

La vie qui bat: Steve Reich's Drumming and Dance
Choreography
La vie qui bat : Drumming de Steve Reich et chorégraphie

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Article abstract

The music of Steve Reich has been widely written about. In this article I will focus on choreographies set to live performances of Drumming (1971). Drumming is perhaps Reich's most important early work and a culmination of his various musical explorations and compositional techniques. I have selected three choreographers: Laura Dean, creator of the first choreography set to the music of Drumming (1972); Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, a choreographer whose works such as Drumming (1998) share Reich's underlying principle of structures as processes; and Ginette Laurin, whose La vie qui bat (1999) was a joint production between Montreal dance company O Vertigo and the Société de musique contemporaine du Québec (SMCQ). As this issue celebrates SMCQ's 50th anniversary, this article will center on the making and performance practice of La vie qui bat. In preparing this article, the author interviewed Russell Hartenberger (Steve Reich and Musicians), Ginette Laurin, and Walter Boudreau (Artistic Director of the SMCQ).

La vie qui bat: Steve Reich's *Drumming* and Dance Choreography

Aiyun Huang

Introduction: *Drumming*, the Composition

The work consists of four movements, each using a specific set of instruments to create four unique timbres. The first movement uses four players on four bongos. The second movement uses nine players on three marimbas and two singers. The third movement uses four players on three glockenspiels and one piccolo player as well as an optional whistler. The last movement uses all the above-mentioned instruments and players combined together. The piece was created through long periods of rehearsals during which Steve Reich was able to try out ideas together with his musicians. Therefore, the learning process was organic and integral. The players learned the piece together with Reich's demonstrations and instructions. The original Reich musicians did not use a score in either the learning process or the performance of the work. The score was created and published by Boosey & Hawkes so that there could be a record of the piece.¹ The original version was a manuscript by Reich and the second version was a collaboration between Reich and Marc Mellits published in 2011. The notated score offers players the option of learning *Drumming* without coaching from Reich himself or one of his players. Players can usually figure out how to play the piece by using the score and a sound recording.

Steve Reich describes *Drumming* as

the final expansion and refinement of the phasing process, as well as the first use of four new techniques: (1) the process of gradually substituting beats for rests (or rests for beats); (2) the gradual changing of timbre while rhythm and pitch remain constant; (3) the simultaneous combination of instruments of different timbre; and (4) the use of the human voice to become part of the musical ensemble by imitating the exact sound of the instruments.²

1. Reich, 1971, p. 2.

2. Reich, 2004, p. 3.

The compositional technique “phasing” was discovered by Reich while he was working with tapes. He noticed that by changing the speed of one tape against a second tape of the same material, one can produce complex rhythmic and timbral relationships. Using this technique, he created *It's Gonna Rain* (1965) and *Come Out* (1966), both of which used words as the raw material to create loops and phasing. Later on, Reich used this technique with acoustic instruments in *Piano Phase* (1967) and *Drumming* (1971). He did not return to the technique after *Drumming* and *Clapping Music* (1972). Below I further explain the four new techniques described in Reich's statement:

3. O'Brien, 2014; Duker, 2013.

- 1) The gradual substitution of beats for rests or the reverse is found at the beginning of the piece and also in transitioning from one pattern to the next during section or movement changes. The beginning of the piece starts with a single hit from a bongo player, then a second player joins in in unison. The players subsequently add a second note, then a third. By the time the fourth note is added to the pattern, our perception of where the pattern begins changes. The possibility of changing perceptions of the pulse or the repeating pattern offered by this compositional technique has fascinated players and drawn interest from listeners since the work's first performance³.
- 2) “Gradual changing of timbre while rhythm and pitch remain constant” is used to transition from movement to movement. It is a very interesting experience to hear how the same musical material can produce a completely new impression when the timbre changes. For example, to my ears, the pattern heard on bongos at the end of movement I sounds faster, hectic, and more energetic than the same pattern played by the marimbas. I hear the marimba pattern as soothing, calming, and more homogeneous sounding. Of course, not only the timbre changes: the chords in the marimba sections produce very different harmonies than in the bongo sections.
- 3) “The simultaneous combination of instruments of different timbre” refers to, for example, the addition of the marimbas to the bongos at the end of movement I and the beginning of movement II. We then hear the combinations of marimbas and glockenspiels at the end of movement II, and marimbas, glockenspiels, and bongos going into movement IV. In addition, in movement III we hear a transformation of the sound by the addition of the piccolo.
- 4) The voice is often regarded as the soloist in Western ensemble music. This is particularly true when text is added; when text is present the listener's attention turns towards understanding the words being sung. In *Drumming*, the singers are part of the ensemble and the voice is part of the instrumental sound. The singers' role is to imitate the sounds of the percussion instruments in order to add to and highlight what's going on. The singers choose nonsense syllables which include “soft consonant attacks like ‘B’ or ‘D’ with a ‘U’ (as in ‘you’) vowel sound.”⁴

4. Reich, 1971, p. 10.

The performance practice of *Drumming* allows some exploratory freedom for the players in terms of tempi, number of repeats, and length. Since its premiere, the piece has been performed within a small range of tempi inspired by the existing recordings, as Reich does not indicate a fixed tempo on the score. The number of repeats of each pattern is notated as a range rather than a fixed number. For example, Reich indicates that

[t]he performance begins with two, three or four drummers playing in unison at measure one. When one drummer moves to the second measure and adds the second drum beat the other drummer(s) may either join him immediately or remain at bar one for several repeats. This process of gradually substituting beats for rests within the pattern is continued with at least six or eight repeats for each measure until all drummers have reached the fully constructed pattern at measure eight.⁵

The result is that the existing recordings vary widely in length. For example, Steve Reich and Musicians released three recordings of *Drumming* in 1971, 1974, and 1987 respectively. The first recording on Multiples (1972) was released in two LPs and timed at 82 min 48 s. It was the recording of the Town Hall premiere. The second recording on Deutsche Grammophon (1974) was also released on two LPs and timed at 84 min and 35 s long. The third recording on Nonesuch (1987) was much shorter at 56 min and 42 s and fit on a single CD.⁶

In addition, movements of *Drumming* can be performed alone without taking away our understanding of the work's structure at large. Through the written instructions, Reich gives various options for the performance practice of the work ranging from the choice of tempi to the overall length, which helps to produce the best performance possible as the performers have the freedom to adjust to hall acoustics, crowds, and performance contexts. This flexibility in design has enabled *Drumming* to become one of the most frequently performed percussion ensemble works from the 20th century repertoire.

***Drumming* and Choreography**

There are three case studies presented here. The centre piece is *La vie qui bat* because this special issue celebrates the Société de musique contemporaine du Québec's (SMCQ) 50th anniversary. The other two choreographies are used to contextualize the discussion.

a) Laura Dean and Dance Company⁷ (1972)

Shortly after the premiere of *Drumming* at the Museum of Modern Art on December 3, 1971, Steve Reich and Musicians embarked on their first

5. Reich, 1971, p. 2.

6. Hartenberger, 2016, p. 112.

7. Laura Dean has used several names for her company throughout her career. During the period of 1972 and 1975, she used the name Laura Dean and Dance Company.

European tour in January 1972. Later in the same year, the group went on their second tour of Europe with Laura Dean and Dance Company. Because of cost and logistics, the tour program consisted of mixed works by Reich (including selected parts of *Drumming*) rather than a full performance of the work, which requires nine drummers, two singers and one piccolo player. Laura Dean's choreography was

based on Sufi spinning technique and added an attractive visual element to *Drumming*. The dancers learned the structure of the piece and timed their movements to our playing so we did not have to alter the pacing of our performance to accommodate the choreography.⁸

8. Hartenberger, 2016, p. 27.

To better understand this first choreography to *Drumming*, I interviewed percussionist Russell Hartenberger, who was a member of the ensemble on this tour. The following is the summary of our email correspondences between March 28 and April 1, 2017.

Aiyun Huang (A. H.): During the tour, how was the stage set up? Were the musicians part of the main space or were they to the side? Were the two integrated visually as one choreography? Was one art form more at the foreground and the other one more in the background?

Russell Hartenberger (R. H.): The musicians were on stage, positioned directly behind the dancers, so all were equally visible. There was no interaction between dancers and drummers—however, the musicians and dancers were given equal importance.

9. *Ibid.*

A. H.: In your book, you summarized Laura Dean's choreography as having "added an attractive visual element to *Drumming*."⁹ This implies to me that the musical performance of *Drumming* was the main event people came to see, and the dance was the icing on the cake. Is this fair to say?

R. H.: Laura Dean's choreography was presented in two different contexts. One was in concerts by Steve Reich and Musicians and the other was at dance performances by Laura Dean and Dancers, so the majority of the audience for each came primarily to see or hear the headlining ensemble. On the 1972 tour of Europe, the two groups were given equal billing but there were several compositions that did not have dance and the main event was the music.

A. H.: Which movements did you perform with Laura Dean on the second tour to Europe?

R. H.: We performed all of Part I (bongos) and Part II (marimbas) through the first two phases and first two sets of resultant patterns. We ended with a cut-off by one of the singers after bar 56 in Reich's manuscript.¹⁰

10. Reich, 1971, p. 12.

A. H.: Was this a successful collaboration? If so, how come Reich did not pursue more of this type of collaboration? If it was a mixed adventure, why do you think that was?

R. H.: There are probably a few reasons why the collaboration between Steve Reich and Musicians and Laura Dean and Dancers did not continue. It was expensive to travel with such a large group and the fees in those days were not large. Reich was achieving recognition as a composer and probably wanted to concentrate on his own works and his own ensemble. Also, Reich and Laura Dean had a personal relationship, and when this personal relationship ended there was less incentive to pursue their professional relationship.

b) Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker's *Drumming* (1998)

As Renate Bräuningner notes, "Choreographer Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker and composer Steve Reich are intrigued by similar principles of composition in which structures become processes during performance. Both use repetition of motives, while subtly shifting their interlinking as well as the relationship among performers, requiring a concentration on the here and now wherein time and space seem to conflate for both performers and audiences."¹¹

De Keersmaeker is a big fan of Steve Reich's music and has set multiple Reich pieces to dance since 1982. Her earliest choreography set to Reich's music is *Fase* (1982), which uses four pieces: *Come out* (1965), *Piano Phase* (1967), *Violin Phase* (1967) and *Clapping Music* (1972). Following the success of *Fase*, De Keersmaeker later created choreography to *Drumming* with the music performed live by Ensemble Ictus. The piece was premiered in 1998 and later was brought back for repeated performances in 2013 as part of the repertoire of De Keersmaeker's dance company Rosas. In this version, the instruments are organized in one line behind a transparent shield. The musicians and their actions are visible behind the divider. In *The Guardian*, reviewer Judith Mackrell wrote that "*Drumming* adapts the compositional principles of its music: tightly rhythmic modules of dance accumulate in detail and scope; and passages of unison shift incrementally out of sync to form brain-teasing, skin-tingling tapestries of movement."¹² This production features twelve dancers and a full live performance of *Drumming* without a conductor.


11. Bräuningner, 2014, p. 47.

12. Mackrell, 2013.

c) *La vie qui bat* (1999): O Vertigo (Ginette Laurin) and the SMCQ (Walter Boudreau)

The premiere of *La vie qui bat* took place in Salle Pierre-Mercure in Montreal on March 31, 1999. The initial run was four performances. The original performance featured five male dancers and four female dancers: Simon Alarie, Annew Barry, Mélanie Demers, Kenneth Gould, Chi Long, Marie-Claude Rodrigue, Anna Riede, David Rose and Donald Weikert. The music

FIGURE 1 *La vie qui bat* Program, Salle Pierre-Mercure, Montreal, March 31, 1999 (provided by the SMCQ archive).



PROGRAMME

SMCQ 31 mars, 1^{er}, 2 et 3 avril 1999, 20 h
33^e saison 1998-1999 Salle Pierre-Mercure
O Vertigo Centre Pierre-Péladeau
15^e anniversaire

LA VIE QUI BAT

UNE COPRODUCTION D'O VERTIGO
ET DE
LA SOCIÉTÉ DE MUSIQUE CONTEMPORAINE DU QUÉBEC

Chorégraphie **Ginette Laurin**
Direction musicale **Walter Boudreau**

Musique **Steve Reich**
Drumming (1971)
pour neuf percussions, deux voix et piccolo
(dans une version de 60 minutes)

Danseurs d'O Vertigo
Simon Alarie, Anne Barry, Mélanie Demers, Kenneth Gould, Chi Long, Marie-Claude Rodrigue, Anna Riede, David Rose, Donald Weikert

Musiciens de l'Ensemble de la SMCQ
Percussions, Dominique Côté, Jean-François Côté, François Gauthier, D'Arcy Gray, Julien Grégoire, Alain Kourie, Johanne Latreille, Robert Slapcoff et Michel Viau ; Voix, Karen Young et Caroline Simard ; Piccolo, Lise Daoust

Scénographie et éclairages **Axel Morgenthaler**
Maquillages **Angelo Barsetti**
Coiffures **Gaston Landry**
Assistant à la scénographie **Gaëtan Desombres**
Assistante/scénographie et éclairages **Amy Keith**
Réalisation du décor **Production Yves Nicol inc.**
Équipe O Vertigo : **Gaëtan Desombres**
Danielle Lecourtois
Alain Ouellette

Réalisation du tapis de scène **Longue-vue Peinture scénique**
Gilles Rochon
Jo-anne Vézina

Fournisseur d'éclairages **Éclairage Focus**
Répétiteur **Raymond Brisson**

LA VIE QUI BAT
O VERTIGO SMCQ

Directrice de production **Hélène Langevin**
Directeur technique et régisseur (O Vertigo) **Jocelyn Proulx**
Directrice technique et régisseuse (SMCQ) **Hélène Gagnon**
Régisseur de plateau **Alain Ouellette**
Machiniste **Serge Caron**
Sonorisateur **Jean-Pierre Côté**
Costumière **Danielle Lecourtois**
Photographies **Rolline Laporte**

Rencontre avec les artistes le **2 avril** après le spectacle.
Durée : 60 minutes sans entracte
L'usage d'appareils-photos est strictement interdit durant le spectacle.

La Vie qui bat est une coproduction **O Vertigo, SMCQ, Joint Adventures** (Munich) et **Le Palace** (Granby)

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Ginette Laurin remercie chaleureusement Walter Boudreau, Luc J. Béland, Carole Courtois, René Lussier, Mark De Coste, Caroline Poirier, Josée Comeau, Suzan Gaudreault, Lizon Proulx et Sylvie Chaput.
Elle tient également à souligner la généreuse contribution de tous ses danseurs à sa recherche chorégraphique.

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VOIX-HOUR

ensemble featured nine percussionists, two singers and one piccolo player. The percussionists were Dominique Côté, Jean-François Côté, François Gauthier, D'Arcy Gray, Julien Grégoire, Alain Kourie, Johanne Latreille, Robert Slapcoff and Michel Viau. The singers were Karen Young and Caroline Simard. The piccolo player was Lise Daoust. The choice of nine dancers is interesting as it corresponds to the number of percussionists needed in the piece. Later on, the O Vertigo dance company went on a tour with the project in Europe without SMCQ. In 2009, O Vertigo brought the piece back with a tour to Japan. In 2013, the SMCQ and O Vertigo went on a tour in the United States with *La vie qui bat*.¹³

d) Description of the Live Performance (DVD made available by the SMCQ Archive)

i) Opening

La vie qui bat opens with intense blue lighting featuring one female dancer on stage, dressed in pants and turtle neck, with short, bright red hair. She moves across the stage to warm up the space and brings in two male/female pairs of dancers. The light changes, and we realize that there are musicians behind a quasi-transparent plastic backdrop; our mysterious female continues moving across the stage with seductive and mysterious gestures. With a series of hand gestures as cues, the music is brought in to our surprise and delight.

ii) Part I (Four Pairs of Bongos)

The choreography features a series of group dances, often with one independent dancer juxtaposed on the group, suggesting the ways that the pulse in *Drumming* can be felt in either fast pulses (subdivision into quick eighth notes) or slower tempi (a broader pulse of three, four, or six eighth notes together). The choreography is often designed to reflect these two qualities: frantic yet at the same time quasi-pedestrian.

iii) Part II (Three Marimbas and Female Singers)

Because of the mellow sound of the marimbas, the feel of Movement II is more tranquil and calming even though the rhythmic material is still notated in 6/4 using the same number of subdivisions (12). Laurin definitely picks up this quality from the music and reflects this feeling of tranquility in the dance. The movement starts with a pair of male dancers moving in slow motion, lifting each other through combinations of turning, twirling, and spinning in fast and slow combinations.

13. Here is the complete list of *La vie qui bat* performed by SMCQ and O Vertigo (provided by the SMCQ office): March 31-April 3, 1999, Salle Pierre-Mercure, Montreal, Canada; July 15, 1999, Les Jardins de l'Hôtel de ville, Quebec City, Canada; February 16-19, 2011, Salle Pierre-Mercure, Montreal, Canada; August 7-11, 2013, Ted Shawn Theater, Becket, Massachusetts, USA.

Critic Andrée Martin from the newspaper *Le Devoir* wrote that

*La lenteur du duo Kenneth Gould et Donald Weikert, de même que la finesse et la simplicité de leurs gestes, créent une suspension du temps qu'accompagne avec délicatesse la musique de Reich et la lumière d'Axel Morgenthaler. Dès cet instant où le mariage entre la danse et la musique se fait moins symbolique et plus enveloppant les corps donnent alors l'impression de flotter dans l'espace, les mains de traverser l'air sans laisser aucune trace, et les pieds l'ignorer le sol.*¹⁴

14. Martin, 1999, p. B7.

For this author, this section is the highlight in terms of the choreographer's ability to react intuitively to the music and to produce movements visually conveying the music's simultaneous qualities of heavy and light, fast and slow. The male dancers lifting each other's bodies very much resemble the performance practice of the music: the ensemble's collective care of one another through mutually shepherding the beat, the basic pattern and the resulting patterns.

Four female dancers enter halfway through the second movement and begin a new choreography—walking towards different parts of the stage and occupying the space into areas of foreground, background, left and right. Following this change was the quick entrance of the last two male dancers and one female dancer creating a flow of people moving in space. The entire ensemble of nine begins to walk on and off the stage in different tempi to create various lines. These movements are less technical than earlier ones in Part II. The combination, recombination and shuffling of dancers helps sustain our interest in this set of exercises and also helps us understand their response to the music performed in the background.

iv) Part III (Three Glockenspiels and Piccolo)

In the transition between Part II and III, we see all nine dancers on stage. At the beginning of Part III we are left alone with just the sounds of three glockenspiels, and the stage is left with five female dancers. The sound of the glockenspiel brings energy to the space and makes the movement brighter and happier in tone than the previous one. Here we see a change in costume (from long pants to shorts and from turtleneck to short-sleeved top). The revealing of the human skin and the visibility of the muscles working to perform the movements injects new perspectives into the way we might examine some of the gestures. The same gestures performed by the dancers suddenly have a lot more power and impact to this viewer as I can clearly see how the muscles tighten and release as they perform the moves. The color of the human skin also brings a highlighted sensation to the eyes when juxtaposed

against the teal costume, blue lights and red hair. Reich has used instrumental timbre and register to expand his musical material, the choreographer works through her possibilities with the creative use of lighting, costume design and spatial divisions of stage to further the depth of the choreography. The end of Movement III features a single dancer against a backdrop of group dancers in a solo dance of hope and joy.

v) Part IV (Full Ensemble)

Transition into Movement IV features a set of single glockenspiel notes setting the pulse for the group before the return of the bongos. Here we see the recall of choreographic motives from Part I including the use of the index finger and the chest (going up and down like a beating heart) to draw out the pulse in the music. Here the dance features a set of fast-moving jumps, twirls, and catches together with a slow dancer, commenting on the situation as she glides across the stage like a coda using gestures we have seen from the beginning of the performance. One of the most exciting features is the change of lighting: we can finally see the faces of all the musicians, and their movements are clearly visible through the transparent backdrop. The orchestra section of the stage has been allowed to become part of the main stage, which adds greatly to the excitement of the finale.

Discussion on Making *La vie qui bat*

In general, *La vie qui bat* received glowing reviews from local newspapers and the international press. I have conducted the following interviews with choreographer Ginette Laurin and Walter Boudreau to speak about their collaboration.

a) Interview with Walter Boudreau (Email Correspondence: March 28, 2017)

A. H.: At what stages were you involved in the creative process?

Walter Boudreau (W. B.): None really, except for my “strong” proposal to Ginette Laurin to create a choreography on music by Steve Reich, possibly *Drumming*...

A. H.: For example, did you check in when the choreography was being created?

W. B.: I did on occasion “visit” the dance company during rehearsals but never intervened other than answering specific questions about certain aspects of the rhythmic structures in order to help Ginette and the dancers understand the music.

15. I believe that Boudreau is actually referring to the *third* commercial recording released on Nonesuch from 1987 because of the total timing of the performance on the archival dvd.

A. H.: Did you suggest a certain version of the recording?

W. B.: Yes, they followed my suggestion to work from the second commercial recording of *Drumming* by Steve Reich and Musicians.¹⁵

A. H.: Did you and Ginette consider rehearsing with live musicians so that the ensemble could learn the music and dance together?

W. B.: No, because it would have been way too expensive!!!

A. H.: What made you decide that conducting the piece was necessary? I only ask this because *Drumming* is normally not conducted and I have never seen it conducted in another setting. I assume that you conducted because it helped the coordination with the dancers. Were there other aspects of music-making gained or lost by having this additional layer in the performance?

W. B.: It's simple: I had to reproduce 'live' the recorded version of Steve Reich, since the choreography was totally built on this artifact. To do so, I had to identify precisely the number of repetitions of every motive and bar in order to reproduce exactly the same performance every time! In fact, in concert I'm acting more as a "manager" than a conductor of the performance. My role was essentially one of counting the bars for the musicians, cueing entries and motive changes, and controlling dynamics so they can concentrate on the music! My real input as a conductor lies—prior to the concert performances—in shaping all the parameters of *Drumming* during rehearsals.

A. H.: I would like to know about the venues and festivals where the show was presented outside of Montreal. Were these primarily dance festivals or music festivals?

W. B.: Outside Montréal, we performed *La vie qui bat* at the Québec City Summer Festival, the New York Summer Festival (Central Park) and more recently at the Jacob's Pillow International Dance Festival in Massachusetts (eight performances during one week).

A. H.: Was there a difference in the reception of the audience depending on the context?

W. B.: Standing ovation EVERY TIME, EVERYWHERE, whatever the context!

b) Interview with Ginette Laurin

The following is a transcript of an email interview with Ginette Laurin, which took place in French and was subsequently translated by the author.

A. H.: Why was it important to have fixed timing rather than flexible timing in your choreography to *Drumming*? Since the structure of *Drumming* is all about process, the music changes as players go through the various phasing cycles to arrive at a different point; so usually when people play *Drumming*, there are slight variations in timing. From what I have seen of other dances set to *Drumming*, there are other choreographers who choose not to have fixed timing.

G. L. (Ginette Laurin, translated): Yes, I understand that it changes the musical concept. This is why I chose to fix the duration of the musical piece: I wanted the choreographic framework and the musical framework to be linked in the same “journey” and to begin and end together—a bit like a train that we all take together. As you know, the dancers at the time of execution did not have access to the score, and many of them could not hear the intricacies of certain musical changes. It should also be said that in my work the choreographic construction is done without the dancers counting, and therefore the speed of execution is the only element that controls the pacing of the choreography. Even if the musical score is adjusted, the tempo (even if we want it to be constant) is not always precise and thus we often have moments of fluctuation between dance and music. So there are four or five moments in the choreography where we have to synchronize with the musicians (through visual cues between the conductor and some dancers) to make sure we finish together. My work is extremely complex and full of details through rehearsals and a long development process, in which it became interesting to superimpose on Reich’s music. In a certain way, it is as if we appropriated the concept of evolution from the musical work and applied it to the process of creating and executing the dance.¹⁶

A. H.: I have watched the complete recording and I really like the use of various numbers of dancers in the different parts to highlight the density of the music or to draw different elements of the music into a different context. Can you speak a little bit about how the structure of the dance was determined?

G. L.: I was inspired by this long evolution—these almost imperceptible changes in the music. I wanted an urban and tribal dance. Powerful and fragile, where the rhythm of the bodies organically bonds with the musical rhythm. For this reason, I divided the space into two precise areas. In the

16. “Oui, je comprends que cela change le concept musical et voici pourquoi j’ai choisi de fixer la durée de la pièce musicale: je tenais à ce que la trame chorégraphique et la trame musicale se lient dans un même «voyage» et commencent et finissent ensemble. Un peu comme un train que nous prenons tous ensemble. Comme vous savez, les danseurs lors de l’exécution n’ont pas accès à la partition et plusieurs d’entre eux n’arrivaient pas à entendre les subtilités lors de certains changements de mesure. Il faut aussi dire que dans mon travail, la construction chorégraphique se fait sans que les danseurs ne comptent et donc, la vitesse d’exécution est le seul élément qui rythme la trame chorégraphique. Il faut aussi dire que même si la partition musicale est réglée, le tempo, même si nous le voulons constant, n’est pas toujours précis et que pour cette raison, nous avons souvent des moments de fluctuations entre la danse et la musique. Il y a donc quatre ou cinq moments dans la chorégraphie où nous devons nous synchroniser avec les musiciens (par des repères visuels entre le chef d’orchestre et certains danseurs) afin de s’assurer que nous terminerons ensemble. Mon travail est extrêmement complexe et truffé de détails à travers des répétitions et un long développement, qu’il devenait intéressant de superposer à la musique de Reich et d’une certaine façon, c’est comme si nous nous étions approprié du concept d’évolution de l’œuvre musicale dans le processus de création de la danse et dans son exécution.”

17. *“J’étais inspirée par cette longue évolution, ces changements presque imperceptibles de la musique. Je voulais une danse à la fois urbaine et tribale. Puissante et fragile où le rythme des corps se lie de façon organique avec le rythme musical. Pour cette raison, j’ai divisé l’espace en deux zones précises. Celle en périphérie de la lenteur, des pas feutrés, d’un geste plus «engourdi». Et celle au centre d’une zone plus dynamique, calculée et rythmée. À quelques moments ces zones s’inversent dans l’espace, mais elles sont presque toujours superposées dans le temps. Les quelques rares moments où les danseurs comptent sont en binaire alors que la musique est en ternaire. Cela donne un contrepoint intéressant entre la trame visuelle et la trame sonore.”*

18. *“Nous avons présenté cette œuvre plusieurs fois dans les 17 années passées, avec la SMCQ en Amérique, mais aussi avec des ensembles locaux au Japon et en France. Une seule fois nous l’avons présentée sans les musiciens à Munich, peu de temps après la création. Et pour moi il devenait évident que cette œuvre se devait d’être présentée avec les musiciens sur scène, car la puissance qui se dégage du spectacle est incroyablement plus forte avec eux. Une grande tension se crée entre la musique et la danse à travers ce désir de s’accorder sans cesse au tempo pour les danseurs et à l’exécution des corps dansant pour les musiciens. Cette tension dramatique humanise grandement l’œuvre et donne avec son évolution un caractère presque jubilatoire.”*

periphery, an area of slowness, of muffled steps, a more “numb” gesture. And in the center, a more dynamic, calculated and rhythmic zone. At a few moments these zones are reversed in space, but they are almost always superimposed in time. The few moments when the dancers count are in two while the music is in three. This gives an interesting counterpoint between the visual and the sonic levels.¹⁷

A. H.: Can you please speak about the relationship you wish to articulate between dance and music in this piece? As the piece was performed live, the music served not as accompaniment to the dance, but rather as an active part of the live performance. Can you talk about how this is different from working with a recording?

G. L.: We have presented this work several times in the last seventeen years, with the SMCQ in America, but also with local ensembles in Japan and France. Only once did we perform the work without the live musicians, in Munich shortly after the premiere. And for me it became clear that this work had to be presented with the musicians on stage because the power that emerges from the show is immeasurably stronger with the ensemble. A great tension is created between the music and the dance through this desire to constantly adjust to the tempo for the dancers and the execution of the dancing bodies for the musicians. This dramatic tension humanizes the work greatly and gives the work its evolutionary and jubilatory character.¹⁸

Conclusion

Choreography set to live music is not a new idea. What’s new and exciting here is the enthusiasm and the continuous interest choreographers have given to Reich’s music in the last four decades. His seminal work *Drumming* is about process—the process of going from one pattern to the next, the process of adding timbres and then taking them away, the process of musicians moving from one set of instruments to the next. This technique of “composition as process” is shared across disciplines and it enables the three choreographers discussed to find meaningful intersections between Reich’s music and their compositional frameworks. They each are inspired by different aspects of Reich’s music and have come up with creative ideas to bring out various ideas in the music through dance.

In the earliest choreography by Laura Dean (1972), she draws on the idea of Sufi spinning technique. Because of cost, Laura Dean only choreographed the first two movements of *Drumming*. The dancers learned the sounds of the structural changes so that musicians did not need to alter their performance practice. They rehearsed together to prepare for their tour.

FIGURE 2 *La vie qui bat*, performance, Salle Pierre-Mercure, Montreal, February 18, 2011, photographer: Jacques Cabana, provided by SMCQ archive.



In the choreography of Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, she and Reich shared the same thinking about composition as process, and she used similar techniques (e.g., repeats and variations on motive) to building a parallel work in dance form. For this article, I did not have a chance to interview De Keersmaeker, so cannot comment on the specific constraints and challenges she might have faced working on the piece.

In the choreography by Ginette Laurin, the dancers rehearsed with a CD (for financial reasons) and then the SMCQ reproduced this disc live in concert. This goes against the conventional performance practice of *Drumming*—that is, to perform the piece without a conductor, to be able to listen to what's going on in the space in order to decide the speed, the number of repeats, and to take time to experience phasing and to enjoy the performative freedom granted to the performers. Each phasing experience can turn out quite differently from another, and performers often look forward to and treasure these moments. The SMCQ performance with a conductor altered the performance practice of *Drumming* and the collective music making experience for the musicians. However, some exciting elements are gained from this, particularly the extra tension created through rubbing against the fixed tempo and number of repeats in order to line up with the choreography. The audience is able to participate in the drama created by the confluence of these different energies and perhaps follows the piece better because of the various signals given by the conductor. *La vie qui bat* was a great adventure undertaken by O Vertigo and the SMCQ. This project brought Quebec's contemporary music and dance to an international platform, and this issue marks the right occasion to celebrate its significance.

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