Michel van der Aa

Michel van der Aa photo © Priska Ketterer

_**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 instance, 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 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, undomed 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 horsetail (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 heighten. 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, unwordly 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 varied.
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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<th>OPERAS 3</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>After Life</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>2005-06, rev. 2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opera for 6 singers, ensemble, video and electronic soundtrack</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2S, M A, 2 Bar; 0.1.1.bcl.0-0.1.0.1-positive org(=hpd)-strings(4.4.3.2.2); electronic soundtrack; video projections</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>World Premiere:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Muziekgebouw aan 't IJ, Amsterdam, Netherlands</td>
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<tr>
<td>Michel van der Aa, director; Netherlands Opera / Asko Ensemble</td>
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<td>Conductor: Otto Tausk</td>
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<td>Availability: This work is available from Boosey &amp; Hawkes for the world</td>
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| **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-perc(1):vib/glsp/met pieces/cabasa/maracas/egg shaker/4Chin.tom-t/BD/bamboo chimes/ratchet/whip(med)/wdbl(lo)/2log drnf(2l);2susp.cym-4vn.3vla.2vlc.db-soundtrack(laptop, 1 player)-film(2 screens) |
| **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 |

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<th>OPERAS 3</th>
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<td><strong>One</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>2002</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chamber opera for soprano, video and soundtrack</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>World Premiere:</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Frascati Theatre, Amsterdam, Netherlands</td>
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<tr>
<td>Michel van der Aa, director; Barbara Hannigan, soprano</td>
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<td>Availability: This work is available from Boosey &amp; Hawkes for the world</td>
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| **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(4 channels); 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 |

| **Upload** |
| 2019-20 | 1 hr 30 min |
| Film opera |
| S, Bar; 1.0.1.0-1.1.0-perc(1)-pft/synthesizer-laptop/doubleA player-strings(1.1.1.1.1); soundtrack(surround); film(multiple screens) |
| Availability: This work is available from Boosey & Hawkes for the world |
BALLETS

Reversal

2016

10 min 30 sec

for orchestra

1.1.2(fl=bc).2(fl=dbn)

-4.2.2.blb.0-perc(2).vib/glsp/marimba/BD/SD/maracas/bongo/tgl/bamboo
chimes/glass chimes/gran cassa/log dr/cym/t/bell/church bell or
b.bells-harp-strings(16.14.12.10.8)
**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
Radio Kamer Filharmonie
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 GbR
Conductor: Gottfried von der Goltz

Availability: This work is available from Boosey & Hawkes for the world
SOLO INSTRUMENT(S) AND ORCHESTRA

akin
2018-19
25 min
for solo violin, solo cello and orchestra
1.0.1.bcl.1-4.1.2.1-perc(2);vib/BD/BD/BD/SD/2bongo/sizzle cym/crash
sym/washboard/vibraslap/whip/sm tgl/log dr/bamboo chimes/key
chimes/cabasa/marimba/med maraca/church bell(G)-harp-strings(10.10.10.8.6)

World Premiere: 09 May 2019
Philharmonie, Köln, Germany
Patricia Kopatchinskaja, violin / Sol Gabetta, cello; Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra
Conductor: Peter Eötvös

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

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)
9790202533536 cello, string ensemble & film

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

SOLO INSTRUMENT(S) AND ORCHESTRA

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
Spaces of Blank

2007 26 min

for mezzo-soprano, orchestra and soundtrack
1.1.2.2-4.2.3(III=brtn).1-perc(2)-harp-pft-strings-soundtrack(doubleA player)

Tech Requirements
This work requires additional technological components and/or amplification, for more information please contact <composers.germany@boosey.com>

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)

The Cluster Chord
for strings, oboe, alto oboe, basson, 2trp, 2trb
2014
1 min 15 sec

World Premiere: 18 Jun 2014
Holland Festival, Amsterdam, Netherlands
Dutch National Ballet

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

Mask
2006
15 min

for ensemble and soundtrack
1.0.1.0-1.1.0.0-perc(1)-strings(1.1.1.1.1)-soundtrack(laptop, 1 player)

World Premiere: 11 Feb 2007
WDR, Funkhaus am Waldrafplatz, Klaus-von-Bismarck-Saal, Köln, Germany
musikFabrik
Conductor: Peter Rundel

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

Shades of Red
2019/20
11 min

for ensemble
1.0.1.0-1.1.0.0-perc(1):gran cassa/BD/congas/bongos/whip/tpl.bl/guero/maraca/shell
shaker/key chimes/agogo bells/crash cymbals/toy walkie-talkies-kbd(Fender Rhodes
and Hammond B3 or high-quality sampled instruments)-laptop-strings(1.1.1.1.1)

World Premiere: 21 Sep 2020
Philharmonie, Köln, Germany
Ensemble Musikfabrik
Conductor: Johannes Fischer

Availability: This work is available from Boosey & Hawkes for the world
ENiembl AND CHAMBER WITH VOICE(S)

For the time being
2012/17 16 min
for mezzo soprano, piano, violin and double bass
9790202534892 Mezzo-Soprano, Violin, Piano, Double Bass

World premiere complete: 19 Apr 2018
Muziekgebouw, Amsterdam, Netherlands
Wende Snijders, mezzo-soprano; Gerard Bouwhuis, piano / Heleen Hulst, violin / Dario Calderone, double bass

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

Here [in circles]
2002 15 min
for soprano and ensemble
c.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
0.0.1.1-0.1.0-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
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Composition</th>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Format</th>
<th>Details</th>
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<tr>
<td>Just before</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>11 min 35 sec</td>
<td>for piano and soundtrack</td>
<td>World Premiere: 30 Aug 2000&lt;br&gt;Felix Meritis, Amsterdam, Netherlands&lt;br&gt;Tomoko Mukaiyama, piano;</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transit</td>
<td>2007</td>
<td>12 min 35 sec</td>
<td>for piano and video projection&lt;br&gt;piano and video projection (via DVD player), amplification (for the video soundtrack)</td>
<td>World Premiere: 21 Nov 2009&lt;br&gt;Phipps Hall, Huddersfield, United Kingdom&lt;br&gt;Sarah Nicolls, piano;</td>
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### Memo

**Year**: 2003  
**Duration**: 9 min  
**Instrumentation**: for violin and portable cassette recorder  
**Availability**: This work is available from Boosey & Hawkes for the world

### Rekindle

**Year**: 2009  
**Duration**: 8 min  
**Instrumentation**: for flute and soundtrack  
**Availability**: This work is available from Boosey & Hawkes for the world

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

### Wake

**Year**: 1997  
**Duration**: 8 min  
**Instrumentation**: for percussion duo  
both perc: vib/5chin.tom-t/chimes/whip/dr/metal  
**Availability**: This work is available from Boosey & Hawkes for the world

#### World Premiere: 12 Dec 1997
De IJsbreker, Amsterdam, Netherlands
Percussion group The Hague
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
Shelter
2017

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