



FINANCIAL TIMES

The Six Brandenburg Concertos, The Armory, New York –
capturing the spirit of Bach in dance
Choreographer Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker has found her perfect musical
source.

Apollinaire Scherr



Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker's Rosas company in 'The Six Brandenburg Concertos' © Stephanie Berger

Many choreographers still adhere to the 1960s prohibition against illusion, drama and spectacle; only Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker observes those strictures while keeping faith with music.

True to her postmodern roots, the Flemish 58-year-old would never deign to dramatise her chosen score or convert it to images. But neither is she content to reduce it to a cultural signpost or a mere pulse. She aims to capture the music's spirit without distortion — to translate it into the visual, kinetic and human without adding or subtracting anything.

A daunting task, but with the *Brandenburg Concertos* she has found her perfect source. Bach's own title for the two-hour work, *Concertos for several instruments*, hints at the chaos excited by the constant shift in soloist — from trumpet to violin to harpsichord. It also emphasises that these instruments are nothing special in themselves, only in what they create.

For *The Six Brandenburg Concertos*, the 18 dancers of De Keersmaeker's company Rosas walked, ran, skipped, galloped, changed direction, backed up, fell down, stood, watched, and left the elevated oval

stage in the Park Avenue Armory's massive drill hall. Anyone could have done this stuff — if not for the tricky rhythms and the sudden splintering of the group by canon or counterpoint.

The commonplace material brought home the dance's sense of play, the physical joy, fellowship, competition, surprise, exhaustion and persistence. But it was de Keersmaecker's sophisticated and idiosyncratic musical response, to both melody and rhythmic pattern, that kept us riveted (with the help of the B'Rock Orchestra, the excellent early music ensemble below the stage). Like Bach, she lays her structure bare without giving away its mystery. You hear the triplet and the gallop in the music, but only sense the rightness of the dancers reduced to a handful for a slow duet between oboe and harpsichord.

The dance travels back and forth from reason to intuition, from head to spirit — with an occasional spell of comedy. For a harpsichord passage so extended that you began to imagine the instrument panting, the dancers galumphed along with a hitch in their wide gait like a child who has peed his pants. For an early walking section, a dog joined the party. Every time the row of dancers reached the stage's lip, the animal pricked up his ears.

The Six Brandenburg Concertos is an unhurried affair. There is time for each concerto's musicians to make a leisurely entrance and tune their instruments while a man in street clothes holds up a sign that spells out the next "Konziert" like a music-traffic cop. In the dance's ebb and flow, the sublime and the mundane hold hands.