

# the DANCE insider

Flash Interview, 6-14: Harmonizing  
Caines Takes on a Musical Opus

By Philip W. Sandstrom  
Copyright 2005 Philip W. Sandstrom

NEW YORK -- On Thursday at Danspace Project at St. Mark's Church, the Christopher Caines Dance Company premieres Caines's "Tenebrae," with 10 dancers joined by 40 singers and one conductor, Kristina Boerger, leading the singers in 16th-century composer [Thomas Tallis](#)'s magnum opus "[Spem in Alium](#)." The evening will also include "Can't Sleep," a work for eight dancers, to selections from William Bolcom's "Cabaret Songs." I interviewed Caines June 6 in New York City.

**Philip W. Sandstrom:** How did this "Tenebrae" project begin? What drives you to make this particular kind of work?

**Christopher Caines:** All of my pieces really start in exactly the same way: I fall in love with a particular piece of music and become completely obsessed with it. Often the falling in love with a piece of music has something to do with the specific musicians involved but not in this case. I belong to the Columbia House Record Club and eight or ten years ago, just on a lark, I bought the CD of the Tallis Scholars singing "Spem in Alium" and other works by Tallis. I've always loved choral music and vocal music generally and my core relationship to music is to vocal music. I became instantly obsessed with this extraordinary piece of music, which really is one of a kind. I immediately began dreaming of choreographing a dance to this

music. But it seemed an insane idea to choreograph to a piece of music that requires 40 singers.

**PWS:** Okay, so you bought the CD, so use the CD; do you prefer to work with live music?

**CC:** My company has never once performed to recorded music.

**PWS:** Never, never?

**CC:** No, never, even my very early solos were with live musicians. It actually never occurred to me to work with recorded music, although now it has become a very self-conscious principle.

**PWS:** Are you trained as a musician or singer?

**CC:** I sang in choirs when I was a child and I had four years of very adult piano lessons. There was a phase, years ago, where I studied North Indian classical drumming and North Indian classical singing as well, a tradition called Dhrupad; it's an ancient tradition of sacred singing. I've taken normal singing lessons and I've taken bel canto lessons. So, I have a lot of musical training but what I know about harmony and counterpoint and theory is entirely self-taught. If I had the leisure and the money I would like nothing better than to find someone to apprentice myself to and really systematically study counterpoint -- especially modal counterpoint because it obsesses me so much.

**PWS:** So to recap your process, you fall in love with the music, you always work with live music; what happened next?

**CC:** This particular piece of music so obsessed me that I'd listen to it hundreds of times in a week. Whenever and wherever I'd listen to it, it would always make me cry. I had to get over that before rehearsals started!

Through a project I did with Kristina Boerger, the conductor, I met Rob Moss, who had produced the only live presentation of "Spem in Alium" that I had ever heard. He has all 41 scores necessary to do the piece; 40 for the singers and one for the conductor. The score itself is an amazing object; it's 40-part counterpoint, 40 independent parts! I've spread the entire score out on the wall; it's quite amazing visually. It appears, in a very abstract way, to be a man with his arms on a cross or spread upwards to Heaven.

**PWS:** Do you choreograph exactly to the music?

**CC:** I can't choreograph without the score; I really have to have the score. I read music and studying the score helps me. If I

40 lines of music; that would be an insane thing to do. I've actually choreographed the harmonic structure. I've choreographed the chord progression.

*At this point in the interview, Caines pulls out the printed score to show me examples. He appears to understand what he is talking about completely and absolutely; I get lost.*

**CC:** The music is like a huge machine turning in space. I've made eight simultaneous solos that are all based on the opening duets. So when I say I'm a contrapuntal choreographer, I mean I devise my own structures that I hope will complement music. In this case I've devised a complicated structure for an unbelievably complicated piece of music. It's a real experiment!

**PWS:** Now isn't "Spem in Alium" only a portion of the whole program?

**CC:** Yes, it's the big climax of the new piece, "Tenebrae." (The piece) starts with a beautiful little jewel-like motet called "If you love me" sung by five singers, continues with the first set of Tallis's "Lamentations," the other one of his big masterpieces, then "If you love me" again, this time sung by the whole choir, then "Spem in Alium." There is going to be a very ceremonial aspect to the staging of the singers: every time we have a new piece of music more singers come onstage.

*"Tenebrae" will be performed by the Christopher Caines Dance Company Thursday through Sunday at Danspace Project at St. Mark's Church.*

*Philip W. Sandstrom is a theater consultant who has worked in production and lighting design, management, and producing, as well as a consulting editor for Twice Magazine.*

only have recordings, then I feel I'm only choreographing to given performances of the music. If I don't have a score I don't know what the music is.

**PWS:** Because you don't see what's coming next?

**CC:** You have to see the score to understand what the composer intends. When I'm choreographing, I normally keep the score on a music stand and race back and forth between the dancers and the score.

**PWS:** How about the speed of the piece -- doesn't it depend on the tempo set by the conductor?

**CC:** I've heard a variety of tempi, some fast, some slow. I think the tempo needs to be like that of a resting heartbeat.

**PWS:** What's that -- about 80?

**CC:** It's about 82 to 86 beats per minute.

**PWS:** Okay, it sounds like I shouldn't say that you choreograph to the music; what should I say?

**CC:** I'm a very contrapuntal person, that's my musical disposition.

**PWS:** Please define contrapuntal?

**CC:** Counterpoint and harmony are two ways of looking at the same thing. Harmony emphasizes the vertical (chordal) relationships among the lines of music, and counterpoint emphasizes the horizontal lines and their relations to each other. Bach's music is predominately very contrapuntal; he's a great contrapuntist.

**PWS:** So what does it mean when you say you're a contrapuntal choreographer?

**CC:** My response to all music, of whatever period, is I'm not ever trying to mimic the music. I'm trying to build an intact freestanding structure that responds to and embeds (itself) in (the music).

**PWS:** Do you feel you're trying to reveal the character of the music?

**CC:** I feel I'm trying to honor the music, to be true to what it essentially is. I've worked with music from anonymous polyphony to 20th-century music in a new score by an American composer. I think it's better to explain by example: For "Spem in Alium," I could have choreographed 40 dancers mimicking the