

Michel van der Aa



Michel van der Aa © Marco Borggreve

An introduction to the music of Michel van der Aa by Michiel Cleij

'Music is only truly exciting when poetry and form are inextricably bound to one another,' says Michel van der Aa (1970). And his compositions epitomize that tension: craftsmanship and eloquence are equal partners, each constantly fortifying the other. Van der Aa's keen sense of clarity and structure betray his background: he studied in The Hague with Diderik Wagenaar and Louis Andriessen. But in breathing life into his compositions he goes entirely his own way, for his music also has a poetic, vulnerable side. One hears living, breathing constructions with human characteristics: loneliness, unexpected humour, detachment and disunity. It is music that elicits extreme reactions, music as upsetting as it is poignant. Listening to a piece by Van der Aa, one might wonder where in fact the music is coming from. In some of his works the musicians are joined by an invisible partner, a soundtrack that enters into a dialogue with them. And where there is no soundtrack, the visible instruments can often reveal an unexpected side. Van der Aa is a dramatist: sounds are for him what actors are to a theatre director. His sounds can be plastic, malleable or recalcitrant; they reinforce or neutralize one another; they dominate or are dominated. This gives the music a strongly visual aspect: Van der Aa's imagery is evident even to the most unimaginative listener. And the confrontation between these images often has the intensity of a thriller.

As soon as the 'protagonist' has been introduced – by a soloist, ensemble or orchestra – he is challenged and prodded by external impulses. The antagonist mostly emerges as an alter ego, another version of the protagonist himself: a sampled version on soundtrack, for example, or a live imitator within the ensemble. This interaction with an alter ego, a typical Van der Aa principle, never fails to astonish. The aural images vary continually, and with them the course of the drama. Every composition gives a glimpse of pleasantly relaxed harmony, but it is the assault on it that makes his music so gripping.

Van der Aa's dramatic powers reached new heights in the recent *Here-Trilogy*. The three sections – composed for a variety of forces, and which can be performed together or separately – share the common theme of

the female singer. Her relationship with her musical environment is different in each piece. In *Here [enclosed]* she is not yet even present: on stage alongside the orchestra is a cabin made of translucent black plexiglas, which reveals a 'replica' of the soloist. This object answers the live music with sampled snippets of musical material from the orchestra itself and in doing so obliges the musicians to become mime artists: they continue playing, but their sound has been robbed by their alter ego. In *Here [in circles]*, for small ensemble, the singer appears in real life. But again she cannot break out of her isolation, getting caught up in loops, as do the ensemble musicians. The singer makes real-time recordings of the proceedings with a cassette recorder, echoing them back at the ensemble, reinforcing the feeling of hopelessness.

Synchronicity between the individual and her surroundings is finally reached in *Here [to be found]*. But the two parties continue to test each other, to complement, trump and repudiate one another – and then go their own way. Likewise, in the chamber opera *One* a single voice grapples with a soundtrack and video projections. The video images are profoundly fused to the music; like the soundtracks Van der Aa applies elsewhere in his oeuvre, they are an extension of the sound itself: an additional instrument, as it were. A typical aspect of Van der Aa's writing is the stark, unadorned way in which he juxtaposes beauty and ugliness. The almost neurotic, disturbed text (penned by the composer himself) and the often highly poetic music form a provocative contrast. By emphasizing 'ugliness' Van der Aa gives beauty a direction and underlines its inexorability.

One could call Van der Aa an expert in disorder, derangement and derailment. *Double* appears at first sight to be a run-of-the-mill duo for violin and piano, but the estrangement from its classical appearance kicks in right from the start. The piano is prepared with horsehair (as in a violin bow) in order to imitate the sound of the violin; the violin in turn does his best to shake off the competition. The stormy interaction that follows is a fierce clash, replete with feints and frustrated communication.

A variant on this theme is the percussion duet *Wake* – even though the definition of 'duet' is here no more than a purely visual one. One percussionist remains silent throughout, participating by miming, imitating or predicting the gestures of the other, in doing so placing his partner's timing in an entirely different context. Here as well Van der Aa exhibits his ability to conceive and realize a dramatic line: along the way the mime player starts to influence the real musician and even takes control of the musical proceedings. What began as a shadow has become a spotlight.

As interdisciplinary as his work appears, music and notes remain Van der Aa's fundamental building blocks. Ten chords form the basis of the 'Preposition Trilogy' *Above*, *Between* and *Attach*. Limited material indeed, but for Van der Aa enough for a complete musical odyssey. A live ensemble and taped samples of the ensemble are the 'characters', and their confrontations are true cliffhangers: as the balance of power shifts, so does the surrounding aural landscape.

Capriciousness and bizarre turns are present in Van der Aa's early works as well. *Auburn*, for guitar and tape, yanks the classical guitar out of its

introverted, respectable stereotype. This is music as a pressure cooker, in which funky riffs pump the temperature yet higher. Likewise in *Oog* it is the cello that threatens to explode, seduced and provoked by the sounds on tape. Michel van der Aa's music, in short, translates everyday, worldly processes into extraordinary, unworldly sounds. He sculpts with sound; his subjects are drawn from the world around him. And because he always works closely with musicians, his music is always fresh and vibrant. Van der Aa challenges the expectations of his audience, then manipulates and distorts them. But you can recognize yourself even in the most warped mirror, whether you want to or not.

The comments of the *Stuttgarter Zeitung* about *Here [to be found]* apply to his entire oeuvre: 'Michel van der Aa poses the best questions, both to himself and to the music. For example: how can I best express what I want to say? And, worthy of a true craftsman, not only: how do I build a tower?, but also: how do I then get out of the tower? How can I make something new out of something 'old'?'

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OPERAS

After Life

2005-06, rev. 2009 1 hr 40 min

Opera for 6 singers, ensemble, video and electronic soundtrack

2S, M, A, 2Bar;

0.1.1.bcl.0-0.1.0.1-positive org(=hpd)-strings(4.4.3.2.2); electronic soundtrack; video projections

World Premiere: 02 Jun 2006

Muziekgebouw aan 't IJ, Amsterdam, Netherlands

Michel van der Aa, director; Netherlands Opera / Asko Ensemble

Conductor: Otto Tausk

Availability: This work is available from Boosey & Hawkes for the world

Blank Out

2015 1 hr 10 min

Chamber opera for soprano and 3D film

S-Bar-choir-soundtrack(4channel); film(3D).

Bar and choir only on film

World Premiere: 20 Mar 2016

Muziekgebouw aan 't IJ, Amsterdam, Netherlands

Michel van der Aa, director; Miah Persson, Roderick Williams / Nederlands Kamerkoor

Availability: This work is available from Boosey & Hawkes for the world

The Book of Disquiet

(Das Buch der Unruhe)

2008 1 hr 15 min

Music theatre for actor, ensemble and film

1.0.1.1-0.1.0.0-perc(1):vib/glsp/3metal pieces/cabasa/maracas/egg shaker/4Chin.tom-t/BD/bamboo chimes/ratchet/whip(med)/wdbl(lo)/2log dr/tgl(hi)/2susp.cym-4vln.3vla.2vlc.db-soundtrack(laptop, 1player)-film(2screens)

World Premiere: 02 Jan 2009

Hafenhalle09, Linz, Austria

Michel van der Aa, director; Klaus Maria Brandauer, actor / Bruckner Orchester Linz

Conductor: Dennis Russell Davies

Availability: This work is available from Boosey & Hawkes for the world

One

2002 1 hr

Chamber opera for soprano, video and soundtrack

World Premiere: 12 Jan 2003

Frascati Theatre, Amsterdam, Netherlands

Michel van der Aa, director; Barbara Hannigan, soprano

Availability: This work is available from Boosey & Hawkes for the world

Sunken Garden

2011-13 1 hr 40 min

3D film opera

2S, Bar (M, Bar on film);

0.0.1.bcl.0-0.1.1.0-perc(1)-strings(7.0.6.5.2); soundtrack(4channels); film(2D,3D); may be produced either in a fully staged or in a semi-staged version

World Premiere: 12 Apr 2013

Barbican Theatre, London, United Kingdom

Michel van der Aa, director; English National Opera

Conductor: André de Ridder

Availability: This work is available from Boosey & Hawkes for the world

BALLETS

Reversal

2016

10 min 30 sec

for orchestra

1.1.2(II=bcl),2(II=dbn)

-4.2.2.btrbn.0-perc(2):vib/glsp/marimba/BD/SD/maracas/bongo/tgl/bamboo
chimes/glass chimes/gran cassa/log dr/cyms/whip/church bell or
t.bells-harp-strings(16.14.12.10.8)

FULL ORCHESTRA

World Premiere: 13 Jan 2017

Staatsoper, Hamburg, Germany

Andrey Kaydanowsky, choreographer; Bundesjugendballett / Bundesjugendorchester

Conductor: Alexander Shelley

Second Self

2004

15 min

for orchestra and soundtrack

0.0.Ebcl.2(II=bcl).0-2.2.2.btrb.1-perc(2)-strings(12.12.10.8.6)-soundtrack(laptop, 1 player)

World Premiere: 15 Oct 2004

Donaueschingen, Germany

SWR-Sinfonieorchester Baden-Baden und Freiburg

Conductor: Roland Kluttig

Availability: This work is available from Boosey & Hawkes for the world

CHAMBER ORCHESTRA

Here [enclosed]

2003 17 min

for chamber orchestra and soundtrack

0.0.1.1-0.1.1.0-perc(1)-strings(6.6.6.4.2)-soundtrack(laptop, 1player); theatrical object

World Premiere: 30 Mar 2004

Budapest, Hungary

Netherlands Radio Chamber Orchestra

Conductor: Peter Eötvös

Availability: This work is available from Boosey & Hawkes for the world

Imprint

2005 14 min

for Baroque orchestra

2ob-hpd-strings(4.4.3.2.1); portative organ to be played by solo violinist; period instruments (415 Hz tuning) or modern instruments played in a Baroque way

World Premiere: 27 Aug 2005

Lukaskirche, Lucerne, Switzerland

Freiburger Barockorchester

Conductor: Gottfried von der Goltz

Availability: This work is available from Boosey & Hawkes for the world

SOLO INSTRUMENT(S) AND ORCHESTRA

Hysteresis

2013 17 min

for solo clarinet, ensemble and soundtrack

bn-tpt-perc(1)-strings*; soundtrack(laptop,1player);
string forces: 1.0.1.1.1(all amplified) or 4.0.3.2.1 or 6.0.5.4.2; db with low C strings

World Premiere: 30 Apr 2014

Queen Elizabeth Hall, London, United Kingdom

Mark van de Wiel, clarinet; London Sinfonietta

Conductor: Baldur Brönnimann

Availability: This work is available from Boosey & Hawkes for the world

Up-close

2010 30 min

for solo cello, string ensemble and film

strings(6.6.6.4.2)-soundtrack(1player; doubleA player software, from laptop)-film(from laptop)

World Premiere: 11 Mar 2011

Konserthuset, Stockholm, Sweden

Sol Gabetta, cello; Amsterdam Sinfonietta

Conductor: Candida Thompson

Availability: This work is available from Boosey & Hawkes for the world

Violin Concerto

2014 26 min

for violin and orchestra

1.1.1.bcl.1.dbn-4.2.2.1-perc(3)-harp-strings(12.12.10.8.6)

World Premiere: 06 Nov 2014

Concertgebouw, Amsterdam, Netherlands

Janine Jansen, violin; Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra

Conductor: Vladimir Jurowski

Availability: This work is available from Boosey & Hawkes for the world

VOICE(S) AND ORCHESTRA

Spaces of Blank

2007

26 min

for mezzo-soprano, orchestra and soundtrack

1.1.2.2-4.2.3(III=btrbn).1-perc(2)-harp-pft-strings-soundtrack(doubleA player)

World Premiere: 19 Mar 2009

Concertgebouw, Amsterdam, Netherlands

Christianne Stotijn, mezzo-soprano; Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra

Conductor: Ed Spanjaard

Availability: This work is available from Boosey & Hawkes for the world

ENSEMBLE AND CHAMBER WITHOUT VOICE(S)

Mask

2006

15 min

for ensemble and soundtrack

1.0.1.0-1.1.1.0-perc(1)-strings(1.1.1.1)-soundtrack(laptop, 1 player)

World Premiere: 11 Feb 2007

WDR, Funkhaus am Wallrafplatz, Klaus-von-Bismarck-Saal, Köln, Germany
musikFabrik

Conductor: Peter Rundel

Availability: This work is available from Boosey & Hawkes for the world

ENSEMBLE AND CHAMBER WITH VOICE(S)

Here [in circles]

2002 15 min

for soprano and ensemble

cl.bcl.tpt-perc(1)-strings(1.1.1.1.1); small cassette recorder (eg Sony TCM-939)

World Premiere: 03 Sep 2002

Amsterdam, Netherlands

Barbara Hannigan, soprano; Asko Ensemble

Conductor: Etienne Siebens

Availability: This work is available from Boosey & Hawkes for the world

Here [to be found]

2001 18 min

for soprano, chamber orchestra and soundtrack

0.0.1.1-0.1.1.0-perc(1)-strings(6.6.6.4.2)-soundtrack(laptop, 1 player)

World Premiere: 20 Oct 2001

Donaueschingen, Germany

Barbara Hannigan, soprano; Netherlands Radio Chamber Orchestra

Conductor: Peter Eötvös

Availability: This work is available from Boosey & Hawkes for the world

Here Trilogy

Here [enclosed], Here [in circles], Here [to be found]

2001-03 50 min

for soprano and ensemble

9790202531709 **Soprano, Ensemble (Score)**

Availability: This work is available from Boosey & Hawkes for the world

PIANO(S)

Just before

2000

11 min 35 sec

for piano and soundtrack
9790202532034 Piano, CD

World Premiere: 30 Aug 2000
Felix Meritis, Amsterdam, Netherlands
Tomoko Mukaiyama, piano;

Availability: This work is available from Boosey & Hawkes for the world

Transit

2007

12 min 35 sec

for piano and video projection
piano and video projection (via DVD player), amplification (for the video soundtrack)

World Premiere: 21 Nov 2009
Phipps Hall, Huddersfield, United Kingdom
Sarah Nicolls, piano;

Availability: This work is available from Boosey & Hawkes for the world

INSTRUMENTAL

Memo

2003 9 min

for violin and portable cassette recorder
9790202531730 **Violin**

Availability: This work is available from Boosey & Hawkes for the world

Rekindle

2009 8 min

for flute and soundtrack
9790202532355 **Flute, CD**

World Premiere: 14 Feb 2010
Kettle's Yard, Cambridge, United Kingdom
Jane Mitchell, flute;

Availability: This work is available from Boosey & Hawkes for the world

Wake

1997 8 min

for percussion duo
both perc: vib/5chin.tom-t/chimes/whip/dr/metal

9790202531723 **Percussion Ensemble**

World Premiere: 12 Dec 1997
De Ijsbreker, Amsterdam, Netherlands
Percussiongroup The Hague

Availability: This work is available from Boosey & Hawkes for the world

VOCAL

One

2002

1 hr

Chamber opera for soprano, video and soundtrack

World Premiere: 12 Jan 2003

Frascati Theatre, Amsterdam, Netherlands

Michel van der Aa, director; Barbara Hannigan, soprano

Availability: This work is available from Boosey & Hawkes for the world

CHORAL

Shelter

2017

4 min

for a cappella chorus

SSAATTBB (24 singers, min.16)

World Premiere: 01 Sep 2017

TivoliVredenburg, grote zaal, Utrecht, Netherlands

Netherlands Chamber Choir

Conductor: Peter Dijkstra

Availability: This work is available from Boosey & Hawkes for the world