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**Choreographic Re-mix. William Forsythe's Trio (1996) and  
Beethoven's String Quartet No. 15 in A Minor Op. 132**

“Bee Da Da Da Da Da-GO!” exclaims choreographer William Forsythe, prompting dancers Dana Caspersen, Thomas McManus and Jacopo Godani to anticipate their movement within the consequent phrase of Beethoven's theme.<sup>1</sup> The second movement of Ludwig van Beethoven's *String Quartet No. 15 in a minor Op. 132* plays a prominent role within this short choreography called *Trio*, which premiered in 1996 at the Ballett Frankfurt. Despite this interesting example of Forsythe choreographing to or with Beethoven's music, he rarely developed pieces to Beethoven, working instead predominantly with living composers.<sup>2</sup> Given the archival video resources within my possession for study of the Ballett Frankfurt in 1996, this conference provided the impetus to analyse Forsythe's interpretation of Beethoven's music in the choreography of *Trio* – an interpretation in which a recording of the second movement of Op. 132 by the Alban Berg String Quartet is re-mixed.<sup>3</sup> The structure of Forsythe's musical decisions and my analysis of how the music and dance come together in this piece form the focus of this chapter, on the basis of specific research questions shaped further in this introduction.

The interrelation of dance and music has been the subject of ample artistic experiments. Looking at recent works in the field of contemporary dance, the scholar Christina Thurner has shown the diverse means by which music and dance can mutually re-charge their interpretation through being paired with one another, creating what she describes as “complex, and purposefully charged audiovisual associative-reflection spaces.”<sup>4</sup> Such spaces subvert what the musicologists Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker have

- 1 Archival video of Ballett Frankfurt, 3 January 1996. Rehearsal and performance videos were generously provided by William Forsythe. Warm thanks to Alexandra Scott for her help in accessing these materials.
- 2 Freya Vass-Rhee's analysis of the sonic elements of Forsythe's choreographies from 1976 to 2011 lists two pieces sourcing Beethoven: *Trio* and the full-length work *Impressing the Czar* (1988), in which the fifth movement of Beethoven's *String Quartet No. 14 Op. 131* is played as a sound sample and arranged into a synthesizer pop-song for the piece's grand finale; see Freya Vass-Rhee: *Audio-Visual Stress. Cognitive Approaches to the Perceptual Performativity of William Forsythe and Ensemble*, PhD dissertation, University of California Riverside 2011, pp. 140 and 359–383.
- 3 Alban Berg Quartet: *Ludwig van Beethoven. Quartett/Quartet op. 132*, EMI 1984 (rec. 1983), HMV 27 0053 1.
- 4 “[...] komplexen, vorsätzlich spannungsvollen audiovisuellen Assoziations- und Reflexionsräumen.” Christina Thurner: “Danser: est-ce remplir un vide? Est-ce taire l'essence d'un cri?” *Musikalische Reflexionsräume im zeitgenössischen Tanz*, in: *Tanz im Musiktheater – Tanz als Musiktheater. Bericht eines internationalen Symposions über Beziehungen von Tanz und Musik im Theater*, ed. by Thomas Betz-

dubbed the “fundamental assumption that all of us bring to ‘reading’ ballet”, namely the prejudice that the movement “should be generated by and correspond to the music.”<sup>5</sup> While the task here is not to test this expectation, it polemically sets the stage for Forsythe’s re-mix of Beethoven – a contemporary interpretation bending the traditional allowances of both ballet and chamber music.

The questions addressed here were formulated reflectively between studying the archival video of *Trio* and reconsidering my practice as a former dancer in Forsythe’s ensemble.<sup>6</sup> I wished to understand: What were the structural characteristics of the interplay of music and dance in this specific piece? Did Beethoven’s music provide the impetus for the choreography of *Trio*, or a layer within a more complex process of choreographic creation? How did William Forsythe and the dancers listen to and embody the music, and how did I, as a spectator of the piece? In my professional dance career, I had rarely performed to the music of historic composers. On the contrary, my embodied knowledge of musicality and musical interpretation in Forsythe’s work was based on dancing pieces that Forsythe made in collaboration with living composers – predominantly Thom Willems (born 1955) and David Morrow (born 1952). In Ballett Frankfurt in the 1990s, there were more instances of performing to recorded music, but Freya Vass-Rhee’s catalogue of the acoustic elements of Forsythe’s performances shows that this generation also predominantly danced to the music of Forsythe’s long-time collaborator, the Dutch composer Thom Willems.<sup>7</sup> Thus I approached this project of examining *Trio* as a scholar with insight into the general interpretation practice of dancers to music and sound in William Forsythe’s later work, and a particular curiosity as to how and why Forsythe had turned to interpreting Beethoven’s music in *Trio* nearly a decade before I arrived in Frankfurt.

This analysis unfolds along three timelines: the sequence of the piece, the chronology of the rehearsal process and situating the example in dance history. My writing interweaves these views. First, I describe the *mise en scène* of *Trio* visually and acoustically – introducing how the dancers’ actions are paired with music and light, and situated in space. Secondly, taking a historic overview, I locate Forsythe’s way of working disassociatively with music in *Trio* within some key historical examples, and describe the particular

wieser, Anno Mungen, Andreas Münzmay and Stephanie Schroedter, Würzburg 2009 (Thurnauer Schriften zum Musiktheater, Vol. 22), pp. 381–392, here p. 392. All English translations here are by the present author unless otherwise stated.

- 5 Carolyn Abbate/Roger Parker: Dismembering Mozart, in: *Cambridge Opera Journal* 2/2 (1990), pp. 187–195, here p. 187.
- 6 As a guest dancer in Ballett Frankfurt (2004), a dancer in The Forsythe Company (2005–2012), and a guest dancer and production assistant in The Forsythe Company (2013–2015).
- 7 Vass-Rhee: *Audio-Visual Stress*, pp. 357–382.