

Voice Noise

JAN MARTENS / GRIP

Assembly Line



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With ‘Voice Noise’, Jan Martens wants to put forgotten or silenced female musical artists in the spotlight. The minimalist staging, the large number of songs and artists featuring on the soundtrack, and the lack of discernible development in the dancers from one song to the next give the performance more the character of the roll-out of an assembly line than a real engagement between the six dancers on stage and the 13 female artists supposed to be highlighted in the backing soundtrack.

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A feeling of lightness dominates from the start. While the audience is still finding their seats, the six performers hang around on stage, shuffling their feet and joking. The lights, evenly distributed across the ceiling, cast a cool haze: soft and directionless. As the performance progresses, the lighting will shift dramatically

from dim pools of light to sharply defined tracking spots that sometimes sway back and forth like a wave. Six microphones stand lined up at the front of the stage as if in silent protest. They wait. So do we.

Fog fills the space as the dancers make their way to the microphones. They vary in age, skin colour and gender. Their clothing is casual and colourful. This celebration of diversity and careful attention to inclusion is characteristic of Martens' oeuvre. The dancers take turns to make distinct sounds and voices into the microphone. It soon grows to a sprawling polyphony of sounds, somewhat reminiscent of a contemporary version of the chorus from Greek tragedies. But here the words have no meaning, they are more like hissing whispers, growling throats, panting breaths, gasps for air and sound imitations. These vocal warm-up exercises feel like exorcisms. It is a taste of what awaits us.

One of the female voices then calls out: ‘Good evening, everyone’. At this point, the intention of the light and informal mood of the beginning becomes clear. The deliberately relaxed and self-reflexive greeting and introduction subtly suggests that this evening’s ‘performance’ is not performative. Rather, the attitude exudes the message that we are here to share the experience of listening to these forgotten voices. The movements of the dancers on stage hence become - or are assumed to be - secondary. The performers step out of the *performance, as it were*.

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This self-reflexivity is a recurring theme throughout the performance. The performers take turns dancing or interpreting the soundtrack, after which they step aside and watch how others do it. As a result of this distance, the energy remains sober and restrained. The faces of the performers are usually solemn or encouraging. It seems a conscious choice to avoid grand gestures, easy entertainment or powerful expression. Yet this decision to leave room for the sounds, to respect the sounds, creates alienation: between sounds and movements, voices and expressions. Between them and us.

The first song is announced and duly credited to Cheri Knight. The performers dance to it together, with their own characteristic style. It is a freedom that only feels choreographed in its way of assigning each performer a specific space. Each of these dancers introduce themself in a vocally specific way: one staccato, the other flowing, yet another with a strangely choked voice. They repeat phrases from The Raincoats to different rhythms and with different accents: ‘I'm no one's little girl’. ‘I'll never be in your family tree’. The hands are dominant in most of the performers' movements: fingers that reach out, grab and sometimes offer resistance.

The soundtrack presents a total of 13 artists. They have been carefully selected. It is an ambitious curatorial gesture. All women, all innovative and in one way or another overlooked, unknown or simply forgotten voices, from the 20th and 21st centuries, from all over the world. Giving a voice to the oppressed, forgotten or undervalued: it is beautiful in theory. But what about *the execution*? The selection is an eclectic treasure trove of strange and wonderful sounds, but it is not immediately clear what these artists have in common other than their gender. Although the performers carefully mention all these artists by name, and the programme also introduces them in such a way that anyone who wants to can

look them up afterwards, it all feels too rushed, too broad, too much of a pre-programmed procession on stage.

Most crucially, too often I struggle to discern a profound connection between the voices of the sound archive and the bodies on stage that are supposed to embody them or move with them. In the translation, all these remarkable but remarkably different pieces of musical invention are blended in dance interpretations that neither engage with the historical or artistic traditions of the musical pieces or demonstrate any sort of development through their interactions with the music other than the simple demonstrative statement: this is how I dance to this.

The performers remain in their bubble the entire time. I have no doubt that this is a deliberate, even Brechtian, choice. Perhaps it is about *not wanting to* feel, not letting go and immersing ourselves, but about remaining critical and conscious. But that only works if the body also gives us a compelling contrasting argument. This is hardly the case. Too often this felt like a rehearsal, as if we were watching warm-ups and not revolutions. Or rather, it felt as if we were tired attendees at a late afterparty thrown by an eccentric host who completely controls the Spotify queue. We listen approvingly, but nothing sticks and the next day we wake up unchanged.

That said, some numbers stand out. Here the dance becomes more raw and the dancers seem more engaged. Especially when Maja S. Ratkje's experimental track swells - if 'swell' is even the right word for something that feels more like a wound bursting open. Zora Westbroek's hands move and tremble. Her spine twists. She falls to the floor as if possessed. Her mouth opens to speak, but what comes out is distorted - whispers, moans, screams. Hysteria, voguing, clowning, grotesque parody, all in layers. The body becomes monstrous, strange in its familiarity.

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However, due to the contrasting presence of the dancers, the mood quickly changes once again. In other words, it is back to the rippling improvisational jam session. In addition to the aforementioned Westbroek, the young Loeka Willems and the towering Mamadou Wagué sometimes draw attention with their bending, TikTok-friendly extravagance. The rest of the ensemble (Steven Michel, Sue-Yeon Youn and Elisha Mercelina) rarely make a comparable impression because the fast-paced choreography, which jumps quickly from one song to the next, leaves no time for things to sink in or for more intimate and subtle relationships to develop between the dancers and the soundtrack.

Ultimately, the prevailing suspicion is that underneath the surface, hidden behind the guise of bringing underappreciated female voices to the fore, Martens' work offers too little substance in terms of true engagement with the musicians on their own premises. Remarkably, the static sounds of the record tape, are alive on a completely different level than the self-conscious bodies that try to embody it.

As time passes, I lose interest. The dancers start and stop, the music continues to move through the 13 selected artists, but fundamentally, nothing changes on stage. The movements continue, but as with the river of Heraclitus, this constant

flow of movement, of change, has something static and fixed about it. ‘Emp-ty. Emp-ty’. Maria Rossi of Cucina Povera repeats it in the hypnotising ‘Varisevalehti’. The word passes through me like a diagnosis. Is this another self-reflective joke? At the end, the dancers continue to dance together until darkness devours them. The audience hesitates, unsure if it is over, until a dancer briefly says it is. We exhale. But do we feel any different? Not really. Not in a way that matters.