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Fascinating draw through dance and music

By Katharina von Glasenapp

With dance and music, the Tero Saarinen Company and the Boston Camerata explore the spiritual world of the Shakers at the Bregenz Festival.

BREGENZ - Lilli Paasikivi, the director of the Bregenz Festival, is also integrating dance productions from her Finnish homeland into her first season. On Wednesday, the Tero Saarinen Company, together with the Boston Camerata in "Borrowed Light" developed an enormous pull, and next Wednesday and Thursday, "Study for Life," a tribute to the Finnish composer Kaija Saariaho, who died in 2023, will follow.

Tero Saarinen, the 60-year-old dancer and choreographer, was inspired by the history of the Shakers in "Borrowed Light," a religious sect that split off from the British Quakers in the 18th century and emigrated to America in 1774 with their spiritual leader Mother Ann Lee. With ecstatic shaking and dancing, the Shakers made contact with the spirits of the deceased in their services; later, this developed into strictly choreographed gestures and melodies. The Shakers strived for harmony and simplicity in their lives, are known for their design and woodworking, and were very progressive in their pursuit of equality.

Saarinen, who after his time as an active dancer also studied Asian forms of movement such as Japanese Butoh dance and incorporated them into his choreographies, developed "Borrowed Light" back in 2004. He had heard a recording of the Boston Camerata with the hymns and melodies of the Shakers and contacted their musical director Joel Cohen. The pure, natural sound of the eight-part a cappella ensemble and the melodies, which are simple, soloistic or monophonic in the group, rarely polyphonic, combine in an almost magical way with the calm, flowing, intense movements of the eight dancers.

A ritualized movement language emerges with wide-ranging arms and long strides, with rhythmic clapping and stomping, which creates its own pulse. By amplifying the sound of the steps with microphones, one experiences even more how the dancers are drawn into the pull of the movement. One feels the spiritual power, also the community in work songs or in joyful folkloric melodies. Solos, duets, communal swaying in the group, sometimes a circle dance of both ensembles together form a language of expression of great depth and tranquility; silence, the unaccompanied dance, is also important.

The dance company and the choir merge with each other; the singers are in motion, relating to the dancers. A lot of atmosphere is created by the play of light and shadow, with which Mikki Kunttu as stage and lighting designer illuminates the space of the workshop stage. Erika Turunen's costumes appear both heavy and light. Over 70 minutes, an enormous density is

created, which was recognized by the audience with long-lasting applause.