Alain Platel created \textit{C(H)ŒURS} in response to a request by Gerard Mortier, who was at the time director of the opera of Madrid, the Teatro Real. He suggested basing a production of contemporary dance on the music of Giuseppe Verdi. This initiative can be understood as a significant manifestation of Gerard Mortier’s endeavour to update the experience of opera. After the end of his tenure as artistic director of the Salzburg Festival, Mortier pleaded for an even more radical liberation of opera from its historical constraints, perhaps even extending these ideas to the very institute of high art. This idea went much further than Mortier’s artistic policy at the prestigious festival in the hometown of Mozart. He founded the democratic Ruhrtriennale in 2002 for precisely that reason. One of the first manifestations of his new direction was his request to Alain Platel to produce something in homage to Mozart. The result was the successful production of \textit{Wolf} (2003). When Mortier took over the leadership of the venerable Teatro Real, he searched for opportunities to align modern performance art with the core of the operatic tradition. He reasoned that the wedding of contemporary dance with the most iconic composer of the repertoire would demonstrate the validity of Verdi’s music for contemporary society better than more routine interpretations of his operas: ‘Alain Platel possesses the art to transmit great music to new audiences and to young people. I have proposed to him to work on the emotions created by the music of Verdi.’\textsuperscript{1} Platel’s team included the dramaturg Jan Vandenhouwe and sound designer Steven Prengels. During the preparations for the performance, Mortier suggested to Platel and his team to broaden the scope of the musical influence, to include excerpts from the operas of both Verdi and Wagner.

\textit{C(H)ŒURS} received its premiere in the Teatro Real on 12 March 2012, at a time when the Indignados movement was very active in the Spanish capital. Indignados means the indignant and is the term for a protest movement that arose in reaction to the excesses of capitalism and a failing globalization. The Indignados movement followed a period of revolt, called the Arab Spring, in 2010. Within this context, the
The choreography of Alain Platel’s les ballets C de la B

The production was readily interpreted as a commentary on the revolutionary events of the time. Platel encouraged this interpretation by declaring that he was mainly drawn to the choral numbers in the operas of Verdi and Wagner. He felt these sections often depicted a group in actions of revolt. In an interview with Michaël Bellon of 2013, he stated: ‘in many works by Verdi and Wagner, one has the feeling that the chorus represents the people, a people often in revolt, by the way. That made them into an echo of the protest movement that one could see right then in the streets.’

To a certain extent, the production could indeed be read as an exercise on the dynamics of revolutionary movements, of group behaviour and of political protest. This aspect of the production is most obvious in the scenes in which the chorus is split into different action groups, in which the group members write down their slogans on banners. The effect of these actions is questioned, however, through the voice of the French writer Marguerite Duras. In fragments taken from her *Autoportrait*, Duras speaks about the value of the individual and the injustice that governs the habit of subsuming people under fixed collective categories. She sharply condemns collective ideologies like Marxism and nationalism as forms of injustice to the individual. By quoting her statements, Platel indicates that his interest is vested more in the relationship between the individual and the collective than in the revolutionary act itself. The revolutionary reading of the performance is certainly not the only perspective on the performance that is possible. A closer look at the musical selection from Verdi and Wagner may provide a starting point to develop a broader interpretative framework.

Alain Platel had accumulated considerable experience in handling classical music before he took on Verdi and Wagner. In 1998, his provocative *Iets op Bach* was his first take on a canonical composer. In 2003 followed the production on Mozart, *Wolf*. With Fabrizio Cassol, Platel worked on the *Vespro della Beata Vergine* by Monteverdi under the title *vsprs* (2006). Next in line was *C(H)ŒURS* (2012). In all these productions, Platel reacted to music as if from the perspective of an outside observer. He always took an intuitive approach to these musical works, reacting to the features that appealed to him at face value. He never approached these classical pieces with the a priori knowledge of an informed listener. The strength and the appeal of his work on classical music is the result of this sense of wonder, of a spontaneous reaction to the appeal of specific musical ideas. During the creative process, the dancers too had a strong influence on the final shape of the production. The final result was always the outcome of a highly collaborative creative process.

Work on *C(H)ŒURS* was somewhat atypical for les ballets C de la B. Since the production included the collaboration of the standard forces of a large opera house, such as an orchestra in the pit and an opera chorus onstage, the musical plan had to be fixed well in advance. During the actual creative process, the only room for flexibility left resided in the final touches on the soundscapes, connecting the opera excerpts.

An interpretation of the relationship between Platel’s choreographic universe and the music of *C(H)ŒURS* could be based on two radically divergent perspectives. On the one hand, it could consider the music as an *objet trouvé*, a pure-sounding
edifice on which Platel projected his visions. According to the sound designer Steven Prengels, the treatment of the pieces in their own right as manifestations of pure music was precisely the point of departure of the entire undertaking. According to Prengels, the music had to be there for its immediate appeal, without any consideration of the function it may have had within its original context. The music was stripped of its historical meaning. The semiotic baggage was wiped off. Stripped of its original meaning, Verdi and Wagner were viewed as a clean slate on which new meaning could be projected.4

Another interpretation could start from the perspective of the original context and meaning of the pieces. Whatever the intentions of the makers, an art form that originated in a specific historical context is likely to carry some historical weight. A complete obliteration of historically constructed semiotic meaning may be illusory. Musical works are likely to carry something of their original function with them, even if they are radically transposed to new contexts. A considerable part of the audience for C(H)ŒURS – especially in its original run at the Teatro Real – would have consisted of seasoned opera lovers. They would have recognized the original significance of pieces from La Traviata or Lohengrin. However hard the makers may have tried to impose a neutral perspective on these pieces, it remains unlikely that the entire audience would experience them in this manner. Opera lovers would readily associate Wagner’s pilgrim’s chorus with the Tannhäuser legend, or the music from La Traviata with the touching fate of Violetta, the famous courtesan dying from tuberculosis in ‘that crowded desert which is called Paris,’ as she puts it herself. The music carries enough gestural content to tie it unequivocally to the cultural dynamics of the nineteenth century, even for spectators without former knowledge of opera. Spontaneous connotations with the highly charged and rhetorical forms of expression of nineteenth-century romanticism would remain hard to miss. This observation alone should suffice to legitimize attention to the original meaning of the pieces in any effort to come to terms with a production like C(H)ŒURS.

The two perspectives mentioned – the music in its essence of pure-sounding energy on the one hand, and music as carrier of historically determined semiotic significance, on the other – echo a debate that has been ongoing in musicology since Carolyn Abbate’s foundational publication on the tension between the drastic and the gnostic in musical understanding.5 In the drastic experience, she understands all the effects of music in actual performance, both on the performer and on the listener. The gnostic is her term to cover the diverse efforts required to read music hermeneutically, to invest musical structures with conceptual meaning. Applied to the musicological interpretation of Platel’s C(H)ŒURS, this drastic approach would seem to be useful in elucidating the relationship between Platel’s extended choreographic language and the music on which it is based. In a balanced musicological approach, however, the gnostic has to be taken into account as well. The pieces onto which Platel has grafted his extraordinary visual language are not neutral in content. They all have been conceived in the very precise context of a drama or a religious service, as is the case for Verdi’s Messa da Requiem. Even transposed to a dance performance that turns them into musical objets trouvés, they continue to carry a cluster of hermeneutical associations.
Platel appears to be conscious of this dualism in music as an experience in its pure form and as tied to expectations and previous knowledge. Both sides of the coin are present in this statement: ‘When I realize a piece, I always try to find what speaks to people in a specific music. What do people know or recognize and how can I use this music in an alternative way? That “recognition” guarantees a direct emotional link, which in this case I find extremely important for this piece.’

In Platel’s vision, the two poles seem to come together. By deliberately using the musical selection in a way that contradicts expectations, he creates a space in which the music can communicate directly to listeners, transcending the hermeneutical confines of its original setting. On the other hand, Platel plays with the genre of opera in C(H)ŒURS. Contrary to previous productions based on classical music (Iets op Bach and Wolf), Platel abandoned his habit of dissociating the stage imagery radically from the visual associations that are traditionally connected with Bach or Mozart. In those performances, Bach is heard in the visual environment of an asylum, Mozart in the chaotic underground culture of the contemporary banlieues. The radical dissociation of the performance from the visual sensory stimuli based on the music’s cultural associations was no longer a defining trait of C(H)ŒURS. Platel tailored this performance to the context and institutional conditions of an opera house. There is an orchestra in the pit, a genuine conductor, a chorus and a ballet onstage. The absence of historical costumes does not place the production outside contemporary operatic practices. Historical verisimilitude in setting and costumes is no longer an issue in contemporary opera. C(H)ŒURS is a work for and of the opera house without repeating the operatic routines from the past. The result transcends the historical confines of the institution in a most radical way.

How revolutionary?

Gerard Mortier tended to use the revolutionary argument in his efforts to explain the relevance of the operatic classics for contemporary audiences. He stated that Verdi and Wagner wrote these pieces in the context of the revolution of 1848. While it is correct to argue that Verdi and Wagner were involved with revolutionary processes, the pieces used by Platel do not necessarily carry revolutionary import – even if one considers Wagner’s active role in the 1849 Dresden uprising. Mortier slightly misses the point when he states ‘Verdi and Wagner played a role in the revolution of 1848. This music that has become so popular in our ears has a revolutionary history.’

In Platel’s selection, no piece has unequivocal revolutionary bonds. Verdi’s Nabucco (1841) may come to mind as a piece obviously linked to the Italian Risorgimento. In reality, the symbolical association of Nabucco with the Risorgimento movement occurred later than the time of its conception and premiere. The famous chorus ‘Va pensiero’ achieved its iconic status of the unofficial hymn of Italians only later during the period of post-Risorgimento consolidation. Wagner’s Tannhäuser (1845) can only be understood as revolutionary in a very individualized sense, in so far as it depicts the internal existential struggle of the individual in opposition to societal conventions.
and pressure. Verdi's *Macbeth* (1847) and Wagner's *Lohengrin* (1850) do have a sharp political edge, but they are hardly revolutionary. Both operas are concerned with defeating tyrants and usurpers. However, the outcome for the crisis is still sought in the reinstatement of the legitimate ruler as the representative (unequivocally so in *Lohengrin*) of God's order.

All the other pieces in the selection are dated later than the revolutionary years of 1848 and 1849. Verdi's *Messa da Requiem* (1874) is a post-Risorgimento statement. Through the commemoration of a representative of the Italian genius, the writer Alessandro Manzoni in this case, the *Messa da Requiem* was planned to strengthen the civic awareness of the citizens of the new Italian state. Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* (1868) is decidedly the most problematic piece when evaluated within the nationalist turmoil of its age. Wagner's opera recognizes the importance of the people as the foundation of national values but more in a spiritual than in an active sense. Although the opera ends with a festive, even jubilatory note, the disturbing implication is that would-be rulers may manipulate that spiritual essence to their advantage.8

The chorus *Patria oppressa* from Verdi's *Macbeth* comes closest to representing revolutionary action. In the original opera, the piece forms the starting point of Shakespeare's iconic scene in the forest of Birnam. Conducted by Macduff, the chief adversary to the usurper Macbeth, the Scottish protesters camouflage themselves with the trees of the forest. Later, Macbeth will be under the impression that the forest itself is moving towards his castle, signalling his death according to the mysterious prophecies of the witches. By reducing the scene to the initial choral number alone, Platel does not include this revolutionary action into the plot of his danced production, only the passive voice of grief of a crowd in mourning.

The famous chorus of the Hebrew slaves, 'Va pensiero' from Verdi's *Nabucco*, belongs to the same category. The historical process of the Risorgimento, the nineteenth-century unification of Italy, has invested this choral number with huge symbolic power. The piece in itself, however, is a lament, a nostalgic elegy on a vanished world. At the time of the opera's premiere in Milan, it did not make an appeal that was likely to disturb the Habsburg authorities.9

The other choral numbers in the selection do not portray people in revolt at all. In the excerpt from Wagner's *Lohengrin*, the armies of Brabant salute their king. The choruses from Wagner's *Tannhäuser* are songs of praise of pilgrims returning from their journey to Rome. In the crowd scene from the third act of Wagner's *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* the chorus represents a collective voice. However, the content of their song is not revolutionary, but laudatory. In the original plot, the citizens of Nürnberg salute their beloved mastersinger Hans Sachs by breaking into his most iconic song. The other pieces are sacred – Verdi's *Messa da Requiem* – or instrumental, such as Wagner's preludes to *Lohengrin* and the third act of *Die Meistersinger*, and Verdi's first and third act preludes of *La Traviata* (1853).

When using the music as the point of departure for reading C(H)ŒURS, the content of the pieces necessitates an interpretative framework that will move beyond the idea of the revolutionary. Considering the production as a dialogue of contemporary dance with nineteenth-century operatic classics, with both mediums equally contributing to
the construction of meaning, other categories come in sight, such as the sacred, the political, the emotional and the role of the body.

Probing the sacred

The first piece of music that is heard in C(H)ŒURS is the Dies irae from the Messa da Requiem by Giuseppe Verdi. This is an iconic piece of sacred music, representing humanity's apocalyptic awe in the face of the inescapable. Verdi's massive treatment of the Last Judgement tableau forms the nec plus ultra in the representation of the terribilità of existence, complete with the notorious grand cassa depicting the splitting of the face of the earth.

The use of this particular piece of sacred music in the opening scene of C(H)ŒURS is no coincidence. The first part of C(H)ŒURS has a definite sacred overtone. Verdi's Messa de Requiem is followed by the mystical prelude to Wagner's Lohengrin, a depiction of the descent of God's grace on earth through the vessel of the Grail. The pilgrim's choruses from Tannhäuser are sacred too. The production employs the actual pilgrim's chorus, chanted by the pilgrims on their way back from Rome, and the chorus of the younger pilgrims that bring the good news about Tannhäuser's salvation. The overarching theme in this musical selection seems to be salvation. The sacred continues in the Wach auf chorus from Meistersinger. This is a chorale on a historical text from the pen of Hans Sachs, the sixteenth-century Meistersinger on whose biography Wagner modelled his fictional character. The hymn celebrates Luther's Reformation. Verdi's Va pensiero is strongly associated with the Italian Risorgimento but also fits within this sacred theme. The text is closely modelled on the words and images of Psalm 137, the famous expression of the desire of the Hebrews to return to Jerusalem during their Babylonian exile.

However, the choreographic treatment of the first musical number immediately defies expectations. The choreography onstage does not duplicate the massive force of Verdi's Dies irae. One single dancer in a white dress is seen from the back. As the dancer keeps the head down, the character's gender is not immediately apparent. The only movement that corresponds to the rhythm of the music is made by the hands, which are visible above the shoulders of the dancer. The choreography reduces the movement to the tiniest possible dimensions, a choice that modifies the perception of the massively orchestrated music. Instead of focusing on the terror of the apocalyptic moment, the choreography presents a vision on the individual, crushed under the terror conveyed in the music. The opening makes clear that Platel will focus on the tension between the individual and the force of the masses. This is not conveyed through the semiotic meaning of the music but through the energy of the sound in itself. The very sound of a huge chorus immediately suggests a group in collective action. The stage picture, however, focuses on the vulnerability of the individual.

When Verdi introduces the trumpets of the apocalypse, which sound from afar, as if from the four quarters of the earth, and gradually come close in a shattering climax, the dancer slowly pulls up his dress to reveal his naked backside. In combination with the apocalyptic music, the image comes close to the iconic Ecce homo from Christian
iconography, the ultimate graphic representation of human vulnerability. The music stops after its climactic chord and gives way to a soundscape in which sounds of trumpets and cheering masses secularize the previous image and tie it to the dynamics of group behaviour.

The choreographic approach to Wagner’s *Lohengrin* prelude is the opposite of the minimalist approach to Verdi’s *Dies irae*. From a musical perspective, the prelude is carefully composed to introduce the idea of the sacred as a defining agent of the drama that will unfold. All the details of the musical texture are carefully chosen to represent the descent of God’s grace on earth. To achieve this aim, Wagner focuses more on texture than on melody or rhythm. The prelude is one of the finest examples of music that couples the unfolding of time to spatiality, as if sound is moulded into a spatial sonorous object. This quality anticipates Wagner’s more extensive elaboration of ‘time becoming space’ in *Parsifal* (1882), his other music drama on the subject of the mystical Grail. In its musical essence, the effect of the *Lohengrin* prelude is based on the coupling of tiny movements in the musical texture within the slow unfolding of musical time. The effect on the listener could be likened to the visual observation of the unmoving surface of a lake, made lively through the wrinkling of the water.

The music is constructed as one gradual expansion and reduction of a basically static texture, with just enough melodic and rhythmic movement at the surface to keep the textural unfolding interesting for the listener. Alain Platel, however, radically alters the impression the music generates. His choreography initiates from melodic details as its starting point. The dancers respond to the vibrating details of the music with large and energetic bodily movements, especially the two dancers at the back. They are surrounded by a girl on the front of the stage, and by a couple in the background, all dressed in white. The gradual expansion of the texture is paralleled with an augmentation of the group of dancers to five. At the entrance of the brass instruments, three women in red take the platform with broad, almost ecstatic gestures. The movement of the dancers continues when the music returns to its ethereal starting point and fades away.

Platel’s approach to the prelude is as drastic as can be. Through his focus on the energy of the melodic movement, he unravels the carefully constructed sacred image. It is a fine example of how Platel’s approach defies expectations and broadens the semiotic space in which the music operates.

As the piece continues, the dancers suddenly drop a piece of cloth that they had been holding in their mouth. At that moment, it becomes clear that they had been carrying their underwear. They start to put it on but are severely hindered by a continuous trembling of the muscles. These uncontrolled movements are part of Alain Platel’s gestural vocabulary, which was also used in his production of *vsprs* (2006). Platel understands this type of movement as more than a mere depiction of bodily dysfunction:

> It is a language that I explore since *vsprs* of 2006 and which might reveal things about that type of feelings for which we do not find words … Perhaps, these brutal movements, which some even qualify as spasmodic – which I do not like to hear – are symptomatic for things we are confronted with in our societies.
The act of putting on underwear becomes almost an insurmountable undertaking. The body has to fight its constant uncontrolled movements. The act is coupled with the pilgrim’s chorus from Wagner’s Tannhäuser. The hymn starts a cappella. The continuous movement of the dancers contradicts the measured melodic shape of the music but draws attention to the sonority of the choral singing in itself. As soon as the orchestra sets in, the movements appear to move along with the markedly rhythmical accompaniment. In the context of the opera, the figuration in the violins was designed as an expression of exaltation for the pardoned pilgrim’s souls, but in Platel’s vision they become associated with the uncontrolled bodily tremors of the dancers.

In the performance, the pilgrim’s chorus is connected to the hymn of the younger pilgrims, which in Wagner’s original work occurs later in the third act of Tannhäuser. In the plot, the hymn marks the moment of Tannhäuser’s salvation. Young pilgrims from Rome proclaim the miracle of the flowering of the pope’s staff as God’s sign for Tannhäuser’s pardon. The accompaniment is constructed as a continuous motion in triplets in the woodwinds, a choice that is meant to give the music its characteristic radiance. The fight of the dancers against their bodily tremors continues during this second chorus, and during the general jubilation with which Wagner brings his opera to a close.

Platel’s treatment of the music of Tannhäuser takes its cue from the accompaniment rather than from the melodic structure or phrasing. However, his interpretation of these accompaniment figures contradicts their original function only at first glance. In Wagner’s concept, they convey the joy of the soul in the assurance of salvation. In Platel’s vision, the quest for salvation becomes tangible in a radically embodied way. Salvation is deprived of its religious meaning and understood in the broadest sense as the act of overcoming hindrances. Whether we would read them as purely physical or as a metaphorical indication of societal pressures, the perception of Platel’s radical embodiment of the struggle remains the same. The victory over hindrances is represented by the effort of the mind to gain control over the body. The shriek that follows the music of Tannhäuser marks the attainment of a new freedom of action. The group’s cry leads to a repetition of the music of the Dies irae as if it were an extension of their scream.

The political turn

The chorus becomes visible in the background onstage and takes over from the dancers with the choral setting of Hans Sachs’ master song Wach auf from the third act of Wagner’s Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg. ‘Wake up, it is almost day’ is the first line of the choral song. Platel takes this as a rhetorical appeal to revolt. In its original context, the song does not have that function. The crowd strikes up the song to greet and praise its composer Hans Sachs. The song is a hymn to Luther and the renovating force of his Reformation. In C(H)ŒURS, the song is deprived of its original meaning. The action onstage takes its cue only from the initial words. It turns the Wach auf into a wake-up call for activism.
The physical presence of the chorus onstage marks the moment in which group dynamics take over from the individualized emotions of the dancers. Verdi’s *Va pensiero* from *Nabucco* represents a further stage of development in the search for a collective voice. During the singing, the dancers stand or perform with their mouths open. They mainly move to the rhythm of the accompaniment. On the prolonged final chord, the singers join the dancers in their movements of the arms. Dancers and singers then put their fist into their mouth as an indication that they are silenced by force.

At that moment, one realizes that Verdi’s iconic choral song is, in fact, about voice. *Va pensiero* is an elegy, a genre of poetry and music that is distinguished by its ability to give voice to complex feelings, mostly of grief and loss. The book of psalms from which the words are moulded is also precisely that: an early literary masterpiece that gives a voice to complex and disturbing feelings. The glory of Verdi’s choral song lies precisely in its ability to turn emotion into melody. The abrupt silencing of dancers and singers at the end of the elegy emphasizes this quality in retrospect.

The soundscape that comes immediately after the *Va pensiero* makes clear that the voice is silenced by the power of the demagogue. In the montage, this force is represented in an iconic way by the use of the recorded voice of the Belgian politician Bart de Wever during his victory speech at the federal elections of 2010, with its undisguised reference to the *Triumph des Willens* of early Nazism through the Latin slogan *Nil volentibus arduum*: ‘Nothing is hard for the willing’. The dancing crowd turns into an active collective force now, stamping their feet, clapping their hands rhythmically, yelling, and hurling their shoes – as a reference to the Arab Spring revolts.

After this intense moment of revolt, the stage is emptied for the gradual development of Wagner’s martial music for the third act greeting of King Heinrich in *Lohengrin*, an operatic ‘pomp and circumstance of glorious war’ if ever there was one. A woman in a red dress dances ecstatically to the sound of the fanfares. Two children observe her. A dancer drags the children away. The dancer in a white dress – the one who had opened the performance – lies on the ground and tries to stand up with difficulty. After the choral acclaim to King Heinrich, he manages to stand up and starts singing. The individual tries to recover his own hesitant and fragile voice. To this aim, Platel employs the music of the king’s address to the armies of Brabant, but stripped from its words and turned into a wordless vocalization. The dancer, who had personified the *Ecce homo* moment at the outset of the production, represents once more the fragility of the individual in the midst of turmoil and agitation.

The following section returns to the non-normative bodily struggling for acceptance, in all its failure and imperfection. Dancers fall, roll off the steps and lie on the ground. The beginning of the music of Wagner’s third act prelude from *Die Meistersinger* has a brooding quality. It underlines an image of helplessness. In Wagner’s concept, the first musical idea of the piece stands for Hans Sachs’s meditation on the source of evil in the world. The ensuing chorale marks the renewal of his faith in life through the strength of his religious conviction. The festive brass chorale replaces these dark musings with their representation of the light of faith. The process is first coupled onstage by the efforts of the dancers to overcome their lethargy, and then their bodily tremors. The dancers seem to deal with uncontrolled bodily movements as a reaction to the
texture of the brass chorale. The soaring passage in the high violins is coupled with heavy gesticulation. The second chorale in the brass is also accompanied with highly energetic bodily movements. The music ends unresolved. The dancers look around in bewilderment, and depart.

On individuality and love

The image of the dancers striving for freedom of movement, with their trembling, uncontrolled bodies, is coupled to a statement by Marguerite Duras about the value of individuality. No two persons are alike. Every form of collective generalization is poor. Simplistic generalizations lead to fascism, racism and Marxism. Even millions of people doing the same thing does not mean that people are alike.

The speech gives way to an act of social organizing. Groups are formed and changed. People make up slogans and write them down on placards. Two children show a banner with the words Revoluciones devoran a sus hijos: ‘Revolutions devour their children.’ The words are taken up immediately in the funeral image of two groups, carrying away...
the corpses of two children. The music feels appropriate for the occasion. Verdi's chorus *Patria oppressa* from *Macbeth* deals with the sorrow of people under oppression. In its original context, the chorus sets the scene for Macduff's aria deploiring the death of his children through the hands of the tyrant. The text of the chorus refers to the imagery of a mother losing her children in its appeal to the fatherland: 'You do not have any longer the sweet name of a mother, since you have been converted into a grave for your children.' The fatherland has become a place of orphans and widows. The entire chorus conveys immobility in the face of collective grief. The dancers convey this feeling as well as they endeavour, once again, to regain their bodily freedom. The gesture of the fist in the mouth suggests oppression. Platel uses the rhythm of the pizzicato strings to highlight the bodily ticks.

The noisy soundscape gives way to a fragment from the third-act exchange between Violetta and Alfredo from Verdi's *La Traviata*, as if sounding from afar. It is Alfredo's promise to Violetta of the renewal of life in the face of her imminent death from tuberculosis. The dance includes the movements of a couple that seeks to comfort each other with their embrace. Wagner's hymn to the evening star from *Tannhäuser* starts in the background of the mind. Wolfram's hymn is also a plea for salvation, although of a more mystical nature than Violetta's plea to overcome her illness through the forces of love. In the course of the aria, couples search and find each other. When Platel shifts from a political grouping to a more individual constellation of lovemaking, the orchestra takes over the instrumental postlude, with its wonderful melody in the cellos and with an accompaniment by the harp. The chorus enters the stage from behind. The dancers continue their lovemaking. The chorus extends the movement of the music. They rattle their fingers on the wood of the stage. They move and breathe rhythmically. When the chorus lies down on the ground, only one dancing couple remains upright.

The words by Marguerite Duras speak about the universality of death and the democracy inherent in human mortality. To this background, the couple of a man and a woman perform a sensual pas de deux, first to the sound of the speech, then to the tones of Verdi's third act prelude from *La Traviata*. Coupled to the music, the *pas de deux* becomes almost classical, if not in style then in impact. The deliberate variations on the classical style – such as the woman lifting the man instead of the more typical lift of the female ballerina by the male dancer – even strengthen the connotation with classical dance. Verdi's instrumental preludes to *La Traviata* represent the fragility of the individual soul. The delicate tone, made by the use of spare textures and fragile violins *con sordino*, points to the most intimate and solitary feelings. In this fragility, a couple of lovers find each other.

The following scene contrasts with the previous one in the depiction of a wild dance unaccompanied by music. The soundscape gives a hint of a march in the background. The chorus lies on the ground. Their hands are red. For the first time, a vocal soloist sings live onstage – apart from the dancer who sang a wordless vocalization to King Heinrich's address in *Lohengrin* in his untrained but dramatically adept voice. At this moment, a professional soprano expresses fear and gives a voice to a plea for salvation through the tones of the *Libera me* from Verdi's *Messa da Requiem*. The piece is shortened. The montage makes the soprano solo connect immediately to the choral
fugue that occurs later in the piece. In the course of Verdi’s *Messa da Requiem*, the fugue represents the certainty of faith in the face of individual anguish. Its abstract qualities hint towards a doctrinal answer to the fears of the soul. In the final movement of the Verdi *Requiem*, however, this doctrinal voice fails to be entirely convincing. The fugue culminates in a dramatic plea for salvation, followed by the subdued recitation of the prayer. The music ends on a major chord, but not in an emphatic way. The conclusion of Verdi’s *Requiem* comes close to a giant question mark in the face of human destiny.

The comparably formalized dance on the *Libera me* which seems to freeze at times in beautiful abstract gestures, could be taken for the veritable endpoint of the emotional process developed during the entire production. The anguish expressed at the beginning has reached a subtle, if not very definitive, conclusion. The rhetorical force of the music guides the viewer towards such a perception. However, the performance is not entirely over. The last piece of music could be heard as a postlude, since it is not accompanied by actions other than the slow retreat of the dancers and the undressing of some dancers and chorus members. The retreat is coupled to a routine movement of the red hands of the chorus members, a movement that is linked to the accompaniment to the melody of Verdi’s first act prelude to *La Traviata*. Again, Platel does not base bodily gestures on the melody but rather on the figures of the accompaniment. The effect of the final tableau derives from the combination of the compulsive, ritualized gestures of the hands with the soothing lyricism of Verdi’s melody.

**Figure 7.2** Romeu Runa, Lisi Estaras and stand-in choir during rehearsals of *C(H)ŒURS* in dance studio S3, Ghent 2009. © Chris Van der Burght
Opera and embodiment

The operatic system of the nineteenth century is to a great extent derived from the principle that musical and bodily movements could parallel each other. This system was already in place in the eighteenth century. The semiotic function of the dance rhythms and their hierarchy in the musical dramaturgy of Mozart is widely recognized, as are the roots of the mimetic function of bodily gesture in eighteenth-century comic opera. In the nineteenth century, this system of meaning developed into new directions, but the mimetic function of the music remained largely intact. In this sense, opera has been characterized as an art of overstatement, in which bodily and musical gestures double each other.

Romantic opera enlarged the expressive means of musical dramaturgy with the representation of inner states beyond the classifiable emotions of eighteenth-century dramaturgy. Feelings like anger or joy could be linked to corresponding bodily states or behaviour, as is largely the case in the semiotic system of eighteenth-century opera. The soul’s quest for salvation, however, does not have a counterpart in bodily movement. Although nineteenth-century visual art and theatre tended to couple the expression of the spiritual quest to exalted bodily gestures, the highly spiritual treatment of the music often suggests otherwise.

For a dance production that takes the extension of emotional gestures of music into movement as its point of departure, it may come as a surprise that most pieces in the musical selection do not correspond to a gestural mimetic category. Several excerpts used by Alain Platel in C(H)ŒURS seemed to originate from a more spiritual standpoint rather than from a kinaesthetic perspective. The most obvious examples are the hymn to the evening star from Tannhäuser, or the third act prelude to Die Meistersinger. Verdi also sought to extend his musical vocabulary as far as possible in the expression of the innermost soul in the two preludes to La Traviata. The chorus of the returning pilgrims in Tannhäuser similarly represents the exaltation of the soul through the coupling of ritualized singing with the radiance of the accompaniment. The highly rhythmical figures that underlie the phrases of the chorale point to overwhelming inner joy. The rhythmical figuration in the hymn of the younger pilgrims serves as a musical equivalent to a visual suggestion of shimmering light.

As a result, Alain Platel’s approach of basing bodily gestures on the figures of the accompaniment is highly significant. His gestural translation of the rhythmical figuration into nervous tremors radically alters their function. Contrary to Wagner’s original work, which expressed salvation received, the dance embodies the quest for salvation at its most basic and tangible level. Nevertheless, the two systems of meaning are related to each other. At the end, salvation becomes tangible through the image of the recovery of bodily freedom to move, even though these movements remain undisciplined and unattractive by conventional standards.

The passage is characteristic for Platel’s dialogue with the music. By basing movement on the musical figuration of the accompaniment, he forges links between dance and music that are both musically justified and unexpected. Musical details may be coupled to broad and energetic bodily movements, as in Va pensiero or the Lohengrin prelude, while the massive violence of Verdi’s Dies irae is confined within
the tiniest dimensions of the gestures of the hand and fingers. Most choral numbers selected for the production are of the passive type. They do not represent a group in action but rather a moment of passive contemplation or mourning. It is significant that Alain Platel presents most action of a revolutionary nature in between the musical numbers. Only in the *Meistersinger* chorus does he derive gestures of contestation and protest from the phrasing and the sheer sonority of the choral texture.

Questions about group dynamics and individuality lie at the basis of the concept of *C(H)ŒURS*. However, the performance moves beyond the political and the revolutionary bonds. The dynamics of human collectives are demonstrated as part of the quest for existence. The dimensions of the personal and the collective, of the individual and societal pressure, are closely connected. Reading the performance through the perspective of the music suggests that salvation is the key concept. Most musical pieces are about salvation in one form or the other, either in the personalized spiritual, or in the collective, societal sense.

The quest for liberation culminates in the ultimate plea of Verdi's *Libera me*. In Platel's production, this quest is conveyed in a radically embodied way. His piece does not lead towards a transcendent end point, but his expressive system does allow for a suggestion of a partial solution to the pressing questions. The first solution is in love, conveyed through the relatively classical *pas de deux* on Verdi's *La Traviata*. The second occurs during the *Libera me*, where abstract gestures acquire an almost tableau-like quality, underlining the search for the stability in faith that is expressed in the music. At these moments, the choreography acquires a measure of control in an abstract shape that is deliberately eschewed in the preceding scenes.

In *C(H)ŒURS*, the drastic and the gnostic intertwine in the perception of the music. The choreography does not only react to the direct emotional appeal of the music. It also engages with the poetic and symbolic content of the original musical pieces. The way it deals with these mental concepts, however, is strikingly physical. In his work with the dancers, Platel situates the quest for salvation in gestural extremes that lie beyond typical norms of behaviour. The chorus members participate to a certain extent in the choreography, but their gestural language stays closer to the standard physicality of ordinary life. Both types of physicality complement each other. As nineteenth-century opera oscillates between the realistic portrayal of behaviour and the representation of the strivings of the soul, Platel's production uses irregular physicality as an extension of the standard behaviour in order to express what cannot be put into words. These two poles underline the interconnectedness of the rational and the irrational in dance; just like it was one of the defining features of the semiotic system behind nineteenth-century opera.

‘Salvation’ is a term laden with much historical weight. In the context of nineteenth-century opera it was associated with the sacred and with a theological vision of the human soul. In the secularized setting of Alain Platel's *C(H)ŒURS*, the quest for salvation becomes more tangible through a radical transposition of the search for deliverance to embodied experience. The need to cope with tics, spasms, bodily dysfunctions or involuntary behaviour becomes an expression of the quest for deliverance. It can be argued that this embodiment is far more tangible and difficult to cope with than
the soul-searching of operatic characters like Violetta or Tannhäuser. Alain Platel represents this quest both on the level of individual experience as on the societal scale of groups in protest against all kinds of societal ills. On both levels, C(H)ŒURS eschews the promise of a radical breakthrough, an optimistic view on utopian transcendence. At best, the dancers and singers arrive at moments of adaptation, control and partial deliverance. Societal salvation is situated in the acceptance of imperfection. In Platel’s world view, that is precisely what we can and should hope for. In the representation of this realistic, and seemingly unassuming, perspective lies the overwhelming emotional force of the performance. It is also the key to the humanistic core that lies at the basis of Platel’s confrontational choreographic language.

When it comes to the relationship between the drastic and the gnostic in Platel’s response to the music, the former is the most apparent. C(H)ŒURS demonstrates that choreographic movement could indeed turn the perception of music on its head. When movements are derived not from the main melody but from textural qualities or musical figures of the accompaniment, the music is perceived in a thoroughly different way. Foreground becomes background, and vice versa. Platel’s spontaneous approach defies expectations but has the strength to reveal the energy of music in other ways. The listener is forced to experience the music anew in its basic quality of movement in sound. This drastic approach does not mean, however, that the gnostic interpretation is entirely absent. Platel does not directly invest in the images or concepts that the music conveyed in its original context. However, the residue of historical meaning remains present in the background of the perception. The concept of salvation is stripped of its ideological and religious connotations but makes for a meaningful dialogue with the representation of the search for bodily control and the struggle of the individual for recognition in the face of collective forces. The music provides more than a collection of objets trouvés. In dialogue with the dance and the stage action, it contributes to the elaboration of an intriguing semiotic space in which the embodied emotions of the present interact with a residue of historical experience.

Notes

4 Personal communication. My sincerest thanks to Steven Prengels for sharing this information with me.

Lorsque je réalise une pièce, j’essaie toujours de retrouver ce qui parle aux gens dans une musique déterminée. Qu’est-ce que les gens connaissent ou reconnaissent et comment puis-je utiliser cette musique de façon alternative? Cette “reconnaissance” garantit un lien émotionnel direct, que je trouve en l’occurrence extrêmement important pour cette pièce.’ Michaël Bellon, ‘Les Séductions du Choeur’, 10–11.


‘C’est un langage que j’explore depuis vsprs en 2006 et qui peut révéler des choses sur ce type de sentiments pour lesquels on ne trouve pas de mots. La danse a toujours joué un rôle à cet égard. Jadis, on voyait dans la danse ces mouvements langoureux et alanguis que l’on trouve un peu ridicules de nos jours, mais qui, alors, étaient peut-être pertinents. D’une façon similaire, peut-être que les mouvements brutaux que certaines personnes qualifient même de spastiques – ce que je n’aime pas entendre – sont symptomatiques de choses auxquelles nous sommes confrontés dans nos sociétés.’ Michaël Bellon, ‘Les Séductions du Choeur’, 10–11.


References


