Nature is in the air – and on the ground and over the water – in Houston Ballet’s “The Rite of Spring” program.

Edwaard Liang’s “Murmuration” is the most kinetically thrilling new work the company has commissioned in some time – a rhapsodic evocation of birds in flight set to Ezio Bosso’s new “Violin Concerto No. 1, Esoconcerto.” The score, reminiscent of Philip Glass but more emotional, was given a virtuosic first run by violinist Denise Tarrant.

With eight couples and one man, this is the kind of dance that makes you wish you could hit the rewind button on a live performance. Seas of fluid bodies swirl and swoop around the stage in swift circles, changing direction rapidly or lining up in vividly interlocked patterns.

A complex canon sequence near the end is pure rapture.

Brief solos let dancer preen; and one section awes with exquisite, sinewy and sharp pas de deux for Mireille Hassenboehler and Simon Ball, Sara Webb, and William Newton, and Lauren Strongin and Rupert Edwards. (All the dancers are superb.) Liang’s partnering shimmers throughout “Murmuration,” often keeping the women airborne with legs wide open or in cartwheels.

At a moment when the music is melancholic, a subtle but enticing narrative unfolds and a magnetic lone man, Christopher Coomer, interrupts Karina Gonzalez and Ball. He gets the girls, but something happens; her powerful energy changes him. The flock reappears, and it feels like a subtle variation on “The Rite of Spring.” When his mate finds the man again, it ends beautifully but not joyfully.

“Murmuration” is beautifully lighted by Lisa J. Pinkham, with floor-level lights casting the dancers’ enlarged shadows against the back white wall early on. The costumes by Liang and Laura Lynch add to the flow of the movement.
Then there are the feathers, falling in what seems to be nighttime: about 25 pounds of them, drifting gently from the upstage rafters through much of the dance, becoming a near blizzard by the finale. Some in the audience found them distracting. I liked them, but I might have taken them for snow if I hadn't known better; and Liang's choreography doesn't need embellishment.

Stanton Welch's staging of “The Rite of Spring” also a premiere, glimmers, with other types of embellishment, a spectacle as vividly lighted (by Pinkham) and costumed (by Welch and Lynch) as one of today's elaborate 3-D films. The backdrops, adapted from Rosella Namok's contemporary Aboriginal painting, are striking; but a front scrim based on an M.C. Escher painting that divides the dance's sections drops awkwardly.

This “Rite” looks fierce, as the entire company, plus a few Houston Ballet II dancers, fill the stage in tribal-inspired finery. It also sounds fierce: Conductor Ermanno Florio and the Houston Ballet Orchestra play Igor Stravinsky's famously raucous score with gusto.

But it's surprisingly tame, even old-fashioned, with mother-father figures and a clear line, at one point, between the strong men out front and women swishing their tooshies in the shadows way upstage.

Many dance companies are celebrating the centennial of Stravinsky and Vaslav Nijinsky's “The Rite of Spring” this year with new productions. The last performed in Houston was Angelin Preljocaj's hard-core rendition, which carries out its sacrifice of a naked Chosen One atop a hill. Houston Ballet used to perform Glen Tetley's stinging version. The freshest on my mind, however, is Pina Bausch's devastatingly dramatic production, which appeared on film last year.

In those stagings, the dread of the mob mentality grips you; you know the vulnerable Chosen One isn't going to escape.

Welch hears the music as a mating ritual between two tribes. At the center, often immobilized, are a fragile female (Nozomi Iijima, who brings a good, Butoh-inspired sensibility to her role) and a make inspired by another of Nijinsky's famous ballet characters, the faun from “Afternoon of a Faun.” That's an interesting idea, but this faun (Joseph Walsh), seems flatly drawn in spite of the black paint swabbed across his face.

The minimal steps for the tribes vacillate from grounded stomps and sways to neoclassical flourishes that confuse the mood. Charles-Louis Yoshiyama and Kelly Myernick add drama as imposing, high-priest types, but the movement gets its biggest charge from the sheer size of the ensemble.

The company premiere of Mark Morris' “Pacific,” which opens the program, is breezy and spirited. Its compellingly and simply contrasts gravity with lightness, sharpness with fluidity, control with release and stillness with stage-eating movement. Much of this happens through the sharply changing shapes of the nine dancers' arms and torsos. Their legs are concealed by
Martin Pakledinaz’s flowing split skirts, whose ombré waists evoke fire (red), earth (green) and water (blue).

The launching point is Lou Harrison’s “Trio for Violin, Cello and Piano,” colorfully conveyed by Tarrant, cellist Barret Sills and pianist Katherine Burkwall-Ciscon.