

## CHOREOMUSICAL REFLECTIONS: REICH & DE KEERSMAEKER ENCOUNTER

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### Abstract

20th cen. has witnessed some of the most productive and well known composer-choreographer collaborations - Igor Stravinsky & George Balanchine, Louis Horst & Martha Graham, John Cage & Merce Cunningham, Philip Glass & Lucinda Childs, Steve Reich & Anna Teresa de Keersmaeker, to name a few. While the metaphor of “happy marriage” of the two disciplines is commonly used in journalistic critiques and quotidian accounts; expressions with negative overtones such as “music as simply accompaniment to dance” or “dance as mere visualization of music” have always been in circulation. And, detachment of dance from music and the resulting asynchronicity has been highly celebrated, especially in post-Cagean academic and artistic circles. Parallel to these positionings, interdependence / dependence vs. independence / autonomy debate has almost always been central to any discussion of choreomusical relationship, either invoked by critics, academicians or by artists themselves. In this article, I'll pursue two related tasks at the same time by focusing on the filmic adaptation of Anna Teresa de Keersmaeker's “Fase: Four Movements to the Music of Steve Reich” (2002). First, by drawing on a historical yet relatively recent collaboration between Steve Reich and de Keersmaeker and by reflecting on compositional dynamics of their choreomusical encounter; I'll question how de Keersmaeker while utilizing “phase-shifting” as the primary compositional principle manages to create a choreographic structure that exists by itself. Then, I'll try to open up a space for more flexible and reflexive ways of thinking about dance-music relationship and the terminology employed in relation to it.

If it's possible to define a choreo-musical continuum in the 20th century, it is generally argued that especially two collaborations -those between Igor Stravinsky & George Balanchine on the one hand, and John Cage & Merce Cunningham on the other- have marked out opposing extremities.<sup>1</sup> Balanchine “made music visible” in many of his choreographies by responding to musical stimuli and by closely following the musical structure. Certain basic elements in the structure of the music such as pitch, timbre, time, rhythm, melody, chords, harmonic successions, phrasing were translated into and found their counterparts in the choreography -for example, in the position and direction of gestures in space, choice of movement vocabulary, movement quality and muscular dynamics, time, rhythm, successions of movements, movements in isolation or unison, etc. This close affinity was recognized by Stravinsky himself, too: “To see Balanchine's choreography of the Movements [for Piano and Orchestra] is to hear the music with one's eyes and this visual

1- Leaving aside recent experiments and technological advances in sound control; it can be admittedly argued that almost all of the creative activity regarding dance-music relationship in the 20th century have occupied spaces between these two extremities.

hearing has been a greater revelation to me...” (Dorris 2006: 137) In Cunningham's works on the other hand, movement and sound had “nothing in common” except for the element of time and they were treated as independent entities. (Cunningham 2002: 167) Musical and choreographic scores were prepared in isolation from each other and brought together only in the final stage of the creation process. In a manner defined by Kostelanetz as “presentational incongruence”, they let dance and music simply coexist simultaneously during the time of the performance, rather than searching for pre-determined points of convergence. (Kostelanetz 1996: 30) At this point, it is vital to remember that Cage and Cunningham didn't simply embrace asynchronicity between dance and music. Due to use of chance operations as the basic syntactic principle, each sound or movement unit is also taken in isolation. In other words, sound and movement blocks existed independently of other sounds and movements preceding or following them. Overlapping of musical and choreographic climaxes –structural, emotional or narrative- was avoided, since there was no climax either in music or in dance. The idea of climax was avoided altogether.<sup>2</sup>

In choreo-musical discourse while Stravinsky-Balanchine collaboration came to be conceived in terms of “music visualization”; Cage-Cunningham collaboration is seen as the quintessential ideal of “choreo-musical counterpoint” –the term used more often today to refer to a divergent, if not totally oppositionary relationship between dance and music. Dance critic Roger Copeland, who has written extensively both on Cunningham and Balanchine, summarizes this binary positioning in bold terms: “...in Balanchine's choreography, the merging of movement and music often borders on synesthesia. Balanchine would not have understood -or at least not have tolerated- Cunningham's and Cage's declaration of independence between movement and sound” (Copeland 2004: 89).

In addition to synesthesia and independence, certain other concepts, metaphors and phrases has been employed in choreo-musical discourse as a result or extension of this binary positioning.<sup>3</sup> On the one hand, the metaphor of “happy marriage” or “dance-music unity”, both of which imply alignment of physico-visual and aural patterns, are still used in an affirmative way. On the other hand, “music as simply accompaniment to dance”, “dance as mere visualization of music”, “mirroring” and the infamous “mickey-mousing”<sup>4</sup> are common expressions and terms with negative overtones especially among post-Cage/Cunningham artistic and academic circles. (Larsen 2007: 90).

Anna Teresa de Keersmaeker is one of the most “musical” contemporary choreographers. She has studied music at an early age. Her dance education on the other hand, started at a relatively late age at Maurice Bejart's dance school Mudra, when she was 18. Then, in 1981 she spent a year studying at Tisch School of the Arts at New York University. From the very beginning her choreographies have focused on the structural / compositional affinity between music and dance. Although, with her company Rosas, she has created choreographies to a wide variety of musical scores –by composers as diverse as Bach, Beethoven, Mahler, Stravinsky, Bartok, Schoenberg, George Benjamin, Toshio Hosokawa, Thierry De Mey, John Coltrane, Joan

2- I'm indebted to Barbara White to articulate this last point. (See White 2006: 69).

3- For detailed accounts and/or critiques of basic views and positionings regarding choreo-musical relationship see, Barbara White's article cited above. (Also see Baner 1994; Jordan 2000).

4- The term was initially employed to refer to the specific usage of music in cartoon movies where almost each and every movement on screen is accompanied by a particular gesture or effect in music. (See Larsen 2007).

Baez- her name is most closely associated with Steve Reich. She has worked with Reich's music in three of her choreographic creations: "Fase: Four Movements to the Music of Steve Reich" (1982), composed of four choreographies to Reich's four scores, *Piano Phase*, *Come Out*, *Violin Phase* and *Clapping Music*; "Drumming" (1998); and "Rain" (2001), created to Reich's *Music for 18 Musicians*. Also, Reich's *Dance Patterns* was used for one of the parts of a 2003 dance-film, "Counterphrases", choreographed by de Keersmaeker and directed by Thierry de Mey. Lastly, de Keersmaeker devised an evening of works in 2007, a tribute to Reich: "Steve Reich Evening".

The rest of my discussion will focus on score and choreography of "Fase" in general, and *Piano Phase* in particular.<sup>5</sup> First, by reflecting on the compositional dynamics of their choreo-musical encounter, I'll give an analysis of how Anna Teresa utilizes "phase shifting" as the primary compositional principle/technique and transposes it into her choreography on the one hand; and how on the other hand she still manages to create a choreographic structure that exists by itself. Based on that, then I'll question what other ways of thinking about dance-music relationship might be possible other than and beyond that posited by interdependence versus independence rhetoric.

All four scores in "Fase" were written by Reich between 1966-72 and all of them are products of Reich's experimentation with gradual phase shifting as the basic compositional principle. As clearly stated in his article "Music as a Gradual Process", Steve Reich is interested in the "audible connection" between compositional processes and the sounding music. (Reich 2002: 34) *Piano Phase* is one of the pieces that clearly demonstrates Reich's interest in this sense. The score is composed of four motifs played by two pianists –second and fourth motives being derivations of the first and the third. It is divided into three parts based on three different rhythmic patterns: twelve beat, eight beat, and four beat respectively.<sup>6</sup> Initially one of the musicians starts playing the first motif. Soon after, the second pianist joins him in unison, playing the pattern in constant repetition. Then one of the pianists accelerates and phase-shifts by one beat within the cycle of repetition. After 12 shifts through innumerable repetitions in cycles, two musicians come back into unison. Repetition of motifs with subtle and gradual acceleration is applied to all three parts. Although very limited number of motifs are repeated over and over again, due to the compositional principle of phase-shifting, listening experience never gets monotonous as new and ever evolving rhythmic and melodic relationships unfold in time.

Anna Teresa de Keersmaeker responds to the music with a simple and quantitatively limited abstract vocabulary of movement composed of three movement phrases, named as A, B and C: "variations on walking, walking with turning, pivoting on one leg guided by the arms and the upper body." (de Keersmaeker and Cvejić 2012: 47) In the choreography, de Keersmaeker applies phase-shifting to three layers. Firstly, as two dancers perform the basic sequence (a longer movement sequence composed of a mathematically constructed combination of repetitions of A's, B's and C's), they shift in movement qualities, defined by de Keersmaeker as normal/fluently, suspension and attacked:

5- De Keersmaeker staged "Fase: Four Movements to the Music of Steve Reich" in Istanbul, 2011 at Fulya Sanat Merkezi within the framework of İDANS Contemporary Dance and Performance Festival. Filmic adaptation of "Fase" is also available in DVD format, released in 2002.

6- My analysis of de Keersmaeker's choreography to *Piano Phase* is to a large extent based on a co-authored book by de Keersmaeker and Bojana Cvejić, where she transparently reveals compositional strategies she has employed in her first four pieces. (See de Keersmaeker and Cvejić 2012: 47-52).

Shifting in qualities is done in unison by the two dancers. First we perform the basic sequence in the fluent quality. When we do the same sequence again for the first time, we suspend the movement A every time it appears. In the next repetition, we suspend all the A's and all the B's. In the third repetition, all the C's are also suspended. The fourth time, we produce a final supersuspended version where all possible movements are suspended. So gradually the sequence transforms itself from a totally fluent into a totally suspended quality. (de Keersmaeker and Cvejić 2012: 48)

Secondly, as dancers shift in qualities from the beginning to the end of the piece, they also shift through space on three lateral lines or corridors: first against the wall, then middle line, and finally downstage. Thirdly and most visibly, phase-shifting occurs right after when two dancers repetitiously perform movement phrase C (turning around their own axis from left to right while pivoting on left leg with right arm swinging) in unison. As two dancers repeat C, one of them (Michelle Ann de Mey) remains in the same tempo and constant rhythm, while the other one (de Keersmaeker) accelerates her pace through repetition until she falls out of unison, and then accelerates further to complete the circle and be in unison again. It is this third layer of phase-shifting which “almost didactically demonstrate the compositional principle of phase-shifting in the early music of Steve Reich” According to de Keersmaeker. (de Keersmaeker and Cvejić 2012: 47) Lighting design by Remon Fremon is very influential in literally visualizing the phase-shifting process in this third layer. Lights placed at downstage (the front side of the stage closest to the audience) corners illuminating the dancers bodies from the diagonal, cast shadows of the dancers on the back wall. On the one hand, individual shadows of the two dancers are cast on the wall. On the other hand, a third shadow which is darker than the other two, juxtaposition of two dancers shadows intersect in between two individual shadows. This third shadow is almost identical to the other two when dancers perform movement phrase C in unison. Yet, when one of the dancers phase-shifts by accelerating her tempo, the juxtaposed image that is the result of two shadows reflected on the back wall starts “asymmetrically” multiplying itself and literally visualizes the compositional principle of phase-shifting.

Regarding the consonance between structures of dance and music, it should be added that the shift in qualities of movement coincide with shifts through space in three lines, which also overlap with three-part structure of Reich's score -from 12 beat pattern to 8 beat, and finally to four beat pattern. Also, apart from this explicit alignment between two compositional structures -and of course, apart from common use of repetition with slight variations in tempo as the basic shared compositional connective tissue- certain musical and choreographic devices match as proposed by Renate Bräuninger:

In de Keersmaeker's movement, there is very little use of space; the dancers stay more or less in place while turning and executing their step sequences. They inch forward and backward in a line, gradually moving to the front of the performance space, but there are no large jumps or traveling footwork with which to traverse the space. At the same time, the tempo of the dancing does not alter significantly. Stops and pauses and changes in quality occur, but most of the movement happens at the same speed. Such minimal use of space and tempo changes could be regarded as parallel to the defined pitch contour and undeviating rhythmic shape of the musical cells. ( Bräuninger 2014: 56).

As can be clearly seen from the above analysis, and as articulated by de Keersmaeker herself, “choreographic structure is inspired by musical structure”, by transposition of the principle of phase-shifting into choreography through shifts in movement quality, shifts in space, and most visibly through phase-shifting of the two dancers. And she adds, “Timewise, however, the structures of music and dance are independent of each other.” (de Keersmaeker and Cveji 2012: 51) For example, while two pianists begin phase-shifting process immediately after the exposition; two dancers move in and out of phase with one another only when they perform longer repetitions of movement phrase C, in total six times throughout *Piano Phase*. Also, due to changes in movement qualities from fluent to suspension to attacked along with pauses and extensions of movements in time; division of time in the choreography and that in the music are not identical. Although dancers take their temporal “cues” from the music, and transitions between three parts of the structure overlap temporally both in choreography and in music; choreography has its own temporal logic and organization basically determined by changes in movement qualities and dynamics immanent to how movement sequences are aligned out of various combinations and repetitions of A’s, B’s and C’s.

Scholars with an anti-reductionistic academic habitus like Bräuninger convincingly draws attention to particularity of choreographic structure, and its dialectical relationship (of alignment *and* counterpoint) with musical structure. It can be admittedly stated that, although de Keersmaeker’s choreographic structure is directly “inspired” by the musical structure; it establishes a dynamic relationship with the music. In other words, rather than being a direct reflection, mimicry, mirroring or imitation of musical structure, choreographic structure comes in and out of phase with the structure of music. Stephanie Jordan pursues a similar attitude in her analyses of Balanchine’s “Serenade” and “Agon”, with musics by Tchaikovsky and Stravinsky, respectively. Regarding the former, she comments that: “Balanchine’s approach to musical detail is no more a matter of simple mirroring than [is] his approach to large structure. He might take a textual idea, question and answer, for instance, but he might not take it on in quite the same way or at the same time as the music, and he might choose to bring out only one part of a texture.” (Jordan 2000: 136)

Her study on the latter not only confirms her anti-reductionistic stance, which is to a large extent grounded on her highly sophisticated knowledge of music; but also complements, if not corrects, Stravinsky’s view on Balanchine’s use of music in his choreographies. As opposed to Stravinsky, Jordan reserves equal emphasis both for “music made visible” *and* choreomusical “counterpoint”: “Analysis reveals the range of rhythmic interplay between music and dance in Agon: dance both visualizing and counterpointing music, whether the dialogue be between event pattern, accents, or meter. ...The excitement of Agon is that shifting and volatile musical/choreographic relationships continually enliven our visual/aural awareness”. (Jordan 1993: 11).

Surprisingly enough, a closer look at some of the artistic products of Cage-Cunningham collaboration may also necessitate a re-articulation of their choreomusical formula, expressed both by Cage and Cunningham as two disciplines being “independent” from each other, or as having “nothing” in common except for the element of time. For example, in Merce Cunningham’s “Ocean” (1995) all the dancers wear blue leotards, and David Tudor’s electronic component (*Soundings: Ocean Diary*) composed of underwater sounds are overlaid on Andrew Culver’s score performed by 112 musicians in the absence of a conductor. Name of the piece, colour of the leotards and the source of “found sounds” in David Tudor’s electronic component create connections –not

rhythmic or structural connections for sure, yet highly probably thematic or affective ones— among various design layers (namely sound design, movement design and costume design) of the whole production, all of which serve to a relatively “interdependent” choreomusical relationship. Since, music was made by Culver after Cage’s death, at least Cunningham’s choices are open to questioning or re-consideration of his defense of autonomy of various layers in a choreographic creation.

Of course, certain exceptions do not necessarily require any re-consideration of choreomusical dynamics, especially if the case at stake is a highly rich *oeuvre*. At its best, it might warn us once again against generalizations and reductionisms mostly employed by art historical and art theoretical meta-narratives, either articulated by critics, scholars or by artists themselves. Yet, it is my contention that there is one more step that this line of intellectual endeavor could take, especially if further opening of a reflexive space beyond modified versions of dependence/interdependence versus independence/autonomy dichotomies is on the agenda.

Juliet McMains and Ben Thomas discuss two broad forms of choreomusical analysis, which they describe as *amplification* and *emergence*. Amplification relates to highlighting or illustration of a musical or choreographic idea in the other discipline, which could take the form of *isolated conformance* (as opposed to continuous conformance, close affinity and alignment between dance and music not necessarily leading to direct physicalization at all times), *isolated opposition* (periods of radical disjuncture framed by passages of greater alignment), and *reorchestration* (the actions of the dancers leading to a change in aural experience by highlighting certain elements in the music that would otherwise be heard as background). Emergence on the other hand, refers to an idea not present in dance or music, yet which comes into being only through their interaction: something qualitatively different, rather than being a mixing or averaging of the individual properties of the two media. (McMains and Thomas 2013: 209-214) Both isolated conformance and reorchestration seems available for an analysis of choreomusical relationship between de Keersmaeker and Reich exemplified in “Fase”. By by-passing binary schemes of analysis/evaluation they might serve the need to define what that specific relationship between visual and aural patterns “is”, in addition to what it is “not”. Especially reorchestration could be highly functional in directing our lenses to continuously evolving interplay both between and across rhythmic and melodic relations in the music on the hand, and physico-visual and spatio-architectural relations in the choreography on the other hand. Since all of these relations are direct or by-products of phase-shifting processes on different plates. Yet, I think that emergence as a choreomusical tool carries a potentiality non-existent in the others especially in relation to *Piano Phase*.

As stated above, due to reflected shadows on the back wall, lighting desing by Remon Fremon in *Piano Phase* is very effective and functional in literally visualizing the compositional process of phase-shifting, when two dancers move in and out of phase with one another through acceleration. Yet, I will argue that its temporal, semantic and affective significance exceeds its didactic, instrumental and/or pedagogical function. This juxtaposed visual image of two shadows intersecting in between two seperate individual shadows, is the emergent element in *Piano Phase*. Timewise speaking, the intersecting shadow embodies three temporalities at the same time: individual temporalities of two dancers that are still discernible in the juxtaposed image; and an inter-subjective or trans-subjective temporality that is the result of rhythmically ever-evolving

interaction between two individual temporalities when they begin phase-shifting process. Steve Reich's reaction to choreography of *Piano Phase* when he saw the piece for the first time in 1999 (17 years after the premiere) is in no way surprising. "My jaw dropped," he said, and continued: "Of all the choreography done to my music this was by far the best thing I'd seen. The way that she used the phasing principle, which is really very difficult; the brilliant use of lighting in 'Piano Phase,' so that their shadows are like alter egos... — it was all analogous to the music. On an emotional and psychological level I felt I'd learned something about my own work." (Sulcas 2008).

Embodiment of three temporalities in the same visual image along with semantic, affective, and even cosmic associations it unfolds, is beyond the capacities of dance or music alone, at least in their given form with two pianists and two dancers. It is unique to the way compositional structures of music and dance interact with each other in *Piano Phase*; and also unique to the way resulting physico-visual-aural effects manifest themselves in time and space. Something qualitatively different, something not simply bigger but "beyond" its constituent parts emerges. Still, it is vital to remember that those physico-visual-aural effects and their countless associations couldn't have emerged in the absence of Remon Fremon's lighting design, an autonomous layer of design just like movement and sound. This last point once again signals the need for an interdisciplinary and relational study of live multi-media (not necessarily technological) performances. An understanding of relationality, which includes choreomusical interactions and goes beyond it in an aim to take all design layers into consideration.

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