**An Unreserved Longing for Harmony**

*Johann Sebastian Bach's music has made regular appearances in Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker's oeuvre. The Six Brandenburg Concerti marked her fifth performance to the music of the German baroque composer. Yet it was only in 1993, twelve years after her first choreography* Violin Phase*, that she began to work with Bach's own music in the performance* Toccata*.*

Interview by Jan Vandenhouwe

*JV: Why did it take you so long to finally take up the task of ‘dancing’ Bach?*

ATDK: “While developing the choreography to Steve Reich’s *Violin Phase* in the early eighties I always had a recording of one of the Brandenburg Concerti playing in the background . Bach's musical oeuvre has always been a guiding light for me ,from the very beginning of my career. However, I felt that at the time I wasn't ready yet to really take on its complexity and abundance, and transpose it into dance. The deeper I’ve managed to penetrate the structure of Bach's music these past years, the more Bach’s absolute genius has revealed itself to me.”

*JV: What makes his music so unique to you?*

ATDK: “Bach always added the small subscript ‘*soli deo gloria*’ [glory to God alone] to his scores. Clearly, his music does aspire to be a reflection of the Divine order visible in the universe – it expresses an unreserved longing for harmony. It is also characterised as a kind of radiating clarity, in both its larger form and the details. I experience it as architecture in motion, organised both along the horizontal axes of the counterpoint and the vertical axes of harmony. All of the separate voices in his music can be easily discerned and can stand as a composition of their own. At the same time, Bach’s voices also leave each other space. Every voice is singular and unique, but Bach always casts it in terms relative to the other voices. He was extremely inventive when applying rules and then breaking them instantaneously. In the *Brandenburg Concerti*, for instance, he uses the common *ritornello* form of the baroque concerto to particularly great effect by alternating the *tutti* passages – which contain the thematic base materials of a part (the ‘*ritornello*’)— with passages better suited to soloists, in which the music is largely new (called ‘*episodes*’). In Bach's music, one always feels as if it’s either an ordered chaos or a chaotic order that rules the day. His music never sounds forced or contrived, of course, but always natural and thoroughly, immensely human. It seems as if this cosmic order is part of the genetic code of Bach's mind.”

*JV: Is that the reason you think it particularly suitable for dance?*

ATDK: “In Bach's music, one recognises experiences buried in the memory of every individual human body: joy, rage, comfort, disdain, revenge, pity, pleasure, pain, melancholy, ecstasy … But, above all, everything in Bach’s music is about *communication*. Like no other composer, he understood the rules of classical rhetoric. How to persuade? How does one keep one’s discourse enticing? How to express opposites? Here, too, Bach is a master in deviating from the rules so familiar to him. His music is not only continuously moving emotionally though; it is also *physically* moving. And that's why we find it so easy to dance to. Pieces like the cello suites or the *partitas* for violin or piano consist of a succession of various baroque dances: allemandes, sarabands, minuets, gigues, etc. But also parts of the Brandenburg Concerti or certain chorals and arias from the St Matthew Passion or the cantatas are geared to dance forms.

*JV: Last year you staged* Mitten wir im Leben sind*, a choreography to Bachs' six Cello Suites, music that he wrote between 1717 and 1723 when, just like the Brandenburg Concerti, he served as Kapellmeister at the court of Köthen. Should we consider* Mitten wir im Leben sind *a kind of preliminary study to the six* Brandenburg Concerti *you’re currently working on?*

ATDK: Both cycles indeed trace their roots to the same period of Bach's life. It was a time in which he was able to compose instrumental music relatively worry-free and under excellent working conditions. At the same time, this was also a period that was marked by the death of his wife and several of his children Perhaps, one could argue then, that the melancholy so prevalent in the Cello Suites bears witness to Bach's increased awareness of his own mortality. In the eyes of a choreographer, however, the difference between the mostly single-line cello suites and the Brandenburg Concerti is enormous. From a purely practical point of view, in a large-scale group choreography like the *Six Brandenburg Concerti* there is a far greater need for 'direct traffic'. In terms of musical substance, however, there are also major differences. Whereas the cello suites are largely melancholic and intimate in nature, I tend to associate the *Brandenburg Concerti* mostly with a sense of vitality and liveliness. In some of the fast-paced sections – often characterised by an uninterrupted repetition of small rhythmic units – it seems as if the musical score was already playing before the striking of the first note, and will continue after the final note with the volume turned down. Bach's music then, seems like a minor morsel of infinity to which we can tune in with our ears for only a brief amount of time. In the choreography to the six Cello Suites, the notion of ‘gravity’ played a big part – as a dancer, I associate the Brandenburg Concerti much more with an ascending motion of opening spirals.”

*JV: How do you approach the task of choreographing the concerti practically?*

ATDK: “The strict choreographic systems I applied to performances like *Vortex Temporum* or *En Atendant –* in which I linked one musical voice or instrument to a single dancer – are not readily applicable to a large-scale cycle like the Brandenburg Concerti. In short, I had to come up with a new system. Just like Bach in composing, I have to impose rules on myself which over time I can break. At the foundation of the choreography, as always, is a geometric floor plan that is composed of circles, straight lines, pentagrams and spirals. Whereas in a performance like *Drumming* the choreography was tightly anchored to the spiral embedded in the geometric floor plan, the choreography of the six *Brandenburg Concerti* meanders much more freely through the pentagram I’m using as a base figure. Measure by measure we try to compensate Bach's musical counterpoint with a choreographic counterpoint. It is certainly an enormous challenge to match the logic of the dance vocabulary with that of the music. The use of space and perspective is essential here. What counts as foreground and what counts as background? What is visible and what isn't? What can one hear at the forefront of Bach's music and how does that translate into a visible phenomenon? In the end, the dance has to remain be an autonomous partner with regards to the music and never become enslaved or entranced by it.”

*JV: How does the structure of Bach's six-concert cycle shape the course of your performance?*

ATDK: Like so many of Bach's works, the six Brandenburg Concerti form an ordered universe in themselves. One can easily detect a certain harmony and hierarchy, for example, between the different voices. In the second, fourth and fifth concert, Bach places a small group of soloists opposite the rest of the group, the so-called *ripieno*. Here, too, he very much enjoys diverging from existing rules. An instrument like the harpsichord – traditionally cast in a submissive role – is suddenly elevated by Bach to the role of principal soloist in the fifth concerto. Later, he includes an immense solo cadenza for that very harpsichord. The first concerto, probably compiled from music of previously composed cantatas, is the only concerto that doesn't consist of three but of four parts. It occasionally has the character of a suite for orchestra, which may be why Bach placed it at the beginning of the cycle. With its festive clarion of trumpets, the first part originated from the opening of Bach's so-called *Hunting Cantata*. The third and the sixth concerto, in turn, are written exclusively for strings. The hierarchy erected between soloist and group (*ripieno*) seems to collapse at this point.

*JV: How do you translate this into choreographic writing?*

In my own choreographic design, I wanted to pay close attention to the overarching form of Bach's cycle. In the first part of the first concerto, I let the entire group of dancers walk the bassline in *unisono*, following the principle of 'My walking is my dancing' - a theme which I’d already explored in previous performances. Also in *Mitten wir im Leben sind*, I let the dancers literally walk some parts of the bassline that carries the course of the music, making it visible: one note, one step. In the first part of the first Brandenburg Concerto, all dancers walk in a straight line, backwards or forwards, from a frontal perspective. And by using a very simple set of musical canons, I then introduce the first visual counterpoint a while later. Not only does it allow for a better presentation of the group as a whole; it also gives space to a different group of instruments: the two French horns, the *violino piccolo*, the oboes, etc. In the slow section of the first concerto I then first introduce the three-dimensional dancing material on which the entire performance is based. In other words, the choreography of the first concerto lays out, as it were, the ingredients we will be using to compose the entirety of the piece. In the second, fourth and fifth concerto, I then attempt to come up with a visual representation of the standard concerto form with its typical interplay of soloists, *ripieno* and bassline. Equally, we offer a depiction of the separate structure of the third concerto consisting of three violins, three violas, three cellos and basso continuo.

Spurred on by the famous anapest rhythm (short-short-long), which dominates the entire first section, the principle of 'my walking is my dancing' then changes into the more audacious principle of 'my running is my dancing'. The second allegro of the third concerto is one of those parts that seemingly offers that morsel of infinity. Again, the music seems to share an earlier start than the first note itself and to continue after the last note is played. At this point, our intention was to unleash a true visual whirlwind, a vortex bending the straight lines from previous sections into spirals and circles which had to, at least symbolically, stand for a notion of the ‘infinite’.