

**Music and Dance in Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker's *Fase, Four Movements to the*
Music
*of Steve Reich***

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Fase, Four Movements to the Music of Steve Reich, choreographed by the young Anne Teresa De Keermaeker, premiered on March 18, 1982, in Beurs-schouwburg in Brussels. Since its original performance and in iterations since then, its essence and impact has been described by critics as, “both expressionist and minimalist,” “mesmerizing and expressive,” (Sagolla, Backstage, 1998) “dismayingly difficult,” (ibid), and “deceptively formal”(Kisselgoff, 1998). Indeed, De Keersmaeker’s four movements were a peculiar and exhilarating mix of sparse and austere structure suffused with emotion, drama, and intensity. This early work garnered much critical attention and launched De Keersmaker’s career as an important choreographic voice. Moreover, it seemed an answer to Reich’s infamous statement in his 1973 essay “Notes on Music and Dance,” that “For a long time during the 1960’s one would go to the dance concert where no one danced followed by the party where everyone danced. This was not a healthy situation.”¹ In researching this work, I constantly came back to the question: what actually constitutes the drama in this highly structured and repetitive work? I found that the unique musical process of phasing, Steve Reich’s musical process, provided the basis for this answer. Reich first describes his concept of “phasing,” a compositional process around which De Keersmaeker’s *Fase* would later be organized, in his 1968 essay “The Phase Shifting Pulse Gate”:

On Lincoln’s birthday in 1968 I had the idea that if a number of single tones were all pulsing at the same tempo, but with gradually shifting phase relations, a great number of musical patterns would result. If the tones were all in phase (struck at the same instant), a pulsing chord would be heard. If the tones were slowly shifted just a bit out of phase,

¹ Steve Reich, *Writings about Music*. (New York: New York University Press, 1974), 41

a sort of rippling broken chord would be heard which would gradually change into a melodic pattern, then another, and so on. If the process of phase shifting were gradual enough, then minute rhythmic differences would become clearly audible. A given musical pattern would then be heard to change into another with no alteration of pitch, timbre, or loudness, and one would become involved in a music which worked exclusively with gradual changes in time.²

Put simply, phasing is the musical process whereby two musicians start playing a pulsing chord melody at the same tempo, and one gradually begins to phase away from unison by delaying his playing ever so slightly, leaving in its wake “a rippling broken chord”, which gradually reunites again into unison. De Keersmaecker transposes this looping musical process onto her own body and the bodies of her dancers in *Fase*. Not only because she used Reich’s music, but more so because of the *way* that she reacted choreographically to it, De Keersmaecker indeed responded to Reich’s call for a “genuinely new dance with roots that go back thousands of years to the basic impulse at the foundation of all dance; the human desire for regular rhythmic movement, usually done to music.”³

This was an echo of a similar exhortation by John Cage to the dance community of his time, the mid-1940’s, to wrest from the ballet the “tradition of clarity of its rhythmic structure”⁴ and bring it into the modern dance, which, he felt, had become too dependent on the compelling personalities and individual styles of its few stars. Calling “lamentable”

² Ibid., 17.

³ Ibid., 41.

⁴ John Cage, "Grace and Clarity." *Dance Observer*, January 1, 1944, 91.

⁵ the fact that “one should, today have to see *Swan Lake* or something equally empty of contemporary meaning in order to experience the pleasure of observing clarity and grace in the dance,”⁶ Cage called for “clarity of rhythmic structure” together with “*grace*”, to form a duality with a “relation like that of body and soul...clarity is cold, mathematical, inhuman, but basic and earthy. Grace is warm, incalculable, human, opposed to clarity, like the air.”⁷ Utilizing compositional devices such as repetition and accumulation, De Keersmaeker fit into a milieu of female post-modern choreographers who were employing similar devices in the late 1970’s and early 1980’s, such as Trisha Brown, Lucinda Childs, and Pina Bausch. Several scholars and critics have attempted to respond to the difficulty of the highly repetitive structure of De Keersmaeker’s work by appealing to various literary, feminist, and psychological analytical frameworks through which to interpret her work.

For example, in *Judson Dance Theater: Performative Traces*, dance scholar Ramsay Burt argues that in works by the aforementioned choreographers, “serial repetition produces levels of meaning that exceed the explicit content of the material repeated,”⁸ and that these function “as symptoms of unresolved tensions within each of these pieces.”⁹ Citing Judith Butler’s theory of performativity of gender whereby the “demand to repeat performative acts that signify compliance with gender norms cannot be refused but neither can it be followed in strict obedience,” Burt emphasizes the possibility

⁵ Ibid., 92.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.,91.

⁸ Ramsay Burt, "Repetition," *Judson Dance Theater: Performative Traces*: (London: Routledge, 2006),144.

⁹ Ibid.

of repeating unfaithfully--repeating with difference--behavior and norms of gender, thereby extending and opening up possibilities to resist normative gender ideologies. Burt's claim that the repetition of movement cells comprised mainly of movements that signify femininity is done in order to open up a "discursive space"¹⁰ in which they were free from "interpellating demands of normative ideologies,"¹¹ inappropriately uses literary theory and a type of feminist discourse far removed from the concerns of De Keersmaeker and the world she lived in at the time *Fase* was made. De Keersmaeker explicitly did not identify as a feminist,¹² routinely expressed boredom and indifference to questions about feminism in her work, and never showed any interest in the type of critical theory that Burt uses to analyze it. This is not to say that her work is not feminist, only that an analysis that seeks to explore the work on its own terms, should look for feminism *inside* the formal, artistic, and aesthetic concerns that were most relevant and pertinent to the work, and resist reaching too far outside the purview of the artist to find neat analytic frameworks.

Alternatively, Renate Brauning, another dance scholar, positions herself inside the discourse about the psychological and emotional landscapes of *Fase*, arguing that textual, representational, and purely structural analyses of De Keersmaeker are insufficient, and instead proposes an "acknowledgement of affective qualities"¹³ in the work, introducing the concept of "trancing" to better understand *Fase*. Brauning

¹⁰ Ibid., 158.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Jill Johnston, "Intimate Moves." *Secret Lives in Art: Essays on Art, Literature, Performance*, (Chicago, IL: Chicago Review Press, 1994), 129.

¹³ Renate Brauning, "Structure as Process: Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker's *Fase* (1982) and Steve Reich's Music." *Dance Chronicle*, 37.1 (2014), 60.

emphasizes the loss of link between consciousness and language as central to the spectator's experience of watching the piece, and invokes the phenomenological idea of the "here and now," where consciousness is "constituted through action and interaction with a world," and where "subject and object relations cannot be defined in separate terms but rather are intersecting or interdependent."¹⁴ While Brauninger is correct to say that there is a psychological transformation or altered consciousness that occurs in the spectators during a work like *Fase*, this mode of watching dance or listening to music seems to forego substantive rigor and nuance in the process of reaching that altered state. Music scholar Dan Wharburton notes that this type of characterization in the discourse on minimal music is problematic in that "the prospect of the audience just switching off—not actively concentrating—is quite abhorrent."¹⁵ This critique can be applied to choreographic processes as well. Although emotional and psychic effects are crucial aspects of exploring De Keersmaeker's work, its detailed, intentional, and subtly changing choreographic structure requires active and close attention on the part of the spectator, rather than a ritualistic and devotional state, which neither De Keersmaeker nor Reich explicitly discussed as goals for their work.

I propose that it was music, rather than dance, literary, or critical theories, that was De Keersmaeker's primary influence and main source of inspiration in the making of *Fase*. She was responding to the music philosophies and theories that Reich himself was responding to, but was doing it through choreographic means—using the body in space

¹⁴ Ibid., 61.

¹⁵ Dan Wharburton. "A Working Terminology for Minimal Music," *Integral 2* (1988), 141.

and time to work through the questions of process and structure in the way Reich and other minimalist musicians were thinking about them at the time. Using Steve Reich's *Writings About Music*¹⁶ as well as Wim Merten's *American Minimal Music*, Susan Sontag's¹⁷ essay "Lexicon for Available Light," and Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*, I argue that music is the critical lens through which to see the magnitude of De Keersmaeker's *Fase*. Far from simply visualizing the musical material with which she worked, either by mimicking its rhythms or using it as an aural landscape to evoke certain emotional states, De Keersmaeker's faith in and relationship to her music flowed out from her body and the bodies of her dancers onto the stage with a purpose. Indeed, the human body in *Fase* is productively antagonistic to its music, that is, it summons forth its textures, contradictions, and expressive potentials. Through her choreography, De Keersmaeker exposes the limits of Reich's structural aspirations when faced with the limits of the human body. Furthermore, she invites contemplation of the tragic, that duality of Dionysian Oneness and Apollonian illusion, which "perishes when derived of the spirit of music just as sure as it can be born only of that spirit."¹⁸

I use Wim Merten's genealogy of American Minimal Music¹⁹ to situate Steve Reich within a musical non-dialecticism that began with John Cage and followed through to Reich and his peers. This aesthetic stance espoused the collapse of form and content and thus the dialectical relationship between social reality and music--essentially, life and

¹⁶ Steve Reich, *Writings about Music*. (New York: New York University Press, 1974).

¹⁷Susan Sontag, "Lexicon for Available Light," *Where the Stress Falls: Essays*. (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2001), 161.

¹⁸ Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche and Michael Tanner. *The Birth of Tragedy out of the Spirit of Music*. (London: Penguin, 1993), 75.

¹⁹ Wim Mertens, *American Minimal Music: La Monte Young, Terry Riley, Steve Reich, Philip Glass*. (London: Kahn & Averill, 1983).

art. In another seminal essay, “Music as a Gradual Process,” Reich distinguishes his “musical processes” from the “processes of composition”; while the former pertains to the experience of the listener, the latter is concerned with the structural devices used in the making of the piece itself. Reich seems to desire a collapse of these seemingly disparate realms of making and listening—his is the desire for transparency of intent and conspicuity of structure in the piece of music.²⁰ The key to Reich’s transparent, collapsed, “perceptible processes”²¹ is that they happen gradually; that is, they unfold and reveal themselves over long stretches of time. The reason that Reich values these processes is that he views them as exceptionally autonomous devices that allow the music to circumvent the ego and the subjective decisions about continuity, tone, and tempo that one must make when “composing” a piece of music.

He writes, “Though I may have the pleasure of discovering musical processes and composing the musical material to run through them, once the process is set up and loaded it runs by itself.”²² That said, Reich sees a number of differences between his approach and other processes such as serialism, or the aleatory, chance-based procedures of Cage, all of which seek to circumvent the ego. According to Reich, in serialist music, indeterminate, or chance-procedure music, “the compositional processes and the sounding music have no audible connection,” whereas Reich himself seeks “a compositional process and a sounding music that are one and the same thing,” with no “secrets of structure” or “hidden structural devices.”²³ Reich emphasizes the way music within this

²⁰ Reich, 10.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

highly controlled process is always “moving out away from intentions, occurring for their own acoustic reasons,” and that through the gradual shifting over time it “invites sustained attention.” Mertens argues that both of these approaches to composition converge in an aesthetic position that denies history because it assumes that “the contradiction between subject and object, mind and matter is solved.”²⁴ Because De Keersmaeker’s movements do not develop in time toward a teleological end but rather accumulate as repeating elements which remain equal in relation to each other, she seems to adopt their refusal of a progressing, historical time in favor of what Mertens calls a mythic or “metrical time” which then becomes “devoid of content.” I believe, however, that De Keersmaeker’s use of repetition was uniquely, if not intentionally, dialectical as it showed the human body’s limits in the face of a non-developing, ideal, repetitive structure.

I also contextualize my analysis of De Keersmaeker’s work using several key terms from Susan Sontag’s immensely useful and comprehensive “lexicon” for Lucinda Childs’ *Available Light* (1983). Childs, more so than Trisha Brown, is most closely related to De Keersmaeker in her formal and aesthetic aspirations, particularly her focused and rigorous use of the music in her choreography. Sontag’s “lexicon” of Childs’ work offers key concepts through which to view a structurally and musically demanding work such as *Fase*. One key term in Sontag’s passages is the “Ideal.” In exploring the role of the “ideal” in *Available Light*, Sontag calls Childs’ conception of dance “Apollonian,”²⁵ that is, it calls forth the “lively, playful, joyous,” affirms beauty as “power, delicacy, decorum, unaffected intensity,” and derides “what is ugly” as “timidity, anxiety, demagoguery,

²⁴ Mertens, 117.

²⁵ Sontag, 169.

heaviness.” De Keersmaeker’s *Fase* too possesses all of these qualities, and indeed it is this specific beauty and vitality that so connects her work to Childs’.

Sontag’s invocation of Apollo in Childs’ *Available Light* suggests that there are other ways to think about and understand so-called “formalist” work, such as De Keersmaeker’s *Fase*. Indeed, she invites one to expand the purview of analytical possibilities for *Fase* beyond clinical deconstructions of structure, anachronistic discussions of its politics, or interpretations of its affective power. In her appeal to Apollo, the great “interpreter of dreams”²⁶ in Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy*, Sontag summons the spectator away from the neat, anachronistic, and topical towards philosophy, contemplation of nature, fundamental questions of art, and indeed the essence of life itself. Although De Keersmaeker herself never mentions this particular text in her interviews and notes for *Fase*, she does note in an interview at KAAI Theater in Germany, that although she was never “intensely involved in any other philosophies or philosophical systems...in the early years there was also Nietzsche and the ideas of Rilke. They were part of that great romantic feeling, that passionate, intellectually challenging involvement in that period. What attracted me in Nietzsche was above all that almost wanton sovereignty, that provocativeness, daring to go further, beyond morality.”²⁷ It is not only appropriate then, but necessary, to consider Nietzsche’s texts if one seeks to understand what De Keersmaeker is truly doing in *Fase*, how she is doing it, and most importantly, why.

The Birth of Tragedy is a text that theorizes ideal art as the Attic tragedy. For Nietzsche, the dual forces of the Apollonian and Dionysian are the “artistic powers which

²⁶Nietzsche, 24.

²⁷Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker, "Kaaitheater," 14|15. April 1, 2008. Accessed December 1, 2014. <http://www.kaaitheater.be/en/>.

spring from nature itself, without the mediation of the human artist”²⁸ and furthermore “whose perfection is not at all dependent on the intellectual accomplishments or artistic culture of the individual.”²⁹ Nietzsche describes the distinction of the Apolline and the Dionysiac as the difference between a “dream and intoxication.”³⁰ The Dionysian is the Primal Oneness of the world, the obliteration of the self and annihilation of form and symbol. It rises in ecstasy and frenzy into the “mystical triumphal cry” of the “primal suffering of the world,” the masses, and the “unbrooked effusion of the unconscious will.” Apollo, on the other hand, reconstitutes the individual from the obliteration of the self in Oneness of Dionysus. The Apolline delivers on “the longing for illusion and redemption by illusion”³¹ and “delightful vision”; symbol, language, myth, and “the immediate apprehension of form.”³² While every artist is merely an “imitator” of these “artistic states in nature,”³³ either an “Apolline dream artist or a Dionysiac ecstatic artist,” Nietzsche nonetheless believes that “art derives its continuous development from the duality of the the Apolline and Dionysiac.”³⁴

The confrontation and oscillation between the two constitutes the *tragic* according to Nietzsche. Its relevance to this study of *Fase* lies in the interaction of the Apolline “art of the sculptor” and the “non-visual, Dionysiac art of music,”³⁵ whereby these “two very different tendencies walk side by side, usually in violent opposition, inciting one another

²⁸ Nietzsche, 18

²⁹Ibid., 14

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹Ibid., 25.

³² Ibid.,15.

³³Ibid., 18.

³⁴ Ibid., 14.

³⁵ Ibid.

to ever more powerful births...; until, finally, by a metaphysical miracle...they beget the work of art that is as Dionysiac as it is Apolline—Attic tragedy.”³⁶ If anything becomes clear in reading the previous literature and review on De Keersmaecker’s *Fase*, it is that this work invites one to ponder dualities and polarities: Kisselgoff’s formality and expressivity, Reich’s human and machine, Brauninger’s boredom and ecstasy, Cage’s grace and clarity—they all touch upon the vitality of *polarity* in this work. If one recalls “that great romantic feeling” she felt in Nietzsche’s ideas during her early period, presumably near the making of *Fase*, the “passionate,” the “wanton sovereignty, that provocativeness,” that went “beyond morality,” then Nietzsche’s theorization of Attic tragedy becomes all the more relevant as a system that undergirds the dance and offers a profound scheme for understanding and thinking about the function of the work, even more so because of the central role music and form plays in tragedy.

Nietzsche was deeply interested in and involved with the ideas of the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, whose book *The World as Will and Representation*,³⁷ dealt with similar metaphysical questions, especially regarding art and music, with which Nietzsche was grappling with. For him, “music differed in character and origin from all the other arts, because unlike them it was not a replica of phenomena, but the direct replica of the will itself.”³⁸ Nietzsche gathers from this idea that “music strives to make its essence known in Apolline images.”³⁹ To attain this symbolic expression of music, “a new world of symbols was required, the whole of the symbolism of the body, not only the

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Arthur Schopenhauer and R. B. Haldane Haldane, *The World as Will and Idea*, 2d ed. (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1957).

³⁸ Nietzsche, 76.

³⁹ Ibid.

symbolism of the mouth, the eye, the word, but the rhythmic motion of all the limbs of the body in the complete gesture of the dance. Then all the other symbolic forces, the forces of music--rhythm, dynamics and harmony--would suddenly find impetuous expression.”⁴⁰ One interpretation of this statement on the dance might conclude that the moving body is always the Apollonian answer to the Dionysiac music, giving the form of the body in dance to the Oneness of music, coming together in the illusion and symbolism of myth--Attic tragedy. While this is true at certain parts of the *Fase*, De Keersmaecker does not confine and restrict the Apollonian and Dionysian to singular realms of the composition, but rather sets them in motion through a series of fluid and ever changing relationships.

In *Fase*, tragedy is created through two main dualities: that of the choreography against itself, and that of the choreography against the music. The possible third would include the music against itself as well, but that analysis is outside the purview of this particular study. These dualities all follow cyclical pattern of ecstasy and clarity, oneness and form, mass and individual, unison and disarray. Through the interactions of these dual forces, the tragic is achieved through subtle and gradual shifts in patterns through space, and the undermining of tempo in time, as well as displays of exhaustion and physical limits inside a mechanistic and infinite structure.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 21.

At the start of *Piano Fase*⁴¹ we see Anne Teresa De Keersmaecker and Anne De May standing in place as the music begins. Abruptly they begin a pendulum-like swinging of the arm with a pivot. The phrase elongates to include several steps and a turn, all the while the arm moves efficiently to guide and direct the swinging body around its momentum. The arms and hand have a relaxed yet precise carriage; the fingers elongate as an extension of the arm but with none of the delicacy of the ballet hand—maximized is its simplicity and efficiency of movement. The women revert back to the simple swing and pivot sequence, and imperceptibly Michele Anne de May slows ever so slightly, in congruence with the second piano line also moving out of “phase.” The sense of rupture and ruin that this delay causes in the harmonious and proportioned cohesion of the dancing is at once remarkable and disturbing. The slightest and most minute change undermines the emotional and psychological harmony up until this point. Yet just as this phasing begins to register disjointedness as such, De May has accelerated just enough to join up in perfectly symmetrical opposition to De Keersmaecker, restoring the balance and evenness of time and space.

The dynamic which comes through in this opening section captures several of the aforementioned dualities and polarities that give this piece its drama and expression. The first duality occurs in the realm of the choreography to itself. The way the phasing principle plays out between De May and De Keersmaecker here recalls Nietzsche’s *principium individuationis*, the principle of individuation, that Apollonian impulse which

⁴¹ For the entire discussion of the dance itself, I am referring to the film of Anne Teresa De Keersmaecker's performance in *Fase, Four Movements to the Music of Steve Reich*, from 1982. This version was directed by Thierry De May in 2002. *Violin Fase* was filmed in the Tervuren forest, in Brussels.

separates the human individual from each other, and from the world itself. This force of reconstituting the individual is theorized by Nietzsche as redemptive, because “if we perceived as purely Dionysiac beings, the myth would lose all its symbolic effect, it would come to an unnoticed standstill beside us, and not for a moment distract us from the reverberations of the *universalia ante rem*.”⁴² Furthermore, whereas in the frenzy of Dionysian and the blurring of lines between people and things, “we breathlessly felt on the verge of extinction in the convulsive paroxysm of all our feelings, connected to this existence by a mere thread...in a sense it delivers us from the primal suffering of the world, just as the symbol of the myth preserves us from gazing directly on the supreme idea of the world, just as thoughts and words save us from the unbrooked effusion of the unconscious will.”⁴³

Piano Fase is set up with two women who not only move in an identical way in space, at the exact same time, but who also look almost exactly alike--their shoes, dress, hairstyle and facial expressions. This repeating motion in unison builds into a Dionysian blur, for their individual natures become blended and multiplied, emphasized even more Thierry De May’s use of light to cast shadows of the dancers on the white wall behind them. The white dresses, shoes, and indeed skin tone, move steadily in front of this bright white wall until the individual boundaries and forms collide and fuse. The phasing *out* of unison by De May, then, is truly a deliverance from the this accumulating sameness; the

⁴² Nietzsche, 102.

⁴³ Ibid.

unique borders of her body are revealed once more as her tempo becomes autonomous and independent from De Keersmaeker.

At first, it does not seem that the type of unison in *Piano Fase* relates to the Dionysiac frenzy, ecstasy, and even pain that Nietzsche delineates. Can one really say that the spectator “felt on the verge of extinction in the convulsive paroxysm of all our feelings” while watching this section? Perhaps not in a literal sense. But certainly when paying close attention with sharp perception, the beauty of the women in perfect, harmonic unison becomes overwhelming to the senses. More than that, it nearly becomes boring and dulling, desensitizing our vision to the wonderment, virtuosity and entrancing quality. Nietzsche observes that the more he becomes aware of “those omnipotent art impulses in nature, and find in them an ardent longing for illusion and for redemption by illusion,”⁴⁴ the more he feels “compelled to make the metaphysical assumption that the truly existent, the primal Oneness, eternally suffering and contradictory, also needs the delightful vision, the pleasurable illusion for its constant redemption.”⁴⁵ The introduction of separation, form, and the illusion of difference is a redemptive compositional choice, because it allows one to constantly renew one’s connection to the Primal Oneness and prevents a desensitization to its wonderment. In this section, the tragic emerges through the oscillation between unison and out-of-phase.

About eight-and-a-half minutes into the piece there is sudden change in the performers. They smile subtly in unison, and their breath becomes more audible, the

⁴⁴ Nietzsche, 25.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

percussiveness of which is unclear in its origin. One wonders if it is choreographed beforehand or an “organic” development of live performance. Whether it is constructed or improvised, this intrusion of the human delight (smile) and exhaustion (audible breath) is an example of what Reich calls “human micro-variation,” that is, the fact of corporeality intruding and making transcendent the mechanical and rigid structure of the piece. In this initial stage of phasing, Reich was working on an electric device called the Phase Shifting Pulse Gate, a prototype on which Reich would twist dials to create the phase shifting phrases.

He later went on to write, in his essay “Four Organs-An End to Electronics,” that the “perfection of rhythmic execution of the gate (or any electronic sequencer or rhythmic device was stiff and unmusical.”⁴⁶ For Reich, the human “micro-variation” and slight inconsistency that permeates the mechanistic processes brings the music alive in these tightly controlled spaces. He notes that the “experience of performing by simply twisting dials instead of using my hands and body to actively create the music was not satisfying...I felt that the basic musical ideas underlying the gate were sound but that they were not properly realized in an electronic device.”⁴⁷ This rejection of the electronic is what Reich believes makes his music, or one might even say minimalist music in general, alive, humming, and ultimately very human. The tension between the controlled, pre-determined, and unwavering simple process juxtaposed to the inevitable variation and expressivity of the human player, gives a piece of music its aesthetic cohesion.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

Similarly, the intrusion of De Keersmaeker and De May's reactions, smiles, breaths, is a reminder that these are still human bodies with preferences, personalities, and limitations. Four minutes later, this breathing becomes more pronounced, as a higher pitched musical melody is added on top of the original two lines, which increases the tension, accumulation, and drama. The breathing of the two women seems to match this. It seems that De Keersmaeker smiles first in a muted delight, while De May catches onto this expression of joy only when she has turned around and witnessed the smile of her partner. It is a small but significant moment, especially within the emotional stoicism and focus of the rest of the piece, where the illumination of the inner life and subjectivity of these women pushes against these external process and unwavering structure.

One of Wim Merten's main arguments in his discussion of American minimal musical lies in the distinction between traditional dialectical music and the non-dialecticism of repetitive music. Whereas traditional dialectical music is "representational," relates to an "expressive content," and is a "means of creating a growing tension" (also called a "musical argument") in repetitive music there is "no longer a medium for the expression of feelings." Phillip Glass, a contemporary and peer of Reich's, states that "this music is not characterized by argument and development. It has disposed of traditional time concepts that were closely linked to real time, to clock-time. Music is not a literal interpretation of life and the experience of time is different...the listener will therefore need a different approach to listening, without the traditional concepts of recollection and anticipation...as a pure sound event, an act without any

dramatic structure.”⁴⁸ If one recalls Reich’s “perceptible processes,” that unfold gradually in time, one might remember that the reason he believes in this way of music is because the processes are autonomous, and they run themselves.

There is a sense among these statements that the music has a certain autonomy and automatism, that is, it exists by itself and on its own terms. The performative emphasis on small expressions of joy, fatigue, and friendship in De Keersmaeker’s choreography challenges the notion that once a process is set up, it simply goes on its own, for they show the human body’s limits in the face of the ideal endless, autonomous, and non-developing repetitive structure.

De Keersmaeker says that she “hides neither the pain nor the pleasure in this struggle of unfolding precise, complicated patterns over a long period of time.”⁴⁹ Even though she may profess an aspirational a-historicism, the “pain” and “pleasure” that De Keersmaeker speaks of here relates closely to the ideas of “human micro-variation” and inconsistency that Reich feels imbues an otherwise mechanistic and precise structure to reveal itself as something transcendent and human. Indeed, the body can only go on for so long, can only maintain precision and adhesion to the musical score to a point. To see the limitations of the body struggle against the tight structure in “pain” and “pleasure,” reveals a certain heroic virtuosity, even kinesthetic transference and connection between the witness and the performer.

⁴⁸ Quoted in Mertens, 88.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 36.

In *Violin Fase* repetition appears as a more singular device. De Keersmaeker is standing along on a sandy surface, a large circle organizing the space. Her arms swing in the pendulum motion that introduced in Piano phase, it is an efficient wrapping motion. Although it clear that these violins are moving in a phase process, there in an immediate problem in this section: De Keersmaeker is alone. How can one phase in only one body? She moves methodically along the circle pre-set for her in the sand. Then a fouetté switches her pattern, and she begins to backtrack on her progress through the circle. The drama, and sense of rupture in the phasing process is still present in the music—where harmony, cohesion, and unity are set up and refigured over and over again only to be shifted out of itself into the reappearance of singular tones. In the choreography, however, a challenge presents itself. There is only one character, moving alone, a subject relative to no object save the music, in which two violins is phasing in an out of sync with each other. Whereas *Piano Fase* mainly concerned the duality of the choreography to itself, *Violin Fase* operates more in the realm of the music against the choreography.

In an interview with Bojana Cvejic in *A Choreographer's Score: Fase, Rosas Danst Rosas, Elena's Aria, Bartok*, Bojana Cvejic, a dramaturg, presents a series of figures on pages 29-34 that illustrate De Keersmaeker's movement across space in *Violin Fase*. These figures include circles, movements from the corner to the center of the stage, figure eights, and then more complex variations on these three themes. There are eleven variations in total, which all build upon the composition device of phase-shifting. Yet the choreography remains distinct and independent because she is a solo performer, and is thus unable to mirror the accumulation of the violins in the music. Because she must mark

the changes spatially, De Keersmaeker explains how “the decision to work with a circle clarified everything and enabled the patterns to unfold by themselves...the circle emerges slowly from the darkness”⁵⁰, and how sartorial choices made in the moment, such as wearing a dress and shoes, ended up being important aspects of the aesthetic of *Violin Fase*. The dress emphasized the prominent turning that repeats in this piece, and the shoes gave her more weight and made it easier for her to make marks in the ring of sand.

The circle as a space-organizing principle gave way to turning as a movement motif. For a long time, most of the movement remains in the upper body, consisting of arm swings that pivot the body along the spine (De Keersmaeker notes that the spine as the axis for pivoting allowed her to quickly change directions). When the legs begin to swing, she emphasizes the unexpectedness of it, yet in regards to the jumping that occurs at certain “spatial points” of the circle, she notes how in the music “certain melodies emerge, and they really invite one to jump, which comes out of pleasure, the same as turning”. Although the variation in music was the impetus for variation of movement in the choreography in *Piano Fase*, the change is not shifting out of unison from the other performer, but actually the changing the movement in space altogether. In this description of her movement it seems there is an oscillation two stark choreographic spaces. One is the natural, organic, “from pleasure” movement vocabulary of gesture and simple jumps and turns, while the other is the structured control of space and time through the manipulation of these “simple” seeds—using “repetition, accumulation, and gradual shifting”⁵¹ to this end. This oscillation coheres in this overall principle: “With every

⁵⁰ Quoted in Cvejic,35.

⁵¹ Ibid, 28.

spatial variation there is a new change in the vocabulary; a new striking movement emerges and becomes secondary in the next variation.”⁵²

Wim Mertens notes that while *Piano Fase* is still a “fairly rudimentary” work which “lacks any harmonic complications,” in *Violin Fase* the “basic melodic motive becomes more complex harmonically as well as rhythmically.”⁵³ This piece has five sections from which “cyclic structure has entirely disappeared; phase shift is still used by the figures no longer return to unison,”⁵⁴ and there is the “appearance of *resulting patterns*.” How exactly exactly is this resulting pattern divergent from the ones in the previous piece? In this section, “when one listens to the repeated figures one may hear the lower tones forming a particular pattern, and after this, the medium tones may become linked to lower ones to form another pattern.”⁵⁵ Furthermore, the “pattern is played very softly and then, by lowering the volume, gradually sinks back into the overall texture, while remaining audible in the whole, as an integrating element in the entire sound field. The listener thus becomes aware of one pattern in the music which may open his ear to another, and another, all sounding simultaneously in the ongoing overall texture of sounds.”⁵⁶ Because of this, “Changes in dynamics occur in this piece, but are hardly audible because each crescendo in one part is compensated for by a crescendo in another part, or otherwise happens very gradually.”⁵⁷ Mertens’ analysis highlights the way in which the music in *Violin Fase* becomes more complex, less cyclical, and even less repetitive

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Mertens, 50.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Mertens, 51.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

(because new patterns constantly emerge due to manipulating the volume of the playing), but the choreography itself becomes pared down (although there *are* changes over time, they are less overt than in *Piano Fase*). Again, this section creates more of the “productive antagonism” between the music and the choreography, whereas *Piano Fase* highlights the duality and tensions inside the choreography itself.

Describing her first work *Violin Fase* which she choreographed as a student at NYU, she says that in her analysis of Reich’s score she discovered the principle of repetition, so central to his other compositional devices. As is mentioned previously, repetition as an organizing principle was not invented by and did not remain unique to De Keersmaecker or Reich, for it had been used by other Judson artists and minimalist composers. Nevertheless, this discovery suggested that she too could organize the “few movements that she liked” born out of improvisation in the studio: “the additive process changes material, but the seed of the movement always remains present.”⁵⁸ Sontag articulates several contradictions and tensions within ideas of repetition, specifically in Childs’ *Available Light*, but which are applicable to a wider range of similar aesthetics. Sontag states that “strictly speaking, there is of course no repetition in Child’s work, but rather a certain strict use of thematic materials, which are first stated and then gradually modified at a different rate of change (more evenly, not expressionistically) than audiences are accustomed to”⁵⁹ The idea that Sontag introduces there is truly no such thing as repetition, but rather a “strict use of thematic materials” particularly when it comes to the human body, is a concept that recalls both the significance of the “human

⁵⁸ Quoted in Cvejic, 27.

⁵⁹ Sontag, 174.

microvariation” within the minimalist and repetitive structures, and the Apollonian impulse toward variation, illusion, form, and difference. This challenges even the labels of minimalism and repetitiveness as they pertain to a work like *Fase*, but in particular *Violin Fase*.

Indeed Sontag observes that while repetition is often taken as “a way of ordering material associated with the idea of the minimal, it could more accurately be called the modern maximalism: repetition as exhaustive patterning; the exhausting of possibilities. Far from making material neutral, repetition has a vertiginous effect...duplications, mirrorings, that are the kinetic equivalent of the static *mise-en-abyme*.”⁶⁰ Certainly in *Violin Fase*, this “vertiginous effect” is prominent, especially because there are so many geometrical rhymes--her dress moves in a circle, her body moves in spirals, twists, and circles, her spatial trajectory is circular, and the forest surrounds the circular stage platform in a total circle. “Repetition in a technique that seems to suggest simplicity, that in principle enhances legibility or intelligibility,”⁶¹ Sontag writes, but indeed these circles have a seemingly endless and exhausting quality--dizzying us not with “simplicity”, “legibility”, and “intelligibility”, but with duplication, multiplicity, and exhausting all possibilities of a single principle, the circle.

Reich observes in “Notes on Music and Dance” that in the improvisatory dance and music forms in the 1960’s and 70’s, “the momentary state of mind of the individual or group during performance creates or strongly influences the structure of the dance”⁶².

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Sontag, 174.

⁶² Reich, 42.

Reich, however, is more interested in how a “predetermined structure of the dance” can influence and change the psychic state of the dancer in the act of performing. In another essay, “Notes on Compositions”, he expands on the psychic process of rehearsing and performing a phasing process. After making the transition from electronic machines to live instruments by playing against a taped recording of a melody, he found that although he was not as perfect as a machine, he “could give a fair approximation of it while enjoying a new and extremely satisfying way of playing that was both completely worked out beforehand...and yet free of actually reading notation, allowing me to become completely absorbed in listening while I played”⁶³ He called this “total sensuous-intellectual involvement”⁶⁴.

Although the process began with machines and transitioned to live instruments, the process of “imitating machines” with the human body transcends both the machine and the body’s more natural inclinations, creating a tension and productive antagonism not unlike the one we find in the Nietzsche’s theory of tragedy, between the Apollonian forms and Dionysian singular energy. Finally, Reich does discuss the experiential and even spiritual dimension to his music, which Reich describes as “a particular liberating and impersonal kind of ritual. Focusing in on the musical process makes possible that shift of attention away from *he* and *she* and *you* outwards towards *it*.” At the root of De Keersmaeker’s *Fase* seems to be a similar desire--to challenge modes of seeing and feeling, to redirect attention back onto structure not for its own sake, but ultimately for the sake of

⁶³ Ibid., 51.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 53.

re-illuminating the imperfectly virtuosic, utterly individual, heroic and human body,
moving through and out of limits and impossibilities.

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Thesis: Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker

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