

## A Blending of Dance and Music

By Caroline Berg in New York (China Daily)

When Sabrina Jaafer told her friend from the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater in New York that she and the Nai- Ni Chen Dance Company were going to perform at the Publick Playhouse in the Maryland suburbs of Washington, her friend gushed.

"Oh, you're going to love it!" the friend told Jaafer. "They have the best audience."

After a stringed prelude by the Ahn Trio, which played live onstage throughout the 11-piece dance and music presentation, stirred the audience to hoots and applause, the dancers were confident this was going to be a good Temptation of the Muses - their last performance of the show this season.

"During the duet, I could hear the audience gasp when Daniel [Johnson] lifted me, and they always made a sound when I'd go into a handstand," Ekaterina Chernikhova said with a laugh in recalling the performance of Lullaby for My Favorite Insomniac.

The 75-minute program is a collaborative effort involving Taiwan choreographer Nai-Ni Chen, the Korean violin-cello-piano Ahn sisters' trio, original works by American composer Kenji Bunch and the improvisation of Chen's international dance troupe.

Chen drew inspiration for the movement and sound in Temptation of the Muses from the poem A Word for Freedom, by Afghan-born Latif Nazemi about a Persian poet. It begins, "Let's kiss water / the root of civilization / a word for freedom".

"I've used the idea of water as freedom to choreograph this piece, and with this idea you see more of an Asian touch with the sensibility of how I use the dancers," Chen said. "The quietness, the stillness and the subtleties in the movement - in this piece you can see more of that influence from my Asian cultural background."

Chen incorporates elements of her Asian heritage into her choreography whenever she deems it appropriate for her cross-cultural contemporary troupe. In addition to original works, the company also performs a range of traditional Chinese pieces, including Hubei Coin Stick Dance, Mongolian Chopstick Dance, and Love Song of Xishuangbanna.

Temptation is more American than Chinese in its style, with touches of jazz, classic rock and country in the score. However, careful study of the choreography reveals Asian undertones.

"It may not be entirely clear that this movement is from martial arts or that movement is from Peking Opera, but the influence is evident in the staging and the visual elements," Chen said.

"You can compare it to a Chinese painting with the contrasts between the yin and yang, and the empty white part, and the strokes of calligraphy."

Chen said she always takes these ideas into consideration when she choreographs a dance, regardless of the overall cultural style of the performance - East, West or otherwise.

Seven dancers and a lighting specialist traveled 3? hours from their home base in New Jersey in two vehicles with Chen to perform at the historic 500- seat theater in Cheverly, Maryland. Their partners onstage, the Ahn Trio, traveled from New York City and Montana.

Chen has her dancers congregate around the musicians onstage - sitting with them, watching them, flirting with them, crawling under a piano, standing on their chairs. The choreographer layers all of these elements in a way that unites the movement with the music.

"The dancers must be very aware of where they are and, at the same time, they can't show any resistance," Chen said. "We have to show how we are really blending together and not have any cautious feelings translated to the audience."

After the performance, all of the performers met with audience members at a reception in the lobby. The patrons eagerly discussed with Chen and the performers the choreography and feelings experienced throughout the diverse range of numbers.

"It's so great how you incorporated the musicians and connected all the elements in the choreography," one person told Chen, who has been running her company since 1988.

Chen said the trio was a little stiff as it played through the integrated movement at the beginning, but she has seen them open up over time and become more comfortable with the choreography.

"In terms of Nai-Ni's choreography, [Temptation] is not as physically demanding as something like Whirlwind, which is like a marathon," Chernikhova said of a dance by Chen that was inspired by her time traveling along the Silk Road in China. "Dancing to live music is the more challenging element in this work."

Nai-Ni Chen and the Ahn Trio have been performing and tweaking this show since its premiere in New York in 2010. Over a span of about 30 performances, dancers have come and gone.

Chen will be holding auditions on June 3 in preparation for another season. Her current troupe is made up of dancers from the United States, China, the Republic of Korea, Russia, Italy and Cuba.

Although Chen draws inspiration from a wide variety of sources, including poems, calligraphy, travel, current events and music, she said she often gets ideas just from improvising with her dancers in the studio.

"A sudden inspiration will come up and I'll remember something from my childhood and I'll put that memory somehow into my choreography," Chen said. "I think because of who I am, subconsciously [my Asian background] is going to come out in my work no matter what."

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## **Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company and the Ahn Trio @ Troy Savings Bank Music Hall, 2/16/13**

Saturday, February 16, 2013 *by:*Tresca Weinstein

TROY – In flamenco, tap and African dance, to name a few, live music and movement are inextricably intertwined. Dancers and musicians respond to and interact with each other on stage, sharing the spotlight and creating a whole that's more than its parts.

That doesn't happen as often with classical music and contemporary dance. But the Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company and the Ahn Trio, performing together Saturday evening at the Troy Savings Bank Music Hall in a program titled "Temptation of the Muses," demonstrated that it can work just as seamlessly.

That was due in no small part to the virtuosity and elegance of sisters Angella (violin), Maria (cello) and Lucia Ahn (piano), Korean-born and Juilliard-educated, who look as if they could as easily be dancers as musicians. In fact, they practically dance as they play, so fully do they embody the music with every gesture. The trio's versatility (they've collaborated with rock and pop singers, photographers, ecologists and even kite makers, among others) complements the range of Chen's work and the individuality of her dancers, who hail from Russia, China, Korea, Cuba, Japan and the United States.

A native of China and a former member of the renowned Cloud Gate Dance Theater of Taiwan, Chen is influenced by Chinese painting, folk ritual and nature. Those inspirations were particularly noticeable in the first half of Saturday's program, which featured three dances marked by serenity, fluidity and grace.

"Yu Ryung," with music by Pat Metheny, has an epic feel, as the dancers move on and off the stage, meet up in tableaux and duets and wind their way between the musicians, taking multiple journeys. In the romantic "Dies Irie," set to music by Kenji Bunch, the musicians take center stage and the dancers scatter around them, moving with slow, caressing deliberation. A basin of water serves as a centerpiece for "Concrete Stream," also with music by Bunch and inspired by one of his poems; the dancers bathe their arms and legs and toss droplets in the air, but the theme feels a bit contrived.

There was more spark and energy in the second half of the program. In Chen's "Lullabye," with music by Ronn Yedidia, four dancers (Noibis Licea, Jamison Goodnight, Guanglei Hui and Sarah Pon) collide in both conflict and intimacy—like a fresh, edgy version of "A Midsummer Night's Dream." The dancers' personalities finally shone out in the swiny "Backstep" and the athletic, angular "Grooveboxes" (both with music by Bunch). And the Ahn sisters' lush, jazzy rendition of the Doors' "Riders on the Storm" was totally unexpected and absolutely perfect.

## **Dance: "Temptation of the muses" - preview with choreographer Nai-Ni Chen**

March 7, 2012

By Eugene Chan, Queens Fine Arts Examiner

Founded in 1988, the Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company is an organization where the influences of the East (such as martial arts movements) meets West (modern dance discipline). In preview of an upcoming performance of "Temptation of the muses" here is an interview with group founder and artistic director Nai-Ni Chen.

**Q1:** Brief explain the origins of how "Temptation of the muses" came about.

**A1** (Chen): In 2010, the initial idea was inspired by a poem called "A word for freedom" by Latif Nazemi, a Persian poet originally from Afghanistan. It was at a time when the company got a "Live music for dance" grant from the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation. Next, based on past associations we decided to work the Ahn Trio (made up of 3 Korean-born sisters) who play throughout "Temptation of the muses." The Ahn trio knew of NY-based Japanese-American composer Kenji Bunch who would write a new piece called "Concrete stream."

**Q2:** Why the title "Concrete stream?"

**A2:** It was Bunch's reaction to Nazemi's treatment of water in "A word for freedom." Working off of Bunch's interpretation of the poem, for the dancers stream came to mean the flow of movement across the confines of a stage. The use of the word stone in the poem made Bunch think of concrete in an urban setting. So concrete stream took on another layer of meaning -- freedom within structure-- like the way a big city or a dance can be.

**Q3:** This will be the fifth time the group will be performing "Temptation of the muses" since its premier at Harlem School of the Arts Theater in December 2010. How has the work evolved since that debut?

**A3:** It has evolved in two specific ways. Since the staging involves having the instrumentalists not be stationary, pianist Lucia Ahn came to me and said I want to be involved with the movement on stage. It took awhile to figure out how to do that, but early on in the piece I have Lucia with the dancers doing a pedestrian walk.

"Yu Ryung" is a section that features Jazz composer Pat Metheny's music. My first reaction to the music's lyricism made me think about individuals in a city trying to enjoy a little piece of nature in the urban jungle. When I learned that "Yu Ryung" meant spirit or ghost in Korean, and that definition was the basis for Metheny's intent--it spurred me to make small changes to the dance.

**Q4:** In a composer's note you said that you gave the dancers a lot of freedom to express themselves while working on "Temptation of the muses." Have you always worked that way or is this practice a more recent development?

**A4:** It depends. When I have a clear vision of what a work is about, I take charge strongly. When I don't have a clear vision and I'm exploring an idea, the dancers are encouraged to contribute to the process.

As an example, say at one point during the process of creating a dance I have three sets of male/female dancers pair off. I throw two words at them like, "connect" and "disconnect," and then I ask them to improvise.

The pairs then explore those words. One pair might click and pop immediately, another pair might experiment and grind for quite awhile. Watching their processes gives me ideas to consider when creating a piece.

**Q5:** What qualities do you look for in a dancer who is looking to join the company?

**A5:** First I go beyond the personal background of a dancer, and consider how will they best fit into my concept. Of course a candidate must have strong, fundamental technique. Beyond that, I'm looking for a dancer who doesn't just move through a given space, but physically inhabits it. Simply by the way a dancer walks I can get a clue to their personality. I find it's hard for dancers to lie with their bodies.

Equally important is a candidate who shows open-mindedness to new styles and ideas. I've had some candidates who were technically exceptional, but set in their approach based on their training and therefore wouldn't be a good match. Also, a dancer who isn't shy about providing feedback can provide me with information that will inform my choreography. When starting on a work whose concept I'm unsure of, both of the aforementioned qualities can make my life easier.

**Q6:** Talk about the economic challenges the company has faced over the last three years.

This company has made it for 23 years, so we know how to survive during economic downtimes, but it has been rough. When times are good, my company has an atypical capacity to have 40 full-time total workweeks.

Right now it's just 20 full-time workweeks with some part-time opportunities.

That said, things are slowly improving as we are getting more performance requests and funding streams are starting to trickle in again. In my experience, economic climate for dance cannot get worse than it was during the low point of 2009 -10.

**Q7:** What is the technically or interpretatively most difficult section for the dancers in "Temptation of the muses?"

Technically, the finale called "Groove box" is hard because there are parts of this section that require the male dancer among many things, to sustain handstands of considerable duration while displaying total command over his entire body.

From an interpretive standpoint, a particularly difficult section is called "Lullaby." I have a certain idea of the meaning behind "Lullaby," but communicating that idea through physical movement is a challenge. I don't reveal too much in the program notes about this section though, because I want an audience member to come at this part from their own viewpoint.

**Q8:** Does audience feedback-- whether it's the person who pays for a ticket or someone in your creative circle-- matter enough to influence the development of a given piece?

**A8:** Andrew Chiang is executive director of the company and his opinion means most to me. He also happens to be my husband and is often the ensemble's toughest critic. He was a dance student in his younger days and has so many years in this business in an administrative role, including a stint with the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA).

For me, I think that dance companies should regularly hold question and answer sessions with audience members as much as possible. This, to break through the third wall and get their feedback whether positive or negative.

I'm confident in my abilities, but not stubborn. If I hear useful criticism, I'll use it to grow as an artist.

## **Ahn Trio unites with Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company for performance**

Tuesday, February 7, 2012

By Sarah Maze

The sparkling Ahn Trio accompanies the Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company for their Gainesville premiere onstage tonight in “Temptation of the Muses,” a concert of original music and dance.

The UF Performing Arts program begins at 7:30 tonight at the Phillips Center. Tickets range from \$25-\$40 and are available at the door.

Choreographer Nai-Ni Chen, along with violinist Angella Ahn, talked about what's in store, as well as how the collaboration came to be.

“We (the Ahn Trio and Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company) are both under the same management in America,” says Ahn. “So my sisters and I had seen the company perform and really liked it. Nai-Ni had heard us before, we all met at an event, and we thought we'd like to work together. Plus, I guess there is that Asian connection,” says Ahn, who was born in Seoul, Korea, while Chen is originally from Taiwan.

“Plus, going to school in New York City and being used to being surrounded by so many interesting and talented people who are all so different, my sisters and I just really love to collaborate often,” Ahn adds. “We've worked with singers of all styles, and we had even worked with another dance company before (Parsons Dance Company).”

“But ‘Temptation of the Muses' feels more organic, natural and comfortable for us”, she says.

In “Temptation,” choreographer Chen places the three strings players right onstage amid the dancing — so the musicians become immersed in the visual element of the piece along with the dancers.

“We move around during the performance, and the dancers interact with us,” Ahn says. Dancers slide through the piano and mimic the cellist's movements.

Chen says the it was important to her that the be musicians be part of the visual effect. “I did not want a collaborative effect where it was like, here is this one color over here, and another separate, over there,” she says. “The whole work is like an Impressionist painting, where all the colors mix together.”

Chen launched the collaboration with inspiration from a poem, “A Word for Freedom,” by Persian poet Latif Nazemi. “The poem talks about water, and water as a symbol of freedom,” she says. “In a lot of my work, I am very interested in nature, and in our human relationship with nature.

“I loved the idea of water, something that we all need that connects all people. And I also wanted to explore an idea that though water symbolizes freedom in both the poem and in ‘Temptation', that it can be contained.

“A large container of water is on the stage both at the beginning and close of the program,” she adds. “And the dancers work directly with water throughout the performance.”

“Temptation of the Muses” contains a commissioned musical score by composer Kenji Bunch, who was heralded by The New York Times as a “composer to watch.” Bunch, one of only three composers selected nationwide to inaugurate the Meet the Composer “Magnum Opus” Project, is also a favorite of The Ahn Trio.

“We perform Kenji's music more than any other composer,” Ahn says. “We love him, he's probably our favorite composer to work with.”

There are also musical selections by Pat Metheny, David Balakrishnan and Ronn Yedidia.

Chen named the piece “Temptation of the Muses” by taking the word “temptation” from Nazemi's poem, and combining it with “muses” after the effect that all of the collaborators had on each other. “‘Muses’ is all of us, all of the collaborators involved,” Chen says. “We have inspired each other working together, not just the Ahn Trio and myself, but the composers, the costume and lighting designers, everyone.”

And while “Temptation of the Muses” premiered in New York City in 2010, Gainesville audiences will see a work that has only been performed a handful of times. “It's a pretty new work,” Chen says. “We just started touring it last fall.”

Ahn says the piece has been performed less than 10 times. “I feel like the show keeps growing each time we perform it,” she says. “My sisters and I are so inspired by the music and definitely by the dancers; and I feel like we in turn hopefully inspire the dancers. And we think the audience also really takes in the inspiration as well.”

Since forming in 1988, The Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company has mounted more than 20 national tours, appearing in some of the nation's most prestigious concert halls.

Angella Ahn is the youngest of the Juilliard-educated Ahn Trio. Her sisters Maria (cello), and Lucia (piano) make up the energetic trio.

“I have always thought our personalities match our instruments,” Ahn laughs. “I'm the youngest, but I'm definitely the bossiest. My sisters would back that up completely; I'm kind of a Type A control freak. And Lucia, she's the middle child, knowing how to get along with everyone, which is just right for a pianist.”

“And while Maria is the oldest only by ten minutes, our parents definitely raised her as the oldest child, and that has always been her role. Which I think suits the cello.”

With six albums and 10 years of successful touring, they are favorites of UF Performing Arts, and reportedly the feeling is mutual.

“We love Gainesville, and we love the Phillips Center,” says Ahn. “It really is one of our favorite places to perform.”

# The Star-Ledger

DANCE REVIEW

December 4, 2010

## Musicians become part of the act in Nai-Ni Chen's newest dance

Robert Johnson STAR-LEDGER STAFF

Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company, "Temptation of the Muses"

The Ahn sisters, a sparkling musical trio, joined the Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company on Thursday for "Temptation of the Muses," an adventurous evening of music-making and dancing at the Harlem School of the Arts.

The program, which continues through tomorrow, features "Concrete Stream," a premiere with a commissioned score by Kenji Bunch, and the dancers and musicians perform alternately interpreting music by Bunch and by other contemporary composers.

Introducing the event, Andy Chiang, the Nai-Ni Chen Dance Company's executive director, announced their intention to transform the black-box theater at the Harlem School of the Arts into a dance destination by performing there regularly. The troupe from Fort Lee has been in residence at HSA for 13 years, and with the added presence of musical celebrities, Thursday's show was a high-profile benefit for the school.

The Ahn sisters are no strangers to dance, having collaborated with choreographer David Parsons in 2004. This time, however, they were more than glamorous accompanists.

In "Concrete Stream," Chen posts them strategically onstage -- and she persuaded violinist Angella Ahn to remove her stiletto heels and wade barefoot into the action. At other points, dancers frame

cellist Maria Ahn by posing behind her.

Chen seems determined to make the most of this performance space and its surroundings.



"Concrete Stream" opens with a melody played on the cello, echoed plaintively from offstage. Dancer Riyo Mito dips her hands into an illuminated basin, making drops of water cascade brilliantly, as Francisco Silvano stands nearby in semi-darkness. The dance takes its theme from a poem by exiled Afghan poet Latif Nazemi, in which water becomes a symbol of freedom. Dancers touch one another without grasping or seeking to hold; and in a complex meshing of bodies, individuals roll off one another and pass through openings like water flowing through a sieve. A piece of fabric unfurls from beneath the piano and flows across the stage diagonally. Although "Concrete Stream" is a

work of poetic allusion, not strident slogans, knowing Chen it is easy to see these references and the contrast between darkness and light, amounting to a political allegory.

Other dances on the program feel more intimate. In "Lullabye," sharply etched tableaux and moments of isolation suggest an uneasy co-dependency among four people. Another piece titled "Lullabye for My Favorite Insomniac" presents tenderness without irony, however. In "Swing Shift," the dancers' mounting energy seems dangerous, as the piece progresses from hard, mechanical gestures to scenes in which dancers leap across rolling bodies.

The Ahn sisters are game collaborators, accustomed to negotiating among themselves, and they take visible pleasure in their repertoire, ranging from David Balakrishnan's fierce "Skylife" to the delicacy of Bunch's "Dies Irie," and on to Bunch's folksy "Backstep," with its queer-sounding rhythms for prepared piano.

Photo: Carol Rosegg