

At the start of **Claire Croizé** and **Etienne Guilloteau**'s new dance piece **Béla**, four dancers burst from the back corner of the stage, propelling their bodies forward in a tight formation before breaking apart. Each of them – **Claire Godsmark**, **Laure de Dietrich**, **Cintia Sebök**, and **Anne-Laure Dogot** – moves as if driven by an internal pulse: staccato movements, sharp angles, clipped percussive sounds. The piece's title refers to the 20<sup>th</sup> century Hungarian composer **Béla Bartók**, yet this first dance occurs in silence. Two pianists and two drummers wait behind their instruments at the back of the stage, letting the dance speak first. This opening establishes the body as the primary source of rhythm. Each dancer follows their own motif, introducing the principle of polyrhythm before it is even heard in the music. "Even if it's not entirely true," Croizé says, "this is a way of saying: we are leading."

When the music – Bartók's ***Sonata for Two Pianos and Percussion*** – finally breaks loose, its energy matches that of the dance: vibrant and explosive, full of sudden shifts and contrasts. Croizé and Guilloteau, eager to deepen their research into the musicality of the body by working with a complex polyrhythmic piece, knew that **Ictus ensemble** could deliver. For Ictus, the *Sonata* holds special significance as one of their earliest works, now reprised by founding member **Jean-Luc Plouvier** alongside a new cast: **Marlies Debacker**, **Tom De Cock**, and **Gerrit Nulens**.

With music this powerful and bewildering, staying close to the score is a way to tell a story that translates more easily – something the choreographers know from their experience with avant-garde composers such as Charles Wuorinen. Yet by remaining one step ahead of the music, the dancers also assert a measure of control: rather than being overpowered by the sound, they can play with it. This tension between tight composition and organic movement runs throughout the piece and ECCE's practice more broadly. **Hans Meijer**'s light design for *Béla* follows the same spirit: at times, it flickers across the stage like changeable weather, gathering and dissolving according to a choreography of its own.

Bartók's complex rhythmical structures were deeply influenced by the folk music he recorded across Eastern Europe, North Africa, and the East – an influence the choreographers carry into their interpretation. Rather than reproducing folk dances, the choreography draws on the dancers' embodied knowledge of different traditions: folk, but also ballet, jazz, tap, contemporary, even *danse de caractère* and pantomime. Just as Bartók did not distinguish between a Hungarian peasant song and Mahler's *Song of the Earth*, the choreographers allow these references to coexist without hierarchy. "It is completely unironic," Guilloteau stresses. "For us, these styles help to evoke different images and atmospheres."

As with many of ECCE's creations, the choreographers also turned to literature to feed this process. In search of Hungarian writers who could offer insight into Bartók's world, Croizé encountered **Attila József**. His poetry is both evocative and unsentimental, speaking of the earth not as picturesque landscape, but as a thundering force that threatens and sustains us. Figures lifted from his poems – sinking into the soil, ploughing the earth, rising towards the sun – quietly filter into the dancers' physical vocabulary. At other times, these images lean into the absurd, the surreally strange. When the dancers halt mid-stride to form a demonic tableau – clawing, hissing and wagging their tongues at the audience – we are drawn into a world that is both dreamlike and unsettling.

This atmosphere deepens when the *Sonata*'s second movement introduces another dramaturgical strand: the descent into the night. Bartók's 'night music' – a recurring motif in his work – is far removed from the romantic contemplation of composers such as Chopin. Instead, it is vivid, anguished and chaotic. As the light dims, the dancers' shimmering, iridescent costumes come alive. Costume designer **Anne-Catherine Kunz** – whose distinctive style, like that of Meijer, has become part of ECCE's signature – has crafted a patchwork of sportswear and intricate, precious fabrics. Creeping through muted light, the dancers resemble strange birds of

paradise, lurking in nocturnal forests – skittish creatures with sticky feathers, ticking their feet to the music's beat.

Their performance echoes the birdsong evoked by the notes of the second movement, while also foreshadowing a new piece of music: **Robin Hoffmann's *Birkhahn Study***. The *Sonata's* brief duration called for forays into other composers and genres – extensions that not only lengthen the work but also disrupt the mathematical perfection of the composition. For the first time, one of the musicians steps out from the tight cluster at the back. Moving among the dancers, Tom De Cock plays a birdcall with expressive gestures. His entrance sets off the first domino in the gradual unravelling of the division between musicians and dancers. Positions are reshuffled, and the notion of what counts as an instrument is expanded, as when De Cock uses his hands to tap a rhythm on his chest, while the dancers add their voices to the mix.

*Béla's* dramaturgical arc runs from nightfall to daybreak. Before dawn arrives, however, we slip even further into the night with ***Protogravity* (Errorsmith & Mark Fell)**, an intricate electronic piece transposed by Ictus to analogue instruments. Its driving rhythms introduce a dense, club-like atmosphere, to which the dancers respond with smooth movements and a cool attitude. They glide across the stage in unisono, lifting their knees in a way that evokes rave dance as much as tap. At the same time, this section carries some of *Béla's* most overt folk references: touching hands, the dancers prance in circles. They don magnificent headpieces, resembling the pleated crowns seen in traditional representations of Igor Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps*.

Eventually, the mood lifts with the *Sonata's* third movement: a *scherzo rondo*. If the first part of *Béla* emphasizes the downward pull of the earth – with dancers slumping low, their limbs hanging heavy, their feet stomping to grounded rhythms – the third movement sees a shift towards lightness and buoyancy, carried by the higher register. “One of the foundations of dance,” Croizé says, “is the knowledge that the floor supports you. By pushing up from it – like a plant pushing through the soil – you can grow towards the sky. You can approach that technically, or in a more mystical or spiritual way, as a way of celebrating the earth.”

Just as the opening insists on the primacy of the dance, the last word, too, is withheld from Bartók. That honor instead goes to ***Rllrlrlrlrlrlrlrlrlrlr***, a repetitive rhythmic composition by **Julian Sartorius**. Performed by two percussionists at the front of the stage, with surprising interventions from the other performers, this final piece brings everyone together in a quietly joyful, near-utopian moment of equality. What *Béla* ultimately seems to propose is neither submission nor resistance to the music, but an active negotiation, in which precision becomes a condition for play.

As the music fades, movements from the beginning of the piece reverberate through the dance – echoes rather than returns. A perfect circle, spiralling back to the beginning, is out of the question. The spool has uncoiled too far, the order has been too thoroughly shaken and reworked. *Béla* does not close in on itself; it remains open, its edges frayed.

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