

What a woman, what music

In *Elisabeth Gets her Way*, choreographer Jan Martens sets to work on the oeuvre of Polish harpsichordist Elisabeth Chojnacka. A masterly discovery.

'The lioness with the red mane' is what they nicknamed Elisabeth Chojnacka. The Polish harpsichordist (1939–2017) was an outsider in classical music, and not only because she sometimes wore stiletto heels during concerts or played so fast that she seemed to have twenty fingers. With her flamboyant style, she converted the general public to harpsichord music, which is not an easy genre. In his intense tribute to Chojnacka, Jan Martens does exactly the same.

In seven mini solos, Martens dances each time to a different piece from Chojnacka's oeuvre. These include at once sixteenth-century repertoire and experimental compositions written specially for her by György Ligeti, Iannis Xenakis and others. 'Phrygian Tucket' (1994) by Stephen Montague was also written for her. In the semi-darkness, wearing only gold-coloured trunks, Martens attempts to keep up with Chojnacka's lightning-fast rhythm. It is a battle of attrition, especially as he performs the dance standing still and can therefore only move his arms hyperkinetically. Honestly, you are dumbfounded at what Chojnacka squeezes out of her harpsichord. Sometimes she strums so fast that you almost seem to hear Arabic techno at 130 beats per minute. At other times, Chojnacka strikes her instrument so violently that it resembles industrial rock. Impressive. And so contemporary!

Elisabeth Gets her Way is a personal tribute and an intimate documentary in one. Through film and audio fragments by music connoisseurs and by Chojnacka herself, we get a fascinating portrait of an adventurous woman who changed the course of her discipline. For example, the keyboard of her harpsichord was not nearly enough, the strings, pedals and wood had to be used as well. She lived for the stage until she got a brain disorder and forgot her notes.

Martens has opted for direct translation between dance and music, with rhythm, emotion and intensity as shared factors. This makes the solo very accessible – an achievement in itself with such special music – but at the risk of becoming at times more music than dance, leaving you choreographically hungry. At the same time, Martens displays his queer signature here more than ever, clearly showing himself the heir of choreographer Marc Vanrunxt. With the sacral arm gestures, the final scene on Ligeti's 'Continuum' seems almost an ode to his Antwerp teacher. Together with the many historical references in Cédric Charlier's costume design, Martens keeps dance and music history very much alive.