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A Choreographic Exploration of Judeo-Christian Themes

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A CHOREOGRAPHIC EXPLORATION
OF JUDEO-CHRISTIAN THEMES

A Graduate Thesis
Presented to the Department of Dance
at the State University of New York at Brockport
by
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Approved For The Dance Department
State University of New York
College at Brockport

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DEDICATION

This thesis is submitted with my thanks to all the members of the Dance Faculty at Brockport who have contributed to my education and training, especially those members of my graduate thesis committee who provided invaluable guidance in my thesis project: Sondra Fraleigh, Santo Giglio, and Susannah Payton-Newman.

This work is gratefully dedicated with all my love to my husband James Duane.
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A. **Problem**

To use Judeo-Christian themes as a source of creative inspiration for choreography.

B. **Purpose**

The purpose of this project was to use Biblical thematic material as a major source of choreographic inspiration. It utilized these themes -- grace, prayer, and the body of Christ -- which dealt with varying relationships between God and humanity.

C. **Delimitation and Process**

Although the original intention was to choreograph three separate dances based on their respective themes, the process developed into a multi-layered effect of the themes throughout the entire septet suite.

The first major theme, "grace," reflects God's relationship to humanity. Grace is the freedom from the need to strive or work with effort, whether spiritual or physical. The second theme, "prayer," derives from the aspect of our communicative relationship with God. Prayer is communication to God in a variety of forms -- physical, emotional, mental, or spiritual. The third theme is based on our relationship with one another because of our connection to God. It is the "body of Christ" which is the center of the Church and an important part of its individual components. The "body" in this thesis project also refers to the physical human body made in God's image, as the
complex instrument of the dancer. Therefore, this paper will discuss the physicality of the body as a psychodynamic instrument.

The dynamic nature of the musical score, Bach's "Magnificat in D Major," assisted in molding the complexity of the thematic work. Bach's Magnificat was a vital source of inspiration for this choreographic project, having central importance in portraying Judeo-Christian spirituality.

Concern for Christianity as a modern phenomenon and its relationship to contemporary dance was a major consideration in choreographic decision-making for this concert. Presenting ecclesiastical dance in a secular theatrical setting was the greatest challenge of this work. The choreographer's use of the familiar modern and semi-classical dance idiom was a conscious decision to present this highly theological study. Maintaining a conceptual (process rather than product oriented) perspective virtually evoked a momentum of movement ideas which finally took the form and shape of complete dances. Working conceptually with thematic Biblical material allowed for the abstraction of ritualistic Christian gesture. Dealing with the work naturally and intuitively helped broaden my creative process as a choreographer. It allowed the true sense of spirit to infiltrate the choreography. This freedom from premeditated choreography parallels the "grace" theme which will be discussed in the second chapter below.
Risk taking and daring are important elements in preserving the "modern" element in modern dance. It involves using innovative movement and organization of the movement in a unique and uncommon fashion. The creative processes of the mind are constantly exercised when discovering new movement. The movement itself is most interesting when it involves physical challenges. The risk taking in this concert involved the use of some random movement that was not necessarily uniquely "religious" in context. Much of the movement was physically challenging and complex as well. Finally, atypically, a good deal of the movement came from an emotional and experiential source.

Having a background and familiarity in Judeo-Christianity with some research into the heart of Christianity -- namely, grace, as it relates to dance and theology -- produced what was hopefully a graceful and spirit-filled evening of dance in Hartwell Hall on April 10 and 11, 1987. The dance was not intended to be a worship service, although Christian ideas presented may have created a form of worship: meditative and quiet, but nonetheless affective.

D. Need

The need of this project was to pave the way for understanding the potential value of dance in a secular setting, to educate religious thought, and elicit an uncommon form of worship. A recognition of these possibilities is necessary because dance, a God-given gift,
is a vital part of the human experience. "The arts are perhaps the clearest mirror of the divine human experience available to us." (1) This exploration of Judeo-Christian dance is also a source of creative inspiration. "Our theological inspiration often is deep and sure and a rich source of creativity." (2)

Dance also has the potential as an art form to communicate, instruct, and inspire Christian faith. The arts are dynamic in that they cross cultural barriers, because they offer us images which move us, disturb us, challenge us, or delight us. They furnish images to which we have responses and in which we can see ourselves, often with a new freshness, as if for the first time. (3) Dance in particular, being nonverbal, offers images that have great capabilities for evangelistic uses. "Our business is to dance evangelism, good news, news of God, out of the unutterable fullness and joy God gives us." (4)

Skillen explains how the arts -- to use his example, fictional writing -- can add flesh to Scripture's "Bare Bones." He writes: "Certainly the desire to bring alive the already vivid world of the Bible is a laudable intention, and the ability of good fiction to fashion a world both apprehensible to our senses and emotions and comprehensible to our minds makes it an apt vehicle for doing so." (5)

De Sola summarizes how dance serves the church. "Its mission is 'explaining' the mysteries, revealing new dimensions of scripture, witnessing to the beauty of God and
creating faith movement responses for community participation, enabling all to experience, with dancers, the power of body and spirit working harmoniously in praise of God." (6)

E. Definition of Key Terms

Themes of Choreographic Inspiration

"Grace" is freedom from the need to strive or work with effort. It is ease in movement, but not necessarily vapid movement -- the state in which a law or technique becomes natural, or "written upon one's heart." In another sense, it may be a free and undeserved gift, as from God.

"Prayer," or worship, is communication with God presented in any form: physical, emotional, mental, or spiritual.

"The Body of Christ," also known as the Christian Church, includes those who are connected to Christ by their acceptance of him and dedication to him, and joined together into a community by that commitment. In another sense, our physical human bodies are made in the image of God.

Contemporary Christianity

When I use the words "contemporary Christianity," I am referring to Christian faith in the context of the modern world.

Dance

Dance is any chosen movement of the human body done for its own sake or for the sake of eliciting an aesthetic
response rather than for some utilitarian purpose or the
desire to accomplish a particular task.

**Inspiration**

Inspiration is the act or power of moving human
intellect or emotions.

**Judeo-Christianity**

Judeo-Christianity includes the entire religious
tradition recorded in the Holy Scriptures of the Western
Church, beginning with the Torah of Moses, through the books
of the Old Testament Kings and Prophets, through the
culmination of God's promises in the arrival of the Messiah
("the anointed One"), Jesus Christ.

**F. Choreographer's Note**

The musical pieces used in this concert were sung
entirely in German and Latin, languages with which the
choreographer has no familiarity. As part of a deliberate
choreographic strategy, the choreographer chose not to look
at an English translation of the lyrics until after the
dances were completed. (Indeed, I did not do so until after
the concert performance, when I began the work on this
paper.) The reason for that choice was to avoid the
tendency of allowing the movement to be unduly influenced or
confined by the content of the lyrics, although it was
important to use sacred music based on Christian teaching.
When I later checked the translation of the cantata,
however, I learned that the essential theme of the lyrics
corresponded very closely with the meaning underlying the
dance movement I had composed. It is truly a testimony to the genius of Bach that his music so effectively conveyed the message of his text musically.

It was not a complete surprise to discover that Bach's music had inspired images so consistent with the lyrics which were unintelligible to the choreographer. Indeed, part of my reason for selecting Bach's work was the reputation this legendary composer enjoys for conveying considerable emotional content in his music. As one music professor has recently observed, "Bach lovers invariably testify to something that is not solely musical in his compositions. Bach's works point to a reality which is more than musical... Conductors often call him edifying or instructive." (7) The legendary cellist and composer Pablo Casals expressed the same point this way: "For the past eighty years I have started each day in the same manner. It is not a mechanical routine but something essential to my daily life. I go the piano, and I play two preludes and fugues of Bach. I cannot think of doing otherwise.. It is a rediscovery of the world of which I have the joy of being a part. It fills me with awareness of the wonder of life, with a feeling of the incredible marvel of being a human being. The music is never the same for me, never. Each day it is something new, fantastic and unbelievable. That is Bach, like nature, a miracle" (8). Paul Westermeyer suggests that perhaps the very structure of Bach's music, apart from its words, contains a revelation of the grace of
God (9), reminiscent of the comment by Martin Luther, Bach's spiritual contemporary that "the devil flees from the voice of music just as he flees from the words of theology" (10). By choreographing the dance concert without reference to the content of the lyrics, I was able to conduct a sort of experiment in divining the spirit captured in Bach's music itself.

Another reason for my decision to choreograph the dances without first acquainting myself with the content of the lyrics, as I have said, was to avoid the risk of allowing the movement to be unduly influenced by the literal content of those words. Anna Sokolow reminds us that "To give dance a literal meaning would be to reduce it to something else. It would lose its capacity to involve the whole person. And one would miss all the subtle nuances and delicate shadings and rich polyvalences of the dance itself." (11)

G. Biblical References

The Biblical references cited in this paper are taken from the New International Version of the Bible, published by Zondervan Publishers.
CHAPTER TWO: GRACE

For centuries, many philosophers and artists have laboriously attempted to define that elusive element in dance which we know as "grace." Selma Jean Cohen has traced the variety of definitions that have been applied to that concept throughout history (1). Grace has generally been defined as consisting of smooth curves, elegance, and the light and becoming qualities which typically characterize balletic movement. With the onset of modern dance, that very narrow view of grace was questioned. The more modern conception of grace was broad enough to encompass angles, earthy energy, and weighted nonchalance (2). The early thinkers had an interesting definition of grace which harmonized its physical as well as spiritual dimensions. They condemned grace that was pleasing only to the senses, but praised grace that was deemed pleasing to the soul, considering it a gift that transforms the recipient and gives the power beyond human effort (3).

This project advocates and develops a contemporary definition of grace as effortless flow, by incorporating the early "physical/spiritual" vision of the term. I attempt to explicate the relations between the modern notion of "grace" in dance movement and the Christian conception of grace. The parallels between these ideas are illustrated both by a comparison of their theoretical similarities, and by an examination of their historical connections.
The Oxford English Dictionary notes that "grace," in the sense associated with gracefulness, is now generally confined to a more restricted application: "The attractiveness or charm belonging to elegance of proportions, or (especially) ease and refinement of movement, action, or expression" (4). As the editors of that reference work note, however, the word once covered a much broader range: it included virtually any pleasing quality or attractive feature, favor, virtue, goodwill, good fortune, or spiritual blessing. To this day, of course, grace still retains its well-known meaning in scriptural and theological language as the free and unmerited favor of God.

Unlike the modern usage of "grace," however, the aesthetic and theological conceptions of this term were not so rigidly divorced in earlier times. Indeed, all of the many possible meanings of the word "grace" listed above trace their etymological roots to a single common ancestor in the Latin gratia -- suggesting pleasantness or gratitude (5). In early English usage, there was a constant connection between the twin images of grace as an attractive quality, and as a spiritual blessing. The parallel is nicely captured by a line from Shakespeare's The Winter's Tale (V, i, 171): "You have a holy Father, a gracefull Gentleman."

The Christian concept of grace offers an excellent analogy to the sense in which we describe a dancer as moving with grace, and each lends a richer insight into the meaning
behind the other. The animating force behind grace is the Spirit of God, what Christians and Jews describe as the Holy Spirit. In Christian terms, grace is the free gift of God, who gave himself as a sacrifice for mankind. The gospel of Christ centers on the fact that we can become free to live life fully, and rise above the shackles of our corruption, only through the grace of God—which allows us to bend and shape our bodies in accordance with our spirits within. Salvation is an unmerited gift from God, and cannot be earned through even our best efforts to perform good works. In the words of the Apostle Paul, "It is by grace that you have been saved through faith -- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God -- not by works, so that no one can boast." Ephesians 2:8-9.

Indeed, grace has long been characterized in theological terms as standing in contrast with the "Law," which represents deliberate and calculating human efforts to live in a manner pleasing to God. Saint Paul went so far as to state in his Epistle to Galatians that "You who are trying to be justified by law have been alienated from Christ; you have fallen away from Grace." Galatians 5:4. Jesus himself drew a vivid contrast between the struggle of obedience to the law and the ease of life by grace. Speaking to the Pharisaic teachers of the Law, Jesus proclaimed: "You experts in the law, woe to you, because you load people down with burdens they can hardly carry, and you yourselves will not lift one finger to help them." Luke
ll:46. But to his own disciples, the Lord promises: "Come to me, all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light." Matthew 11:28-30.

In "Freedom, Gravity, and Grace," Sondra Fraleigh offers a definition of grace which is strikingly similar to the Christian conception of grace. In her words, "When that which originally required effort ceases to be an effort, bodily spontaneity, freedom, and grace appear" (6). Fraleigh identifies the unique value in dance which she describes as "the freedom we experience as a purification and deliverance from effort," or more simply, as "effortless ease" (7). She defines grace, much as Christian writers do, as that intangible spiritual quality which lends an appearance of natural freedom and ease to our actions. And in language much like that employed by St. Paul, she observes that "Grace is a gift and cannot be willed. If it is pursued directly it recedes" (8).

Fraleigh's essay also points out another theoretical issue of equal concern to the theologian and the dance critic alike: the connection between grace and nature. Many theologians have separated nature and grace, or even gone so far as to characterize them as opposites. The traditional view of grace placed it in the realm of the heavenly and unseen absolutes which provide meaning to existence and moral value. Francis Schaeffer writes about the "nature-versus-grace problem" which tormented Renaissance
philosophers: how can there be any meaningful connection between the infinite and ineffable higher domain of grace, and the supposedly lower realm of created nature? (9) The two were seen as incommensurable and incompatible, eternally residing in mutually exclusive worlds. In the words of the seventeenth century English poet John Dryden, "All below is strength, and all above is grace" (10).

Under this traditional paradigm, grace was thought to be in opposition to nature -- the lower, created, and individual acts of humans. Fraleigh's essay identifies good reason to believe that grace and nature should rather be understood as a unity. In her view, grace appears first in nature through our bodily spontaneity before we reflect upon it. This approach to reconciling the two might have struck Renaissance theologians as unacceptable, but it finds a more receptive audience among modern Christian theorists. John Galvin, in a recent review of the work of the German Jesuit theologian Karl Rahner, shows the way to strike a harmonious compromise between nature and grace. Like Fraleigh, Galvin's remarks in "Grace for a New Generation" portray grace as being esteemed beyond nature, but manifesting itself first in human nature (11). Galvin reminds us that the downfall of many in the church has been the impulse to divorce grace from humanity in a distilled form, in the belief that we could only come to experience grace when in a highly mystical state, drawn apart from the ordinary world of our everyday experience. This model of grace had the
unfortunate drawback of alienating it from humanity. Rahner, on the other hand, adopted the terminology of Martin Heidegger to coin the term "supernatural existential" to describe the transformation of the human condition effected through God's grace: supernatural because it is the result of God's free gift, and existential because it permeates the whole of concrete human existence (12).

Comparison of "grace" in terms of Christian theology and dance theory yields several interesting parallels. A major concern shared by Christians and choreographers is the ideal method of instruction, and the subject matter to be taught. Christian doctrine takes as its starting point the Bible as the revealed expression of God's word. The foundation of a dancer's abilities is the fundamental principles taught in technique class. Yet in each case, grace plays an important role for both dancer and Christian by allowing the student to go beyond mere laws and rules, and to move into a realm of true freedom.

Grace is the very spirit and soul of the individual, finding itself in true expression. Many religious legalists are quite knowledgeable with respect to the details of catechismal dogma. They also may become quite good, perhaps through sheer force of habit, at conforming their conduct to those laws. Yet without grace, they will be motivated only by fear, or a sense of obligation, or ritualism. The gospel of St. John relates the story of such a man, a Jewish teacher named Nicodemus. Although he was a model of
obedience in his faithfulness to the Law of Moses, Nicodemus was advised by Jesus that he would need to be born again of God’s spirit before entering the kingdom of heaven. John 3:3-5. Through the transformation of that Spirit, Jesus repeatedly taught his disciples that they would become free to move and act in a manner pleasing to God; obedience to God’s will would become spontaneous and natural. He promised them: "On my account you will be brought before governors and kings as witnesses to them and to the Gentiles. But when they arrest you, do not worry about what you are to say or how to say it. At that time, you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you." Matthew 10:19-20. On another occasion, Christ told his disciples that after he left them, "the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and remind you of everything I have said to you." John 14:26.

So we see that Christ left his students much more than a collection of rules, laws, and proverbs. He gave them all that, of course, but he also left them the gift of grace, so that their actions and words might be a spontaneous response within them. No longer would they be required to resort to external rules to shape their movements in a manner pleasing to God. As the Lord spoke through the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah, "This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel at that time: I will put my law in their minds and write in on their hearts." Jeremiah 31:33.
These principles are equally applicable to the education and training of each new generation of dancers. It is fundamental to begin with certain basic rules of movement, but the truly effective teacher must one day lead the dance student to recognize within herself the capacity to go beyond those laws. Anna Sokolow correctly observes that "It is easier and quicker to teach by rule, but in the end it's no good." Rather, she concludes, "the creative teacher opens doors for his students to see what life is, what they are. They have to take it from there" (13). That process, in both dance and religion, is the development of the ability to move and feel through grace. Saint Augustine simply and accurately wrote: "If you take away the work from his hands and take from his mind the intention of exercising his art and you say pleasure moves his body -- 'It will be a dance'" (14).

When a dancer performs a piece with technical excellence but fails to put her heart and soul into the performance, a dry and uninspiring outcome is inevitable. But when the dancer goes beyond the mere laws of technique, and finds within herself the ability to move with natural grace, the true spirit of the dance can be released. This grace cannot be taught; it can only be revealed to the dancer as she discovers the freedom within her own spirit.

In dance as well as spiritually, there is a sense in which true grace can be confined by an excessive concern with the "rules." Saint Paul recognized that "the letter of
the law kills, but the Spirit gives life." 2 Corinthians 3:6. Jesus corrected those followers who were so preoccupied with their search of the scriptures that they were unable to respond to him with openness and simplicity of heart. John 5:39. These same dangers can be found in dance aesthetics. The principles of dance technique developed over centuries play a vital role, and must be mastered by any dancer who aspires for greatness. But the one who remains confined to those strictures is destined for tragedy. In the same way, the dance critic who tries too hard to capture the aesthetic dimension in dance in a collection of objective rules of evaluation may well end up losing sight of the simplicity behind the grace she seeks to explain.

Dance becomes truly graceful when it is no longer simply the recollection of a routine in the mind of the performer. The graceful dancer seems to move with an effortless ease, for her motion is shaped by an impulse which is a part of her. To paraphrase the prophet Jeremiah, the performer who dances with grace, like the Christian who learns to live by grace, finds that she has somehow taken her mind off the laws of elegance and balance, for they have truly become "written upon her heart."
"These people honor me with their mouths and lips, but their hearts are far from me. Their worship is made by rules taught by men. I will astound these people with wonder upon wonder. The wisdom of the wise will perish; the intelligence of the intelligent will vanish." Isaiah 29:13.

The revolutionary prophet Isaiah proclaims in the above verse how our Lord ought to be praised. This verse condemns worship of rules taught by men and advocates worship which flows from the heart. Again, the conventional methods of verbal prayer and worship are criticized, while non-conventional heartfelt prayer forms challenge the people of God. What better form of prayer that is an expression of the heart than dance? Nonverbally through dance one rises above the limitations of human language and expresses inner heart and soul of the being. Dance is perhaps the most powerful and best form of worship unto God. In *Nature and Grace in Art*, John Dixon writes that "It is not only possible but essential for the health of theology that it be conducted through the total work of the mind and the creativity of man and not simply through verbal and conceptual statement." (1)

Dance involves use of our deepest consciousness of thought. Perhaps the only perfect interpreter of this bodily form of worship is the omnipotent creator of the human body to whom it is offered. The best known scriptural character whose worship pleased God is the prophet-artist
David. David was a genius, prophet, poet, musician, songwriter, and dancer, as well as the King of Israel. Yet this many-talented man's greatest strengths were not his gifts, but his garment of humility. The youngest and least of his brothers, yet chosen by God to rule the nation of Israel, David surprised the traditional prophets of God. His impeccable coordination, with the power of God behind him, was clear after his first victory with a mere slingshot over the mighty Goliath. He was a man after God's own heart, who danced before the arc of the covenant as a sacrificial offering to God. The psalms are full of his heartfelt poetic prayers, which by their words themselves pierce the heart, and which so exemplify honest prayer pleasing to God.

A similar form of worship described in the New Testament is worship in the form of foreign tongues as utterances unto God, which can be understood only by the spirit of God. (2) Dance is similar to this gift of tongues in that it permits human prayer beyond the understanding of mere human minds and allows for a higher level of prayer, on a less familiar plane of consciousness.

The human as an expression of the divine is also a paradox of expression, "though of course a paradox which is hallowed by divine example. If God reveals himself as a man, then we must not view man as the highest development of a power given in nature, even less as something that thereby is divine. But we must see him as an unworthy base,
fragile, vessel, into which God desires to pour his grace." (3)

Although dance is a strong source of communication to God for the Christian, care must be taken not to make the art form an idol unto itself. Dance, the means of expressing one's heart and soul, should never be mistaken as religion itself. Dance is limited by human imperfection. "Man cannot make a redemptive art but he can make an art that communicates what he experiences of redemption as a man and what he knows of it as an artist." (4)

Biblical dances are generally expressions of thanksgiving and glory. In Exodus 15:20, Miriam danced after the miraculous passage through the Red Sea. "She took a timbrel in her hand, and all the women went after her with timbrel and dancing." Carla De Solo concludes that if prayer is the central core of life, then dance becomes prayer when expressing relationship to God, others, and all the world of matter and spirit, through movement originating from our deepest selves -- this same central part of worship. (5)

Finally, an important aspect of prayer which dance provides is healing. Dance existing in a moment of time and space has the power to sear itself upon the human memory. "The elements of time and space, united in the dance, may become occasion for man's creative and living response to God, expressed as the search for life's meaning or as an invocation of praise." (6)
"Do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit within you, which you have from God? ... So glorify God in your body." 1 Corinthians 6:19-20.

There is little need for this paper to detail the errors of the Church over the centuries through its disapproval or denials of the flesh and the body. The theological arguments addressing this question are already numerous and complete. Therefore, my emphasis will be on explaining the value of the human body as a gift like all gifts given mankind, which can be either nurtured or abused.

"True Christianity knows that the body and soul were both equally created by God, equally attacked by corruption, and equally saved by Christ." (1)

The Bible speaks of many instances where the use of the body in the form of dance glorifies God (2). The Bible is clear about the fact that mankind is made in the Image of God (3). This seems to suggest that God also has a body that moves. The Songs of Solomon represent explicit sensual bodily imagery as good and positive, in a context which has been widely understood as symbolic of the loving relationship between God and his people. It is the thoughts of man that corrupt and condemn the body, which in its natural state is pure. Christ presses this issue when he speaks of man committing adultery in his heart without even touching a woman. The body is clearly a very special,
sacred, and holy place to St. Paul, who instructed men to love their wives as their own bodies.

Whiteman writes that "If God became flesh through the incarnation of Jesus Christ, surely flesh is an honorable aspect of our humanity." (4) The human body is honorable and good because it is created by God. St. Augustine wrote that "All beauty and every bodily form are derived from the form which is supreme over all things, that is, the truth." (5) Our bodies were made with the natural capacity to move and dance, so certainly they should be used for such. Certainly there are scriptural references to God dancing as well.

Judith Rock notes that "Human bodies and sexuality are dimensions of humanness. The muddy thinking which leads to the rejection of dance because of fears related to sexuality usually involves the failure to distinguish between sexuality as an element of humanness, and the use one makes of sexuality. People need to be helped to realize that these are two separate theological issues: first, the affirmation of God's gift to them, of being either women or men; secondly, by their own moral choices about how to relate to other people as men and women." (6) Generally speaking, the "female" body image is the one most struggled with. Most of my choreographic works had feminine attributes of strong emotion and intuition because of my understanding and experience of womanhood. The strong mother-image for me has also been a factor in my
choreography. Biblical female heroines -- such as Eve, Ruth, and Mary -- have contributed to my understanding and sensibilities as to womanhood as a gift of strength, character, and wisdom. Scripture often portrays women as equals with men -- for instance, Queen Esther, Mary Magdalene (the first to witness the resurrected Lord) -- and Christ was a major liberating force for women. He dealt with them as human beings, and chose a woman to be one of his first witnesses to others (7). The Lord God is often characterized in the Bible in feminine as well as masculine terms. For example, Jacob called his son Joseph blessed "because of your father's God, who helps you, because of the almighty, who blesses you with blessings of the heavens above, blessings of the deep that lie below, blessings of the breast and womb." Genesis 49:25. The Lord spoke through his prophet Isaiah: "Rejoice with Jerusalem and be glad for her, all you who love her; ...for you will nurse and be satisfied at her comforting breasts; you will drink deeply and delight in her overflowing abundance... As a mother comforts her child, so will I comfort you." Isaiah 66:10-13. Indeed, one of the many names attributed to the Lord in the Jewish scriptures translates from the Hebrew into "the Lord of the Breast."

The music of Bach complemented the feminine character of this piece since the subject matter was about Mary's conception of the Lord Jesus and her overwhelming joy at the news. The Biblical passage itself to which Bach set his
music relayed Mary's joy: feminine, strong, emotional, and poetic.
CHAPTER FIVE: RECORD OF PROJECT

On April 10 and 11, 1987, the outcome of my research on the Christian themes of grace, prayer, and the body was an integrated choreographic celebration of the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ and his many-faceted personality -- his majesty, power, mercy, strength, grace, and abiding love.

In this choreographic study, I chose to use seven movements of Johann Sebastian Bach's Magnificat in D Major. All of the movement in my dances was choreographed independently from the music, but then worked into the music. I chose to create all of the movement independent from the musical structure in order to create more interesting movement that would not be dictated by the music. When eventually applying the music to the movement, I was given the choreographic option of playing rhythmically with the music by either attending to the music or complementing it. Therefore, I was able to add another rhythmic layer and phrasing of the movement for complexity and to distinguish the dancing from the music. It was challenging to control the music as a component of the dance and not to be dictated by it.

The titles of the pieces were scriptural verses that captured the general essence of each dance. The dances were not choreographed, however, with those particular verses in mind.

The first piece, Written Upon Her Heart, was a female quintet which opens with the chorale movement from "Jesu,
Der Du Meine Seele," a German cantata reflecting the strengthening grace of God for overcoming the weakness of man. The stage is dimly lit as the upper torso of one of the dancers is slowly revealed from the wing. An impulse shoots through her torso and she gracefully falls out onto the stage. The dance begins as earthly life did, with the human fall of Adam's sin. Without sin we would have no need for grace. The dance gradually grows from a bare stage with slow movements to a full, fast-moving, energetic, large, exalting movement of five dancers in and out of unison and canon movement that traveled all over the stage. The intensity of the lights and music grew as well. The movement involved several lifts and free upper body movement with a lot of spiralling action through the body. The chorus of the Magnificat, "Magnificat anima mea Dominum" ("My soul doth magnify the Lord"), sweeps the dancers to the large movement of exaltation. This dance is representative of purity through the simplicity of line and white costumes. It is about triumphant exaltation, a form of prayer to God and of grace as effortless ease or flow.

The second piece, Daughters of Prophecy, is another female quintet, to the aria from the Magnificat -- "Et exsultavit spiritus meus in Deo salutari meo" ("And my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour"). This dance reveals the child-like dimension of Christian faith. "They send forth their little ones like the flock, and their children skip about. They sing to the timbel and harp, and
rejoice at the sound of the flute." Job 21:11. The nonsensical play of Christian life was portrayed in this piece. It reflects the rejoicing and joy of the Lord and the support of the Church as the body of Christ. The lifts and supports in this dance represent the mutual support of each other in this body. Dance is a perfect tool for the expression of these child-like characteristics because, as Van Der Leeuw states, "Dance is one of the purest and most perfect forms of game." (1)

The third piece, An Altar of Earth, was a solo which I choreographed for myself, performed to the soprano aria: "Quia respexit humilitatem ancillae suae: Ecce enim ex hoc beatum me dicient Omnes generationes" ("For he hath regarded the low estate of his handmaiden; For behold, from henceforth shall all generations call me blessed"). This piece portrays the spiritual experiences of the female dancer. The major thematic for this piece is relationship to God through prayer. The dancer begins by being pulled into a holy presence and unfolds into her full acceptance of it, eventually being totally immersed in it. A second theme is grace, with particular emphasis on its redeeming qualities from a sinful past in the form of repentence. The third theme is a sense of religious ritual being washed away by a spirit of renewal. The ritual is repeated in the dance, but with greater energy, enthusiasm, and new-found meaning as the change in tempo of the music goes from subdued and slow with a solitary soprano voice, to lively
and fast with many voices. The fourth theme is total submission of the body to the Lord. The dancer’s sensual statements are expressed as part of this surrender.

Finally, it has a great deal of imagery as a fifth layer of complexity: (1) cupped hands, symbolic of pouring the cleansing waters of baptism and the healing powers of anointing with oil; (2) sign of the cross, a Christian gesture typically used as an opening to prayer; (3) folded hands, a traditional symbol of prayer; (4) arms gesturing upwards in praise; (5) prostrate prayer, the most submissive form of prayer; and (6) kneeling, another traditional posture of prayer.

The soloist in this Bach suite begins her dance in order to expose dance in its purest form -- meditative and silent. Carla De Sola beautifully and poetically addresses this issue: "So dance can be a part of prayer, just as stillness can be a part of movement, and silence can be a part of music. There is one root; all the rest, movement or stillness, silence or sound is its expression. The closer the source, the purer the song." (2)

Will the Dust Praise You?, the fourth movement in the dance concert, was a duet done to the aria "Quia fecit mihi magna quia potens est: Et sanctum nomen elus" ("For he that is mighty hath done to me great things; and holy is his name"). This duet portrays the reconciliation between David and his wife Michal after his dance in sackcloth before the arc of the covenant of the Lord. The movements in this
piece were intended to be about their spiritual relationships to God and to each other, rather than their physical relation as husband and wife. Michal's movement fluctuated between fast, direct sharp movement and flowing, indirect, streaming movement. This was illustrative of her varying personality, contrasting the harsh, strong, legalistic woman with the eased, gentle, forgiving woman. David exemplified the heartfelt man who, although a king, was clothed in humility. His continued love for God, Michal, and mankind were clear in his movement and facial expression. The most vivid moment in David's movement is when he lies prostrate and gestures as if he were tossing dirt upon himself in mourning. Here he has a complete realization of his humble place in eternity, aware of his humanity as he rediscovers the earth from which he came.

The fifth piece in my concert calls to mind De Sola's reminder that "It is a touch of grace if a dance comes easily." (3) This piece, which was entitled *List My Tears Upon your Scroll*, featured seven dancers performing to the duet "Et misericordia a progenie in progenies timentibus eum" ("And his mercy is on them that fear him from generation to generation"). This dance is a reflective, timeless piece symbolic of a surrealistic environment in which the soloist dances about the struggle and uncertainty of the Christian walk. The chorus of dancers represent the soloist's community as her spiritual support. The soloist, modulating between strong sharp movement and slow,
sustained, meditative movement, contrasts against the smooth melodic line of the music. The group's variations of the soloist's movements are symbolic of the diversity of spiritual experiences within the church.

A major part of List My Tears upon your Scroll deals with the struggles and low points of life. The soloist's movement was created as a combination of despair, anger, and depression. Sara Bentley cogently summarizes that "We need to push the bounds more so that religious dance, like all dance, is not so trapped in the conventions of beauty and harmony, or only nice emotions. If you really dance religion, a lot of powerful feelings are involved, a good deal of Sturm and Drang -- real struggle -- and it isn't timid gestures." (4)

Bentley believes in the healing and therapeutic powers of dance. "By watching me they experience me using my whole body to express a broken heart, a rejected sinner, whatever." (5) In List my Tears Upon your Scroll, the soloist's figure also goes through a healing experience and a truly peaceful moment occurs when one dancer later embraces the soloist in a gesture of compassion.

The final piece in the concert, Mounted like Jewels, is performed to the chorus: "Fecit potentiam in bracchlo suo; Dispersit superbos mente cordis sui" ("He hath showed strength with his arm; He hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts"). The principle choreographic challenge in this piece was to allow the dance movement to
be an explosive stream of movement, almost impulsive in nature. The dance begins as a duet, then a quartet, and culminates in a procession-like conclusion which brings on the entire cast. This piece is expressive of praise, exaltation and joy, majesty and recollection of moments of passion from earlier points in the concert.
CHAPTER SIX: EVALUATION

Although alluded to in earlier chapters, I will readdress some major issues commonly faced when working with sacred themes. The first is the problem of literalism, or the challenge of finding ways to bridge the text of scripture with movement. I fervently avoided being bound to the literal content of the scriptural texts used in this thesis concert. I made certain that the dance was nonliteral, and an overall abstraction of feelings and ideas was portrayed. I deliberately used a non-English version of the music so that the movement would not be unduly influenced by the lyrics.

The music being sacred and classical in nature gave the feeling of religious experience without necessarily dictating it. The music was powerful. I chose where to highlight its power choreographically, so that it never overpowered the "dance" statement. I wanted music to be a vital source of my dance. I felt it was important to use music with an integrity of its own that could elicit emotion and spirit. My use of the masterpiece of Bach's Magnificat has been covered in Chapter One of this thesis.

A third problem confronted in this concert project was the problem of doing sacred dance in a secular setting, where my greatest challenge was to evoke the sacred by use of dance. I wanted to express my interests and studies of Judeo-Christianity in a nonverbal forum. The challenges of this type of project are unlimited. In exploring the use of
dance as a medium for expressing the sacred, I faced the challenge of preserving the dance as the most powerful tool of the project, rather than the written or spoken word of theology. Discovering innovative ways of using the body as a beautiful and acceptable form of praise to God was a fulfilling aspect of this challenge.

There are some general, non-detailed criticisms of my thesis concert which are pertinent to the choreography and which I will now address.

An overall critique of my work is the tendency to "over-choreograph." This is a very valid critique which deserves my attention and consideration. It is important that I as a choreographer make conscious decisions about the complexity of my work. One must carefully make decisions about how much new material will be presented in one thematic dance. A decision must also be made as to how much thematic material is repeated to give a sense of cohesiveness to the piece.

My approach to this problem is to be continually aware of the impact the movement has on an audience. Consideration for the audience is crucial to good choreography. This is accomplished not by giving the uneducated audience what is familiar to them, but by expanding their horizons and carefully drawing them into viewing with an open and informed mind.

The choreographer should not merely give his or her stream of consciousness in a work unless he or she clearly
intended that as part of a choreographic device or choice. The choreographer must make clear connections between the movements in order for the viewers to have an overall comprehension of the piece.

In each of my pieces, greater care could have been taken with the organization of movement thought, some general movement moments of cohesiveness, and more repetition of thematic material. This is a major critical problem in Daughters of Prophecy, Will the Dust Praise You?, and Mounted like Jewels. More explicit detail of these problematic areas of each piece is given later in this chapter.

Yet, in an honest appraisal of the overall suite in terms of complexity, I must attribute the complexity of music and movement to the choreographer's aesthetic choice, which leaves it in the category of the "subjective." The overplay of simple theme and variation, especially with the over-use of canon and repetition, can become an insult to the intellect of the audience. Moments of simplicity are pleasant in a dance, but oversimplicity produces boredom. Complexity in choreography also involves the artistic advantage of offering the audience so much to perceive that they are more likely to be left with a desire to see the dance again, in the hopes of gleaning levels of meaning and expression that may have escaped them on their first viewing.
Finally, it is my viewpoint that audiences want to see people do what they themselves are not capable of performing. Virtuosity does have importance in choreography, as long as it is contemporary virtuosity to which the audience can relate.

In this thesis work, I learned the necessity for giving a piece a clear sense of direction, intention, and organizing complexity, with continual refinement of the structure throughout the choreographic process.

Perhaps my strong feelings for virtuoso movement have been at times overextended in this thesis project. The best overall learning experience has been to maintain a sense of balance in all of one's work. When pursuing choreography, I will try to creatively balance my choreographic tendencies of complexity by simplifying the complexity and adhering to the recognition that less is oftentimes more. For me, the virtuosity was an aspect of the ecstasy and the high energy that was crucial to the expression of the power and glory of God.

A final overall comment was the problem of my eclectic choice of costumes in an integrated suite. This is a valid comment on the concert as a whole. Perhaps more unity in the costumes would have brought a cohesiveness to the concert and would have helped it make more sense as a suite. The redesigning of the costumes would involve a great deal of detail on specific changes and require a lot of time.

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Contemplating the choreographic process utilized in expressing this work, I had general feelings of satisfaction and uncertainty. This unsettled feeling is especially distressing after a viewing of the concert on videotape. As much as the videotape undermines the three dimensionality of movement, it is also painfully honest about the precision, clarity, and uniformity of the movement. A vital problematic aspect of choreographic work is viewing the performers as the creative artists of the choreography. This is especially true where the chosen pool of dancers has varying levels and forms of dance training and background. In the following section, I will review each piece separately in order to evaluate my choreographic process.

The two largest obstacles for the performer are to carry out the movement technically and clearly, and to bring out the choreographer’s intent in the movement. In the rehearsal process, I found a growing kinship between myself and the dancers. Written Upon Her Heart was a clear example of how the movement began as sheer technical maneuvers with which the dancers struggled, and gradually became heartfelt and human in its intent. Eventually we had to discover ways of getting choreographic intent into the movements and expressions of the dancers. I was well aware of the fact that most of the dancers had no strong personal religious experiences from which to draw individual inspiration. It was therefore important in the rehearsal process to elicit a response from them based on similar nonsacred experiences.
The dancers who had the clearest expression of intent were those who had some sacred experience or perhaps a nostalgic religious experience.

While working upon *Written Upon Her Heart*, I believe grace did become apparent. All the dancers clearly gave a sense of spiritual intent, which is why I believe many of the technical difficulties were overcome.

When I view the piece on videotape, I realize its general need for rehearsal in terms of unison and clarity of movement. I also think the greatest restriction in presenting this piece was the physical dimensions of the stage. The dancers were crowded at times, although I also found at the other extreme that the music to this piece seemed to overpower the dance when the stage was not full and active with movement. It would be interesting to restage this piece on a larger stage in order to find out how it would affect the dancers' performance and the viewers' perception of the dance.

*Daughters of Prophecy* was one of my greatest choreographic struggles. The piece began its development with too many layers of complexity -- music, voice, movement, and script. When I narrowed down the intent, it became a dance of joyous praise and human relationships. A problem I felt with this piece was a scattered intent without enough reiteration of images. This piece, although simplified constantly in the rehearsal process, is the piece which was still "over-choreographed" in the sense of too
many movement variables taking place. The more connections I made in the rehearsal process, the more interesting the movement became. Further work at making more pertinent connections probably would give me a greater sense of completeness in this dance. Also, some minor performance problems would have been resolved with additional rehearsal.

*An Altar of Earth* remained for me a proper balance of the technical demands a dance should entail and the spiritual intent pursued by the choreographer. The dance is complete with fervor of spirit, love of God and man, and a quiet, gentle flowing stream of movement. It is choreographically complete for now.

*Will the Dust Praise You?* would be reconstructed to distinguish more clearly the characters' roles. I would have David, the male soloist, dance by himself at first, and then have Michal enter as an intrusion upon his solo. I would also have more moments of contact between them and more focuses of attention between them. I would also try to attend more closely to the rhythmic nature of the music as well. This piece may have been overpacked choreographically. Some very powerful images need to be isolated and emphasized, while other less pertinent moments could be deleted.

*List My Tears Upon Your Scroll* felt right from its beginning. It went through few revisions. Although I had always been tentative about being in this dance myself, the dancers themselves expressed being so moved by the solo
material that it inspired the quality and intent of their movements. Much of the success of this dance is due to its simplicity, strong emotional content, and the way I related the dancers to each other and to the music.

The final piece, *Mounted Like Jewels*, clearly received the most critical attention of all my pieces. The closing of the dance was rather abrupt when all the dancers entered, because I had not prepared the audience by having the dancers enter earlier in the piece. I thought it might have worked because the dancers were on stage earlier in the suite, and I did not mind an element of surprise at the time of the finale, which was emotionally climactic. I would rework this piece by bringing the dancers on earlier, and integrating the entire cast in the finale suite.

The choreographic complexity of this final piece was intentional and meaningful. The movement powerfully reflected the music. It exalted God in movement of praise with the complexity of the human mind. The movement was purposefully continuous in order to give a sense of ongoing eternity. The dancers danced with controlled freedom and fluidity. The movement was controlled because it moved from their centers, and free because it was uplifted movement of release. The dancers struggled with the careful balancing of control and freedom in this piece, but wonderfully accomplished the task, considering their time constraints.

This thesis was successful from my viewpoint because of the satisfaction it brought me. The audience also responded
positively to my work. Many described the work as spiritually fulfilling and uplifting. I felt that I had overcome a giant stepping stone toward the task of revealing the sublime mysteries of spirituality to the skeptical world of the secular. Although I appreciated the positive audience response, this project would have been worthwhile even if only one person had been touched by the concert.
CHAPTER ONE


2. Ibid., p. 20.

3. Ibid., p. 12.

4. Ibid.

5. J.E. Skillen, "Trying to Add Flesh to Scripture's 'Bare Bones,'" Christianity Today (March 5, 1982), p. 32.


8. Ibid., p. 292.

9. Ibid.

10. Ibid.


CHAPTER TWO


2. Ibid.

3. Ibid., p. 46.


5. Ibid.


7. Ibid., p. 3.

8. Ibid., p. 8.


12. Ibid.


CHAPTER THREE


2. 1 Corinthians, chapters 12-14.


CHAPTER FOUR

1. Van Der Leeuw, p. 55.


3. Schaeffer, p. 133.

4. Whiteman, p. 86.

5. St. Augustine, p. 131.


CHAPTER FIVE

1. Van Der Leeuw, p. 12.


3. Ibid., p. 148.


5. Ibid., p. 604.
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