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Cuba's charisma shines on Sarasota

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In 2014, the fledgling Sarasota Cuban Ballet School, then just three years old, began a collaboration with the Cuban National Ballet School in Havana, an exchange of teachers and students that has resulted for the past two years in a summer showcase at the Sarasota Opera House. Saturday's third "On Stage" performance confirmed that the Cuban students are still miles ahead of their American counterparts, but it was encouraging to see that the home-grown talent, trained by SCBS founders Ariel Serrano and his wife, Wilman Hernandez, is beginning to narrow the gap.

With the exception of "Evolution" — a contemporary work by Cuban choreographer Tania Vergara Perez set on the entire student body of SCBS's summer intensive that was filled with showy extensions, lifts and acrobatics — it was an exclusively classical program, filled with familiar variations by Soviet choreographer Marius Petipa, considered the most influential dance maker in ballet history.

Francisco Serrano, son of the SCBS founders, who will join The Royal Ballet this month, and Francois Llorente, a soloist with the Ballet Nationale de Cuba, got top billing and I was anxious to see how both had evolved since the first year of the exchange, in which they both participated as students. While the magnetic presence, near perfect physique and outstanding technique of each is undeniable, the material they were given in this case did little to show off their potential.

Serrano was an elegant and understated partner for Cuban student Amanda Perez in the Grand

Pas and Grand Coda from "Paquita," but, aside from a few impressive leaps, it gave him little opportunity to shine. While I understood the choice of material – the ballet's many variations call for a large corps of women and few men, which suited the gender imbalance of the student population and the need to give all the students a chance to shine – the choreography is not especially scintillating and its technical demands exceeded the capacity of some of the student body. Perez, on the other hand, could not be faulted in her presentation, though it didn't make my heart race the way Cuban performances often do.

Nor was Llorente, who astounded me three years ago, at his best. His overenthusiastic entry in the male variation from "Flames of Paris" resulted in a rough start and his brief time on stage was hardly long enough to evaluate his gifts. I was reassured, however, when he came back on stage for the final dancing bows and whipped off an easy eight pirouettes.

So, unexpectedly, the night belonged to two Cuban students, Katherine Ochoa and Narciso Medina, both under the age of 20, who performed the pas de deux from "Diana and Acteon" about as well as I have ever seen it done. Those around me were gasping at the height of Medina's jumps, but it was Ochoa who stunned me, not only with her technical prowess – the long, unassisted balances on pointe, the triple fouetté turns and the precise footwork were all there – but with her saucy attitude and confident musicality, so rare in an artist so young. Cuba is famous for its charismatic male dancers, but Ochoa drew me like a moth to a flame.

Of the lineup of more than half a dozen variations from well-known ballets, one in particular stood out. I have never loved the cutesy pas de deux from "Harlequinade," but it was irresistible as performed by the diminutive Oliva Ratner and Harold Mendez, both local talents. I have followed Ratner since she was a precocious tot and it was lovely to see her continued blossoming, as both performer and technician. But again, it was Mendez, who has a remarkable presence and posture for his age (not to mention great feet), that usurped my attention.

Ramona de Saa Bello, director of the CNBS, contributed the quietly lyrical opening number, "Requien," which featured lots of arabesques, port du bras (use of the arms) and épaulement (use of the shoulders and chest). Notable among the bevy of young, lithe beauties in sheer, pale green flowy dresses was former SCBS student Emma Town, now a member of Milwaukee Ballet's second company, whose languid arms and lovely lines captured de Saa's intentions beautifully.

As long as Cuban ballet students continue to be hand-selected in adolescence for their physical type and provided with eight years of government-sponsored training, they will always have a head start on their American counterparts. But programs like this one are encouraging for what they presage about the dissemination of the Cuban style outside that country's borders. It is already having an effect right here in Sarasota, and it is, without question, a very beneficial one.