

ANNE TERESA DE KEERSMAEKER: THE SIX BRANDENBURG CONCERTOS



In what has to be one of the most elegant productions in many a season, Belgian choreographer Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker brings us her comprehensive response to one of Bach's most familiar and beloved works, the six Brandenburg Concertos, in the overwhelming spatial volume that is the drill hall of the Park Avenue Armory, October 1-7. In front of a bank of stadium seating for nearly a thousand, the stage is a light gray circle that must be 90-feet in diameter and hanging above it a chandelier-like structure containing the lights. Set and lighting are by Jan Versweyveld. In the orchestra pit at the front are the members of the B'Rock Orchestra, conducted by first violinist Amandine Beyer.



Cast of SIX BRANDENBURG CONCERTOS by Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker

In contrast to the all-black clothing of the dancers, Lav Crnčević wears a different colorful outfit each time he enters with a sign, announcing the next Concerto. His trek across the stage gives the dancers time to breath and change clothes and the musicians to change seating between sections. The two-hour long intermission-less piece starts with its sixteen dancers lined up across the back like runway models of a fashion week collection in minimalist couture by Belgian designer An D’Huys – jackets, trench coats, loose slacks or knee-length shorts, low-heeled pumps on the women, sneakers for the men; under their jackets, the men wear mesh tanks or tees. The only movement in the whole first movement is walking, forwards and backwards, in unpredictable counts but precisely in unison. Walking articulates the pulse of the dance throughout.



SIX BRANDENBURG CONCERTOS by Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker

Singly, dancers begin to break from the walking formation into individual phrases,

removing a jacket or shoes as they do. In Concerto #1, with the winds and reeds, a white hunting dog with a black patch around one eye, led by Mark Lorimer and Sandy Williams, joins in the walking. The dog, Stella, the dog, and her escorts are on one side of the stage alongside three women on the other. Stella keeps veering towards the women, but Williams keeps tight hold on her leash. The canine cameo underlines the metaphor, “walking is my dancing,” adds a whiff of levity, and then is gone.



Jason Respilieux is lifted in SIX BRANDENBURG CONCERTOS

In the Fifth Concerto there are more extended solos, duets, and small groups. The dancers move robustly but with physical efficiency – a necessity because of the two-hour length and bruising pace of the dance. There’s a constant play between the dancers seeming to impel the music and vice versa. At the start and in some of the allegro passages, especially for the men, the music pushes them; in the adagio sections, the dancers seem more in charge, although it’s really Bach that’s running the show the whole time. Even the musicians have trouble hitting all the notes in some of the briskly paced allegro and presto passages.



(center) Frank Gizycki jumps in SIX BRANDENBURG CONCERTOS

De Keersmaecker uses a relatively limited palette of moves that recur throughout and are passed among the dancers – fast whipping turns in a wide stance, a backward fall with feet shooting upward, a half handstand (hands down, one foot in the air), jumps with the knees lifting, sweeping reaches with outstretched arms, and whatever kinds of steps devour lots of space – skips, chassés, and runs at speeds from loping to full-out Olympic-caliber sprinting. The choreography tests dancers' stamina, and they rise to the occasion like the champion athletes they are.



The men of SIX BRANDENBURG CONCERTOS

The choreographer is always inspired by music, and Bach is among her favorite composers. Her choreography takes its cue from Bach's rhythmic persistence and richly complex internal structures. She builds close canons and contrasting counterpoints that match the musical structure; they're like little visual puzzles. In the enormous stage space,

several simultaneous actions are usually happening, but some of the twining trios and duets of Concerto 4, and its harpsichord obbligato, danced soulfully by Boštjan Antončič, give us visual respite from the density. Then, Frank Gizycki or Jason Respilieux will take off like a bat from hell, running around the periphery of the huge stage.



The men of SIX BRANDENBURG CONCERTOS

The courageous dancers also include Carlos Garbin, Marie Goudot, Robin Haghi, Cynthia Loemij, Michael Pomero, Igor Shyshko, Luka Svajda, Jakub Truszkowski, Thomas Vantuycom, Samantha van Wissen, Sandy Williams, and Sue Yeon Youn.



Dancers and musicians in SIX BRANDENBURG CONCERTOS

Just as people lust to climb Mt. Everest “because it’s there,” De Keersmaeker faces Bach’s enormous musical work as a similar kind of challenge. The music is vastly more complicated than Steve Reich or Philip Glass or John Adams or other of her favorite

minimalist music makers who deal with persistence. And as a dance maker who is not at all reticent to try conquering it, her choreography for The Six Brandenburgs reveals perhaps the most intricately sophisticated example of her craft to date.

Photos by Stephanie Berger

Batsheva – TheYoung Ensemble in “Naharin’s Virus” by Ohad Naharin.

Photos by Ascaf

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