

# ***Vortex Temporum,* or Choreographing the Sensible of the Music**

Interview with Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, by Bojana Cvejić

**BC** *The wish to create a choreography to Vortex temporum (1994–1996) predates the project you embarked on last September. Is it, like in the case of Ars subtilior, another “rendez-vous retardé”—this time with one of the key compositions of spectral music, the rigorously constructed and refined mature work of the late French composer Gérard Grisey? How did it come about?*

**ATDK** My answer risks becoming “standard.” The interest to choreograph to *Vortex* I owe to my “music dealer.” While working on *Zeitung* (2006), Thierry De Mey recommended to me a concert in which Ictus was going to play what he called one of the seminal pieces of contemporary music created in the last forty years. This was the first time I heard *Vortex temporum* live in concert.

*You are among the few choreographers who find it important to consider and explore dance in relation to classical and contemporary music. Is it a matter of a mission to which you dedicate your choreographic work? A kind of faith in the fruitfulness of mutual service: not only what the music does for the dance, but what your choreography can do for the music?*

At this point, the music I am mostly drawn to is the gigantic repertoire of the early, pre-Baroque period, dating from the eleventh century on. Then it is Bach, whose oeuvre is unique in the history of humanity, not only by its magnitude but also in its

manifoldness. After Bach, my curiosity leaps over the Classical and Romantic periods into modern, twentieth-century music, primarily the music of Webern and Bartók, and then into the twentieth century and contemporary music by the living composers, like De Mey, Steve Reich, George Benjamin. I didn't know much about spectral music when my interest began to gravitate to *Vortex*—but I could reach it via Debussy, and Messiaen, who was a precursor of spectral harmony and Grisey's professor.

To answer your question of why I stick with contemporary music: apart from the genuine inspiration I find in it, it is a question of an artistic duty I feel towards it. Contemporary music reflects our times, but it also has a difficult time finding its place among a broader public. Sometimes I see it literally disappearing in the low shelves of stores, and I want to unearth it, make it present and accessible again. I am not looking for ways to teach the audience and make them understand the music that they might not like after first hearing it. I seek to choreograph my experience of the music. What I am looking for are ways to make the audience perceive the dancing quality hidden there. And this is all the more challenging with contemporary music, because it often abolishes the regular pulse and tonal harmony in which our ears are bathing today thanks to pop. So the alliance between contemporary music and dance is challenging: it goes beyond the immediate relationship that can be intuited between the properties of sound and movement.

*Spectral harmony allows tonality to vaguely emanate through the resonance with natural harmonics that are proper to any tone, which might evoke a remote sense of familiarity. What is it that specifically interests you in Vortex?*

I am fascinated by how time is composed in this music, how it ranges from the coded time of regular pulse to a kind of liquified temporality, where the pulse is destabilized or dissolved. Now that I am dancing to Bach's second Violin Partita with Boris Charmatz, the comparison between the music which was in its origins intended for dance and contemporary music is all the more evident. In spite of its layeredness and finesse, Bach's Gigue, for instance, offers a sense of natural and motoric flow due to its rhythm and harmony, which contemporary music doesn't do. But what is common to all

the music I've been working with, Ars subtilior, Bach and Grisey, is meticulous construction and inherence of motion.

The sound space of *Vortex* is vast in terms of both refinement and contrast of extremes. I hear it as full of movement, especially as regards the movements of contraction and dilation of time. The potentiality of dance in this music is abundant. On the one hand, it stems from an abstract mathematical construction readable only in the score, which I find beautiful. On the other hand, it is anchored to the performance of the music, to the physical gestures of playing that reveal the relation between the musicians' bodies and their instruments, as well as the consequence of sound emanating from the concrete and raw materiality of the instrument that engenders it. What I particularly like about *Vortex* is that intensity is integral to the composerly writing, and that the aim of the composition is to shape the experience of listening, a microscopic insight into the world of sounds and gestures that produce it. What continually draws me to integrate musicians in live performance in my work is that I love to watch them and stay close to them as they play music. Dancing movement materializes the energy of music for the eyes and kinaesthetic experience of the audience; it visually records the perception of change in the passage of time.

*How do you distinguish between watching music be played and listening to dance?*

It is a kind of laboratory work where you untangle the fusion of things heard and seen; and in separating them and putting them together again, the chemical substance may change. I began experimenting with the synaesthetic shifts between watching and listening to sound and movement in *The Song* (2009), the piece in which my collaboration with Ann Veronica Janssens and Michel François originates. In *The Song*, we composed movement to music and then removed the music from it. Using the technique of the foley artist, we would derive the foley sounds from movement and then subtract the movement that gave rise to the sound and superpose another dance on it.

You see, even if my main “partner” is music, I spend a lot of time in the studio working in silence, which is where I seek out musicality

created from movement alone. One of the principles I apply there is, as I refer to it, “my walking is my dancing,” where the rhythms inherent in the body—such as the most mechanical and automatic one, i.e. heartbeat; or breathing, which is semi-mechanical and susceptible to change; or walking, which is voluntary—form the ground for organizing movement in time and space, and its musicality. In the studio, we try to listen to the dance. Then I also use a lot of time with dancers to watch the musicians play *Vortex*. When we watch the music, we try to see a dance emerge from it.

*At the same time, you engage a rigorous method of composing movement bar by bar, which entails a studious analysis of the musical score with the conductor of the Ictus Ensemble, Georges-Elie Octors.*

I first developed the method of visually transposing notes into movement while choreographing Bartók’s fourth string quartet in 1984. In choreographing the music of Ars subtilior in *En Atendant* and *Cesena* (2010–2011), the idea to stay close to music was realized through learning to “walk” the music, and eventually even sing it. Dancers are paired up with musicians, which is what I apply again in *Vortex* between six instrumentalists constituting a small chamber ensemble (flute, clarinet, violin, viola, cello, and piano) and seven dancers (seven and not six, because two dancers correspond to the two hands of the extremely virtuosic piano part).

*Thus dancers become the first-hand perceivers of the music. They offer us, the audience, a window to see music through movement. What are the criteria you used to match up dancers and instruments respectively?*

I search intuitively for correspondences between dancers and instruments. All matches are, of course, possible, but certain connections offer a more congenial combination of physical energies, not only between a particular dancing idiom or body of a dancer and the role that an instrument plays in the piece, but also between specific people dancing and playing music.

*How does the the relationship between the dancer and the musician and his instrument evolve physically?*

While in my last two works, which were dedicated to the three-part counterpoint of *Ars subtilior*, the dancers are assigned tenor, contratenor, or cantus phrases according to instruments or voices, in *Vortex*, not only do the dancers associate their movements with the instrumental part in the written score, but they also interpret the physical gestures of playing music. Hence, the gestures of arms will be prominent for dancers coupled with the strings, or breathing with the wind instruments, or jumping with the percussive cascades of the piano. I recall that already in the creation of *Achterland* (1990) our dancing movements appeared elephantine compared to the fine, swift movements of the violinist playing Eugène Ysaÿe's sonatas, and that closely tying dance to music might require isolating certain body parts and avoiding movement of the whole heavy skeleton in high speed. In *Zeitung*, I began to fundamentally investigate the genesis of movement in the head, torso, and pelvis. I started to connect other body parts to the three regions: hands symmetrical to feet, wrists to ankles, knees to shoulders. All these particular zones of movement are integrated by the spine, the axis of the body as a cathedral. In *Vortex*, I am further exploring the motion of unfolding and folding in, contraction and expansion of the spine. I derive movement from observing the architecture of vertical and horizontal axes of the spine, which has a spiraling structure and, one could say, is a vortex of sorts. This is a new step beyond "my walking is my dancing," which bears the influence of Tai-Chi Chuan that I have been exploring with the dancers.

*Since most of the movement material is generated in the studio and without musicians, what are the principles it is founded upon, independently of the music?*

The dancers share the same geometrical framework of movement that I have been developing since a while, i.e. the magic square, which determines points and directions in space and orients the bodily architecture. I adapted the qualities of tenor and cantus voices in the three-part counterpoint of *Ars subtilior*, where tenor designates slow and sustained movement and cantus denotes quicker, denser, more detailed and spatially elaborated movement. The qualities that we refer to as "tenor" and "cantus" are then combined with various expressive attributes, such as "attacked."

***How does the distribution of watching and listening, of dancing and playing music between dancers and musicians shape the space?***

It involves configuring perception between foreground and background, literally in space, and figuratively in attention. I adopted, from rehearsals of *Cesena* with Björn Schmelzer, a way of rehearsing while standing in a circle. In *Vortex* we often stand in a circle from which we start to dance. This enables everyone to be geometrically and dynamically connected within the same visual field. The patterns of movement in the music of *Vortex* invite circles and spirals in dancing. Like in *Cesena* and *Partita 2*, I am exploring the circle again with the pentagon inscribed in it. While the square suggests a closed and static structure, the pentagon offers a harmonious constellation as a result of a sum of three and two, circles and angles, and it supports a rotation characteristic of whirlpools as well as vortical motion in general. The geometrical pattern in composing the space entails five circles and one large connecting circle, corresponding to six instruments in the music. In addition, I am investigating the notion of a mobile center, which is the only still point in vortices, and the movements of opening and closing, which correspond to the contraction and expansion of time.

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Carlos Garbin, Boštjan Antončič, Marie Goudot, Igor Shyshko, Cynthia Loemij,  
Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, Julien Monty, Michaël Pomero  
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Handwritten conductor's score for *Vortex temporum* by Gérard Grisey, annotated by Georges-Elie Octors. The score is written on five staves: Flute (Fl.), Clarinet (Cl.), Violin (Vn.), Viola (Via.), and Piano (Pf.).

**Annotations:**

- Tempo/Beat Markings:**  $(\dot{=}120)$  and  $(\dot{=}60)$  are written in blue ink.
- Section Markings:** "SECTION 17" is written in blue ink. "Section  $\alpha$ " is written vertically on the right side.
- Measure Numbers:** Handwritten numbers 15, 16, 3, 4, 5, 4, 4, 4 are placed above the staves.
- Performance Indications:** "V.L." (Violino Left) is written in pink. "P.no." (Piano) is written in pink. "ff" (fortissimo) is written in red.
- Diagrammatic Elements:** Various shapes (squares, circles, triangles) and lines (blue, pink, red) are drawn across the staves, often corresponding to specific notes or dynamics.
- Other Markings:** "C1 A1", "A2", "A3", "A4 + A5", and "B1" are written in blue ink on the right side. "3' 34" and "3' 38" are written in blue ink near the piano part.

The conductor's score of *Vortex temporum*, Gérard Grisey, annotated by Georges-Elie Octors. Reproduced with kind permission of MGB Hal Leonard, Italy.

The score is annotated with rehearsal marks and performance instructions:

- Flute (Fl):** Rehearsal marks 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43. Annotations include  $\alpha-1$ ,  $\alpha-2$ ,  $\alpha-3$ ,  $\alpha-4$ , and  $\alpha-2$ .
- Clarinet (Cl):** Rehearsal marks 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43. Annotations include  $\alpha-1$ ,  $\alpha-2$ ,  $\alpha-3$ ,  $\alpha-4$ , and  $\alpha-2$ .
- Violin (Vno):** Rehearsal marks 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43. Annotations include  $\alpha-1$ ,  $\alpha-2$ ,  $\alpha-3$ ,  $\alpha-4$ , and  $\alpha-2$ .
- Viola (Vla):** Rehearsal marks 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43. Annotations include  $\alpha-1$ ,  $\alpha-2$ ,  $\alpha-3$ ,  $\alpha-4$ , and  $\alpha-2$ .
- Violoncello (Vc):** Rehearsal marks 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43. Annotations include  $\alpha-1$ ,  $\alpha-2$ ,  $\alpha-3$ ,  $\alpha-4$ , and  $\alpha-2$ .
- Percussion (Pc):** Rehearsal marks 37, 38, 39, 40, 41, 42, 43. Annotations include  $\alpha-1$ ,  $\alpha-2$ ,  $\alpha-3$ ,  $\alpha-4$ , and  $\alpha-2$ .

The conductor's score of *Vortex temporum*, Gérard Grisey, annotated by Georges-Elie Octors. Reproduced with kind permission of MGB Hal Leonard, Italy.

Vertical strip of colored tabs labeled with Roman numerals I through V.







Julien Monty, Jean-Luc Plouvier, Chrysa Parkinson, Michaël Pomero,  
Dirk Descheemaeker, Igor Semenov, Jeroen Robbrecht, Boštjan Antončič,  
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