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DANCE REVIEW; A Strangely Cool and Eloquent Use of Arms

By JENNIFER DUNNING

The dances presented by Lydia Johnson and her company on Saturday night at the Theater of the Riverside Church stood out for their simplicity and quiet depth of abstracted feeling. Ms. Johnson trained with major New York teachers but has worked in New Jersey, where her troupe is based. That distance from the hectic, cliquish New York dance scene may have been a good thing for her. She is on to something, and that something is entirely her own.

One unusual aspect of Ms. Johnson's choreography is the way she uses arms, giving them an importance usually vested only in the torso and the legs. The arms that reached and gestured from the standing women in "Hymn (In Three Sections)," a signature opening dance set to hymnal music by Mozart and Monteverdi, had a strangely cool, crisp eloquence.

Those arm moves became a little too familiar in Ms. Johnson's new "Sonata, Op. 53," set to a Beethoven piano sonata performed live by Steven Masi with a complementary simplicity and sumptuousness. But the first and most persuasive of the dance's three movements had a pearl-like richness as four women (Rachel Frank, Tara Mora, Sabra Perry and Marianne Raub) and two men (Justin Bates and James C. Lacey) moved in an unforced flow of sudden brief asymmetries and serene quirks that initiated each new push of momentum.

Ms. Johnson also has a gift for integrating children and teenage girls unsentimentally into her dances, almost as added texture, as she did in "Hymn" and "Sonata." And she is clearly a choreographer with a special sensitivity to music. Her surprising "Hold Fast" revealed an unexpected classicism in Steve Reich, to whose Triple Quartet the driving, stark group dance was set.

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