

Mark Morris Dance Group steps online for its 40th-anniversary season

By [Anying Guo](#)

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As the Mark Morris Dance Group’s fall season approached, the company knew it would be significant: This year is the modern dance troupe’s 40th anniversary, and programming would have to be almost all online.

“Of course, we had very big plans involving revivals and touring internationally,” Nancy Umanoff, executive director, says. “Then we became digital several months ago. There was a bit more uncertainty, but tremendous opportunity.”

The Mark Morris Dance Group was not accustomed to incorporating technology into its work, what with the choreographer’s longtime focus on creating a symbiotic relationship among the audience, performers and musicians. But when the coronavirus pandemic struck and stayed, the company quickly organized to create programming that was distinct, creative and almost exclusively digital.

On May 28, the company released “Dance On!: An Evening With Mark Morris Dance Group,” which featured its first video dance performances, including “Lonely Waltz,” showcasing a collaborative effort on the now ubiquitous platform Zoom. Umanoff says 4,400 people registered for the one-hour event, the largest audience ever for a premiere of a Mark Morris work. And over the summer, the company’s archival series, “Dance On! Video Vault,” gained popularity for videos of rarely performed works.

Umanoff says the group naturally lamented the loss of live performance but is excited about its upcoming stacked repertoire. The added digital components — video screenings, digital archive, socially distanced classes, interactive Q&As with Morris — are “silver linings in all of this,” Umanoff says.

“I think everyone knows this is our life now,” she says. “So if you want and need, as so many people do, to keep the arts alive and to have the moment of beauty that arts can bring . . . this is how we can consume it right now.”

Here are some highlights from the new season, all the way through next spring (see the full lineup at markmorrisdancegroup.org).

Dance On! An Evening with the Mark Morris Dance Group Part 2

Though named as a follow-up to the May performance, “Dance On! Part 2” is a stand-alone production marking the anniversary of the company’s debut in 1980. Umanoff says to expect four, maybe five, new dances created by Morris exclusively for video, with a piece based on his earlier work “Empire Garden.” Special appearances include cellist Yo-Yo Ma and a Q&A with Morris. Plus, the digital archive will stream the company’s first performance on Nov. 28, 1980, and it will be available through Dec. 6. (A “Dance On!” Part 3 will premiere May 13.) *Nov. 12 at 8 p.m.*

MMDG Holiday Special: Home for the Holidays

During normal times, “The Hard Nut,” Morris’s spin on “The Nutcracker,” would be performed in Berkeley, Calif., or Seattle, and include a lavish week of curated events for families and friends. Umanoff hopes that with some tweaks, this year’s holiday programming will be just as festive. Events include a Family Fun Day, which will feature screenings of “Snow (Waltz of the Snowflakes)” and “Flowers (Waltz of the Flowers),” as well as recipe swaps, singalongs and dancer meet-and-greets for student dancers. *Dec. 12-18.*

Dido and Aeneas week

Morris’s adaptation of Henry Purcell’s 1689 opera “Dido and Aeneas” will have a week of its own this season. The 1995 filmed version of the danced opera, in which Morris plays two female roles, will be available to stream all week. There will also be a live Q&A with Morris and the director, Barbara Willis Sweete. *Feb. 8-14.*

L’Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato week

One of the most instantly recognizable Morris works was staged to George Frideric Handel’s oratorio, premiered in 1988 and filmed at the Teatro Real in Madrid in 2014. Like “Dido and Aeneas,” the film will be available to stream the entire week and include a Q&A with Morris, talks with dancers and collaborators, a screening of the short film

“L’Allegro Movement Project” and classes for those who want to learn the legendary choreography. *April 19-25.*

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