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## Dance: RIOULT surprises at George Mason

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Once every season or two, George Mason University's Center for the Arts books an unfamiliar modern-dance company that is unexpectedly worth the drive to Fairfax. This year, that company is Rioult (pronounced "Re-YOU"), a 19-year-old, New York-based troupe that on Friday made its long overdue Washington-area debut.

All four pieces on the program were connected by the keenly musical choreography of French emigre and former Martha Graham dancer Pascal Rioult. The movement vocabulary obviously suited the music, but was never the most obvious choice. "Wien" ("Vienna") is so-named because that was the early title Ravel gave the symphonic poem that would become "La Valse" ("The Waltz"). Yet Rioult's "Wien" is so dark and quirky that the gorgeous swirls Balanchine employed as ballroom music are almost unrecognizable here. The six dancers were costumed like early-20th-century Viennese pedestrians, and roamed the stage as if alternately drunk, making love or marching in protest.

Both "La Valse" and "Bolero," another Ravel classic on the program, were originally ballet commissions. More than many modern-dance choreographers, Rioult seems to recognize the value of collaborating with prominent composers. He commissions a piece each year, and the central work on Saturday's program was "On Distant Shores," the result of his 2011 partnership with Pulitzer Prize winner Aaron Jay Kernis. The narrative approach worked because composer and choreographer were on the same page. Charis Haines danced the role of Helen of Troy, a woman who could incite a war yet was rendered powerless by her own beauty. Four of the company's strong, capable men portrayed her Trojan suitors, and Haines submitted willingly to a pas de deux with each of them, as well as a deeply moving balletic solo. Mouth-gaping silent screams during the battle section added unnecessary melodrama, but the central conceit — that Helen of Troy was not a slutty siren, but a wistful beauty manipulated by fate — was poignantly conveyed through the movement and music.

The program closed with "Bolero." Ravel's incessant snare drum sets up the potential for frenetic, driving movement. Instead, Rioult had his corps moving in precise, robotic fashion. With each switch of solo instrument, from English horn, to trumpet and so on, solo dancers took turns slowly rotating through leg extensions, always balancing on one foot, always firmly feeling the music.