Foreland - Bach and Britten

On the choreographic encounter between dancer Nitsan Margaliot and cellist Isaac Lottman

This text is a creative response to my involvement in "Foreland - Bach and Britten" by Nitsan Margaliot and Isaac Lottman, all three shows of which I had the opportunity to watch in my capacity as the production's press and communications officer.
Yet, I have not been commissioned to write the present text. Rather, it is the result of a spontaneous desire to put words to experiences and observations.

We enter an airy, light-flooded church in the Tiergarten district of Berlin, right next to Kulturforum and the Philarmonie. The foyer is carpeted, the side galleries host an exhibition by painter and sculptor Michael Müller.
In a series of three shows spread over two days, we will be witnessing the re-staging of a dance solo accompanied by classical music that has its roots in an encounter between a contemporary dancer and a cellist in the US seven years ago.

As these two cultural realms, represented by Margaliot and Lottman respectively, meet in "Foreland - Bach and Britten", so do the unspoken codes that come with them.

Dancer Nitsan Margaliot and cellist Isaac Lottman - who travelled from Amsterdam for the occasion - enter the stage together. Clapping ensues on the premiere day, very much akin to the reaction one would expect from a classical concert audience when all the members of the orchestra take their seats.
No clapping is to be heard on the two consecutive days, possibly due to a prevalence of dance-lovers in the public. Or might the premiere be given such privilege only? As is the nature with unspoken codes, they unconsciously come out and are hard to explain once they happened.

Isaac Lottman takes his seat on a piano stool, his music stand in front of him, and faces the altar from afar, near the foyer. He softly engages with the first bars of Bach's 5th Suite for Cello. The bow makes the strings vibrate in the lower register, the sound spreads out into the central nave of the church where Nitsan Margaliot appears a couple of minutes later. As the piece develops, so do the responses of the performers. The emphasis has to be put on the plural here, since both cellist and dancer equally embody, embrace and dance along the sounds that escape the cello's wooden hull.
Isaac Lottman breathes heavily at times, sways, rocks back and forth, lets the bow glide over the arch like a spindle with a shifting centre, his body locked around the cello, his head a seeming natural extension of his own instrument. The crescendos and diminuendos, the play of double tones and the odd sense of austere, yet vivid sadness are beautifully carried by the church's crisp resonant air.

The challenge of engagement of the dancer, however, is of an entirely different kind. Anyone who has had any dealings with contemporary dance will be able to second that tackling "loaded material" such as sonatas by Johann Sebastian Bach or any work by classical maestros - and often their entire families - comes with a great fear of failure. "Am I worthy of such music? Can my dancing be equal of the composition? Other choreographers of renown have already produced seminal pieces to the music? What could I possibly add to the canon?".

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At the time of writing, we celebrate the 110 years of "Rite of Spring" by Russian composer Igor Stravinsky, with new interpretations in dance being produced as a result. Ten years ago, for the centenary of "Rite of Spring", a whole generation of choreographers delved deep into the score to explore new, contemporary narratives to this seminal piece.

Looking at the painting and sculptures that populate the church's side alleys, one would assume that such considerations are somewhat minor, if not to say utterly banal.

The exhibition "Am Abgrund der Bilder" (engl. "At the Abyss of the Images") deals with the "unspeakable". To quote the exhibition leaflet:

"Artist Michael Müller is showing a complex of works created between 2013 and 2022 in St. Matthew's Church that is dedicated to the question of the possibilities and impossibilities of an artistic approach to the Holocaust. Can the horror of the Holocaust be shown? Gerhard Richter's "Birkenau" cycle is considered the most important artistic engagement with the subject.

Michael Müller questions Richter's work by uncovering its painterly layers and posing fundamental questions about the artistic representability of singular events. In interplay with the other works in the exhibition, alternative forms of engagement are thus presented without providing a definitive answer.
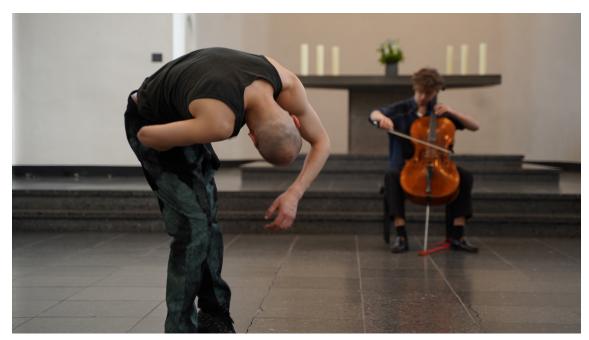
Rather, Müller's works create a space of openness and call for an examination of the question of appropriate forms of memory. In the church space, he not only poses anew the question of the biblical prohibition of images, but also the question of a God who could allow the murder of millions."

The large-scale paintings with multiple layers of coloured paint, one scraped off over the other, alternate with painted black-and-white reproductions of photographic views of one of the most known extinction camps in the history of the Holocaust: Auschwitz-Birkenau.

The contrast couldn't be bigger. Here, the attempt of artistically dealing with unspeakable suffering, murder, death and generations-impacting injustice, there the serenity of a plain altar bathed in mild light, and thirdly, the loose-limbed movements of a dancer oscillating between composition and liberty in gestures, between swirling across the space and resting on the floor with his arms stretched out in front of him.

The key word in the exhibition text is "question". And so it doesn't come as a surprise that the church's priest, in attendance for Saturday's afternoon show, asks the choreographer after the performance: "What is dance?" And indeed, he won't be granted an explanation that could rest his curious mind. Trying to answer such a question makes for a dancer's entire career.

The gravitas of Bach's cello suite in the first part makes space for the odd tension and sense of alterity of Benjamin Britten's Suite 1, op. 72. This time, Lottman is seated with the altar right behind him. Margaliot shares the "stage" from the beginning, sitting on the floor in front of the cellist, hands flat on the ground, his legs bent in what would be called "fifth position" in contemporary dance lingo. Poised and serious, he seems to motionlessly soak up the music, letting the bars linger around him.

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Anyone eager to witness a strict one-to-one transposition along the lines of a note-versus-movement coefficient will be disappointed here. The cooperation between Lottman and Margaliot is not a game of who interprets the composer's music best. Rather, it is a friendly cohabitation, a shared space where the music serves as an anchor of commonality between two artists.

Margaliot's open-limbed, somewhat pensive and hesitant movement vocabulary takes its time to unfold and has him eventually whirl across the central nave with one arm in an open embrace and the other wrapped around his bent neck. There are a lot of glides on the floor, with ploughing feet and loosely cupped hands that seem unwilling to point and grip with determination.

What makes "Foreland - Bach and Britten" a unique audio-visual experience is this body's readiness to have the sounds come and go, not submitting to the reverberant power of the cello, but accepting its "offerings", such as the staccatos and moments of extended playing technique where the bow ricochets over the strings, as an invitation to find a response in the organicity of the dancer's, and the musician's, body.

Stream

Live Art Writing

"Foreland - Bach and Britten" by Nitsan Margaliot (dance) and Isaac Lottman (cello) was a performance programmed in the frame of Soundance Festival and took place at Sankt Matthäus Kirche, Berlin, on 12 & 13 May 2023.

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