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In a Footstep, Making a Cello For Beethoven

By GIA KOURLAS

MUSICIANS play, and dancers dance. But the choreographer D D Dorvillier is flipping that notion upside down in a work that transposes a late Beethoven string quartet into a dance for four.

In "Danza Permanente," at the Kitchen beginning Wednesday as part of the **Crossing the Line** festival, the dancers are the instruments. Ms. Dorvillier has choreographed movements that reflect the musical phrasing; each of her four dancers embodies a different instrument. While choreographers like Mark Morris adhere rigorously to a score, the actual music is heard. In Ms. Dorvillier's case she has choreographed to a score that will never be played.

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"There's an underlying structure in music that implies or imposes feeling or thoughtfulness and causes emotional states between the listener and the player," Ms. Dorvillier said over coffee during the summer. "I was curious: Do we have that experience in dance?"

She became entranced with Beethoven's String Quartet No. 15 in A minor, Op. 132, after an argument with someone over Belgian beers about which composer was better, Bach or Beethoven. At the time Ms. Dorvillier chose Bach, but she soon started listening to Beethoven and particularly this string quartet.

"I close my eyes and listen to the music, and I'm transported," she said. "Not taken away, but I'm moved. So that was very curious and beautiful, and it's why I make work. It's this merging of thinking and feeling."

With the help of the composer and collaborator Zeena Parkins, Ms. Dorvillier set about inventing a dance that would create a movement code for Beethoven's score. Aside from Ms. Parkins's acoustic environment, which includes field recordings, the only sound onstage comes from the dancers' feet. As Ms. Parkins said, "You're not really sitting in silence because you're hearing the score in movement."

It may seem a strange way to bring music to life, but for Ms. Dorvillier, a Bennington College graduate who splits her time between New York and Paris — she is married to a French composer — the dance exemplifies her fascination with exploring the dimensions of the body in untraditional ways. An integral part of the experimental New York dance scene in the '90s — among other things she was the curator of a raucous improvisational performance series at Performance Space 122 — Ms. Dorvillier created two of the most scintillating dances of the last decade: "Dressed for Floating" (2002) and "No Change, or freedom is a psychokinetic skill" (2005). In the fall of 2013 she will explore the possibility of a retrospective as part of a four-week Platform series at Dan-space Project.

In "Danza Permanente" Ms. Dorvillier is exploring the pitch and dynamics of the body. Her dancers follow their assigned instruments closely: Naiara Mendioroz is the first violin, and Fabian Barba is the second violin; Nuno Bizarro is the viola,

and Walter Dundervill is the cello. As the dancers skim across the stage in chassé slides and light prances or blast the floor with stomps, their upper bodies reveal another language of gestures. Patterns emerge and rhythms grab hold as questions are raised: How can pitch be told through movement? Is there such a thing as silent music?

"I wanted to find out what happens if we take some of the score's structure and translate it into people moving instead of people moving their hands over an instrument," Ms. Dorvillier said. "It was very exciting to work on, and silly and deep at the same time. We had to develop a means of translating that score, but once we interpreted the minutiae of the music, the choreography became apparent."

It was a painstaking process, especially at first; transposing the first three pages of the score into movement took four weeks. "We did a lot of listening and let the quality or the formal organization of the movement express how we could tackle it," Ms. Parkins said. "We had to figure out a way the score could be communicated with the most specificity to the four dancers."

While the dancers have varying levels of musical understanding, they have memorized the score. The initial challenge was to identify the themes in the first movement and to transpose each one — there are four — into gestures, which are repeated and layered over time.

For Heather Kravas, who dropped out of the dance after she became pregnant — she became the rehearsal assistant — the first notes sounded like a punk anthem. "They felt really grand," she said. "There was an old punk rock song by the Godfathers, and I don't know why, but that line came to me: 'Birth! School! Work! Death!' We fell in love with that idea."

There is something vaguely punk, or at least defiant, about an experimental choreographer turning to classical music today. But the approach is fresh. The dancers aren't expressing the music on an emotional level; they are the music. Specific movements, for instance, reflect those opening notes: Birth features the arms stretched out to either side; school pulls the elbows back; work is one hand to the brow; and death is suggested by a swoon.

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“On the surface this piece is very movement oriented, so on one hand it feels traditional,” Mr. Dundervill said. “But the score acts like a diagram. You’re like a machine or inside of a puzzle. So even though it was a process about making a dance on all these traditional levels, such as ensemble work and musicality, the final result and way of getting there were really strange and not traditional.”

Even more intensely than a musical quartet, the dancers must maintain the same pulse as a group. Ms. Dorvillier said: “You can’t doubt. You can’t hesitate. If you don’t know what you’re doing, you have to fake it. And if you fake it, you really have to fake it. You can’t do it as if you’re faking it. It’s all absolute participation. Otherwise you wake up and find yourself onstage.”

As a choreographer, Ms. Dorvillier is trying to uncover the difference between an emotional and visual impression. “What does it leave me with?” she asked. “The process was so challenging and so rich and so strange and painful. It wasn’t a question of inventing a whole new universe. I mean, we did — but the recipe was waiting to be discovered.”

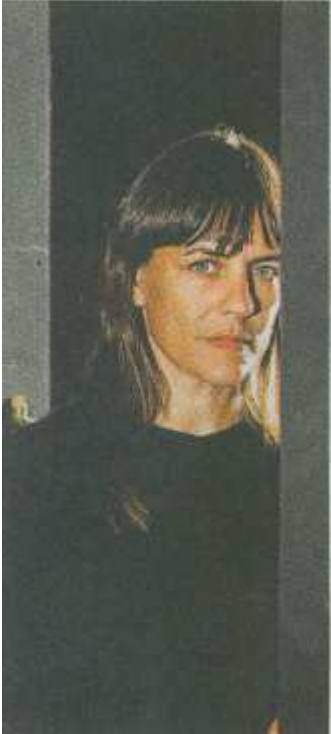
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D D Dorvillier, above,
has choreographed
"Danza Permanente,"
right, a piece to
Beethoven featuring,
from near right,
Naiara Mendioroz,
Walter Dundervill and
Nuno Bizarro.

