



# FUTUR PROCHE

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## INTERVIEW WITH JAN MARTENS

***FUTUR PROCHE* is the follow-up to two shows: *Any attempt will end in crushed bodies and shattered bones*, a group show created for the Festival d'Avignon in 2021, and your solo *Elisabeth gets her way*, dedicated to the great harpsichordist Elisabeth Chojnacka...**

**Jan Martens:** The harpsichord in *FUTUR PROCHE* is an essential point of connection. I used Górecki's harpsichord concerto in *Any attempt will end in crushed bodies and shattered bones*. The show was about political and social engagement but also explored the concept of immobility on stage. I wanted to find music that could express revolt and rebellion. This Polish composer is usually known for the authentically spiritual dimension of his work. At the height of the Solidarnosc contestation, he left his university position. He thought the government was too interventionist. He then composed a harpsichord concerto in the spirit of American minimalism, a reference the Communist regime didn't appreciate. I discovered a video by the first person to perform that work, Elisabeth Chojnacka. I was fascinated by her personality, her performance, and her story. I decided to create a solo about her, *Elisabeth gets her way*, and I delved into the harpsichord repertoire. Today I'm working through the contemporary repertoire with 15 dancers from the Opera Ballet Vlaanderen—the Royal Ballet of Flanders—two children, and Polish harpsichordist Goska Isphording.

### **Why does this instrument fascinate you so?**

I created the solo *Elisabeth gets her way* during the pandemic. With so many shows postponed or cancelled, I was able to dedicate more time to discovering an instrument often seen as belonging exclusively to the baroque repertoire. I realised, through Elisabeth Chojnacka, that there are many contemporary works composed for the harpsichord. It's interesting to note that it's often female musicians who are most closely associated with the performance of those contemporary pieces. Goska Isphording continued this tradition of commissions without bias and without focusing on a specific aesthetics. The harpsichord repertoire shows a process of constant reinvention. That concept of renewal became the central theme of *FUTUR PROCHE*, thanks to those doors opened onto an unknown musical world. To reinvent a repertoire over time just like we might try to transform our society in a time of climate change and covid is what *FUTUR PROCHE* is all about.

### **What are you looking for with the harpsichord, in terms of choreographic writing?**

The sound of the harpsichord is often described as very metallic, perfect for a "futuristic atmosphere," or something that sounds like 1980s video games. Similarly, Elisabeth Chojnacka's and Goska Isphording styles are profoundly percussive. I immediately saw it as a reflection of what I am: a rhythmic dancer. The velocity that can be felt in many pieces responds to my desire to experiment with different rhythmic dances. When I opened up to contemporary music composed for the harpsichord, something shifted. Before that, a predominant concept or theme came before the choice of soundtrack, usually taken from pop music. Right now, the music itself leads to a choreographic gesture, and then to a thematic reflection. It's a radically new way of working for me.

### **You've offered to share this repertoire with a ballet corps, 38 years after the dancers from the Opéra de Paris came to the Cour d'honneur. What do you have in mind?**

*Any attempt will end in crushed bodies and shattered bones* was made with seventeen dancers of all ages. I approached that ensemble as I would a ballet, leading the dancers towards group movements, precise costumes, a very recognisable aesthetics. I would never presume how a show will be received, but that one, especially at its peak, with its final dance, was seen as a message of hope. With the Opera Ballet Vlaanderen, I'm working with fifteen dancers expert in a specific type of dance, and thus in a way of working—and of touring. I've chosen to turn things around again: to work as if they were part of a company, to ignore the rules of ballet, of coordinated,

synchronous movement, but instead to bring their individual bodies, their uniqueness, into existence, to put on equal footing all those “interprètes” [performers], that beautiful French word, when in Dutch the closest we have means “executors.” I’ve also chosen to turn the economic model on its head as well: foregoing complicated sets to be able to tour more easily, and using recycled costumes.

### **Does this transformation of the work allow you to propose a different worldview?**

No solo, no duet! *FUTUR PROCHE* explores our capacity for evolution, renewal, and possible transformation when faced with a world in crisis. I wanted to bring this state of crisis to the stage through a raw, rough, and wild dance. I created the choreography with less serenity, if not hope, than for *Any attempt will end in crushed bodies and shattered bones*. The looming climate catastrophe is one of our modern problems for which real action is constantly postponed. *FUTUR PROCHE* isn’t speculative fiction: we’re already facing a terrible situation. Some of our current rulers behave as if they were untouchable, accelerating a process of pollution with obvious cynicism. But we shouldn’t forget our own contradictions, like our consumption habits! Aware of the diverse nature of those questions when tasked with a renewal symbolised in the world of music by the diversity and history of the harpsichord, I’ve conceived this choreography as an exercise in democracy. The dancers of the Opera Ballet Vlaanderen weren’t invited for their skill and expertise; the children and the harpsichordist can stand among them without immediately standing out.

### **What other aspects are characteristic of *FUTUR PROCHE*?**

The performers are all on stage. I’ve done away with the tradition of entrances and exits as it exists in ballet. It’s an interesting shift for the dancers, which allows them to experience a continuous presence on stage, even if they aren’t part of the choreography at all time. To be there and feel it, in a state of inaction, of waiting, of immobility, it all feeds this desire for reinvention. I don’t always like to speak in terms of aesthetics, but *FUTUR PROCHE* was conceived as an answer to a desire for a certain brutality, between crisis and rawness. The key concept, influenced by the music for harpsichord, is this idea of “presence.” To show all those bodies as a large group of equals, I chose to avoid the ponderous forms specific to ballet and to its scenography. Take the costumes for instance, often created specifically for a show and usually closely fitted. We really went through all the closets of the Opera Ballet Vlaanderen! We found clothes used for other shows and therefore worn, weathered, even dirtied. Such a choice allows the audience to see bodies as belonging to human beings and not to performers who are but an expression of plastic perfection. If you “loosen” the costume, the body takes on a different shape; it changes what movements it can make. This desire for inversion isn’t an obsession for its own sake. Many artists, when they bring people to the stage, want to turn the stage into a different world. I’m wary of this demiurgic impulse. This way of working in the goal of coming up together with a new vision of what the human is echoes the desire shared by many ballets to work with new choreographers.

### **How did you choose the contemporary pieces for harpsichord that will be used in *FUTUR PROCHE*?**

Education through art is something that’s often rejected in Belgium and elsewhere. But I think art is always educational. If I discovered contemporary harpsichord music thanks to Elisabeth Chojnack, a great educator, I then went on an investigation of my own to discover this little-known repertoire, especially compared to that of the piano. Harpsichord today is a niche within a niche; right away, you’re asking the question of what belongs to the musical canon. I started by building up a nice collection of secondhand LPs, after reading a number of texts written by Elisabeth Chojnacka in a PhD thesis at La Sorbonne, in which I found an impressive list of her commissions. There’s something thrilling about this repertoire: it’s vast, but can be circumscribed. Goska Isphording, who can link harpsichord and synthesiser, then opened her music collection to my research, allowing me to discover other treasures. You have Ligeti’s student Erkki Salmenhaara, or the modernity mixed with baroque textures of a piece by Anna S. Thorvaldsdóttir, or the more experimental nature of Aleksandra Gryka’s work; those works, alongside Dan Locklair, Janco Verduin, Pēteris Vasks, or Graciane Finzi’s playful ones, show a diversity of writing that can only encourage different dances.

Interview conducted by Marc Blanchet