***Il Cimento dell’Armonia e dell’Inventione***

The starting point for *Il Cimento dell’Armonia e dell’Inventione* was the exquisite recording of *The Four Seasons* by virtuoso violinist and long-time Rosas collaborator **Amandine Beyer** and her ensemble Gli Incogniti. Antonio Vivaldi’s composition is one of the most well-known, iconic and reproduced pieces of music; a veritable ‘hit’ of the baroque repertoire. It is also extremely precise and complex; a rich fabric of tightly interwoven lines and layers. It is specifically this multidimensionality of *The Four Seasons* that inspires Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker and Radouan Mriziga, who embarked on the creation process of their latest collaboration by carefully unraveling the composition, together with Beyer and the four dancers. An important part of this project concerns examining what exactly is at the source of *The Four Season*’s immense success; to really get into the details of the music, to open it up, and to take it apart, level by level, thread by thread.

The title of this new choreographic work refers to the original publication of which *Le quattro stagioni* were a part. *Il Cimento dell’Armonia e dell’Inventione, Op 8* was first published in Amsterdam in 1725. Apart from *La primavera, L’estate, L’autunno, and L’inverno*, the collection includes eight additional concertos composed by Antonio Vivaldi. The title is commonly translated as the ‘trial’, ‘essay’ or ‘contest’ ‘between harmony and invention’. The dialectical relationship it appears to set up from the outset between classical compositional technique and creativity or imagination is rather mysterious. While *The Four Seasons* is now a very familiar ‘object’, the form in which it was originally presented appears to embody a sense of ‘tension’ as well as a space for reflection and questioning. In this sense, this title already accommodates for different voices and lines of inquiry to come together. It resonates provocatively with the strategies De Keersmaeker and Mriziga are exploring to formulate a choreographic counterpoint to Vivaldi’s music.

**[The Four Seasons]**

Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker and Radouan Mriziga, who previously collaborated on *3ird5 @ W9rk*, an outdoor performance created especially for the garden of the Maison des Arts in Brussels in 2020, share a keen interest in the observation of nature, geometry, and embodied abstraction. 3ird5 @ W9rk also brought to the fore their concern for the environment. Vivaldi’s mesmerizing music provides a new perspective from which to examine these themes. Contemplating the four seasons in nature by contemplating the nature of this musical composition not only inspires further explorations of patterns, movements and structures present in plant and animal life, celestial configurations, and cosmology as possible starting points for choreography, it also raises urgent questions regarding the effects of climate change. Do we still recognize bird songs? Do we still have four seasons? How do we relate to nature today? How sustainable is this relationship? In addition, Vivaldi wrote *The Four Seasons* three hundred years ago in the Mediterranean, a region at the intersection of different continents. It thus also invites reflection on the circulations of culture, knowledge, power, and histories this region represents.

Antonio Vivaldi’s *The Four Seasons* are known in the first place as a striking ode to (the forces of) nature. Vivaldi made expert use of the violin’s capacity for imitation to bring nature to life. Bird songs, a dog’s barking, murmuring streams and tree branches, subtle breezes and gusts of wind, thunder, scorching heat, and cracking ice are represented in an incredibly evocative manner. In much depth and detail, the composer creates a series of richly textured images for each of the four seasons.

At first sight, Vivaldi’s gesture is simple. The composition provides a clear structure. It consists of four separate concertos that each represent one season. Together they form a forty-minute work. Each concerto is further divided into three separate movements. The ‘newness’ alluded to in the title of the original publication points not only toward the extended format (of longer and interconnected concertos) but also to the fact that each concerto is accompanied by a sonnet, which is similarly divided into three sections, each depicting a scene or tableau evocative of the season in question. There is some debate as to whether the poems were written before or after the music, but it is clear that the music and the extra-musical information that accompanies it are intimately intertwined. The music appears to follow the images and the words of the sonnets almost to the letter. The poems, which are believed to have been written by Vivaldi himself, are illustrative and concrete. They are informed by farm life, literature, painting and mythology, and depict animals, elements of nature, and weather, as well as hunting scenes, drunken brawls, dancing, and ice skating, for instance. Vivaldi, who also composed operas, was inspired by the observation of nature but he also made nature theatrical. Apart from these poems, which are believed to have been written by Vivaldi himself, the musical notation is interspersed with additional indications; short descriptive captions that guide the musicians in how to embody an image, a sound, a landscape, a scene. The composition thus includes different types and levels of clues for listening to, reading, interpreting, and performing the music

The intertextual aspect to the composition is striking. The musical analysis with Amandine Beyer revealed the significance of the work’s narrative quality: the four concertos come together to tell a story. Vivaldi not only brings to life the landscapes he describes, the music also embodies the character traits of the people that inhabit these landscapes, their emotions and moods, which range from joy and pleasure to fear, exhaustion, anxiety, and horror. The music oscillates between festive and pensive, bright and dark, energetic and languid. The analysis brought to light that many parts are composed in a minor key, resulting in more tension and suspense than would perhaps be expected. While *Spring* and *Autumn* are pleasurable, nature is depicted as rather threatening in *Summer* and *Winter*. *The Four Seasons* portray different relationships between human beings and nature, from distant or detached, to concerned, and overwhelmed.

**[Simple/Complex]**

In the world Vivaldi creates, man is often an observer of nature, often disengaged (asleep, dreaming, drunk), solitary, and positioned on the outside. Today, when the impact of climate change is increasingly acutely felt, what kind of (collective) gesture is needed? How does this beautiful ode to nature, composed more than 300 years ago, speak to the urgency of the situation we are faced with today? How does one approach this composition in a way that moves it into the present, to enter into a meaningful dialogue with the current situation?

On the one hand, the familiarity of this music instantly creates common ground. It is beautiful, accessible, and part of our collective memory. It is welcoming, and allows for many people to join the conversation, and the space of the performance. On the other hand, the superposition of different levels in Vivaldi’s composition allows for many different points of entry into the material. It also opens up the possibility to add new layers; to pry open spaces in between the existing layers to reveal stories, gestures, rhythms, patterns and structures that tend to remain hidden; and to insert something entirely different, create new resonances, and let other readings emerge.

Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker and Radouan Mriziga do not have the intention to create a manifesto or to offer a complex discourse. Vivaldi’s straight-forward treatment of the seasons, allows the choreographers to access the material in a similar manner and to start out by focusing on simple elements: heat, cold, sun, birds, horses, trees. The choreographers find inspiration in the clear structure of the musical composition; the images and stories evoked by the text, and the close relationship between notes and words; as well as in the detailed representations of various landscapes and moods embodied by the music; and its quick shifts in temperature and temperament. In addition, the dance vocabulary draws on a diverse range of paintings and images depicting landscapes, farm animals, agricultural labor, seasonal practices, festivities, rituals, and mythology from Western Europe, as well as from North Africa and the Middle East. The choreographers also aim to bring to the fore the role music and dance have historically played as a medium for bringing people together; as an act of collective reflection, mourning, and celebration. In *Il Cimento dell’Armonia e dell’Inventione*, we see the four dancers move along complex patterns of straight and curved lines, and through different registers of movement. Gestures travel, circulate, are shared and passed on between them, and variously transformed. The impressive jumping, swirling and turning of the dancers also resonates with the swift movements, quick bounces, the lines, circles and spirals of the violin’s bow.

The approach De Keersmaeker and Mriziga took to Vivaldi’s *The Four Seasons* was to challenge its apparent familiarity by dissecting it in detail. Its imagery, patterns, elements, and rhythms are examined, isolated, turned inside out, and opened up. After this initial gesture of deconstruction, the choreographers set out to re(con)figure and reconstitute the different building blocks to arrive at other possible approaches and readings of this famous work.

Inspired by the multidimensionality of the musical composition, they introduced a radical gesture. The choreographers decided to break open the linear development of the four seasons and to explore separate, parallel trajectories for a while; to create space for a multiplicity of voices and points of intersection and tension to emerge; to develop different, contrasting layers, together and apart.

For Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, music has always been the starting point for a choreographic work. She analyzes it in great detail and derives information from it that inspires the content and form of a piece, its movement vocabulary, as well as its temporal and spatial structures. Her approach to Vivaldi’s music is no different. Radouan Mriziga works quite differently with music. In response to the knowledge acquired about *The Four Seasons* – its rhythm, narrative, meaning, original context, and contemporary resonances – Mriziga decided to take away the music entirely during part of the creative process and began creating dance vocabulary in silence. “For now, we created two spaces. It’s almost like the idea of positive and negative space. Now, we will bring these spaces together. If you think of the choreography as a reflection of the music, it’s almost as if we are remaking the composition. First, we take it apart, then we have to put it back together again. This is another part of the work: shaping it, like a craftsman would create an object.” (Radouan Mriziga)

They arrived at the point where they are starting to bring the layers together again, to interweave their disparate tracks, in order to form one choreographic work. The different lines slowly begin to resonate, intersect, intertwine, and contaminate one another. The music inspires both choreographers to explore the potential of a diverse range of abstract and concrete gestures. At the same time, their differing approaches to music and choreography result in a layering of and interplay between various fields of tension, in counterpoint to the clarity of the structure and the apparent accessibility of *The Four Seasons*. In addition, the artists were inspired by a newly commissioned poem by Asmaa Jama. It contrasts sharply with Antonio Vivaldi’s three-hundred-year-old sonnets, which reflect the bucolic settings popular at his time. Asmaa Jama’s powerful work instead speaks to the painful destruction of the environment that characterizes our current times. It paints a catastrophic picture of where we are headed. Both sets of poems and the tectonic shift between them constitute additional layers in the densely textured fabric that informs the choreography.

*Il Cimento dell’Armonia e dell’Inventione* wishes to explore social, spiritual, and political gestures of reflection, necessary and urgent at this time of multiplying and intersecting crises. Multiple strands are gradually coming together to form a unique choreographic language. The piece aims to return to the core, the structure of Vivaldi’s famous composition and the many associations and emotions it evokes, while offering a choreographic counterpoint to it. At the same time the dance underscores that there may be something contemplative to be found in *The Four Seasons,* in its familiarity, and in the familiarity of nature.