**Zigzag through Bach**

*The Six Brandenburg Concertos* stem from a double desire on behalf of Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker: firstly, to do something with a large group of dancers; secondly, to take the next step in her ongoing *pas de deux* with Bach. After her interpretation of Bach’s cello suites in *Mitten wir im Leben sind* – with an intimate setting, performed by a small ensemble, bathing in a dark and contemplative atmosphere – De Keersmaeker went for the Brandenburg Concertos this time around: triumphant, luminous, grand, joyous. “This is youthful music, its energy is up and away,” relates De Keersmaeker.

As a composer, Bach was unprecedented in his experimentation with the relationship between the *ripieno* – the accepted term for a supporting orchestra – and the soloist, an emblem for the interaction between group and individual, foreground and background. De Keersmaeker again managed to draft a choreography tailored to Bach’s musical score with a degree of ‘measure by measure’ precision. But no matter how closely she insists on following the music, the translational battle is never a question of literal transposition. One could call it a meeting at counterpoint between the logic of dance and the logic of music, between the opulence of Baroque and a contemporary – and yet so atypical for our times – attempt at an extremely ‘exacting’ form of beauty. Exacting, since it is characterized by a lack for the classical urge to please prevalent in performance art, and by the knowledge that freedom only flourishes in the interstices of a rule-bound, rigorous system.

For a total of five times now, De Keersmaeker has carried out choreographic research into and via Bach. Still, it should come as no surprise that she hasn’t yet grown weary of the German composer who was known for his propensity to be as strict as he was frivolous. Bach’s music combines an eminently danceable character – much of his music is based on old forms of dance – with a high degree of abstraction. Bach turns a theme consisting of four notes into a musical cathedral, deploying processes of variation, inversion, development. From simplicity to complexity, balancing between order and chaos. It compares to how Steve Reich extracts a complex rhythmic and harmonic counterpoint from a simple musical riff like for instance in *Violin Phase* (footnote: in the process of making her choreography of *Violin Phase*, De Keersmaeker had the fifth Brandenburg concerto on repeat). This approach that was also characteristic of De Keersmaeker’s previous work: clear rules, basic geometric forms and simple movement material as a foundation to arrive at a complex organisation of bodies in time and space.

The current Concertos require the mobilization of the largest group of dancers De Keersmaeker has ever had to organise in those same spatio-temporal co-ordinates. Sixteen dancers from three different generations testify to De Keersmaeker’s ability to gather unique forms of talent around her. Firstly, an experienced corps, whose bodies ‘contain’ the physical memory of three decades of the Rosas repertoire (amongst whom Cynthia Loemij and Samantha van Wissen, both esteemed assets to the Rosas ‘choreographic armoury’ since the early nineties). Secondly, a middle generation with whom De Keersmaeker created her work from the past ten years (for example Michaël Pomero and Marie Goudot). And finally, a younger generation stepping into the limelight with pieces and revivals such as *Zeitigung* (2017), *A Love Supreme (2017)* and *Achterland (1990).*

“We were looking for material that fits both men and women, with the clarity, detail and a controlled refinement I see in Bach as well. But this type of material can only flourish when buttressed by a strong and clear-cut architecture. This is necessary to arrive at that articulate counterpoint to such a complex score, involving such a large group of dancers. It is far from easy to organise such a large troupe of people in space without it turning into a burdensome task. The geometric axes stipulating the dancers’ vertical and horizontal movements, the question of what counts as foreground and background – all of that has to be enunciated with extreme clarity. This is similar to Bach’s music, in fact: his language is always set out clearly in broad lines, but is very refined and rich in the detail.” Once again, De Keersmaeker set out from a geometric floor plan – spiralling pentagrams – with three basic geometric objects superimposed on that same plan: a straight line (a row), a weaving motion (the zigzag), and the circle.

**The Row (My Walking is My Dancing)**

Lined up and facing the audience, the sixteen dancers of *The Six Brandenburg Concertos* walk the bass line of the first of the Brandenburg concertos. The music is joyous and triumphant, the (unusual) use of the natural horns suggests aristocratic hunting scenes. Walking can be a war dance, too, certainly when sixteen dancers do so frontally and synchronously (think Riverdance).

For this task, De Keersmaeker takes considerable time. While walking, the dancers introduce their key material: their bodies. They use the principle *my walking is my dancing* to enact it. The result is that the activity of dancing undergoes a reduction to what may be the most fundamental pattern inherent to human beings, which, from an evolutionary perspective, also turned them into human beings in the first place: walking erect.

From a logistical standpoint, this walking *must* take time: sixteen dancers are engaged in the same movement and are presupposed to thereby reveal their individuality. Our gait captures us as our handwriting does: the movements not included in the choreography, that which is not described in the score, slightly leaning forward, a kink in the left knee, the right wrist touching the hip, a shoulder accentuating the movement just a little more markedly. Call them unintentional ornaments, inadvertent variations. They are superfluous movements – not strictly necessary for the accomplishing of the ultimate goal: achieving locomotion – but define the specific ‘sonority’ of every body and are indispensable for a human being to credibly do what we call walking. Indispensable because they define the walker: ‘This is how I walk, this is my version of what people do when they walk.’

The movements themselves do exactly what an overture is supposed to do: walking back and forth, in a mesmerising manner, offering an invitation. As such, the movements play on audience’s so-called ‘mirror neurons’, giving them an eagerness to engage in the very movement themselves: ‘I can do that, too’, ‘that’s me. If dance is indeed ‘about’ something, here, it is simply ‘about’ us.

**The Zigzag (Deliberation Without Purpose)**

A multitude is always in need of limitation, just as a certain amount of ‘mass’ calls for a gravitational pull. Bach’s music often has the allure of a musical puzzle he set himself – where lies my freedom within this limited framework set by a few very rigid rules? De Keersmaeker similarly looks for freedom within the confines of rigorous frameworks. On top of the self-imposed limitation in the use of space achieved through a limited selection of geometric shapes and a strict floor plan, De Keersmaeker applies a few organising principles alien to music which are pleasantly disruptive of too literal a translation of music into movement. Similar to *Golden hours*, where Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* provided subtext to the movements, this time she confronted the logic of Bach’s music with the *abécédair*e of Gilles Deleuze, a television programme in which the French philosopher improvises to an abecedarius proposed by Claire Parnet: from ‘a’ for ‘animal’ and ‘j’ for ‘joy’ to ‘t’ for tennis and ‘z’ for zigzag. These terms subsequently provide the inspiration for the gestures the dancers not so much act out but touch upon. They are flirting, as it were, with the boundary of not quite acting it out and make the dance concrete without adding meaning too literally. The letter ‘d’ – desire – gave rise to a languorous pose, much like in the ecstatic Spanish Baroque paintings by El Greco or Zurbaran, but it draws just shy of being concrete enough to invite interpretation. “What it does do is add punctuation and rhythm,” relates De Keersmaeker. “And a sense of intent and precision.” This attention to refinement and ornamentation – also emphatically present in Bach’s work – provides eloquence without actually saying anything concrete. It invites the audience to regard the movement of the dancer from outside, from the moving body to the intention that triggered the movement in the first place. The body shows itself as something that is not only body but also possesses another component, a component that we, in a now dispensed myth, would refer to as ‘spirit’. It gives a sense of deliberation, even though it lacks purpose. (Deliberation without purpose, incidentally, is how Immanuel Kant – Deleuze’s ‘k’ – defined art.)

The twenty-five letters/poses are gradually dispersed throughout the various *concerti* and parts within the *concerti* to add to the development of the piece. This is always done in zigzagging, weaving patterns, both along a straight line and on the edge of an imaginary circle.

“Bach possesses a formalism and a high degree of abstraction”, De Keersmaeker explains. “he likes to play around with numerology. But the thing that makes his music so transcendent *and* popular at the same, is the way he combines this numerology with clear narratives and recognisable affects. Bach’s music is a clearly developed argument and, at the same time, it is filled to the brim with a sort of mysterious code language. Deleuze’s abecedary is an internal tool – you are not expected to pick up on this. Just as Bach hid mathematical figures in his music, we also have our secret language. They are private jests that give our dances colour and direction.”

**Musical Intermezzo: Bach’s Essential Oddity**

A thorough engagement with Bach the composer is not to be ranged amongst easiest of experiences. The chief problem is always Bach’s deceptive ‘familiarity’. In other words: the greatest of challenges to the interpreter is to in fact, expose the essential *oddity* and ‘weirdness’ of Bach, especially concerning the Brandenburg concertos. These concertos have formed part of the standard repertoire for such an extended period of time that their *weirdness*, according to music historian Richard Taruskin, has lost its immediate visibility. Even though Bach starts off with the form that also gave Vivaldi its popularity – capitalizing on the *concerto grosso* which consists of a fast, a slow-melancholic and a subsequent pacey part – Bach treated this model in the same way he did every musical form he encountered, as well as musical system in general: stretching its substance and pushing its boundaries. Often enough, he did this through using the device of a paradox: he introduced experimental innovation by drawing on musical practices that had recently gone out of fashion. No wonder that in their turn, modernists like Stravinsky, Schönberg or Hindemith drew on Bach with similar intentions and with similar effects. *Reculer pour mieux sauter.*

What precisely is so *odd* about these deceptively familiar *concerti*? We are not going to talk about the structure just yet – six *concerti* that were not written on commission, never performed as a whole, written over a period spanning more than ten years in what Bach regularly regarded as the happiest period of his life, yet brought together by Bach the systematician in such a way that their arrangement, order and mutual harmonic and sonorous proportions demonstrate a clear global and well-thought-through architecture. But let us proceed.

What made the concerts truly ‘extraordinary’ in the eyes of contemporaries, in turn, was the way Bach used the instruments at his disposition, and more precisely, the division of labour between different soloists. In short, Bach completely changes the classic hierarchies in the orchestra prevalent at the time. Instruments such as the gamba, the recorder (!), and the harpsichord, traditionally associated with ‘supporting roles’ in an ensemble, are given significant and elaborate places as soloists. In the fourth concerto, the violin concertante engages in a kind of musical abdication, breaking its pattern, and carries on supporting the soloist recorders as *bassetto*. In the final concerto, Bach pits two layers of string trios against each other – one consisting of new string instruments and one of older ones like the gamba and the by then already obsolete violone. The notion of a collective ‘group’ of instruments opposing ‘individual’ solo instruments seems to die out here, while tradition and innovation enter into a musical dialogue. The concert as a form has dissolved.

The most obvious example is the way the harpsichord – usually a reliable, discrete supporting instrument – in the fifth concerto steps forth out of the background as a progressively more intense accompaniment, eventually taking over entirely (some commentators refer to it as a hijacking) then bursting out into a dizzyingly fast, grotesquely extended, almost improvisational *cadenza*: the first piano ‘concerto’ in music history by accident.

Also the evolution seems telling: whereas the first concerto with its natural horns still refers to aristocratic hunting rituals and established societal hierarchies, the final part is devoid of any hierarchy.

Are we witnessing the triumph of Bach the rhetorician over Bach the formalist here? In other words: was Bach trying to make a point? The question is not that farfetched. Even in the eighteenth century the orchestra was a metaphorical social microcosm that reflected established social structures. Musicologist Susan McLary dared to compare the coup of the harpsichord in the fifth concerto to a ‘symbolic assault on the Bastille’ at the moment thinkers within the European Enlightenment were clearing the path for a political revolution seventy years later.

It is a tempting interpretation indeed, were it not for Bach’s unlikely familiarity with the revolutionary political theories of his time. Michael Marissen does take into account Bach’s intellectual background, juxtaposing the *concerti* to Bach’s Lutheran religious disposition. On the one hand, Bach’s brand of German Lutheranism appeared strongly attached to the institutional status quo. On the other hand, however, it could also – as in after the Final Judgement and therefore also at the end of the series of *concerti* –fulfil a strangely subversive role in its egalitarian aspirations. In the face of the Almighty, all hierarchies and privileges are ultimately to be abolished. Are we to speak, then, of secular piece of orchestration, yet one that is also embedded within a deeply religious outlook ? An odd suggestion indeed. And yet perhaps not so odd after all, especially when considering Bach was busy composing music from a Pythagorian perspective, which stipulated musical harmony was a miniaturistic version of the cosmos writ large (and, thereby, of the divine harmony inherent in that cosmos) and that he as a composer by following the harmonic rules could express said divine order.

**The Circle (Completion)**

We have come full circle. As De Keersmaeker: states “A line in space always has a turning point. That turn-around-point at the end of a line injects rhythm into movement precisely due to its finite nature. As a figure, the circle knows of no such quality, since, in principle, its qualities are unending. It may very well be the most successful attempt to make as abstract as ‘infinity’ into something concrete. Bach also manages to evoke this sense of infinity in his Brandenburg *concerti*. The piece’s recurring tempos instil a kind of sustained pulse in the whole score, present throughout the whole collection. It was there before the performance started and will continue – inaudibly – afterwards. It is as though for a brief moment you manage to tap into a vibration that has been going on forever and will yet never cease. On the one hand, the music is carried by its rhetorical qualities, an aspect that lends it its eloquence, on the other hand, one could also call it an explicit *chant of infinity*.”

‘What is spirituality?’ This is the question André Comte-Sponville asks himself in his booklet *The Spirit of Atheism. Introduction to Spirituality without God*. His answer: spirituality rests on our finite relationship with the infinite, our temporary experience of the eternal, our ‘relative’ access to the ‘absolute’. People may be marked by their ability to walk erect, but this ability is much more than a mere technical feat. Humankind decided to straighten its vertebra, and directed its gaze upward. And in that upward gaze lies a question about the *condition humaine*: why are we as humans so tragically (or comically, everything depending on perspective here) wedged between the finite and infinite, the animal and the deity? What are we supposed to do with such a tragic disjunction? How are we to comprehend the incomprehensible, imagine the unimaginable?

But we were completing the circle, so let us return to the question of walking. As a technical side note, we might note the horizontal movement of the vertical spine, which shifts the centre of gravity by leaning forward, causing the equilibrium of stasis to be disrupted. It thereby requires the search for a new, temporarily reinstated equilibrium, in a forwardly propelling motion which immediately turns out to be a pivot point for the next state of imbalance. In this purview, walking seems to nothing less than a constantly controlled state of ‘failing’ to fall over. Or: nothing seems more difficult than walking.

This is probably what dancers and in particular choreographers are engaged in: bringing a movement to halt, perhaps only temporarily, inverting and restyling the familiar arsenal of movements available, and thereby endowing them with special significance in the process. In short, the organisation of a new access to our own physicality, as well as new modes in which this physicality can be expressed through specific movements.

In his essay ‘Federer: Both Flesh and Not’, which treats Federer’s own particular mode of playing tennis, the American essayist David Foster Wallace pauses at the *beauty* of the player’s movements, which he refers to as a kind of ‘kinetic beauty’. ‘What it seems to have to do with really’, he notes, ‘is human being’s reconciliation of having a body.’ Perhaps that is what dance does as well: it styles our movements and physicality, maybe rendering it alien, again, but also reigniting the miracle of ‘having’ a body in the first place.

**Wannes Gyselinck**