the Geneva Camerata is a model of innovation. You may love a program or find it contrived, Mr. Greilsammer said, but these intrepid players are showing what classical musicians are capable of – and inventing ways to make the great works of the past "alive today," as he put it.

Even during Mr. Greilsammer's student days, he said, he worried that classical music was becoming disconnected from the world at large. He thought musicians needed to "challenge the very way we listen," he recalled, and question the "whole show" of classical music. "I knew what I had in my dreams," he said, but "I didn't know how to define it."

Early in his career, Mr. Greilsammer attracted attention as a Mozart champion, playing marathon cycles of that composer's 19 piano sonatas. With the Geneva Chamber Orchestra, he performed all 27 Mozart concertos, conducting from the keyboard. (He and the ensemble recorded a sparkling, playful and probing account of the Ninth Concerto for Sony.)

But, determined to do something about a nagging restlessness, he founded the Geneva Camerata with Céline Meyer, who became the orchestra's general director, in 2013. They each plopped 50 Swiss francs on a cafe table and vowed to create a risk-taking orchestra, Ms. Meyer said in an interview.

Mr. Greilsammer did not at first anticipate the large role that choreography would come to play in the Camerata's offerings. He simply wanted to present orchestra programs that were as adventurous as the piano recitals he had been performing and recording, like "Baroque Conversations," which alternates works by Baroque composers with fiercely contemporary scores. The Camerata collaborated with jazz singers, funk musicians, directors and actors. Then came choreographers, who naturally suggested that the musicians get up and dance.

Conservatories, Mr. Greilsammer said, should encourage students to take dance classes. A Bach

piano suite, after all, is made up of movements based on dances like the gavotte and gigue.

"Music," he said, "is movement."

Yet musicians are "so inhibited in our bodies" and the "narrow spaces we play in," he said, especially pianists, who perform hunched over a keyboard. He added that it has been "amazing" to see the players in the Camerata let go as they embrace the choreographic elements of their programs. Members of the ensemble – in interviews during a rehearsal, then on a bus trip to their tour stop in Bourg-en-Bresse, France – said that the movement has been liberating.

Ricardo Gil Sanchez, a violist, said that the dancing, while demanding, released his inner actor. Indeed, the hard part for him was to memorize a Mozart symphony. Clara Rada Gomez, a cellist, said that she loves it when, in the Mozart, the dancer tilts back her chair and she must continue playing with her instrument resting on her body. She finds it exhilarating.

Lully's music, written for Molière's "Bourgeois Gentilhomme," practically screams for a dancing complement. And the Camerata's performance gets you thinking: Why shouldn't musicians be the ones to do it? Mr. Garaio Esnaola's choreography puts a powerful contemporary spin on Molière's comedy, which tells of a pompous, bourgeois gentleman who longs to be accepted by the aristocracy. The Camerata's version focuses on a stranger – a suspicious "other," the dancer – who shows up and wants to join the players. But, not knowing what to make of him, they put him off at first. Eventually, there are some scenes of courtly mingling and good will; yet the musicians end by slowly marching offstage, playing a stately dance, some of them shedding their shoes – the only remnants of the encounter the dancer is left with.

Flawless execution, even with players this skilled, would be impossible, given the demands of moving, dancing and playing from memory. Yet the performances in Bourg-en-Bresse were impressive, incisive and richly expressive.

"Before anything, we demand from ourselves to be a top-notch orchestra with a level of excellence on its own terms," Mr. Greilsammer said. Otherwise, he added, these "radical projects" will have "no life beyond."

Although the orchestra's programs regularly offer contemporary – even commissioned – works, each one includes core repertory, frequently in traditional (which is to say dance-free) performances played from sheet music. The orchestra's debut recording, "Sounds of Transformation," released last year by Sony, juxtaposes works by Lully, Henry Purcell and Jean-Philippe Rameau with jazz-styled arrangements and transformations of the pieces, featuring the pianist Yaron Herman. These pairings are clustered around Ravel's Piano Concerto, with Mr. Greilsammer as both the soloist and conductor, one of the most exciting accounts of this piece available.

This season, the Camerata is presenting the five ambitious programs of its main Prestige series at the Bâtiment des Forces Motrices, a former hydropower plant from the late 19th century that was converted into a performance space in Geneva. Another series is called "Les Concerts Sauvages" (wild concerts), with soloists from the orchestra joined by jazz, folk and world music artists. There are also family concerts and special programs, totaling nearly 40 performances – more than half of which are presented on tour, and all of which are nearly sold out.

Because the ensemble's season doesn't add up to full-time work, most players live elsewhere; 17 nationalities are represented in all. Geneva, a center of finance and diplomacy, might not seem the most obvious town for an experimental orchestra. In fact, the Camerata gets most of its funding from local corporate sponsors and foundations.

Ms. Meyer, the orchestra's general director, said that the most frustrating part of her job can be explaining to presenters exactly what category the Camerata belongs to. Is it an orchestra? A dance group? Some kind of music-theater ensemble? The answer to all these questions may be yes. If Mr. Greilsammer and his colleagues succeed, he said, each "different, radical, mind-provoking project" should explain itself.

The Camerata has laid down a marker for classical music. If a group of fearless musicians can push the boundaries this far and thrive, then even major orchestras should be able to move beyond their traditional comfort zones.

Anthony Tommasini