



Dance and percussion

Throughout human history, percussion instruments have accompanied our music, our rituals and our dance.

In the West, they have gradually been integrated into the orchestra, making up an increasingly imposing section, whose role is evolving and whose numbers are growing over time. Instruments from non-Western cultures are also being added to traditional percussion, creating a source of incredible inspiration for composers and choreographers.

In the West, the early 20th century saw noise, as an element of the environment, becoming a source of fascination and inspiration for new soundscapes, which made increasing use of the constantly evolving percussion family. Growing awareness of non-European music also generated more interest in rhythm and gave a new dimension to compositions for percussion.

The foundations of this new music can be seen in particular in the works of Stravinsky, Debussy, Bartók and Varèse. These composers placed a new emphasis on the percussion section within the orchestra. In the instrumentation of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, a work extremely popular with choreographers (Nijinsky, Béjart, Bausch, Gallotta, Preljocaj and Graham), the percussion section takes centre stage.

During the First World War, Europe discovered jazz, both its music and its dance. This new trend from the United States was to have a massive impact on certain composers (Stravinsky, Milhaud, Ravel). The arrival of the jazz drums introduced the new concept with the diversity of timbres that could be played simultaneously by a single instrumentalist.

At the same time, the rise of Latin dance in the 1930s introduced new instruments which would be added to the orchestra's arsenal.

With *Ionisation* by Varèse in 1930, the first piece exclusively for percussion (13 performers playing 37 instruments), the possibility of a repertoire solely for percussion was born, a repertoire that would continue to blossom with composers like Carlos Chávez and John Cage. The latter's artistic collaboration with the choreographer Merce Cunningham marked an important chapter in the history of dance.

Dance and percussion are partners in crime, two histories colliding, often intersecting and growing together, enriching the other and always reinventing themselves, to our constant delight.



1. Between tradition and modernity, dance and percussion intertwine here and elsewhere...

In a relatively wide non-European context, several choreographers, with their origins in Asia, India and Africa, have drawn from the deep roots of their ancestral cultures and folklores, forging a resolutely innovative artistic identity, without turning their backs on a traditionally strong heritage.

The ChangMu dance company – *Chum, Ku Shinmyung*

In Korea, the creativity of the ChangMu Dance Company is founded on their complete mastery of all aspects of Korean traditional dance, including shamanic, Buddhist and folk dances, social dances and the dances of the court.

Chum, Ku Shinmyung – Dance and its dynamic force – offers us captivating choreography searching for modernity and freedom, drawing its original strength from a deeply rooted folk tradition. The music, played on traditional, mostly percussion instruments, is based on traditional melodies and rhythms, while borrowing very freely from a rich repertoire of folk dances,

Percussion instruments play a very important role here. The same four instruments are generally used to produce the rhythms for Nongak, the rural music and dance, and for the shamanic music Sinawi: the jing (a large gong), the buk (a barrel-shaped drum), the janggu (an hourglass-shaped drum) and the kkwaenggwari (a small gong).

Birju Maharaj – *Kathak*

In *Kathak*, Birju Maharaj immerses us in the delicate art of the eponymous North Indian dance.

He uses his extreme personal dexterity to demonstrate the dazzling facets of this traditional, precise dance with its fascinating steps. The play of nuances and contrasts and the musical quality of the gestures are a true delight, while the rich and complex rhythmic exchanges between Maharaj and his tabla player are exhilarating and show a rare precision.

Akram Khan – *Gnosis*

With *Gnosis*, in a more contemporary approach, the suggestive dance of Akram Khan allows us to see and hear all the subtlety of music played on the sarod (a plucked string instrument), cello and snare drum.

His gestures and those of the dancer Fang-Yi Sheu move between majestic force and a sensitive brittleness.

With his ability to bring music and dance to life, Khan confirms his status as a complete artist and a choreographer with a rare narrative vision.



Germaine Acogny – *Waxtaan*

Waxtaan (a wolof word meaning “palaver” or “parley”, “discussion”)

On the stage, eight exceptional African dancers are accompanied by live music from five percussionists from the Ecole des Sables playing djembes, doum-doums and other small percussion instruments. Sometimes the dancers also participate in the musical discourse by tapping on a table to create polyrhythms or by using their own bodies as percussion instruments.

They give a virtuoso demonstration of the riches of a repertoire that extends through Mali, Guinea, Burkina Faso, the Ivory Coast, Benin, Congo and Senegal. So many countries, so many rhythms, styles and choreographic identities participate in this search for origins, without nostalgia or attachment to the past because: “it’s the moment when you look back in order to be able to look forward” says the Franco-Senegalese choreographer Germaine Acogny, who gives the piece a political dimension.

Miguel Angel Berna – *Solombra*

Closer to home, in northern Spain, the communicative enthusiasm and fresh ideas of the Aragonese choreographer Miguel Angel Berna have allowed him to collaborate with many artists in expressing their folkloric heritage in innovative ways.

It’s about respecting tradition on the condition that it does not restrict their artistic practice. Thus, the musicians (playing several percussion instruments including traditional castanets and the wooden drum called the “cajón”), the singers and even a visual artist brought their expertise to the process of creation that resulted in *Solombra*, where everything breathes the innovation which Berna wanted so much: the expression of his free and personal vision of the fusion of the Aragonese folklore with flamenco and contemporary dance, based on a music clearly rooted in the foundations of a cultural past, but also very innovative with its exotic and charming influences from Arab, Jewish and Christian music, skilfully arranged.

Unanimously praised by the critics, Berna is also highly regarded by lovers of “Jota” (the traditional Aragonese dance), because he is a great dancer, a great choreographer, and with castanets in hand, the typical percussion instruments of the Jota, still a master of dance and percussion.

2. Dance and percussion, different directions and new present-day connections...

From the end of the 20th century until the present, other choreographic projects have continued to appear, impossible to categorise, with multiple influences that showcase the crossovers between dance, music and even theatre. They continue to nourish, in



sometimes very unusual ways, this relationship, both young and old, passionately enjoyed by dance and percussion.

Les Ballets C. de la B. – *Aphasiadisiac*

The musical universe of *Aphasiadisiac* of Les Ballets C. de la B. explores many and varied influences, combining the energy of Slavic melodies with the rhythms of bossa nova. It is supported by a hugely effective soundtrack that mixes pop, classical and traditional Czech music.

All the performers participate in the music and the live drums create an incredible electric atmosphere on the stage. Here drums and percussion impose rhythms, create suspense, provoke powerful energetic impulses and sometimes even play a direct part in the theatrical situations that develop among the dancers.

The drums therefore participate in the dramaturgical dimension of the piece, for example when Lhotáková clings to Pieterjan Vervondel as he plays the drum, her desperate kisses disturb his rhythm, creating an astonishing tension.

The visual impact and the unusual use of these percussion instruments also gives them a scenic role and a spectacular dimension, in particular when one of the musician-dancers climbs the wall to reach his drum which is suspended vertically in the stage set. He secures himself to the seat in order to suddenly let go and thus release his entire upper body: guaranteed surprise and sensation!

Arcosm – *Echoa*

Echoa also exploits performers' versatility and brings together dancers and percussionists in the same physical and musical ensemble. Created jointly in 2001 by the choreographer Thomas Guerry and the composer-percussionist Camille Rocailleux, this explosive quartet for two dancers and two percussionists is an original, poetic and mischievous exploration of the links between dance and music, as imagined by the Lyon duo from the Arcosm company.

Onstage, the presence of many percussion instruments (marimba, vibraphones, skins and accessories) constitutes the principal scenic element, and delineates the performance space.

Here all is dance, all is music. The contact, the hands placed on one another, the feet on the ground, the portés and even the breathing of the performers contribute to the piece's great rhythmic score. The musicians' gestures become the choreography to the point of completely freeing them from their instruments, creating a music of bodies, organic and subtle, that makes us forget the rigour of the very precise timing – an invitation to “see the music and hear the dance” as Balanchine so eloquently put it.



Association Woo – *Barroco*

Improvisation has often been seen as conducive to fascinating crossover collaborations between dance and percussion.

Constantly bouncing between extremely precise choreographic writing and improvisation, *Barroco* is in constant evolution, and appears as onomatopoeia, a whistle, a rhythmic refrain. Two dancers “switch” between the symmetrical and the asymmetrical, contradictory or mutually supportive movements, keeping the spectator in suspense throughout the piece.

In reality, this duet is actually a trio, created by the dancers with the musician, weaving a time-space that is in constant movement. The drummer-guitarist carries the beat, the tempo, the time that we cannot stop but which is always present, which sometimes tears us apart but which also brings us together. The accents, the variations and the nuances of the musical interplay nourish the dance and have a permanent influence on it.

Here, the rhythm defines the relationship to time, to the space between two sounds, an interval, a suspension. It drags, leaves a trace and pushes forwards, allowing the fluctuations and giving free rein to the sensual, the suspended, to initiative or to the chaotic.

This triangular relationship with the musician is very sensitive. On several occasions, long gazes exchanged by the three artists create a very particular intensity, the performance space thus exploited to its maximum. The tension generated on stage never diminishes, until the sober and quiet conclusion of this splendid, electrifying and magnetic performance.

There has always been a close relationship between dance and percussion. It is a natural, original and deep bond which opens up territories of infinite sharing and exchange, which always invites us to explore ever deeper, and allows us to catch glimpses of many unexplored avenues and possibilities. It is a fraternal bond linking the two languages, which are still far from having revealed all their secrets.



To go further :

Discography

OHANA, Maurice (1913-1992). *Quatre Etudes chorégraphiques* (18'), Ballet pour ensemble de six percussionnistes, CD Schott (Mayence), 1955.

Credits :

Camille Rocailleux studied piano, musical writing and classical percussion from 1984 to 1999 and won the 1st Prize at the National Conservatory of Music in Lyon. Since 1997, he has performed in various ensembles such as the Orchester National de Lyon, the Opéra National de Lyon, the Orchester National de Toulouse or Ensemble Odysée. In 2000, he founded the Arcosm Company with Thomas Guerry, with whom he creates musical and choreographed pieces. In addition, he receives many commissions for compositions for the theater, the cinema and the television, for instrumental formations, he evolves in the middle of the French and international song alongside artists such as Daphne, Benjamin Biolay, Camille, Caroline Rose ... Today he deepens his exploration of musical theater, imagining atypical crossings between very varied forms of expression such as body percussion, lyric singing, growl death metal, human beat-box etc.

Excerpts selection

Camille Rocailleux

Texts and discography

Camille Rocailleux

Production

Maison de la Danse

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