

Dance 2367H

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Paper 4

### The Essence of a Bird

A man dressed in a bright blue is the first to enter in Mark Morris' "Birding" from *l'Allegro, Il Penseroso, ed Il Moderato*. *l'Allegro* was originally an opera composed by Handel. Morris choreographed a collection of short dances, such as the one titled "Birding", to it. "Birding" is lighthearted and comical, effortlessly evoking the likeness of birds. The movements are deft, and the dancers keep their arms fluid while moving their body like ticking clock hands.

In the corner of the stage, the blue bird draws one foot to his knee, creating a triangle. He repeats this movement in sets of three, alternating legs in time with the staccato high-pitched bowing of a violin. His wing like arms naturally undulate up and down. The overall effect is of a bird perching delicately on a branch. He then jerks his head, imitating the mechanical gestures of bird heads. With his knees bent, legs glued together as one, and arms fluttering, he jumps backwards delicately in a circle. He shakes his shoulder as if ruffling feathers and repeats the hopping circle. Then he runs in a big arc, with arms fluttering to exit at the opposite corner of the stage.

A large flock of birds runs out, their arms held in a vertical diagonal that is parallel to the rest of the group. As they reach the left front corner, they flap their wings and as they turn, they switch the diagonal of their arms as if to catch the wind. They "land" and do the same perching sequence that the dancer in the cerulean costume did. Their sharp leg movements are

synchronized; however, some members of the flock jerk their heads into varying angular positions, truly evoking the image of birds.

As the piece continues the dancers begin to move less like birds. Their movements become more fluid and it seems as if the outer shell of the bird is melting away. What is left is the true spirit of a bird, free and weightless. The metaphorical bird is danced by a woman in a fluttery dress. Compared to the male soloist, her entire body is free and there is no tension in her legs or head. Morris continues to use the flock of birds to break up scene, but these birds have also been freed from their physical form. The birds actually leave the ground as they are lifted by partners in waves.

However, an interesting progression occurs: every time the flock sweeps across the stage there are fewer birds, evidenced clearly by partners lifting empty air, until no more birds fly. Before this culmination, a group of men walk across the stage, their figures darkened by the scrim, carrying two women, frozen stiff. The strange progression seems to indicate that the birds died, possibly because it became winter. The female soloist comes out immediately after and cheers up the mood as she dances with her shadow, another dancer behind the scrim. Her playful dance is followed by the same lifting sequence performed by just one pair. The birds have started to come back and mirthfulness is restored.

Morris truly displays allegria with his immaculate mimetic choreography. There is no discernable story in "Birding", yet the audience does still has a sense of the passage of time. The literal bird choreography is so accurate that it becomes comical. However, Morris also captures the essence of birds by showing that despite hardships they always return cheerful

and free. His choreography transcends time and thus is accessible to a wide audience, transforming old opera music into something relatable.