

'Radicale danssolo over flamboyante klavecijniste', Fransien van der Putt, *Theaterkrant*, July 14, 2021. translation: Patrick Lennon. <https://www.theaterkrant.nl/recensie/elisabeth-gets-her-way/grip-jan-martens/>

RADICAL DANCE SOLO ABOUT A FLAMBOYANT HARPSICORDIST

Seen on July 12, 2021, Julidans, Theater Bellevue, Amsterdam

Halfway through the portrait of the flamboyant harpsichordist Elisabeth Chojnacka (1939–2017), Jan Martens lets the sounds and rhythms of an anonymous sixteenth-century piece pass through his body. His minimal movements are so lyrical that the auditorium in the Theater Bellevue fall silent.

The flat floor is white. With a few lamps set up along the side walls, a clothes rack with costumes at the back and a projection screen hanging across the full width of the rear stage, attached with steel clips. The stage apparatus is visible and poor, as in *arte povera*. Carefully lit by Elke Verachtert (moved by hand, I learn afterwards) and provided with slightly disruptive costumes by Cédric Charlier, the dance solo maintains a strange balance between frenzy and distance, surrender and grip.

For this scene midway through the performance, Charlier has given Martens a pair of bright-red knee breeches and a sporty shirt with a round, high-necked neckline. There's something page-like about it, as yesteryear swirls into a culture of sportswear, rave, house and heels. A plunging neckline at the back and a recurring ruche – like a drooping feather or a dragon's tail – give just that little bit of extra spice and levity to Martens' otherwise serious appearance.

The energy and concentration are intense, the form of the dance solo also tends towards the monumental. Nowhere does Martens become ironic or apologize for the force, or frenzied power, of the work of Chojnacka and of composers such as Ligeti, Xenakis, Ferrari, Berio, Krauze or Montague, who often wrote works especially for her. Heavy metal is nothing compared to this.

The performance opens relatively lightly with a concerto by De Falla, but soon it hammers away – atonal, complex, rhythmic and prepared. Martens surrenders to the precision and complexity of the music, but also very delicately writes a story about a woman who didn't care about, as one of the interviewees puts it, the grey world of new music.

Voices relate that she did her concerts in brightly coloured high heels, was not only very precise and serious, but also a real communicator, drawing her audience to her. Naked, Martens pats his body like a prepared harpsichord, spreads his legs generously towards the audience, provoking in his own way a certain surrender and openness with the artistic work.

Nowhere does Martens as a dancer seek to rival the virtuosity of the harpsichordist with his dance. As he has already demonstrated in *Lostmovements* (2019, with Marc Vanrunxt) and *Ode to the Attempt*, there is more to music and dance than that. Simple starting points such as walking and sitting, feeling the space along with one's own body, and the pleasure and pain of intense experiences become part of an active form of listening that unfolds step by step, scene after scene, in front of an audience.

A recurring theme are the texts that Martens includes in his choreographic performances, this time expanded with sometimes hilarious television images with or about Chojnacka, in addition to concert recordings and a single photo. New interviews with still living witnesses like Krauze and Montague were recorded by Martens himself, together with Yanna Soentjens, who also made the beautifully uplifting sound montage of the many voices and the music.

In *Elisabeth Gets her Way*, layers of documentation and expression, of quotation and interpretation, of history and art practice are juxtaposed with little added commentary. The construction provides direction, but also carefully leaves holes. Instead of being presented with a statement, spectators can discover for themselves what to do with the new music and with the career of a headstrong artist who went her own way regardless of convention. The loneliness of that road is also only touched on here and there, never elevated to heroics.

What appears unapproachable in both the music and in Martens' dance becomes something to hook into and come back to precisely because of this. Heavy metal without wallowing in a sweating mass may take some getting used to, but also offers an alternative to listening together in the concert hall with closed eyes in deep piety and exclusivity.

In his own way, Martens distances himself from certain conventions in order to generate a different proximity or involvement. When, after the first French television images from the 1970s, he opens the performance dancing in a white country blouse and leggings with a vague panther print, in the full light with his bald head, you are alienated at first. This exuberant dancer in hilarious costume forces you as a spectator to ask yourself what you are looking at and listening to, what you feel and why.

During the performance, this at times somewhat intimidating strangeness is transformed into an intimacy of attention, concentration and passion. The phenomenon Chojnacka, or Martens, dance or atonal music, crumbles into an experience. The explicit construction makes it possible to withdraw from less consciously experienced constructions such as the obligatory conventions, the pleasing and the obviousness of well-to-do. I still associate that freedom of risk with punk, with breaking conventions without even knowing how to. Its vulnerability is as difficult as it is infectious.

In addition to the new solo to be seen now during *Julidans*, a gigantic group choreography by Martens entitled *Any attempt will end in crushed bodies and shattered bones* is to premiere next weekend in Avignon. It was in researching the music for that performance that Martens came across Chojnacka, as the harpsichordist of Górecki's *Concerto for Harpsichord and Strings Op. 40*. Martens seems to have found a format for converting his vision into radical work, which precisely for this reason succeeds in reformulating the communal. Hats off.