



## INTERVIEW: MATTHIAS SPERLING Q&A

TUESDAY 2 FEBRUARY 2010



**Matthias Sperling is a contemporary dance artist, choreographer, performer and educator, originally from Canada and now based in London. He danced with Wayne McGregor's Random Dance for five years and has also danced with Matthew Bourne's Adventures in Motion Pictures and Siobhan Davies Dance.**

**As part of a celebration of the work of composer George Benjamin, Matthias has been commissioned to make a new work which can be seen at the Queen Elizabeth Hall on Sunday 7 February....**

**Tell us about your part in the London Sinfonietta's celebration of composer George Benjamin's 50th Birthday...**

**Southbank Centre** have given me the very exciting challenge of creating a choreographic response to *Viola, Viola*, a fiery and exhilarating piece for two solo violas. The work is so densely packed with events between the two musicians that I wanted to also make a duet, and invited the phenomenal **Rachel Krische** to join me. I decided to place the parallel journeys of the dance and the music side by side (watching the musicians play the piece is in itself very visually rich), hence the title *Duet, Duet*.

George has a wonderful openness to collaboration, and it was his suggestion that this particular work could invite a choreographic encounter. My extremely lucky break came through Southbank and **Siobhan Davies** – when she wasn't free to do the commission herself, she very generously pointed them in my direction, knowing I would love the challenge. Having a dialogue with George during this process has been completely thrilling – he is spectacularly acute in the way that he describes the work (despite having written it twelve years ago), while also genuinely inviting a totally free response to it.

**What is it you particularly like about his music?** \*\*I can understand why George is described as one of the outstanding composers of his generation. His works really have the quality of living organisms: complex, multi-layered, unpredictable, yet fluid and continuous. His works have a personality that you get to know more and more closely as you listen repeatedly, and they seemingly never run out of new facets to reveal. *Viola, Viola* itself is a tour de force – after hearing a recording, people frequently guess that they have just heard four or five violas all playing at once, not just two. I also love that the piece is, in one sense, a riposte to the indignity of 'viola jokes'. Much to my surprise, this is a huge phenomenon in orchestras – google it, it's pretty astounding!

**How did you first get in to dance?** \*\*In Toronto, Canada, where I grew up, I saw a performance of a youth dance company when I was nine, and that was it for

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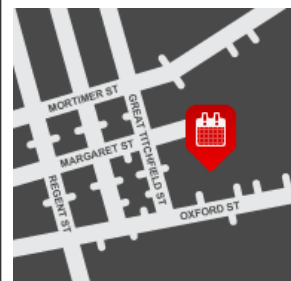
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me. Thanks to supportive (if slightly bemused) parents, I started training with that group the day after I saw them, and stayed with them for nine years, training intensively and performing in commissioned works by over 20 different choreographers.

**Do you remember the first performance you saw which really impressed you?** \*\*Aside from that first brush with dance, I remember absolutely idolising **Toronto Dance Theatre** when I was young – in exactly the way that many dance artists who grew up here describe being awed by **Rambert** or **London Contemporary Dance Theatre (LCDT)**. Like LCDT, it began as a Graham-based rep company formed after forays to New York. I'm really fascinated by the way that those dancers still seem like demigods in my memory, although what I'm interested in doing now is so different. Sometimes, I think there might be a piece lurking somewhere in that dichotomy...

**The companies you've worked with have been very wide ranging – from Wayne McGregor's Random to Siobhan Davies Dance. Has that been a conscious choice to expand your range – or responding to opportunities?** \*\*I guess it might seem outwardly strange, but in certain ways, I don't see Wayne and Sue as worlds apart. For me, what interests me about working with each of them is their investigation, the meatiness of their creative processes. The fact that the results have individual signatures doesn't make them un-linkable for me.

**With Random, which was the production you most enjoyed working on?**

Working with Random was always exciting, but I suppose Wayne offered me some particularly juicy challenges, which I really relished, in the last creation I did with him, **Amu**. Dancing that work with **John Tavener's** score performed live by 60 musicians and 8 singers was also completely breathtaking. Oh, and we spent a month on an island off the coast of Kenya while we were making the work, that was rather incredible too.

**And Siobhan Davies?** \*\*Aside from participating in the (now sadly discontinued) Bank Project and having fantastic dialogue with Sue as a choreographic mentor, I've done just one collaboration with her: a solo performance in **Minutes**, part of a dance and visual art exhibition **The Collection**, shown in art galleries last year. I hugely respect how Sue continues to challenge herself to experiment in her work. In this process, we really delved into what it means to engage with the different time, space and context of the gallery – it felt to me like an incredibly exciting expansion of choreographic practice and something I would definitely like to pursue further.

**How do you think of yourself now – primarily as a dancer, or a choreographer?**

I like to think of myself as an artist now, more than as a dancer, and I like to keep re-evaluating what that means. I'm still interested in performing and collaborating with other artists as well as making my own work, but in situations where I am invited to participate in drawing the boundaries of a work, rather than to fill in boundaries that are already fixed.

**Is your own choreography driven by movement, or ideas?** \*\*If idea suggests mind and movement suggests body – I like to think of dance as being about the relationship between body and mind, so I would similarly like to think of my choreographic practice as being about the relationship between idea and movement.

**Are you enjoying the freedom of working as an independent dance artist these days?** \*\*Operating independently seemed daunting at first, but I love it now. I really value being able to put my own interests into practice and gradually develop my own perspective on things. I learned a huge amount from the years that I worked in a company situation and had a fantastic time, but I don't think I fit in to that type of environment anymore.

**You were part of Transitions at Laban. Did you find that a valuable experience?** \*\*I did Transitions in 1998, soon after I first came to the UK from Canada. I had just taken some time away from dancing to make sure I wasn't just

continuing to do it as a habit, so it was a really good chance for me to get going again and it also gave anyone I hassled for a job here something on my CV that they recognized and respected.

**So what else will you be working on in 2010?** \*\*The next thing I'll be working on is a commission for third year students at Northern School of Contemporary Dance, and after that, I'm hatching a plan to make a new installation that explores how our everyday understanding of the relationship between our mind and body might be provoked to evolve in some way by the rapid progress being made in brain science.

**If you weren't working in dance, what would you like to be doing?** \*\*If I wasn't a dance artist, I could imagine myself as a scientist studying consciousness and the brain. However, I'd very likely end up sabotaging my scientific ambitions by inadvertently transforming all of my experiments into dances.

**See Matthias in London Sinfonietta's celebration of George Benjamin on Sunday 7 February, Queen Elizabeth Hall. [More details/online booking](#)**

**Find out more:** [www.matthias-sperling.com](http://www.matthias-sperling.com)

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