

Danceworks, Aperi Animam and Maria Gillespie Team for a ‘War between Heaven and Hell’

John Schneider : 7-9 minutes : 5/14/2024

For me, the most exciting collaboration in the Milwaukee dance world this season arrives this Friday, Saturday, and Sunday at the Calvary Presbyterian Church at 935 W. Wisconsin Avenue. The double bill, titled “Dixit Dominus and Cantos,” will fill the church to bursting with 13 of our best contemporary dancers, all members of Danceworks Performance MKE, accompanied by 15 singers of the exquisite and far-ranging early music choir Aperi Animam and a small Baroque orchestra under Conductor Paul Thompson.

Christal Wagner, visionary artistic director of Danceworks, is the choreographer for *Dixit Dominus*, an impassioned 1707 masterwork by a young George Frideric Handel. Maria Gillespie, an important force in dance experiment, is the choreographer for *Cantos*, a collection of five choral songs that span the ages and continents, conceived by Gillespie, Thompson, and Aperi Animam Production Designer Jacque Willis.

“It’s about the war between heaven and hell,” says Willis about Handel’s piece, “but really it’s the conflict we have within ourselves.”

Meditative Baroque

Willis co-founded Aperi Animam seven years ago. Her current role, in addition to singing, is programming the what, who and where of the company’s undertakings. “We do mostly music from the Medieval and Renaissance periods,” she tells me, “so we dabble in Baroque music, which is what the *Dixit* is. But we also sing music written in a similar soundscape to those styles. We’ve been doing a lot more contemporary music. We try to provide a kind of meditative experience, a space for people to reflect on whatever message we’re giving or whatever they want to think about. We like to keep it open-ended, so people can hold the weight of the singing in the way they need.”

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Willis fell in love with *Dixit Dominus* as a music student at UWM and was surprised to learn that it was composed by a 22-year-old Handel. “He was living in Rome trying to prove that he was a master of the Italian style, writing this virtuosic, compassionate, expressive, really profound music,” she says. “It’s very hard for singers.”

“The Lord Said is the title’s translation,” she explains. “It was the time when God was looked on as a king rather than just a deity. It was also a time when the pope banned opera. So Handel created probably the most compelling, interesting setting of a church text ever, because it’s written like an opera. It has enough of a story, about the Lord conquering the world on a large scale, where Handel felt he could do that.”

“When I listened to it,” she continues, “I just saw some heavy athletic dancing. I thought it would beautifully heighten the already heightened passion of the piece into something really bombastic. I’d been looking for a project to collaborate with Danceworks because I knew Christal would be really thoughtful about the choreography and the music and have a

lot of respect for the scholarly way we approach things. I knew she would do intense research about the text and the music, which she did, and that her artistic process would be the perfect marriage for everything that early music is.”

Human Experience

Wagner picks up the story. “We definitely stray from the religious nature of it,” she says. “I went in a direction of thinking about the human experience of suffering. I’m always intrigued by the fact that we spend our time on earth trying to cope with suffering, thrown into trials to decide whether we enjoy something or we don’t, and with all the many emotions in between.”

“So I chose to follow one character as they experience the vast amount of emotions we experience as humans, but grappling with suffering always,” she continues. “Cuauhtli Ramirez Castro dances that character. But it’s very much an ensemble piece. We lean into the cyclical feeling and driving rhythms of the music to note the different types of suffering we’re forced into, not only by living a human existence, but one that has leadership that thinks one thing versus a population that thinks another. Like Jacque said, it’s about the war between heaven and hell, and we certainly think about war in the piece,” she confirms. “I wanted to touch on many things I felt the audience could relate to.

“It’s a bit abstract in the way the space is used,” she continues. “But with Cuauhtli playing a character we follow and empathize with, it’s dramatically theatrical. I know full well it’s going to be interpreted differently by everybody. They’re going to apply the thing that’s most haunting to them, and the thing that they’re going through in this moment. And all religions deal with that same curiosity about how to cope with suffering. They offer hope. So exploring those ideas is a way to allocate time and space in our brains for that.”

Ancient Text, Modern Composer

Similarly, Gillespie tells me of *Cantos* that she wanted to include “pieces of music rooted to folklore, the everyday person, the labor of life, the celebration of life, and the resistance that’s found in folklore; and then to play between the duality of our material present life and the mystical esoteric beyond that the sacred music evokes.”

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So *Cantos* opens with Meredith Monk’s *Dawn*, an avant-garde work using vocal sounds instead of words to convey awakening. A playful 13th century round come next, followed by a gritty Bulgarian polyphonic folksong. Then, the angelic *Ave Dona Sanctissima* about the Virgin Mary draws it to final sacred text, *Nunc Dimittis*, often sung in Catholic funeral ceremonies. Gillespie describes it as “an elegy about relinquishing your earthly life, and the peace that comes with recognizing that what comes after is promising. It’s an ancient text with music by a contemporary composer, Paul Smith.”

Willis tells me that Smith is delighted that his piece inspired a dance. And Gillespie says, “I’ve wanted to work with Danceworks for so long. What a joy to work with dancers who are profound, powerful and elegant in so many ways. It’s amazing that this show is with Aperi Animam. I’ve become really interested in vocal work and choreography lately, so much so that I started taking vocal lessons. I hope I do the singers justice.”

Performances are Friday, May 17, 7:30 p.m.; Saturday, May 18, 2:30 and 7:30 p.m., and Sunday, May 19, 2:30 p.m. at Calvary Presbyterian Church, 935 W. Wisconsin Ave. Visit danceworksmke.org or call 414-277-8480.

John Schneider

John Schneider is the Shepherd's dance writer. He is a longtime artist-in-residence and performing arts faculty member at Marquette University, and the founding director of the much-awarded Project Non-Violence.

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