

THE BODY IS BEAUTIFUL. GET USED TO IT.

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Verklärte Nacht

By **Wannes Gyselink**

Two rewritings

Almost twenty years after its first performance in 1995, Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker revisits, or rather, restates her choreographic answer to Arnold Schönberg's *Night Transfigured* (*Verklärte Nacht*).

Schönberg rose to fame first and foremost as austere modernist master and tonal iconoclast. However, when he composed his now famous sextet *Transfigured Night* in 1899, he was young, penniless and completely unknown. It turned out to be his first masterpiece: a dark elegy that morphs into a jubilant song of triumph; in which Brahms and Wagner, on the breath of Mahler, are vying for the upper hand.

De Keersmaeker elected to choreograph not for the original sextet, but for the later, more sumptuous orchestral arrangement for string orchestra. Though Schönberg preferred to see himself as the 'modernist Prometheus' who gave music its new dawn – rather than as the autumnal late-romantic debutant he was back in 1899 – he kept on returning to his youthful debut, first in 1917, and a second time in 1943. Ultimately, and rather to his annoyance, *Transfigured Night* remained the most oft-performed piece Schönberg ever wrote.

The harmonic and sonic textures of *Transfigured Night*, in its version for string orchestra, are thickened into a truly symphonic poem. With her re-working of the piece, De Keersmaeker has taken a contrary path, following the arch-modernist adage 'less is more': The impressive, overtly romantic decor of the 1995 version has been stripped back to an empty stage; the autumnal lighting, that drenched the stage in warm sepia tones in the original, is now neutral, cold and objective. Of the six couples and two female soloists, only one couple, plus a third man, remains. A love triangle – the most concise synopsis of a tragic love story.

'Zwei Menschen'

There is indeed a story to the piece, albeit not a tragic one. Schönberg wrote his string sextet with the eponymous poem by Richard Dehmel firmly in mind. He managed to translate the

poem, sentence by sentence, into a complex texture of developing and intertwining leitmotifs, which tell a wordless story: a man and a woman walk in the moonlight ('*Zwei Menschen gehn durch kahlen, kalten Hain*': two people are walking through a bare, cold wood – evoked by a sombre, descending melody, with harmonies progressively fanning out into the upper tonal regions, on top of a dark, brooding bass note). The woman confesses to the man she loves that she is expecting a child from a man she does not love. The triangle closes itself around the unborn child. The woman's lover responds with a gesture of emotional generosity that is as surprising as it is moving, especially given the late-19th century context: he reassures her that their love for each other, will transfigure the child so that she will carry it as if it were his.

Musically, this tension between crisis – the woman's desperate confession – and its transcendence – the lover's generous response – is expressed by the brusque alternation of harmonically transparent passages and passages in which harmonic resolution is endlessly postponed and avoided. Only in the final minutes do the harmonic tensions and dissonance resolve into a triumphant apotheosis ('*Zwei Menschen gehn durch hohe, helle Nacht*': 'two people walk on through the high, bright night').

The art of not falling

After its first performance in 1902, *Transfigured Night* was received with scepticism. Schönberg had allowed dissonant notes to rub up against each other in 'non-existent chords' (that is, chords that were not permitted, even deemed 'impossible', within classical harmonic standards) – sufficient reason for the Vienna Music Society to refuse the piece.

The passages in which Schönberg consistently avoids harmonic solution indeed pay testimony to the strong erosive forces at work at the end of the 19th century, the gradual breaking down of classical tonality. In 1908, six years after the first performance of the piece, Schönberg disrupts musical history by abolishing classical harmonic relations and 'freeing the dissonant' from its harmonic constraints – 'atonality' as it is commonly called; though Schönberg himself found this a rather unfortunate term ('it is on a par with calling flying "the art of not falling," or swimming "the art of not drowning"', he wrote).

Already in *Night Transfigured* the young Schönberg, not unlike Mahler, pushed the boundaries of traditional harmony in search of previously unheard dissonances – but still remained within the harmonic system itself. Nine years later, he fulfilled his modernist duty and painted the musical equivalent of Malevich's *Black Square* (1913).

A mere story

But Schönberg was not only radical in violating tonal taboos. In writing chamber music that expressed a marked narrative programme, he had disregarded the ideal of 'absolute music' – of which chamber music (a genre reserved for connoisseurs and initiates) was thought to be the last bulwark. Since the arrival of Wagner and Liszt on the musical scene, the ideal of 'pure, absolute music' had already been under heavy attack by proponents of the more 'vulgar' genre of the symphonic poem, in which music served to tell a story or express an idea; Music reduced, the critics spurned, to illustration or expression.

Even as late as 1950, Schönberg felt the need to defend himself against the accusation of having subjugated the genre *par excellence* of absolute music to telling a 'mere story' (an accusation even more pertinent for the orchestral version, which indeed sounds a lot like a 'tone poem'). In response to his detractors Schönberg stated: 'Because it does not illustrate any action or drama, but is restricted to the portrayal of nature and the expression of human emotion, it seems that (...) my composition has gained qualities which can also satisfy, even if one does not know what it illustrates; or in other words, it offers the possibility to be appreciated as "pure" music.' Thus, the older Schönberg is trying to re-cast his youthful, late-romantic tone poem as absolute music.

Dancing stories

For her re-working of *Verklärte Nacht*, De Keersmaecker has used the later version for string orchestra, as interpreted by Pierre Boulez: 'I think Boulez' iconic, grandiose interpretation contrasts beautifully with the cold, objectifying stage set-up,' De Keersmaecker says. 'But in the end the piece remains, of course, shamelessly romantic. In the 1995 version, I tempered the romantic narrative by fragmenting and multiplying the characters into six couples that engaged in a varying series of physical propositions between man and woman. By reducing this multiplicity to only one duet – with an extra man in the opening minutes – I go back to the essence of the piece, I think. As a consequence the narrative aspect of the choreography is foregrounded. In that respect my choreography resembles, even pays homage to, the famous classical, narrative ballets.'

Not unlike late 19th century music, the history of dance in the 20th century is marked by an unresolved tension between formalism, and dance as dramatic storytelling. Should dance express emotions and represent a story or should it be nothing more than 'visible music' – the arrangement of bodies in time and space? As in music, orthodox modernists have denounced narrativity and theatricality as 'too easy', as generic contamination or a cheap concession to a more vulgar, popular taste for readable stories that are easy to paraphrase afterwards. Yet there are a number of, often female, choreographers – Pina Bausch to name but one – who managed to counter this criticism with works that convinced and continue to convince both on a formal, theatrical and emotional level.

In her works, De Keersmaecker acknowledges the presence of both this 'formalist' and narrative strand:

"I consider *Verklärte Nacht* as one of the stages in my personal research into duet writing. A duet is often a form of storytelling 'about' two bodies. It suggests a relationship, and a relationship in movement is inevitably a story. In my early duets, *Fase* for example in 1982, I managed to suppress this narrativity almost completely. *Fase* is, so to speak, the exact opposite of the duet in *Verklärte Nacht*. It conceives of a duet as a mere physical, formal doubling of bodies. In the duets of *Bartók/Mikrokosmos* in 1987 and certainly in *Mozart / Concert Arias* in 1992 I explored much more deeply the intrinsic theatricality of the genre. *Verklärte Nacht* pursues this line of research further still. 'On a more general note, I fail to find the opposition between formalist and dramatic dance interesting or fruitful. In my mind, a dancing body is always more than mere form. It is tangible, and therefore inevitably expressive. A dancing human being is always telling some kind of story."

Shamelessly romantic

Speaking of the romantic nature of the piece, De Keersmaecker, adds: "The expressive vocabulary in *Verklärte Nacht* is partly based on the stylised poses of Rodin's sculpted couples. I also made use of gestures and poses drawn from a manual showing men how to assist their partners during labour. On a more structural, formal level the notion of down- and upwards spiralling movement is persistent throughout the whole piece, both within the movements and in the use of space."

"It's all about striking a delicate balance between formal, or rather, structural and more concrete, expressive qualities. In its new form, *Verklärte Nacht* is, in my view, the right answer to Schönberg's piece. And to Dehmel's poem. I find the man's generous gesture very impressive and touching: two individuals who lift each other up by mutual understanding and trust. This may all sound rather romantic, but then I am by nature a very romantic person. In that respect it may seem strange that my musical repertory jumps from Bach, via Mozart and Beethoven, directly to the great modernists, ignoring the romantic period entirely. Schönberg and Mahler are exceptions, although their late-romantic music is more a departure from romanticism than its culmination.

I don't think my tendency to keep away from the romantic age is a coincidence. I believe that an artist with a passionate nature and an inclination towards chaos and entropy, will

produce work in which this inclination is countered by strict, confining structures. A matter of attracting opposites I guess."

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Transfigured Night

Two people are walking through
a bare, cold wood;
the moon keeps pace with them
and draws their gaze.
The moon moves along above tall oak trees,
there is no wisp of cloud to obscure
the radiance
to which the black, jagged tips reach up.
A woman's voice speaks:

I am carrying a child, and not by you.
I am walking here with you in
a state of sin.
I have offended grievously against myself.
I despaired of happiness,
and yet I still felt a grievous longing
for life's fullness, for a mother's joys
and duties; and so I sinned,
and so I yielded, shuddering, my sex
to the embrace of a stranger,
and even thought myself blessed.
Now life has taken its revenge,
and I have met you, met you.

She walks on, stumbling.
She looks up; the moon keeps pace.
Her dark gaze drowns in light.
A man's voice speaks:

Do not let the child you have conceived
be a burden on your soul.
Look, how brightly the universe shines!
Splendour falls on everything around,
you are voyaging with me on a cold sea,
but there is the glow of an inner warmth
from you in me, from me in you.
That warmth will transfigure
the stranger's child,
and you bear it me, begot by me.
You have transfused me with splendour,
you have made a child of me.

He puts an arm about her strong hips.
Their breath embraces in the air.
Two people walk on through
the high, bright night.

Poem by Richard Dehmel (Translated from German by Mary Whittall)