

July 15, 2021 by Wendy
Lubberding

Live Performance |
Review

Elisabeth Gets Her Way – Jan Martens | GRIP

On Monday 12 July, during Julidans festival, the Belgian choreographer and dancer Jan Martens premiered *Elisabeth Gets Her Way* at Theater Bellevue. The thoughtful seven-part solo explores the unique force and precision of Elisabeth Chojnacka's harpsichord playing, and comes up with a plethora of danced responses. I saw the show on 13 July.

Dance maker Jan Martens knows how to bend the space and time in which his work takes place. He bends them to accommodate bodies and minds other than his own (*The Common People, Passing the Bechdel Test*) or unexpected combinations of dancers' bodies (*BIS, any attempt will end in crushed bodies and shattered bones*). But he also bends them to



pull his audience deep into the choreographic mind (*Lostmovements*). Now he is making space and time for the mental and physical prowess of harpsichordist Elisabeth Chojnacka (1939 – 2017), who bent the use and sound of her instrument to her monumental will.

Ostensibly, Martens does this by presenting a series of seven solos, each set to a particular piece of music performed by Chojnacka. From the first it becomes clear that Martens' is closely following the angular, clipped tones from the instrument: to a recurring, brief cluster of short notes in the bass line, he takes a series of small steps forward, dipping his knees and one shoulder, while looking the audience in the eye. To the middle notes he stretches his arms sideways and for the higher notes, his arms move high up, his forearms parallel and sliding backwards and forwards to each pluck of the strings.

But there are more layers to Martens' performance. The solos are embedded in a patchwork of interviews with and about the musician. The composers who wrote for her, Lucinda Childs who choreographed alongside her, and Chojnacka herself. Some of it on video, some of it is audio only – which is very powerful – and some of it is text, projected onto the white backdrop in three languages, English, Dutch and French. An image arises of Chojnacka as a strong-willed, hard-working, talented instrumentalist who could take any piece of music and dexterously deepen it with

layers of emotion to make the composition sound spacious and timeless. She knew her strengths and played them out. And she looked the part, with her fiery red curly hair and striking outfits with glitter and gold.

Fair enough, but this is where Jan Martens finds his opening and adds a layer of contrast. As a dancer, his presence is much softer than the image we get of Chojnacka, and of the instrument we hear (in a harpsichord the string is plucked when a key is struck and immediately muted when the key is released, which makes for a generally harsher and more clipped sound than the more modern piano). He too knows his strengths, but instead of overwhelming his audience with virtuosity, big hair and loud clothes, he places himself on the audience's side and wonders with us: how can anyone play so many notes in so little time, how to register them all in time, how to endure the onslaught of sound?

Martens' movements and physical appearance (with beautiful costumes by Cédric Charlier) create space and time to consider how the music feels, and then offer a fitting response. So, to a 16th century composition, the anonymous *Uppon La Mi Re*, he convincingly proposes a club dancing sequence. He wears his body out by stepping and jerking his shoulders to the violent timings of a long and complicated piece while holding an imaginary straight line from left to right across the barely lit stage. He strips, taps a bare foot on the floor

and in the aural and visual silence offers first a ‘profil sonore’ of his own before Chojnacka brings in that of Graciane Finzi. In the end, the most important question Martens’ solos explore is how to carve out a space for oneself faced with intimidating power.



photos: Luis Xertu

Tour dates Elisabeth Gets Her Way

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