



# TUMULUS

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## INTERVIEW WITH FRANÇOIS CHAIGNAUD AND GEOFFROY JOURDAIN

***t u m u l u s* is the alliance of dance and music, in a deliberately embodied form. How did you bring together artists with such diverse practices to create a coherent assembly?**

**François Chaignaud:** *t u m u l u s* was born of a desire: to create a community sharing its practices. Practice is both the starting point and the heart of this project—we wanted to experience music and dance not as speculative forms, but as repeated experiences of transformation and self-invention... Through collective practice over time, bodies make use of new abilities, develop new perceptions and modes of expression, and use their muscles differently... I also like to think that bodies create in the archeological sense. It's a process that is an act of faith. To believe that our bodies aren't assigned, disciplined and finite entities allows us to dream to a personal, *diaphragmatic* and total link between the arts that are dance and music.

**Geoffroy Jourdain:** This collaboration we'd long been discussing with François is based on a shared desire to mix our disciplines, to confront them to each other and hybridise them, without having the singers creating the soundtrack to a dance show. It's important to say again that neither of us thinks of our disciplines as "rules of behaviour" but rather as relationships of exchange in our respective fields of expression, our working methods, our inspirations, like a master to a disciple. With a large ensemble of performers (lyrical singers from the Cris de Paris as well as performers from the field of dance), we went through casting sessions and workshops to end up with a group of thirteen people. The diversity of their profiles and tessiture, the complementarity of their musical preferences and the potential for mutual aid and transmission we felt when working with them allowed us to create this community.

**What links the architecture of a tumulus to a show where contemporary dance, Renaissance polyphonic repertoire, and current works and vocal practices come together?**

**F. C.:** A tumulus always brings unease to a landscape, because it's the result of a gesture at once architectural and human. It's at once an active and voluntary operation to build a mound that will serve as a tomb, and the result of it being relinquished to nature so that it can cover it, blur its edges, and take back what belongs to it. This indistinction—between the deliberate gesture of humans and the passive gesture of nature—guided our work. The bodies themselves go through this specter and the tension it promises—between effort and ecstasy, work and grace, presence and absence... But on stage, a tumulus is also a sort of theatrical machine, which allows the performers to appear and disappear, to climb up and to fall... while also serving as a hiding place and a promontory. On top of all that, if *tumulus* gave us *tombeau* in French [*tomb* in English], it also sounds similar to the verb "tumer," which in the Middle Ages meant to dance, and more precisely to tilt backwards at the risk of falling down, like a challenge to death...

**G. J.:** Our first exchanges were about the polyphonic repertoire of Renaissance sacred music, the *ars perfecta* of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, through works tied to the liturgy for the dead, like funereal motets and requiem masses. The idea was never to create a show about death, but to explore the intensity of works that transcend death, that try at once to overcome and circumscribe it—works that are at once grandiose and intimate, glorious and pathetic. The tumulus rose at a crossroads; the crossroads between horizontality and contrapuntal writing, made of lines at once autonomous and depending on one another (as in a canon, for instance), and the verticality induced by their skilful interlacing. If something is written for several voices, their simultaneous singing creates between them harmonic relationships. Polyphonic music was until the 17<sup>th</sup> century seen as the reflection on Earth of the cosmic order. The almost immutable process of superimposed imitations between the different voices was supposed to reproduce the music created by the movement of the planets: "the harmony of the spheres."

**What dance can arise from a repertoire inherited from the Renaissance, even though contemporary music is also present in your show?**

**F. C.:** What fascinates me with hybridisation between music and dance is precisely the possibility it provides to make different and sometimes contradictory relationships to time and history coexist within a single body. For

instance, to see how a historical score can infuse a body dancing in the present. The dance in *t u m u l u s* isn't a historical reconstitution, even though iconographic reminiscences may find their way into our work on posture. The main hypothesis for this show was to consider that sacred music should not freeze bodies in an attitude of deference. Music here is literally a vehicle. We're even betting on the fact that a certain sacred dimension of the space or of the experience can only be reached if the community going through it takes a vow of permanent movement! Just like some monastic communities take a vow of silence to reach a certain relationship to the divine, here we're refusing to ever anchor ourselves, to never take root or stabilise anywhere... This constant movement gives rise to difference speeds as well as evanescent images of processions, fashion shows, or danse macabre... We also explore the tension between the effort of a body stomping and sweating in the present tense while singing songs which describe a certain idea of eternity. Similarly, we also considered bodies oscillating between the most and the least active polarities, when it becomes nothing more than a membrane, a receptacle, moved by others or by higher forces. The beauty of being in the world, being on stage, is not only to conquer new territories but to let oneself be moved by them, almost like a medium.

**G. J.:** I've always experienced and thus approached works from the Renaissance repertoire as powerfully rhythmic works. It may seem strange, as this music is always seen as suspended and ethereal... But with our performers, we tried to share the idea of an inner circulation of the smallest possible rhythmic unit, we tried to perceive the smallest common denominator when it comes to the division of time, as if we could isolate every grain of sand in the continuous movement of an hourglass. I think that's what structures Western music as a whole, down to the concept of being "in tune." I don't believe in the right intonation without the right rhythm; ideally, it must go through the body, not only during concerts, but even when you're sitting at your desk alone and reading silently... 500 years ago, there were no conductors to conduct the works of Josquin Desprez. It's a much more recent invention. To set up this music which seems to us not to have a pulse, which doesn't feel right away like it has a *tempo*, the cantors shared the *tactus*. Each of them would tap their neighbour's shoulder, and their neighbour would do the same to their neighbour, all becoming a link in a "tempo chain." We explore the same desire for a physical integration of music through the beautiful contemporary piece *Musik für das Ende*, written in 1971 by Québécois composer Claude Vivier, a "music for the end," which opens the show.

### **Can you tell us more about the musical repertoire used in *t u m u l u s*?**

**G. J.:** We built the repertoire around and through Renaissance sacred music. We'll sing an excerpt from the *Messe de Requiem* composed by Jean Richafort (1480-1547) for Josquin Desprez. Josquin (1450-1521) was a major figure of *ars perfecta*. His polyphonic writing provides individual lines for each voice and contains in itself all we want to do with this project. *Dies irae* by Antonio Lotti (1667-1740) was written later and is therefore more "theatrical," but it explicitly refers to the aesthetic canons of Renaissance. We use it for distortion processes we created during rehearsals. *Musik für das Ende* by Claude Vivier (1948-1983) played a central part in the conception and realisation of the show. It's one of his early works, more a protocol than an actual composition, which leaves a lot of room to the performers in its creation of a utopia in their relationships to one another. Each of them has a series of six sounds, a six-foot rhythmic series, and a personal note that allows them to "vibrate with the cosmos." Claude Vivier's approach was to determine the encounters between people, the way a performer could hybridise with another according to pre-established parameters. For instance, singer A can meet singer B and adopt their rhythm, while singer C adopts the pitch of singer B... Having to explain and set up this work with artists from such diverse backgrounds was a challenge that taught me a lot about my own working habits and methods. But beyond the repertoire we chose, the simple fact of not conducting their execution myself changed my own practice considerably, the way I perceive and listen to the performers.

### **Did you experience a similar shift when creating the show?**

**F. C.:** Not to appear on stage is a radically different experience that allows you to practice your art differently. In my shows, which are almost always created in collaboration with other artists, I put myself in a position of learning, of ignorance, of porosity, to be shaped by the material itself. It's a way to avoid the demiurgic delusion so common in dance, and to approach the appearance of gestures and forms from their most passive and *acted on side*. *t u m u l u s*, in that sense, is a challenge and a shift, because it calls on me and the other dancers to use our bodies in new ways. It's a real artistic odyssey, but also a psychic and intimate one. All this project is about is movement and shifts. And in these times of rising communitarianism, our project and our use of archives aim to reaffirm the complexity of these historical expressions, which is much higher than what it's been reduced to in our modern imagination...