

Imperceptible Virtuosi-

ties

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A sound has no legs to stand on. The world is teeming: anything can happen.
John Cage,
“2 Pages, 122 Words
on Music and Dance,”
1957

To dance a work of music. Not to dance to music, subjecting the dancer’s movements to the hierarchy of a preexisting score, but rather to experiment with the operations specific to music as they prompt choreography’s perceptive functions and sensory aggregates. To make music visible. Not to illustrate music through tightly associated gestures, making a dance that would resemble music in an undifferentiated state, but to create a dissonant refrain between sounds and movements; unexpected encounters that unfold in time while acting against it. In *Danza Permanente* (2012),

DD Dorvillier invites us to witness such paradoxical moves between dance and music, intertwining the sonic, the visual, and the kinesthetic; the abstract and the real; the moving and the silent, through many forceful, exquisite disturbances.

Dorvillier’s choreographic practice has often dealt with the outcomes of pressing forms and feelings up against each other, unleashing the affective content through given procedural structures. In *Danza Permanente*, the skeleton of the choreography is that of Ludwig van Beethoven’s 1825 “Opus 132, no 15 in A minor”. Part of the composer’s series of late string quartets, and regarded at the time as fragmentary and dissonant, the work has since been hailed for its complex assemblage of rhythms and motifs, its setting free of manifold thoughts and emotions. One might follow the intricate and affective nature of this musical

composition, embodying bourgeois music while pointing to its limits, as it triggers acts of transposition across history and different art forms.¹

What kind of dance might the string quartet suggest? What does its choreography look and feel like? In *Danza Permanente*, Dorvillier worked with composer Zeena Parkins and the dancers to meticulously translate the musical structure into movements. On stage, four performers embody each instrument: Naiara Mendioroz and Fabian Barba become the violins, Nuno Bizarro the viola, and Walter Dundervill the cello. Dancing mostly in silence, except for the bare, eclectic sound environment that acts as counterpoint and seems to remind us of silence as a necessary condition of music – and perhaps also of Beethoven’s deafness when composing the work – the moving bodies reflect the string quartet’s five movements across time and space: its shifting tempos and moods; the accumulation, repetition, and scattering of themes; the relations of harmonies and dissonances. Working directly from the score, using color-coding to map the recurrence of motifs across the whole, particular keys and harmonies, Dorvillier carefully selected and assembled diverse gestures to make a choreography that would follow the structure of the work as closely as possible. Whether or not one is familiar with that specific string quartet or the strategies applied in the choreographic process – for instance that the orientation in space corresponds to specific keys: A minor faces forward and C major backward – as the performance goes on, the many compositional subtleties slowly come together to weave a precise, meaningful choreographic work. And indeed the dancers’s elaborate sequences performed in silence may first appear slightly uncanny, as if echoing the famous saying: “And those who were seen dancing were thought to be insane by those who could not hear the music.”²

Yet, little by little, one begins to hear music as the dancers enact singular rhythms or dance in canons; amplify tremors and breaks or move in a soft and continuous fashion; brush against each other or spread across the stage. The gestures range from simple, recognizable ballet and modern dance vocabulary, to diverse pedestrian and everyday motions. However, the meaning of the performance is not located within those particular gestures or their recognition, but rather in the intricate assemblage built over time; through the series of affective relations prompted by the score.

Fascinatingly, such a forceful experience in abstraction, in dazzling shifts of meanings and temporalities, seems to emerge through the precise and meticulous “becoming-instrument” of each performer. Dressed in simple, identical costumes of different colors – violins are coral and burgundy; viola is yellow; cello is blue – the dancers not only follow distinct musical trajectories, but can be seen as embodying their instrument and its given identity. This objectification of sorts might be the necessary condition for the work to escape representation. José Gil described the paradox of a dancing body: dance must constantly return to the body to depart from it yet again, in order to create a range of creative effects.³ One might witness this ontological oscillation in *Danza Permanente*, as the gestures between sounds and movements occur at the limits of the perceptible and yet always come from and return to the sensuous, upright bodies – the instruments here. The performance, deeply affective while never lingering in romanticism or psychology, is devoid of drama so to speak: it presents nothing but a dramaturgy of relations. Through movement, each dancer consistently weaves a series of articulations

in time: between foreign bodies, sounds and meanings. These gestures simultaneously move together and part, emphasizing co-existence and separateness, as the dancers impinge on one another “as separate melodic lines in constant interplay with one another.”⁴ In this, the performance might be said to redispense the historical and methodological relations, the sedimented hierarchy, between music and dance.

But what do these gestures, dissonant and virtuosic all at once, tell us about the work in regard to the passing of time; how and where meaning and experience might be held? How does this performance of a score across music and dance enact a complex tension between flight and restraint, the ephemeral and the eternal? Theodor Adorno, in his unfinished “diary of his experience of Beethoven’s music,” which he worked on for most of his life, described the quartets as “the most sublime music ever to aim at freedom under continued unfreedom.”⁵ Through an inherent “dynamic totality” and “continuous functioning” as substitutes for meaning, the music carries a tension between the fugitive and the still – it enacts an “escape-in-confinement” in Fred Moten’s words.⁶ Elsewhere, Adorno suggested:

The self-evident, that music is temporal art, that it unfolds in time, means, in the dual sense, that time is not self-evident for it, that it has *time as its problem*. It must create temporal relationships among its constituent parts, justify their temporal relationship, synthesize them through time. Conversely, it must act upon time, not lose itself to it; must stem itself against the empty flood.⁷

Danza Permanente presents time as its problem: it exposes nothing but the restless encounters between dance and music. And yet by experimenting with their ever shifting relationships, it resists, acts upon, and suspends time. By “binding itself to time

as it sets itself against it,”⁸ the work proposes an intimate yet remote experience of time as transversal of freedom—moving across the eye, the ear, the kinesthetic.

The performance ends as it begins, with a promise of nothing but time; with the feeling that it might indeed never end. Here, the dance becomes a fugitive object of sorts, “by bodying forth a temporal progression that belies thingliness.”⁹ That which *Danza Permanente* embodies is thus a paradoxical refrain made tangible; a string of imperceptible relations holding music and dance together.

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1 For instance, T.S. Eliot noted the extraordinary “auditory imagination” at stake: “I find it quite inexhaustible to study... I should like to get something of this into verse.” The result was *Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt, 1943); quoted in Ellen Tate, *T.S. Eliot: The Man and His Work* (New York: Delacorte, 1966), 54. See also Jean-Luc Godard’s *Prénom Carmen* (1983), which not only includes Beethoven’s quartets in the soundtrack, but also seeks to render the music as filmic matter through its compositional process. Dorvillier has also experimented with transposing Godard’s film into a collective choreography, in *Don’t Ask Act* (2009).

2 Often attributed to Friedrich Nietzsche, the expression comes from Madame de Staël: “as at a ball, where we did not hear the music; the dancing we saw there would appear insane.” *De l’Allemagne* (Paris: Firmin Didot Frères, 1850 [1810-3]), 527.

3 José Gil, “The Paradoxical Body,” in *Planes of Composition: Dance Theory, and the Global*, ed. Jenn Joy and André Lepecki (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2010), 87.

4 Gilles Deleuze, “Mediators,” in *Incorporations*, ed. Jonathan Crary and Sanford Kwinter (New York: Zone Books, 1992), 285.

5 Theodor Adorno, *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University, 1998), ix; 44.

6 Fred Moten, “Taste Dissonance Flavor Escape: Preface for a Solo by Miles Davies,” *Women and Performance* 17:2 (July 2007), 217.

7 Theodor Adorno, “On Some Relationships between Music and Painting,” (1965) transl. Susan Gillespie, *The Musical Quarterly* 79:1 (Spring 1995),: 66.

8 Adorno, “On Some Relationships between Music and Painting,” 66.

9 Moten, “Taste Dissonance Flavor Escape,” 236.

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Scan of the first page of the 30 page score for *Danza Permanente*, and of Beethoven’s *String Quartet in A minor Opus 132*