

Atemporal: a cross-over between contemporary dance and Chopi music

With *Atemporal*, Yentl de Werdt (choreographer and dancer) and Matchume Zango (musician and instrument maker) bring together contemporary dance and Chopi music. In doing so, they engage in dialogue with each other and the audience. We talked with them about their music and dance, and the creation of their project.

What is Chopi music?

Matchume: “Chopi music and dance are part of the culture in southern Mozambique. Our people got the name ‘Chopi’ during wars with other ethnic groups, such as the Shangana, as they used bow and arrow. Chopi music is played at ceremonies and festivities. These are cultural manifestations where everyone comes together to cook, eat, play music and dance. The main instrument used is the *timbila* (singular: *mbila*). This is a kind of xylophone with calabashes at the bottom of the wooden slats. The instrument comes in different shapes and sizes: from soprano (*mbila sanje*) to double bass (*xikulu*). During festivities, *timbila* is played with a whole orchestra. And if you are Chopi and don’t play, you have to dance. It is a part of life.



Mtchatcha tied around the leg | © Moa Karlberg

Next to the *timbila*, there are many other traditional instruments. During the performance *Atemporal*, we also use *njele* (a kind of shaker), *mtchatcha* (a percussion instrument tied around the leg), *xitende* (a musical bow with a calabash as a sound box) and *mbira* (a thumb piano). And I sing in the Chopi language, Chichopi.”

Yentl: “What I like about Chopi music and dance is that they are one with each other and with the audience. When you hear the music, you don’t think ‘what should I do to this’. The beat just makes you move. You can really embody it.”

What is contemporary dance to you, Yentl?

Yentl: “In contemporary dance, we don’t stick to a certain technique, like in ballet, or basic steps around which you improvise, like in salsa. In my dance, I work with ideas and create something around them. My inspiration can be music, the space I’m in or a concept. I look at how I can go into dialogue with that and still keep my own authenticity. Contemporary dance for me is something that is very adaptable. There is a kind of openness; you can touch different things and dance styles to create something new with them, starting from your own personality and way of moving.”

How did you get started with dance and music?

Yentl: "I started dancing thanks to the support of my mother. She was a ballet teacher. But when I just started ballet, I thought it was weird to be taught by my mum and went to play football. When I was older, I did want to start dancing again, but actually I wanted to dance like on MTV, Michael Jackson and so on. However, my mum thought the best option was to study ballet. I took lessons from her again and she inspired me to audition for the Royal Ballet School in Antwerp when I was 11 years old. There I did my high school education and was in a daily routine of dancing. Then I went to P.A.R.T.S., a contemporary dance school run by Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker. In 2016, I started my own organisation, [AYU](#), through which we try to get people connected and moving. We do this both with music and dance, by building bridges between different organisations, artists and genres."

Matchume: "I grew up in Mozambique, in an artistic family. My brothers and I danced and played music together with my father and mother. When I was 3 or 4 years old, I started trying out instruments. We didn't go to a (music) school to learn it, but watched how others did it. At that time, there were no music schools in Mozambique where you could learn traditional music. Our masters did not have a degree as a teacher, but were masters in a traditional way."



Matchume plays *mbila sanje* | © Moa Karlberg

How did the idea of *Atemporal* begin?

Matchume: "We met back in 2009 in Maputo (Mozambique), where we collaborated with a Mozambican videographer and Swiss dancer on the performance *Em Camadas*. It was an interdisciplinary performance that we played at the Kinani Festival in Maputo, where music, image and dance came together. When I moved to Germany in early 2024, I contacted Yentl again."

Yentl: "Matchume let me know 'Hey, I'm around'. We decided to meet and [organise a small concert](#). That took place on March 22, 2024 at the Dome of The Secret Garden in Hasselt. Beforehand, we brought people together to dance. I led the dance workshop and in the evening Matchume gave a concert. We hadn't prepared much, we just mainly wanted to bring people together. That was really nice and we wanted to further develop the idea of meeting."

In what way do Chopi music and contemporary dance come together in *Atemporal*?

Matchume: "We just started creating. Sometimes we started from the music and from that came the dance. And sometimes we started with the dance and the music grew out of that. Step by step, the performance then started to take shape: 'Maybe we can do this or use that'. We now have a concept, but during the performance we still improvise within

that frame. Every day we play, we get new information and adapt. Throughout the whole process, we really try to listen to each other and give meaning to what the other person is saying.”

Yentl: “There is an openness for change. It is not fixed what we do. Even during the performance, Matchume may play something else and my body will react to that. That happens very naturally. We are constantly in dialogue with each other, but also with the audience. We are aware that there are people watching and participating. The audience can bring a different energy every performance and then you have to go along with that energy.”



“The audience can bring a different energy every performance” | © Moa Karlberg

There is also an educational component to the performance?

Yentl: “Indeed. Most people already did a workshop with us before the performance. There, the audience learns about the instruments and can ask questions. We dance with them, we explore certain movements, and we teach them the rhythms and a song. That way you already create a bond with the audience. When they then come to the performance, they feel even more part of it.”

The first performances and workshops were also documented. For what purpose did you do that?

Yentl: “We mainly use the photos and videos to reach out to people. We have created a show and that is fun, but now we also want to share it with as many families and children as possible. And a picture says a lot more than words in this regard. With ‘contemporary dance’ and ‘Chopi music’, people find it hard to imagine something. But when they see a picture with the *xitende*, they immediately want to know what kind of instrument it is. And then they might go to our website, where they can see what the performance is about.”

**“Don't be afraid to ask for help
and establish collaborations.”**

You received funding for this project and worked with several partners.

Yentl: “I had received funding for a *bovenlokaal project* (a project across borders) before. And then there was an info moment in Genk about the new funding [kleinschalige bovenlokale cultuurprojecten](#) (small projects across borders). There I got all the information and spoke to Mehdi from [OP/TIL](#). They also helped me write out the application. Besides, we received financial support from [ECRU](#) and [HET LAB](#), the residency of the Krokusfestival of Hasselt cultural centre (CCHA). They co-produced the performance *Atemporal* as well. In February 2025, we met at HET LAB, who provided their

studio and flat and gave feedback during the creation process. Furthermore, we received support from [Internationaal Comité](#), who gave us feedback and helped communicate about the project.”

What tips would you give to someone wanting to do a similar project?

Yentl: “Believe in yourself and your ideas, and be open to invite people to join. Connect on different levels and listen to each other. Listen to other people's stories and ideas without any judgement or expectations.

We have also made our performance accessible to play in different places. We only have one light stand and some lights on the floor. We hire our own light and sound system so we can bring it with us. It's important to make your performance accessible that way too. We don't need a theatre. We can put up our performance anywhere.

And for the project funding: make sure you have a clear idea of what you want to do and what you need to do it. Also think about which partners can help you do this. Don't be afraid to ask for help and establish collaborations.”

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