

# 'WHEN I MOVE, I BREATHE WHEN I BREATHE, I MAKE SOUND WHEN I MAKE SOUND, I MOVE'

I meet Simon Mayer end of November 2019 in Brussels where he is rehearsing for his newest piece *Being Moved*. The dancefloor is empty, on one side stands a little piano, and a violin lies on the table. In his work, Mayer explores different artforms but also practices that expand the consciousness, in order to nourish his artistic practice. He tells me: 'The combination of movement, breath and sound is the key to perform in a more universal way and to enjoy the full range of the expression of the body.'

An interview with performer/dancer, choreographer and musician Simon Mayer by Eva Decaesstecker (art historian, writes regularly for Kaaitheater, Rekto:Verso and Cc Strombeek)

You started out in ballet and then moved to contemporary dance. What were you missing or looking for, that triggered you to make this shift?

Most of my artistic shifts came from being inside some kind of system and needing to break out of it. That system appeared in ballet, in the state opera, in PARTS, and is part of the freelance scene in which I am now, but of course it also exists outside the arts world. I question my personal relation with these systems, which I call the field. The field can be society as such but also an energy field, an atmosphere, the political context in which we live.

My first encounter with strict forms was in ballet. In my opinion, it does not allow the full potential for a human to manifest. That is why I felt much more at home in music, and later in performance and contemporary dance. Although contemporary dance is the most open field I know for now and it allows human expression in its full capacity, I'm still looking around to see if there are other forms of expression that might suit me better. It's not important to find the ultimate form of expression, you have to use a form with which you can connect at this very moment.

Music appears very physical and performative in your performances. Which role does music play for you in your pieces?

When I move, I have to breathe and make sound. These are the three keys that appear when I go into rehearsal or into a performance practice. They are part of my natural expression: voice, breath, and movement. I cannot see them as separate forms. What I'm interested in when making something, is the link between spirituality and art. This counts for me professionally, but also personally. I use singing, dancing, and playing instruments for my self-balance. It explains why I've always been drawn to a multi-dimensional practice. The combination of movement, breath and sound are for me a universal way of using the body, it comes from the inside. A lot

of human bodies that I observe – including myself – find their potential through these three keys. In a lot of spiritual practices, these are the major things that keep the energy flowing. You cannot hold back on any of those three because it would block some potential.

In traditional art and celebrations, you indeed also always find a combination of movement, music and some kind of larger spiritual experience. Does that explain why you so easily go back to your own folk tradition?

Before the ballet, I did folk dance and folk music. I learned yodelling from my father, there was a children folk dance group, and we had a folk music group with my brother and the neighbours. I grew up on an organic farm, in a traditional environment, in a small village. When I came to Brussels, being far away from home, these traditions became interesting again. The distance made me question my origins and culture, and made me return to folk dance and music. I went back and became part of that childhood folk dance group again, which still exists. Whenever I go home, I still have a rehearsal with them or we do a show. Back then I didn't know why folk was so interesting on a deeper level for me. I later discovered it was because of the completeness of its artistic practice: where there is dancing, singing or vocal celebration is always involved.

But I felt there was another dimension in these folk dances. In *Volxfest* I experiment with going away from the stage to create a more immersive and interactive experience exploring the proximity of an audience. I use the artistic and celebratory quality of folk art as a resource to meet past trauma that folk culture and our society has gone through.





I also started to research tribal dances and music and their rituals from an anthropological point of view. These dances are not only used to have a good time in the community but can also be part of healing practices or of rituals for the sun to come back the next morning. I discovered that the link between spirituality, art and healing is very present in traditional art; a link that has been lost since the onset of Modernity in Western society. I feel connected when I'm in contact with traditional culture. When I talk about spirituality, I also see it from this angle: just being in connection with yourself. It can literally be about being in physical touch with yourself or with another person, but also in more abstract terms, with a collective or with something unknown, that I don't know how to name.

In your newest piece, *Being Moved*, you connect with spirituality by letting trance play an important role. How do you seek to integrate this trance practice? Is your aim to pull people into a trance, give them a physical experience? Or are you also aiming to give them a transcendental, spiritual experience?

I always felt drawn to folk art because it has the potential to give direct access to an expression of the creative soul and heart of each individual. Trance is a well-known tool for this. I also use trance in my own practice: it helps to counterbalance self-judgement, because all that matters is being in touch with yourself and revealing whatever is present in you right now.



*Sons of Sissy* © image Arne Hauge

Therefore I'm searching how my performance can be of any use to the audience, in whatever way it is needed at that moment. What impact can the trance I perform have on the audience members? Can my performance become a channel for the audience? Can it conduct

them to somewhere else? I'm not looking for a spectacular physical effect. I want to use trance as a reminder of the audience's own potential. I hope that there will be something contagious about it, though in a beneficial way.

Trance is a practice that comes back in a lot of cultures all over the world. Is there one that you are working with specifically?

Yes, it's called cognitive trance. It's a practice that was further developed by Corine Sombrun. With the help of neuroscience and through giving workshops, she discovered that the trance state is a state we can all access. A year ago, this state of trance was recognized officially by neuroscientists.

The state that people reach through this cognitive trance is something that most people know from before. I knew it from folk dance and music, and from spinning. Or from moments of pure joy or partying. But what's interesting with Corine's trance practice is the ability to induce it in one second and also immediately stop it. My interest in the scientific development around trance is to find the link with a trance practice and an artistic practice.

When looking at your work, you could say that *Sons of Sissy* and *SunBengSitting* has a connection with the past, with tradition. *Oh Magic* is placed in the future. And now, with *Being Moved*, you come to the present. Is there for you personally or on a larger, society-wide scale a need to be in the present?

There is definitely a need to dive into the present. At the same time, when it acquires the form of an improvisation, it scares me a lot: not being able to bear not being prepared. With the solo, I'm consciously going in a direction where I still haven't arrived yet, where fear is still dominant, instead of flow or love. Being here and now, and using the situation that I have with an audience for example, that is what trance is really good at. It enables a state of being connected, to yourself but also to the outside. This may seem a very individual practice, but it also resonates with larger groups of people. For me it speaks again about these four levels: finding the home in myself, finding the home with another person, with the collective, and the unknown. Those four aspects keep on coming back in a way, also in *Being Moved*. All this has to do with the here and now. Slowing down and meeting the challenges of life, changes and impermanence with full presence. This is very helpful, especially in the times we are facing now.

You take experiences and practices from all around the world into your own practice. Would you say you are appropriating these cultures? What is your opinion about that? Which position do you take yourself in this debate?

A year ago, my team collaborated with the Coupé Décalé collective (who are very involved with the question of cultural appropriation) and made the *Ecstatic Body Festival*. We invited several trance experts such as Corine Sombrun, a Korean shaman, and a Derwish to give workshops. In each workshop we added a second (Western) teacher to address the aspect of cultural appropriation in a practical way. Because of the general focus on discourse that exists around cultural appropriation,



our goal was to deal with it in practice. We also held a symposium called *Cultural Appropriation versus Appreciation*, with several Latin American artists and researchers from different countries and backgrounds. And one thing that still stays in my mind is the concept that Robert Steijn contributed: cultural appreciation. What does appreciation mean and how far can you go, in being curious, in wanting to know everything? And when does it turn into appropriation? By the definition that I know about appropriation, it cannot happen if there is a deep appreciation. You need to create a deep understanding and awareness of the practice, fully respect it, stay conscious of where it comes from and let it feedback to these origins.



Oh Magic © image Caroline Lessire

Intuitively, without knowing too much about cultural appropriation, for *SunBengSitting* or *Sons of Sissy*, I first really wanted to connect to where I came from, to find out more about myself. I didn't know what to do with everything I had learned at school about other cultures, such as ballet, afro-dance and other forms of dance. For example, some people call ballet an Austrian tradition, most people link it to the Vienna State Opera, but I found that it is actually very international. The clapping on the back of the feet and the stamping in folk dances is not from Austria, it happens nearly everywhere. Instead of looking for differences, I want to see what they have in common. Without ignoring its diversity, this question remains important to me: 'What do we share?'