

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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