

Project description

Neither Nor

The Art of Violin Playing (or Don Quixote's Lance)

"Finally they passed the night among some trees, from one of which Don Quixote plucked a dry branch to serve him after a fashion as a lance..."

- Miguel de Cervantes, Don Quijote de la Mancha

The Art of Violin Playing (or Don Quixote's Lance) is a movement-based music-theatre work for 2 violinists, 2 dancers, actor, a team of volunteer performers, TENS muscle controllers, robotics and audio and video electronics. The key themes of the piece are unpredictability, fragility, absurdity and dignity. All are qualities that characterise Don Quixote, whose adventures informs its content.

Don Quixote is the story of a man who loses his mind to fiction. Old and frail, he believes himself to be a young and gallant knight. He will fight evil with his lance. But he mistakes windmills for giants and his battle is a farce. His enemies imagined.

The lance Don Quixote eventually fashions for himself is just the branch of a tree. But despite his foolishness and delusions, he is a man of tragedy and grace. He embodies some of the most compelling qualities of human aspiration and unpredictability. He captures our valiant struggle to transcend the frailties of flesh and bone. His endeavours aren't perhaps so very different from our own.

In aspiring to transcend our humble selves, we submit our capricious minds and bodies to impossible exertions. Human beings are endlessly inventive in devising new belief systems, techniques and proper methods. From religious texts to technical instruction manuals, we seek order, strategy and control. Carl Flesch's book 'The Art of Violin Playing' is one such epic of instruction.

To shape herself according to the model that's been devised, the violinist must undergo the daily discipline of practice. She must train like a soldier. Master her bow as a soldier might his weapon - or a fictitious knight his lance! She must serve her instrument entirely. And when it comes to performance, her presence on stage is as a violinist above all else. Her body is subsumed by the definition. The freedom she experiences in command of her technique, also renders invisible the constraints within which she plays.

The Art of Violin Playing (or Don Quixote's Lance) explores what music and what movements might emerge if this relationship is reversed. Instead of being in service to her instrument, the violinist's body becomes the instrument itself. And music a kind of by-product of her physical interaction with the violin.

Establishing the stage as an area for internal investigation allows for the absurd to emerge with dignity, for awkward and incongruous events to be driven by an internal logic. The space between the body and the techniques it has acquired became more visible, expansive, volatile and expressive. Expression emerging from exploration. The violinist's objectives aren't mastery and projection but a playful and unpredictable internal investigation - in which the symbolism of *Don Quixote* leads the way.

In *The Art of Violin Playing (or Don Quixote's Lance)*, the body is a vehicle for thought as well as action. Music is the song of this embodied thought. And a cognitive experience too. Not just a soundtrack to the action. Sound and movement, mind and body, text and action are all inextricably intertwined. Cognitive and causal relationships between music, language, stage action, mechanics, kinetics and electronics are investigated and re-assessed.

Background:

The Art of Violin Playing (or Don Quixote's Lance) started development in 2014, with two workshop performances at O Espaço do tempo in Portugal and at Cornerteateret in Bergen. Neither Nor has now received a letter of intent from the Bergen International Festival to premiere the final production in 2018. In order to complete the project, we need to further develop and document the movement vocabulary and sounds, improve portability and reliability of the robotics and other electronics, build additional robotics and electronics, advance the dramaturgy and develop scenography, costumes and lights.

By the time of the the work-in-progress performances in Portugal and Bergen we had made some initial studies into:

- How to prepare violinists for the physical work involved.
- What kind of working methods are fruitful for both violinists and dancers.
- In what ways can they best interact.
- What are the specifics of violin technique that can form the basis for our investigations.
- What kinds of sounds do these investigations produce.
- What kind of movement qualities emerge.
- How can these movement qualities be transposed and developed across every aspect of the performance.
- How to develop a movement and sound vocabulary that is investigative rather than performative in intention.
- What techniques do the performers need to develop in order to inhabit the theatre as in a private space in which they can try something out, rather than a public space in which they must perform.
- What role do the volunteers play.
- How can the live performers interact with the robotics, audio and other electronics.
- How can the story of Don Quixote inform and guide the mood, action and design of the piece.
- How to document and notate.

Use of technology:

The Art of Violin Playing (or Don Quixote's Lance) makes use of a range technologies, the intention of which is mostly to enhance the absurd and unpredictable elements of the piece. It is generally fragile and disruptive rather than slick and enabling. During the work-in-progress performances early prototypes for the electronic systems were used. They were unstable and unpredictable and need to be considerably developed for the premiere in 2018.

1. Robotic Arms:

Live performers share the stage with a number of mobile, partially autonomous wooden, branch-like robots that display a whimsical combination of kinetic virtuosity, helplessness and heroic fragility. Their visual rhyming with the violinists' arms and bows, the dancers' bodies and Don Quixote's lance makes them important elements in the piece. They are absurd and tragic, but at the same time dignified in their appearance and function. Easily anthropomorphised (bending as they do at the 'waist' to look like unusually tall, thin, Don Quixote-like figures) they become characters on the stage. As with the electronically controlled volunteer performers, they are not in control of their own actions. Their expressive qualities are always a by-product of external forces. Thus, as well as clearly illustrating the Don Quixote theme of the piece, they also encapsulate the theme of expression as a by-product (of something) rather than as a direct intention. The size and movement capacities of the robotic arms make it possible for them to reach all parts of the performance space from a fixed point on the stage. However, we would like to increase the mobility of these robots so that they can move around the stage, as well as increasing their number to 8. We also need to develop their narrative role in the piece.

2. Moving Scenography:

One significant area in which this piece needs to be developed is scenography. Our plan is to construct a series of large, self-propelling (robotic) panels that will constitute a versatile and responsive scenography (an ecosystem) with which we can easily transform the space and provide a means for artists to enter and exit the stage invisibly. They will also act as projection surfaces with which we can integrate video more closely into the staging.

3. Video:

The video material in this piece consists of filmed observation exercises, as well as of re-workings and re-enactments of scenes from Werner Herzog's 1971 deaf-blind documentary *Land of Silence and Darkness*. The act of 'reading' and 'speaking' with the hands (body) explored in the original documentary and the project's video material is a theme we would like to investigate and develop further, as it expands the possibilities for reflecting on the body as a vehicle for thought (not only action).

4. Volunteers TENS performers & wireless muscle sensors:

In the first phase of the piece we created a system for remote controlling the volunteer performers' muscles with Transcutaneous Electrical Nerve Stimulators (TENS). The TENS themselves were controlled by the violinists' audio output and by muscle tension sensors, as well as by pre-set sequences.

The volunteers' role is not only to act as an onstage audience (thereby establishing the function of the space as a place for observation) but also as a kind of chorus, commenting on the stage action with gestures imposed on them by the actors themselves. By functioning as kind of emotional feedback loop, they create the act of expression as an absurdity. Their seemingly emotive physical gestures (of arms raised to heaven or hands and shoulders contorted in pain) are entirely out of their control and without intent. In this respect their actions rhyme with those of the robotic 'arms'. The result is ridiculous but also touching. We are moved to empathy and humility by their lack of expression, rather than because of it. The two work-in-progress performances implemented prototypes of the technical systems which we now need to develop further for more reliability, complexity and wireless control.

