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## **What an American Free Church Can Still Teach Us Today**

**The Tero Saarinen Company was inspired by the Shakers. The minimalist piece was now seen in Bregenz.**

BY ELISABETH SCHWIND

There are said to be movements in which one dances one's own name. But to design an entire ballet about a religious movement seems rather far-fetched. Especially since the Shakers - this American free church is what this is about - even at their peak in the mid-19th century, only reached 6,000 members. Nevertheless, the Finnish Tero Saarinen Company was inspired by the Shakers for their evening "Borrowed Light."

This is because many principles of the movement appear surprisingly modern from today's perspective: the Shakers lived gender equality and pacifism. They were also considered open to technical progress and innovations, developed their own minimalist design and architectural style, were economically successful, but nevertheless lived in communes without private property. The name "Shaker" comes from the shaking dances with which they danced themselves into ecstasy in their services - that alone is a perfect template for any choreographer.

Nevertheless, Tero Saarinen does not want his choreography to be understood as a piece specifically about the Shakers, but as one about community and devotion in general. As always: anyone who experienced "Borrowed Light" during the Bregenz Festival understood why this 20-year-old piece is still so successful. Especially in conjunction with the music, which consists of nothing more than the simple, monophonic chants of the Shakers (Boston Camerata), a world unfolds here that, in its reduction, pleasantly stands out from our overstimulated present.

The stage is unadorned and dark, light falls only indirectly onto the dance floor as if through the small window of an old church building (hence the title "Borrowed Light" - a specialty of Shaker architecture), on which the eight singers also move (stage and light: Mikki Kunttu). All wear long, black skirts (costumes: Erika Turunen), the footwear is heavy and robust, appropriate for a hard-working world, the dance steps often wide-legged and stomping.

And yet there is this connection between grounding and spirituality, between down-to-earthness and ecstasy, which exerts a very special fascination.

The same applies to the music, which comes entirely without instrumental accompaniment. The chants, some performed solo, some in groups (musical direction: Anne Azéma), have a folkloric character on the one hand, but then again, in their modal tonality, they also seem like a religious return to late medieval melodies. In the last quarter of the evening, the space is additionally

expanded into the sacred by added reverb (sound direction: Heikki Iso-Ahola), which would not even have been necessary for this minimalist art.

On July 30/31, the Tero Saarinen Company will present another choreography, "Study for Life," this time to the music of Kaija Saariaho. [www.bregenzerfestspiele.com](http://www.bregenzerfestspiele.com)