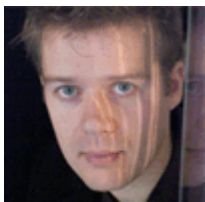


## Michel van der Aa



Michel van der Aa 2007 © 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

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

Text: Libretto by Michel van der Aa after Hirokazu Kore-Eda (E)

2S,M,A,2Bar;

0.1.1.bcl.0-0.1.0.1-positive org(=hpd)-strings(3.3.3.2.2); electronic soundtrack; video projections

*"Michel van der Aa is the hottest property in Dutch music at the moment... Van der Aa's piece combines the imaginary with the real, intercutting the fictional operatic action with documentary video interviews in which a variety of people are asked to remember the defining moments in their lives... But it's the meshing of that plot with the documentary elements that proves so teasingly effective, for as the 100-minute piece goes on, the boundary between the two blurs until the four interviewees are seen on video encountering the operatic characters, so that their touching stories seem to infuse the fantasy with something much more directly emotional. It's a strange effect, supported and sustained by van der Aa's ensemble writing, which is dominated by richly detailed string textures and enriched by electronic transformations."*

*The Guardian*

**World Premiere: 02 Jun 2006**

Muziekgebouw aan 't IJ, Amsterdam, Netherlands

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

Conductor: Otto Tausk

### The Book of Disquiet

(Das Buch der Unruhe)

2008

1 hr 15 min

Music theatre for actor, ensemble and film

Text: Libretto after Fernando Pessoa, adapted by Michel van der Aa (E,G,Pt)

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

## One

2002

1 hr

Chamber opera for soprano, video and soundtrack

Text: Music, libretto (E), video & directed by Michel van der Aa

*"Michel van der Aa fascinates in One... important is the sheer quality of the notes themselves, possessing a highly concentrated, sublime sharpness and a taut beauty, both mechanical and human." (Ernst Vermeulen, NRC Handelsblad, 13 Jan 2003)*

*"Mastery of the disorientation. With its absence of personalised psychology the piece spreads its aura over generations, since it reflects its secrets with the clarity of a mirror." (Sybill Mahlke, Der Tagespiegel, 12 Oct 2003)*

*"One is masterly... a wonderfully poetic piece. As enchanting as a dream." (Erik Voermans, Het Parool, 13 Jan 2003)*

*"Intense opera... The piece is innovative in its individual design. Imagery, sound and movement add up to more than the sum of its parts." (Roeland Hazendonk, De Telegraaf, 14 Jan 2003)*

**World Premiere: 12 Jan 2003**

Frascati Theatre, Amsterdam, Netherlands

Michel van der Aa, director; Barbara Hannigan, soprano

## FULL ORCHESTRA

### Second Self

2004

15 min

for orchestra and soundtrack

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

*"Sophisticated shadow plays." (Eleonore Büning, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 19 Oct 2004)*

*"Perfect and emotionally balanced... emotion and superior technique exactly form the grandiose combination that rules in Van der Aa's composing... virtuosic use of electronics... a work full of fantasy that always sounds apparent and striking but also always surprises." (Telegraaf, 12 Dec 2004)*

*"Fresh music that carefully balances the electronic and acoustically produced sounds." (Trouw, 9 Dec 2004)*

*"Michel van der Aa's highly expressive work Second self depicts an exciting inner conflict. Sensitive plainchant passages and virtuoso pizzicato interludes are accompanied by ticking time measures and extreme rhythmic changes. We hear clusters forming in several layers. A live orchestra, a solo string quartet and recorded samples of the orchestra make up the virtuoso 'characters'. Roland Kluttig consistently developed the interactions and vibrant confrontations of this inwardly glowing piece. Again and again the surrounding aural landscape would lurch and lose its balance. Somewhat mysteriously, the musicians were joined by an invisible partner. The string quartet responded to the orchestra with sampled excerpts of the musical material. One attractive element of the piece were its prominent dynamic contrasts." (Alexander Walther, Das Orchester 1/2005)*

**World Premiere: 15 Oct 2004**

Donauessingen, Germany

SWR-Sinfonieorchester Baden-Baden und Freiburg

Conductor: Roland Kluttig

## 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

*"Enclosed by the sound of noise'. Claustrophobia played a very intriguing role in the Matinee in the Amsterdam Concertgebouw. It was the subject of the new composition by Michel van der Aa... while the phrases expand and the cracking and hissing gets louder, the chamber orchestra is gradually enclosed by noises on the soundtrack. Van der Aa also shows a theatrical side. On stage is a plexiglass cabin raised like an upright coffin that reveals its contents at the end of the work. The ending is strong, as the solo violin, as if in fear of death, doesn't dare to play any further and keeps on repeating the same note." (Ernst Vermeulen, NRC Handelsblad, 13 Apr 2004)*

*"A special attraction was the new work of Michel van der Aa, Here [enclosed]." (Frits van der Waa, Volkskrant, 13 Apr 2004)*

*"During Here [enclosed] a black plexiglass monolith was placed on stage, as impeccable as Van der Aa's music; a stone guest with which the composer referred to the 'self' and the 'other', and to the divided sense of loneliness which pervades his whole oeuvre." (Anthony Fiumara, Trouw, 13 Apr 2004)*

*"Striking clarity and structure... Here [enclosed] is a model of Van der Aa's open-minded sense of sound." (Jos Ruiters, Noordhollands Dagblad, 13 Apr 2004)*

**World Premiere: 30 Mar 2004**

Budapest, Hungary

Netherlands Radio Chamber Orchestra

Conductor: Peter Eötvös

## 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

*"... a rhythmically taut, effective demonstration of collective virtuosity." (Max Nyffeler, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 29 Aug 2005)*

*"By far the most convincing work on the program ... Van der Aa was interested in more than sound colors, and transferred Baroque articulation, Baroque gestures, energy and virtuosity into a modern musical language." (sda, Der Zürcher Oberländer, 29 Aug 2005)*

*"In Imprint Michel van der Aa plays an obliquely humorous game with the sound material – in a way one seldom hears with Dutch composers. Refreshing, like a Baroque blueprint developed ever further, ultimately suggesting a parody of the idea of the basso continuo by laying metal rods on certain keys of the organ." (Thomas Meyer, Tages-Anzeiger, 29 Aug 2005)*

*"The shortest work of the evening, Michel van der Aa's fiery and brilliant Imprint, is surely the piece with the greatest chance of making its way into the repertoire. The Dutch composer dares as no other to not only exploit the languishing, sinewy and swelling tones of a Baroque string orchestra, but also to utilize the jagged contours and vitality of a robust, abrasive forte. Imprint is simply a pithy new interpretation of the standard Concerto Grosso, vigorously buffeted against dynamically craggy themes and woven into a net that sustains the piece." (Jörg Königsdorf, Süddeutsche Zeitung, 7 Sept 2005)*

*"By far the most gripping piece was Imprint by the young Dutch sensation Michel van der Aa – not least because it was the only work to confront directly the irony of a 21st-century composer meddling in 18th-century sonorities. Van der Aa's response was twofold. He gave the work the frenetically patterned feel of a Vivaldi concerto, with the leader (the excellent Gottfried von der Goltz) gradually infecting the whole band with manic figuration. But as the piece progressed another process was at work. More and more lead weights were placed on the keys of a chamber organ, building up a permanently sounded chord that glimmered through the strings. For Van der Aa, this represented 'the hand of a long-deceased Baroque composer': a neat metaphor and a clever musical device." (Richard Morrison, The Times, 22 Nov 2005)*

**World Premiere: 27 Aug 2005**

Lukaskirche, Lucerne, Switzerland

Freiburger Barockorchester

Conductor: Gottfried von der Goltz

## VOICE(S) AND ORCHESTRA

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### Spaces of Blank

2007

26 min

for mezzo-soprano, orchestra and soundtrack

Text: Emily Dickinson, Anne Carson, Rozalie Hirs (E)

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

*"Van der Aa translated the dizzying poetic potential of the texts into entirely satisfying music... [His] alternation of brass blocks, textures dominated by shadowy hues, hectic and static moments, and the use of electronics was tasteful, effective and vivid. This is modern music that warmly welcomes the listener, but that also takes him seriously... a beautiful piece."*  
*Het Parool*

**World Premiere: 19 Mar 2009**

Concertgebouw, Amsterdam, Netherlands

Christianne Stotijn, mezzo-soprano; Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra

Conductor: Ed Spanjaard

**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

## ENSEMBLE AND CHAMBER WITH VOICE(S)

### Here [in circles]

2002 15 min

for soprano and ensemble

Text: Michel van der Aa (E)

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

### Here [to be found]

2001 18 min

for soprano, chamber orchestra and soundtrack

Text: Michel van der Aa (E)

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

*"The highlight of this Musiktage... Here [to be found] contains cantilenas sung beautifully by soprano Barbara Hannigan. The music flows organically and is of exquisite simplicity. After the preceding examples of aimless syntax and compositional convulsions, Here [to be found] was a true blessing." (Stefan Hoffmann, Die Welt, 23 Oct 2001)*

*"One could say that Michel van der Aa poses the best questions during these Donaueschinger Musiktage, 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 say the 'old' is new again? Van der Aa's piece is called Here [to be found] and the title does not promise too much." (Mirko Weber, Stuttgarter Zeitung, 23 Oct 2001)*

*"Success for Van der Aa at the Donaueschinger Festival. It's beautiful how the airy string chords precede Van der Aa's quiet poem. He knows how to freeze a scene, create a vacuum. The theatricality in turbulent figures comes across very well. The same is true for the ending, where the synchronicity of the voice, the orchestra and the soundtrack gradually disintegrates. The piece was very successful with this select audience that included many composers, programmers and publishers." (Ernst Vermeulen, NRC, 22 Oct 2001)*

*"An impressive work... The sound of the electronic soundtrack melted with the orchestra and the soprano, and 'mechanical switch' sounds send into the hall through loudspeakers triggered the orchestra to start and stop. There we finally had the idea that we were listening to 'state of the art' Dutch music and for a moment it lifted the festival [Netherlands Music Days] above its provincial level." (Anthony Fiumara, Trouw, 17 Dec 2001)*

**World Premiere: 20 Oct 2001**

Donaueschingen, Germany

Barbara Hannigan, soprano; Netherlands Radio Chamber Orchestra

Conductor: Peter Eötvös

## Here Trilogy

Here [enclosed], Here [in circles], Here [to be found]  
2001-2003

50 min

for soprano and ensemble

*"Van der Aa's Here trilogy is a tightrope walk between different styles. In this work for soprano, the 34 year old Dutch composer explored the subject matter – separation, paralysis, isolation – in an astonishing manner. As in the cult film The Matrix, he evoked an unstable illusion of reality through snapping noises, sudden breaks and unexpected flashbacks. A striking moment was the outstanding soprano Barbara Hannigan's recording of herself on a tape recorder. Singing earlier passages anew, accompanying herself in a duet and almost casually demonstrating her superbly confident intonation, she caught the listeners by surprise. The chamber orchestra too, formed by the Dutch Asko and Schönberg Ensembles under Reinbert de Leeuw, produced a brilliant performance." (Ulrich Pollmann, Märkische Allgemeine, 29 Sep 2004)*

9790202531709 Soprano, Ensemble (Score)

**PIANO(S)**

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**Just before**

**2000**

11 min 35 sec

for piano and soundtrack  
9790202532034 **Piano, CD**

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

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**Transit**

**2007**

12 min 35 sec

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

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

## INSTRUMENTAL

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### **Memo**

**2003** 9 min

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

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### **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

## VOCAL

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### One

2002

1 hr

Chamber opera for soprano, video and soundtrack

Text: Music, libretto (E), video & directed by Michel van der Aa

*"Michel van der Aa fascinates in One... important is the sheer quality of the notes themselves, possessing a highly concentrated, sublime sharpness and a taut beauty, both mechanical and human." (Ernst Vermeulen, NRC Handelsblad, 13 Jan 2003)*

*"Mastery of the disorientation. With its absence of personalised psychology the piece spreads its aura over generations, since it reflects its secrets with the clarity of a mirror." (Sybill Mahlke, Der Tagespiegel, 12 Oct 2003)*

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*"Intense opera... The piece is innovative in its individual design. Imagery, sound and movement add up to more than the sum of its parts." (Roeland Hazendonk, De Telegraaf, 14 Jan 2003)*

**World Premiere: 12 Jan 2003**

Frascati Theatre, Amsterdam, Netherlands

Michel van der Aa, director; Barbara Hannigan, soprano