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## Ballet Collective and Hotel Elefant at the Skirball Center

by Steven Pisano



*Photo by Matthew Murphy*

Formed in 2010 by [New York City Ballet](#) (NYCB) dancer [Troy Schumacher](#), [Ballet Collective](#) is a forum where dancers, choreographers, artists, writers, composers, and musicians can collaborate to create pieces that embrace the “ephemerality” of performance. In the wrong hands, this type of high-minded collaboration usually leads to artistic disaster, resulting in a formless, tasteless mush with no single guiding vision to keep things under control. But Ballet Collective is fully up to the challenge, and for a number of years now has created pieces of exciting artistic vigor, earning remarkable popular success, and garnering critical acclaim in *The New York Times*, *Dance* magazine, and elsewhere.

On October 29 and 30, Ballet Collective performed two sold-out shows at NYU's [Skirball Center](#), along with new music ensemble [Hotel Elefant](#). The dancing, using from two to seven dancers, was at a very high level. Sometimes bounding with strong athletic force, other times gently wrapping around each other in quiet moments of intimacy, the dancers use the syntax of ballet, but in a different way to express a new type of dance not quite classical ballet, yet not quite modern dance either.

The music for all three dances was written by [Ellis Ludwig Leone](#), of the Brooklyn pop band [San Fermin](#). Leone studied composition at Yale and has worked with [Nico Muhly](#) and [Sufjan Stevens](#). His dance music is stimulating and charged, sometimes rhythmic (as you would expect dance music to be), other times more dreamy and storylike, which makes sense since two of the three pieces use different poems by [Cynthia Zarin](#), poet-in-residence at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine, as the “source” of inspiration that Leone and Schumacher drew from. Considering the cinematic flavor of this dance music, don't be too surprised if one day soon you find Leone in Hollywood writing movie scores.

Unlike so many dance performances where a recording is played, the music in these performances was played live with great élan by Hotel Elefant. Having music played live in the orchestra pit while dancers are on stage is such a guilty pleasure, like eating two desserts. Sometimes it was hard to know who to pay attention to more, the dancers or the musicians. But most of the time they were perfectly in synch, and the effect was electric.

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