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Heights 'Dearth of Dance' Offset by Music Society

BY MARILYN HUNT

In its "Music to the Dance" program, the Brooklyn Heights Music Society went all out to make up for the dearth of dance performances in the Heights. The February 22nd event held at St. Ann's Church presented examples of three major contrasting dance forms: ballet, modern dance and social dancing, offering all three with the luxury of live music.

The premiere of the evening was "A Time of Delicate Deception," choreographed by Brooklyn native June Lewis to a new composition by composer Robert Starer, a Brooklyn Heights resident. Both are members of the faculty of Brooklyn College. To the very attractive score, both melodic and interestingly percussive, Miss Lewis has created a tale of the eternal -- in this case -- quadrangle in a modern dance style based on her former teacher Martha Graham. The "deception" of the title is that the male protagonist blindfolds a young woman in order to substi-

tute himself for her former lover who has been lured away by another woman, danced by Miss Lewis. In the end the young woman accepts the protagonist for himself. He is characterized by the choreography as a loner and a caged creature, scratching at his bars and testing his territory with his feet. But there is a static and cramped quality about the overall effect, even given the small stage space. Miss Lewis herself, for example, had a dark forcefulness in relation to her partner, but made small steps even for herself.

The program opened with a one-act version of the ballet "Coppelia" by the Christine Neubert Ballet Company, called here "The Girl With Enamel Eyes." Miss Neubert has long experience in staging story ballets for the abilities of young dancers. In this recent work she has adapted the second act of "Coppelia," where the heroine Swanilda fools the old toymaker, Dr. Coppelius, into thinking she is his beloved mechanical doll Coppelia; come to life through his magic, and then upsets all his dolls and shows him the lifeless body of Coppelia. In the original version she does all this to distract him from harming her fiancée, but here her pranks are pure mischief, and Dr. Coppelius is a tragic hero.

Most outstanding was Ron Komora, as the old toymaker. He gave his predominantly mime role with sympathy and charm. The pert Kathleen D'Orto was Swanilda. Staged imaginatively with a minimum of scenery, the production gives a number of students, some quite young, performing experience as the mechanical dolls.

The best part of the evening, however, was a thoroughly delightful and informative presentation of English and American traditional dances by the Country Dance and Song Society of America. Costumed appropriately for each period from the seventeenth to the twentieth century, the enthusiastic and well drilled dancers were themselves a pleasing cross-section of ages and types, mainly drawn, I am told, from a performing group organized for the Bicentennial celebrations. Their director, James Morrison, gave just the right amount of lively commentary to set the dances in context.

These carefully researched group social dances are interesting to watch because the patterning and dynamics form a whole greater than the sum of the non-virtuoso individual parts; and the dancers' enjoyment is contagious as well. (Ballet of course began with courtly amateurs, and just this stress on floor patterns, and has been borrowing elements from folk and social dancing ever since.)

Most of the dances performed here were country dances, a fairly specific term for dances in a round or square, or even more characteristically "longways" -- that is, a line of men facing a line of women, with the lead couple gradually working its way down the line. Originally English folk dances, they were taken over and elaborated by the upper classes by the time of the earliest recorded examples, as the group showed. But with the innovation of the caller in the nineteenth century, country dances could once again be danced by all, without intensive lessons. The group brought their survey down to a still-living square dance from the American south and longways dance from New England.

In country dances, men and women are paired, and their repeated approach and separation express a mild flirtation, but it's subsumed in interweaving and cooperation with the group as a whole. In this sense these dances reflect a society where the family unit depended on the community for safety and well-being.

Related dances balanced out a well varied program: energetic English Morris dances for the men with bells on their legs, the aristocratic minuet with its stately bending knees and rising on half-toe, and a southern clog dance, relative of tap dancing, where the upper body relaxes more than in its ramrod Irish counterpart.

By the way, if you feel inspired to join in the fun, act on your impulse. The Country Dance and Song Society holds classes every Tuesday night and has dances every Saturday night, both at the basement of Metropolitan Duane Church, 201 W. 13th Street in Manhattan. For further information call their office, 255-8895. Bravo to the Brooklyn Heights Music Society for bringing this group across the river.