

Boston Ballet orchestra adds live electronics to the mix for ‘The Space Between’

Music director Mischa Santora and jazz pianist/electronic artist Michael Cain collaborate on music for the new ballet by choreographer Ken Ossola

By [A.Z. Madonna](#) Globe Staff, Updated May 8, 2024, 2 hours ago



At the Citizens Bank Opera House, Boston Ballet music director Mischa Santora conducts the orchestral rehearsal of “Toccatà,” for the ballet “The Space Between.” PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF


When the creative trio behind the new ballet “The Space Between” are off the job, none of them is usually listening to the typical orchestral ballet music.

Choreographer Ken Ossola has lately enjoyed starting his day with Janet Jackson’s “Together Again,” or music by Billie Eilish or American rapper El-P. If you get in the car with pianist, composer, and electronic artist Michael Cain, you’ll probably hear hip-hop or electronica à la Kendrick Lamar or Sampha. And after Boston Ballet music director and composer [Mischa Santora](#) gets home from a performance, he’ll get on YouTube and look for live performances by Thelonious Monk or Keith Jarrett.

“The problem with that is you get so immersed in it that the next thing you notice, it’s 2 a.m., and the next day is going to be really bad,” Santora said during a break in rehearsals for “The Space Between,” which premieres Thursday in Boston Ballet’s “Spring Experience” contemporary program.

And the pit orchestra for “The Space Between” might be large, but “Tocatta for Orchestra and Live Electronics” — the new piece Santora and Cain created for “The Space Between” — doesn’t resemble the usual orchestral ballet music one might recognize from “The Nutcracker” or “The Firebird.” In one corner of the pit sits Cain’s luminous workstation, where he manipulates sound using Ableton Live and his own software, Ekwe.

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At the Citizens Bank Opera House, electronics composer Michael Cain, center, rehearses "Toccata," for the ballet "The Space Between." PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

“There’s sampled acoustic pianos from the turn of the century that have been processed. There’s kalimbas from Africa. There’s a whole host of acoustic instruments where I’ve

taken those samples and reworked them into a state where there's a degree of familiarity, but at the same time it's something that you hopefully haven't quite heard before," said Cain.

The seed for "The Space Between" was planted when Ossola came to Santora with the idea for a dance piece inspired by Michaelangelo's famously unfinished sculptures "[The Prisoners](#)," in which male nude figures appear to be wrestling free of blocks of marble. "What is interesting is to try not to polish the movement, to leave the dancer free space to interpret," said Ossola. "To initiate the movement and see where it leads."

Santora looked to the Italian Renaissance as well for musical inspiration, and found the starting point for "Toccata" in a phrase of a madrigal by the Italian composer Carlo Gesualdo. When Ossola asked for electronics in the piece, Santora reached out to Cain, a veteran jazz composer, bandleader, and sideman with whom he'd briefly collaborated a few years ago.

Writing for a ballet feels like "such a homecoming," said Cain, who was "convinced he was going to be a ballet dancer" for most of his childhood in Las Vegas. "I've composed for dancers in a variety of settings, but not specifically ballet," he said.

Composers have been experimenting with the combination of various electronic instruments and orchestra for nearly a century now, and when working on "Toccata," Cain's interest was piqued by the places "where electronics could weave in, and fit in the orchestral setting," he said. "There's a whole host of electronic textural sounds where you might not be aware that they're there, but if you were to take them out, you would all of a sudden be 'oh, something's not in the orchestra.'"

Working with younger choreographers had already given Santora the impetus to experiment with the sound of the ballet orchestra, he said. "People say [to them], 'how about a Stravinsky piece?' and they're like 'oh, that sounds so old-fashioned.'" Music that was avant-garde 90 years ago, he said, might not "speak to a much younger generation that gets its music from Spotify."



Choreographer Ken Ossola (left) with Boston Ballet second soloist Tyson Ali Clark in rehearsals for "The Space Between." BROOKE TRISOLINI/BOSTON BALLET

Boston Ballet has performed contemporary repertoire that incorporates a variety of pre-recorded music — choreographer Stephen Galloway’s 25-minute [“DEVIL’S/eye”](#) was set to five songs by the Rolling Stones, and “The Space Between” shares the “Spring Experience” program with William Forsythe’s “Blake Works III (The Barre Project)”, set to the music of English producer and songwriter James Blake. (The third ballet in the program is “Bella Figura,” by Ossola’s mentor Jiří Kylián; Ossola performed in the [original cast](#) as a company member of Nederlands Dans Theater.)

The union of live electronics and orchestra, at least on the scale of “Toccata,” is “new to Boston Ballet,” Santora said.

“This is just one attempt to say hey, let’s do something new. Let’s do something creative. Let’s get a great team, which we have,” Santora said, looking over at Cain and Ossola.

“I’m really excited.”

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