**Flipping the Hourglas  
Notes on *Fase: Four Movements to the Music of Steve Reich***

*Fase: Four Movements to the Music of Steve Reich* is Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker’s ‘opus 1’. In addition, it also forms the twenty-one-year-old dancer’s signature piece. Her initiation was an intense learning experience, she claims. “By making *Fase,* I learned how to choreograph”, De Keersmaeker says. She still sees herself – after a quarter century of choreographing – more as a dancer than a choreographer who, for the first time, is not dancing the piece herself. This last remark should not be considered a detail: it is a parting, a marked experience in the oeuvre and life of De Keersmaeker. In this way, she admits, “it does involve a form of mourning.”

And how could it be any different? All dance movements in this choreography are expressions and variations of the physical keynotes in De Keersmaeker herself. In *A* *Choreographer’s Score*, Bojana Cvejić remarks about *Fase* that the early Rosas, more than a dance company, had the allure of a rock band with a front woman. The title of their first production under the name Rosas – *Rosas danst Rosas* (1983) – Cvejić believes is telling: the dancers dance themselves. And when other dancers took over at some later time, they dance ‘Fumiyo’ or ‘Anne Teresa’. Role and dancer converged.

No matter how varied her oeuvre, the key choreographic principle in the oeuvre of Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker is surprisingly constant. In short: from the simple, small, to the complex, large by arduous and transforming labor. From micro to macro, from cell to organism, from dot to spiral.

It is tempting to apply De Keersmaeker’s choreographic principle – the movement from the simple and affective to the complex – to the place of *Fase* in her oeuvre as a whole. Because from its early beginnings it was in fact all there: the basic principle referred to above, the dramaturgy of space, intensity and affects, the solid but never subservient dialogue with the music. *Fase* is the starting point from which the spiral that became her oeuvre evolved, but like a seed it already contained a small version of it on its way to complexity through an organic growing process.

“Creating those first pieces was a highly intuitive process. I was tenacious in that I wanted to stay close to myself. I didn’t want to turn dance into a vehicle to demonstrate the virtuoso discipline of my classical training. I wanted to dance what felt right, not what looked good. That meant dancing without a mirror. And anyway, we had no money for a mirror. That is why the basic vocabulary of *Fase* is so simple. It is in essence the movements children make when you ask them to dance: turning, jumping, waving their arms about. And walking. *Piano Phase* is really a variation on *my walking is my dancing*. Walking and turning. Hands are rarely raised above shoulder level. *Violin Phase* starts from a turning movement. And that movement has something to do with a dress I wore in the studio which twirled pleasantly whenever I span around. First, there was the dance, then the choreography. Also *Clapping Music* is in essence that jumping motion. It’s a vocabulary which will make the audience members believe they’ll be able to do, too — movements people can see themselves doing as non-dancers. Very often you see people quietly trying the material of *Fase* at the bus stop after a performance. That potential for imitation is important, it is an important way for dancers to make a connection with their audience.”

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In 1981, De Keersmaeker flew to New York with the music of *Violin Phase* packed in her bag. Why Reich, exactly? Or: what can a choreographer learn from Reich’s earliest compositions? Even though the dance that De Keersmaeker paired with the music is rarely a literal translation of the principles used in the music, music and dance do share a kind of youthful discipline. One simple but powerful idea is explored in all its consequences to test its possibilities. They are trials and tribulations. In an interview with Michael Nyman in 1977, Reich states something similar about his early work: “There was something didactic about my first pieces; looking back I would say that when you come up with a new idea, it is important to present that idea in a powerful, clear and pure manner. But once that’s done, then what?’

Whilst watching De Keersmaeker’s first choreography, one witnesses a similar tenacity, a rigor resulting from the discovery of what turned out to be a fundamental choreographic principle. When De Keersmaeker dances *Violin Phase*, spectators witness a pleasure that may very well be akin to that of a reliving of the choreographer’s initial discovery. Witnessing this pleasure is, admittedly, quite contagious.

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The affinity between Reich and De Keersmaeker reaches much further, however. Reich, too, exhibited an almost programmatic break with his training – destined to become a hardcore modernist, he once admitted that he never fancied Haydn, Wagner and consorts all too much. He did like the *Brandenburg Concerto No. 5[[1]](#footnote-1)*, *Le Sacre du printemps*, and bebop – all of them examples of music with a markedly continuous pulse. Instead of composition, he started with a study of percussion. The ‘composition’ – in scare quotes, since it’s more of a script than a score – that illustrates this basic idea both acoustically and visually (in a radically programmatic and even didactic way) is *Pendulum Music* (1968). Here, we see four microphones attached to long cables pushed out of balance and clamped by the four performers, periodically pushing them into swing. After the moment of letting go, their role ends and the performers become observers alongside the audience (Reich states this literally: “the performers then sit down to watch and listen to this process along with the rest of the audience.” It reminds one of De Keersmaeker’s own dancers and how they pause to observe their colleagues from the sideline).

Positioned at the lowest point of the trajectory are the speakers. Every time the microphones swing over, on reaching their lowest point, a short feedback tone becomes audible. The pulse accelerates as the trajectory of the microphones turns shorter, mainly because of the effect of gravity. Initially, the microphones are perfectly synchronous in their swinging motion, and the feedback tones occur at the same intervals – they are ‘in phase’, as physicists describe waves with the same frequency – until they gradually go out of sync and phase, resulting in the creation of several rhythmic patterns. The composition comes to an end with all four of the microphones coming to a stop above their respective speakers, and the four feedback in unison.

Reich applied the same principle two years prior in *Come Out* (1966), one of his earliest attempts to explore the idea of the ‘phase’ (and the loss thereof). He composed *Come Out* at the occasion of a fundraiser for six boys arrested for murder during the Harlem Riots. To be allowed transportation from the prison to the hospital, one of the boys, who had been beaten by the police, had to show his blood. In an interview the young man explained: “I had to, like, open the bruise up and let some of the bruise blood come out and show them.” Reich lets the sentence run out of phase on four tracks by running two identical tracks and gradually slowing down one of them by holding his thumb against the running tape while recording it. Subsequently, Reich did the same with this recording and a third track, only to be joined by a fourth. The result is a play between synchronicity and polyphony, structure and chaos.

Some years before, Reich himself had attributed this discovery to the inferior quality of one of the tape recorders in question. When he tried to record two identical tapes synchronously, one ran slightly too slow, gradually causing a kind of echo effect. As the time difference between the two tapes increased, a pattern of rhythmic accents became manifest, almost as if one was dealing with a canon. In an interview, Reich describes the physical impact of this first listening experience, this moment of discovery: “The sensation I had in my head was that the sound moved over to my left ear, moved down to my left shoulder, down my left arm, down my leg, out across the floor to the left, and finally began to reverberate and shake before it eventually came back together in the center of my head.”

Because of the bareness of the material – a loop – the simplicity and the length of the process, the listening experience can become physical. In the program notes of *Come Out* (1966), Reich describes this as follows: “By restricting oneself to a small amount of material organized by a single uninterrupted process, one’s attention can become focused on details that usually slip by.” Repetition and the play with minimal variations can work as an acoustic magnifying glass: since so little is happening, that which *does*– the minimal variation – turns into a event of considerable magnitude.

To Reich, the most important thing was that the compositional process was *audible*. In his programmatic text ‘Music as gradual process’ (1968), he writes: “I am interested in perceptible processes. I want to be able to hear the process happening throughout the sounding music.” There is little mysterious about this process. It is one we are well-acquainted with as everyday listeners. “Performing and listening to a gradual musical process resembles: pulling back a swing, releasing it, and observing it while it gradually returns to its rest; turning over an hourglass and watching the sand slowly run through the rear-end; placing your feet in the sand by the ocean’s edge and watching, feeling, and listening to the waves bury them progressively.”

It is remarkable how Reich almost puts the experience of ‘performing’ and of ‘listening’ on equal footing, as he already did in his *Pendulum Music,* with such particular astuteness. Reich thinks both may lead to a kind of spiritual experience: “While performing and listening to gradual musical processes”, he claims, “we can participate in a particularly liberating and impersonal kind of ritual. Focusing on the musical process makes possible that shift of attention away from he and she and you and me outwards towards *it*.”

Such a correlation between form and how attention may result in an almost spiritual dimension is a dimension certainly also present in De Keersmaeker’s oeuvre (in the words of the modern French mystic Simone Weil: ‘Praying is the most perfect form of attention’). Just like Bach – De Keersmaeker’s other *compagnon de route* – Reich manages to fuse simplicity with complexity. The piano motif of *Piano Phase* can be played by an unschooled piano player, but a correct execution of the composition requires great virtuosity due to the fact that two pianists must engage in occasional accelerations which cause the motifs to step out of the phase, while the other pianist moves up one note relative to the other, causing the emergence of different rhythmic and harmonic patterns. Ultimately, the music of Reich shows this curious combination of nearly physical presence – the process is crystal clear, the impact is physical – and mathematical-cerebral abstraction.

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One could argue that De Keersmaeker’s first choreography – the one to *Violin Phase* – started from a paradoxical impossibility: dancing a solo to a four-part contrapuntal composition. It immediately forced her to let go of the logic of the music and put something else, something new, in its place. First, there were the movements and only then the search for an organizing principle. “The music of *Violin Phase* has a pronounced dancing character”, she claims, “there is something almost klezmer-like about it, something inviting: somebody picks up a violin in the village square and starts playing, asking ‘who wants to dance?’ But the way in which Reich organized the four parts was impossible for me to embody on my own. So I had to start looking for a different system. I ended up with a principle of accumulation: gradually introducing all the movement material. I dance the first movement, repeated it a given number of times, inserted the second movement, returned to the opening phrase, repeated it again, returned to the second movement, now in repetition. This pattern is established in advance according to mathematical proportions that reflect the music. As such, the movements transform gradually, without a clear break, comparable to a kind of countervailing rhyming scheme. The main challenge was to organize the choreography within a given space. What trajectory do I follow, where do I go? There is also something of rondo-like to this music, mainly since the repetition revolves around an axis and becomes thicker as it goes along. Treating the circle as a floor plan offered a solution.”

De Keersmaeker carried out something similar in *Come Out*. “*Come Out* was my first attempt to create something for two – my first exercise in counterpoint. It was done in New York, where work space was incredibly expensive. Space is money. I had about one hour of rehearsal time a day with my partner. So that requires an efficient approach. I remember showing the movements to the other dancer who subsequently danced them and me thinking: ‘Ah, that’s not looking good.’ At some point I decided not to look any more. I put my trust in the way it felt, in our physical presence on the scene, that’s what I took as a reference point and for the remainder I continued on paper and trusted to the counterpoint that was written out. It was essentially straightforward: I made a series of movements, take movement a, b, c and d. I then made variations on these series: when you do a, I do b, when I do abc, you do acb. That allows for quick work. And to achieve a great complexity relatively quickly while remaining readable.”

It is striking how De Keersmaeker talks about *Fase* so intimately. It barely feels like something she is looking back on. “I did continue to dance it and by dancing, it continued to move, to stay alive.”

It prevents dance from becoming a museum experience, because in essence, dance exists in the physical memory of the dancers. “After so many years, you are in a way on autopilot when dancing. It takes you to a place of extreme order and of anarchy at once, a place I find very exciting to be at.” However, the anarchy is one of the square millimeter: the liberty is in the joints.

“The schedule of, for instance, *Piano Phase* is extremely tight”, she explains, “the synchronicity with your dancing partner, who you can only see out of the corner of your eyes, requires an almost mechanical control. Once you start dancing, the machine is set in motion. In this case, freedom is something you look for in every joint available, in the hinges between two movements. In the split second of a turn, you realize that you’re going to do this this way now, this is where you’re to give the system a little push. But this freedom always lies in the immediacy of the moment, because at the same time you have to stay perfectly on track and keep counting. It’s an experience that is hard to explain, especially when you have been dancing a piece like that for 25 years. While you are dancing, an avalanche of images and memories is dancing along with you. It is the memory of a body that is etched into your bones.”

This is probably why De Keersmaeker still feels such intimacy with that work: it barely ages when danced regularly. Analogously, it ages along with the age of the dancer and thereby keeps up with their development. The fact that she is not dancing this original material herself for the first time is a strange experience for the choreographer who has, for the most part, remained a dancer. “Yes, it does feel like a goodbye. I have done it before, for instance with *Rosas danst Rosas*, but with *Fase* I feel it more profoundly.”

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There may be a continuity between De Keermaeker’s early and her recent works, but there also is a difference: the way in which the individual parts in *Fase* end. Abruptly. Or like an audience member once described it: “It goes on and on, and suddenly it stops.”

The four movements of *Fase* suggest a never-ending present, and that may have something to do with the never-ending ‘now’ that characterizes adolescence, the rush of late youth. After all, De Keersmaeker was only twenty-one. Even though Reich’s ‘gradual process music’ focuses on the passage of time – the sand flowing through a turned hourglass – what the piece shows primarily is the permanence of a given moment. This ‘now’ in time, the moment that shows itself time and again, is so utterly absolute it appears to be in a state of complete stasis. Like high and low water, objects can move so fast as to appear almost motionless. The four movements in *Fase* are not slices of life, but slices of rescinded time, a state resembling infinity: it was there already before it began and it will not stop when it ends. However, that infinity is not yet transcendent, it does not yet summon the counterpart of our finite and therefore mortal nature. When you are twenty-one, the horizon of death is not only beyond reach, it is out of sight. Time still feels like ‘forever now’.

Admittedly: the arrangement of the four movements, the use of space, of back- and foreground, reveal a clear dramaturgy of time. By placing *Clapping Music* – of which the music consists entirely of two people clapping a rhythmic motif – at the tail end of the performance, De Keersmaeker turned this fourth part into a styled prelude to the applause by which the audience acoustically marks the end of a performance.

Yet that is quite a different approach from the one deployed by De Keersmaeker in her recent work, in which she has tended to sculpt the passage of time in an almost architectural manner – think of the golden ratio applied to the *heart of darkness* in *Mitten wir im Leben sind*, the sarabande in which Bach himself seems to stretch time. In the end, it became a duet in the dark between the cellist and his shadow, a contemplation on death marked by the ostensible absence of any dancing bodies. De Keersmaeker seems to graft that curve on what a human life feels like, and how one might tell the story of such a life: not like an empty chain of moments, or in several, separate stages, but much like a narrative with varying speeds, increasingly exerting the strong pull of gravity, enacted, in the end, by something that Julian Barnes has aptly termed *the sense of an ending*.

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1. De Keersmaeker did initially improvise to this concerto before switching to Reich [↑](#footnote-ref-1)