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Just how hard can ballet rock?

Dancers from National
take on White Stripes

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When British composer Joby Talbot set out to adapt the White Stripes' stripped-down garage-blues tunes for the grandeur of a full orchestra, he felt he first needed the blessing of the Detroit duo's frontman Jack White.

If White — famously fastidious about every esthetic detail of his band's sound and look — didn't approve of the idea, it would be bound for the "dustbin."

So Talbot was understandably nervous when XL recordings honcho Richard Russell played a couple of Talbot's preliminary tracks for White while the band was on tour.

As Talbot remembers it, the tour had been taxing and White was exhausted and dealing with "various problems in his life" when he first heard Talbot's clattering, unsettled take on "Aluminium." Still, he responded well.

"Apparently, he leapt to his feet and kept saying: 'This is badass! This is badass!'" Talbot recalled in a telephone interview. "Richard and I were very pleased. We said, 'I think we've got the go-ahead.'"

So, in 2006, Talbot released *Aluminium*, a 10-track collection of the White Stripes' songs reworked for an orchestra.

What happened next surprised even Talbot. Award-winning British choreographer Wayne McGregor heard *Aluminium* and decided he wanted to develop Talbot's arrangements into a piece of dance by London's Royal Ballet called *Chroma*.

The production, featuring three White Stripes songs alongside some of Talbot's original compositions, opened in the U.K. in 2006 and will make its Canadian debut with performances by the National Ballet of Canada beginning Nov. 24. It will be performed with George Balanchine's *Serenade* and Crystal Pite's *Emergence*.

The unorthodox fusion received positive press during its original run back in '06, with the *Guardian* calling *Chroma* "fast and furious and 'totally gripping,'" while also noting that the audience seemed to be divided down the middle: half well-heeled ballet regulars who had never heard of the White Stripes, half younger rock fans who had never been to the Royal Ballet.

When reminded of that breakdown, Talbot chuckled.

"You know, I've spent my entire musical life jumping between different genres of music," said Talbot, who studied composition at Royal Holloway and Bedford New College at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama, but also toured the world with the British band the Divine Comedy, which melded alternative rock with chamber pop.

"To me, the idea of bringing these arrangements into the opera house didn't strike me as even slightly revolutionary.

"Everyone got kind of fixated on the 'White Stripes invade the opera house' thing, as if kids were tearing down the place. It wasn't like that at all."

The idea for the orchestral adaptations originated with Talbot and Russell.

Talbot had been wondering why he had heard so few inventive instrumental albums. And Russell had the "slightly disingenuous, naive genius" to ask Talbot, "Why couldn't you put this and this together? Wouldn't that be cool?"

"I thought, wouldn't it be cool to have the orchestra actually play some visceral, in-your-face rock music?" recalled Talbot, who has composed music for the films *Son of Rambow* and *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*.

But it was crucial to Talbot to avoid the winking irony that has sometimes accompanied such adaptations. He says he kept wondering: "How do we kind of make this a cheese-free zone?"

"We decided on a short list of songs that were not just the White Stripes' greatest hits," he recalled. "We chose the more obscure tracks that people might not know or

might not be so familiar with, and then set about finding a way to capture the intensity and the sort of raw power and emotion that were in the original songs, but amplifying those through an orchestra.

"So it's totally not about filling away all the rough edges. It's about capturing those rough edges and extrapolating from them crazy orchestra pieces."



Tamara Rojo and Steven McRae in the Royal Ballet's *Chroma*. The work comes to Toronto next week.

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