

Wayne McGregor: ballet meets maths

Wayne McGregor mixes dance, art... and maths in his new Royal Ballet piece. Jessica Duchen meets him

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It has not been easy to reach Wayne McGregor, the Royal Ballet's resident choreographer, but no wonder. Creating a ballet to *The Art of Fugue* – the most mysterious, complex and puzzling of JS Bach's masterpieces – is no small ask. This latest shove at the boundaries of dance, music and art is due to open in early February, set to seven movements from the baroque titan's last, unfinished work.

McGregor has a fascination with the piece that stretches back many years. "I find it such an enigma, with incredible numerology behind it," he says. "You can work with all sorts of mathematical principles to unlock some of the codes within the music."

Now 43, this shaven-headed visionary choreographer has held his post at the Royal Ballet since 2006; unusually for this company, his background is contemporary rather than classical dance. He trained in Leeds and New York and he has brought to the hallowed portals of Covent Garden a galvanising energy, a fascination with technology and electronics, and a passion for collaborative efforts with visual artists, so that dance, music and design become equal partners in creativity. Key moments for him have included the award-winning *Chroma*, with striking and simple designs by the architect John Pawson and music by Joby Talbot and *The White Stripes*; and the more controversial *Raven Girl*, premiered last year, in which he worked with the novelist and artist Audrey Niffenegger.

The idea for *Tetractys* – the *Art of Fugue* initially sprang from his wish to collaborate with the American artist Tauba Auerbach. Her work explores language, time and logic through a variety of mediums – she has also dreamed up and built some extraordinary new musical instruments – and her first solo exhibition at the ICA, *Taubach: The New Ambidextrous Universe*, is opening in April.

"There's a lot of codes in her work, whether graphic-based or in the way she rotates and shifts shapes and tries to trick the eye into understanding what's happened in a different way," McGregor suggests. "When we started talking about music, the idea of *The Art of Fugue* kept coming back to me; it seems to function in a similar way." Her costume designs, he says, in some cases divide the dancers' bodies and in others gradate colour from one to the next, often according to the systems at work within the music – and with everything enhanced by the lighting design of Lucy Carter.

A series of contrapuntal pieces all based on the same theme, Bach's last work transforms its central motif, and the strands that combine in it, every which way including upside down ("inverted") and backwards ("retrograde"). "It's great food for choreography," says McGregor.

Together with the composer Michael Berkeley, McGregor selected seven extracts to form a suite about 32 minutes long, which Berkeley arranged for piano and orchestra. The music seems very abstract when you first hear it," he adds, "but the more you get involved in it, the more it transcends those patterns."

This Bach, after all, is not geometric only for the sake of it. "Tetractys" is a Pythagorean symbol, both mathematical and metaphysical, that supposedly encompasses many divine mysteries. It is a figure of 10 points arranged in four rows of one, two, three and four, building an equilateral triangle out of smaller triangles. Its mystical symbolism references the harmony of the cosmos, the four elements, a variety of dimensions and a set of perfect proportions that apply to musical intervals, visual harmony and more.

"There's evidence that Bach used this as a structuring principle for The Art of Fugue," says McGregor. Yet the concept is no less human for its complexity: "It transcends all these elements because Bach is playing with that through his materiality – his body, his consciousness, his sense of spirituality, his time. It is all connected."

The new work's line-up of 12 dancers includes some of the company's biggest stars: seven men, including the astonishingly dramatic Edward Watson, who is often considered McGregor's muse; and five women, among them Marianela Nuñez, Lauren Cuthbertson and Natalia Osipova, the Royal's starry new recruit.

"She's amazing in the studio – a real team player and so creative," McGregor declares. "All those women are powerhouses and each brings a different dimensionality to the work. The idea, though, is not about having a succession of stars, but about the way the dancers work together. I'm excited to be making a real company piece."

Tetractys – The Art of Fugue is at the centre of a triple bill, flanked by two Royal Ballet classics: Frederick Ashton's Rhapsody and Kenneth MacMillan's Gloria, a powerful work inspired by Vera Brittain's Testament of Youth. Bringing this Bach masterpiece to visual life on the stage of the Royal Opera House is certainly a challenge of the highest order – but, one hopes, the most thrilling as well.

'Tetractys – the Art of Fugue', Royal Opera House, London WC2 (020 7304 4000) 7 to 15 February