

Michel van der Aa



Excerpt from the score of *Here* [to be found].

perc. vibraphone *ff*

sound-track sssst ccccccccl ssss

9'32" 9'34" 9'46"

counter The Financial Times on *After Life*

sopr. stand star - less still With li-ttle or no light I clear - ly sce

senza vibr. *ff* poco vibr.

An Introduction to the Music of Michel van der Aa

by Bas van Putten

At first glance, *Spaces of Blank* (2007) by the Dutch composer Michel van der Aa appears to be a conventional three-movement song cycle for mezzo-soprano, orchestra and soundtrack. The work, written on a commission from the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, Radio France and the Norddeutscher Rundfunk, is a setting of evocative poems by Emily Dickinson, Anne Carson and Rozalie Hirs; it is scored for more or less standard orchestral forces; the solo part is, for the most part, without vocal eccentricities. Less common is the addition of a soundtrack, but on the surface there appears to be nothing particularly radical about it.

Right from the opening measures, though, nothing is as it seemed. Sombre multi-voiced brass blocks vaporize in a stratosphere of high-frequency electronica and cool, soft strings; in the background, mechanical 'clicks' on the piano, harp and glockenspiel in their uppermost register transform the orchestra into a quasi-digital instrument. As 'beautiful' as it is, the music is clearly the product of an imagination that far surpasses the purely musical. The broad expanse of the orchestra creates an immediate sensation of space, the audible space that, as a metaphor for anxiety, becomes the work's 'house'.

Anyone familiar with this composer's music will recognize its inhabitant. Since the opera *One* (2002) and the *Here* cycle for soprano, chamber orchestra and soundtrack (2001–2003), she is the proverbial Van der Aa personage: a reclusive individual, this time lost in 'a solitude of space / a solitude of sea / a solitude of death'. The composer explores her in the same way the woman observes her own world: hyper-edgy but devoid of sentimentality. He views her drama objectively, not explicitly. The apparently 'Romantic' gesture of the rushing, driving strings is neutralized by the strictly-imposed detachment of the notes; vibrato is forbidden from the first to the last measure. The orchestra is not so much an instrument of overt feelings than a study object. At times it is as though it gets caught in a groove, and is transformed into a misfiring apparatus that operates even more mechanically than the human-like electronica. The singer, detached and yet close by, sings 'in Baroque style with regard to vibrato, clarity of tone and expression.'

And so *Spaces of Blank* becomes, by playing with the outward show of the opposite, everything that a 'normal' song cycle is *not*. No vale of tears, not yet another post-Romantic intimate declaration; the cool yet intense analysis of sweeping,

cryptic suffering. As a dramatized documentary *about* a genre it is quintessential Van der Aa. He is the observer whose expedition begins with the vital life questions his characters pose on his behalf. What do I see and hear, who am I, what do I feel, what do I think, where do I stand? His brand of composing – and in the meantime, much more than just that: Van der Aa also films and directs – is less a matter of style as of attitude. 'I'm not a composer of just notes,' he once said. Although he willingly qualifies that statement ('not that notes aren't important'), music is for Van der Aa unmistakably part of a larger whole. The immediate recognizability of his tone, with the typical alternation between hectic motion and serene, surprisingly sonorous electro-acoustic harmonies, does nothing to diminish this assertion.

Van der Aa's subtle and refined implementation of his conceptual principles earned him a meteoric reputation, first in the Netherlands and then abroad. Not yet 40, Van der Aa is already one of the world's most performed Dutch composers. It says something about his musical qualities, but also about his talent for presenting abstract ideas in such a way that his complex musical language still appeals to a wide audience. The unruly, rugged idiom of *Imprint* for Baroque orchestra (2006), written for the Freiburger Barockorchester, does not pose a problem for the listener. It cannot escape him that the piece is about the intense dialogue between the musicians of the orchestra. The medium – pitches – remains completely subordinate to the objective: the dramatization of a musical action.

Klaus Maria Brandauer in Michel van der Aa's video for his world premiere production of *The Book of Disquiet* (Linz 2009).



Recordings

Second Self

SWR-Sinfonieorchester Baden-Baden und Freiburg / Roland Kluttig (Donauschinger Music Days 2004)
Col Legno WWE 1CD 20245



Imprint

Freiburger Barockorchester / Gottfried von der Goltz
harmonia mundi HMC 905187.88
(siemens arts program)



After Life:

Bottom left, Michel van der Aa on the filmset for his work.

Top right, the world premiere production at Netherlands Opera (2006) with Roderick Williams (Aiden) and Richard Stuart (Mr. Walter).

Equally essential to Van der Aa's music is the alienating, magical power struggle between electronica and acoustic instruments. The composer developed the technology himself for the controlling the interaction between these poles – he took a course in recording technique as part of his composition study – and leaves nothing to chance. Van der Aa's soundtracks, executed on a laptop he calls the 'doubleA player', undermine music's linear timeframe with samples of pre-recorded music fragments, echoes, white noise and montages of clipped sound. The result is to the ear what an illustration of M.C. Escher is for the eye: a dizzying, irresistible and intriguing trompe l'œil.

Van der Aa blurs the line between acoustic and electronically-manipulated material to the point that the origin of his sounds is often nearly impossible to ascertain.

At certain moments during a piece it is as though a nearly identical composition can be heard in the background, almost simultaneously, like a faraway echo from a parallel world, and only audible when the live music happens to fall silent. 'And then you suddenly realize that that other music was being played the whole time,' he explains. 'Through a gap in one layer of music you can make out another layer. It is more than a montage technique. You create peep-holes. I want to show what's behind that window without the object being visible right away.' In this way he creates space in a real-time context.

A conflict model arising from the interplay between mechanical/electronic and acoustic components makes more recent instrumental works like *Second Self* for orchestra and soundtrack (2004) and *Mask* for ensemble and soundtrack (2006, rev. 2008) into textless theatre pieces, with abstracted 'plots' that dramatize the interaction between the poles. In *Mask*, a game of sound layers, the soundtrack 'steals' overtones from the ensemble, and the soundtrack and musicians 'mask' one another, while the percussionist rips lengths of gaffer tape from a desk and wraps an old-fashioned metronome, inside a three-dimensional frame, with tape until the ticking of the metronome is nearly muted. In *Second Self* a similar conflict situation occurs within the orchestra when a string quartet separates itself from the rest of the string section, 'in order to confront the

orchestra with its own material, and force it to respond,' says the composer. 'Finally it sinks into reclusiveness. That is what the piece is about.'

'Before I begin on a piece,' says Van der Aa, 'I want to be able to communicate in a single sentence what it's about.' At times a work emerges from the abstract projection of two time lines that first converge and then diverge. At other times he sees in his mind's eye a desperate female singer who is crushed by the overwhelming might of an orchestra: the individual vs. the masses. Always that solitary individual. Sometimes he hears the snapping of branches: a sound, a click, a gesture. That is the germ of a composition. The exact pitches come later; they are the flesh on the skeleton of an idea. And with Van der Aa it's always about identity: of people, sounds, instruments, musicians, musical societies. Even in his earliest works, the 'communication mechanism amongst the players' is at the forefront. 'My work,' he says, 'is about conflicts, dialogues and the way in which the individual experiences them.'

The consistent multidisciplinary approach, apparent in his earlier compositions as well as later works, justified the expectation that Van der Aa would, sooner or later, move on to music theatre, the world of sound and imagery. And he did. His move from the concert hall to the theatre was accompanied by the necessary expansion of resources and media. The laptop was joined by the film camera and the composer became stage director as well. In 2002 Van der Aa took a year's leave of absence to study at the New York Film Academy; he felt that his technical and musical expertise was no longer sufficient for an oeuvre with an increasingly important visual aspect: 'I could no longer express my dramatic ideas in music alone.'

With his multidisciplinary chamber opera *One* (2002) for soprano, video images and soundtrack, featuring soprano Barbara Hannigan, Van der Aa demonstrated – now as composer, director and librettist – the fruits of his new, expanded horizons: a keen sense for the immediate impact of imagery. A totally isolated protagonist – shadowed by video fragments in which five women relate a vague but crucial event in their life – becomes increasingly confronted with herself. The combination of timeless human drama and high-tech dramaturgy gives *One* an uncommon intensity, in part thanks to the unwavering concentration on a single theme: solitude.

In retrospect, *One*, both structurally and thematically, can be seen as a preliminary study for the opera that resulted in Van der Aa's international breakthrough: *After Life*, for six soloists, large ensemble, video and soundtrack (2006), based on the film by the Japanese director Hirokazu Kore-Eda. But *After Life* goes one important step further: it is a work in which composition, stage direction and film are definitively forged into an integrated whole, in which the composer can, in his words, 'determine the balance between the three elements note for note.' Another essential aspect is

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Selected works published by Donemus

Ensemble

Attach (1999–2000) 17'
for ensemble and soundtrack
ob, cl, bn, tpt, perc, strings(2.2.2.2.1); soundtrack
(The piece can also be performed with single strings, but the double strength is preferred.)

Above (1999) 17'
for ensemble and soundtrack
fl, ob, cl, bn, tpt, perc, 2vln, vla, vlc, db; soundtrack

Between (1997) 17'
for percussion quartet and soundtrack
(International Gaudeamus Prize 1999)

Orchestra

See-through (2000) 12'
for orchestra
picc, fl, 2ob, Ebcl, cl, bcl, 2bn, 4hn, 4tpt, 2trbn, btrbn, tuba, 4perc, harp, strings

Chamber music

Solo for percussion (1997) 9'

Quadrivial (1997) 8'
for flute, violin, cello and piano

Double (1997) 8'
for violin and piano

Oog (1995) 9'
for cello and soundtrack

Auburn (1994) 10'
for guitar and soundtrack
(versions for classical or electric guitar)

Works published by Boosey & Hawkes

The Book of Disquiet (2008) 75'
Music theatre for actor, ensemble and film; Libretto after Pessoa, adapted by Michel van der Aa (E,G,Pt)
fl, cl, bn tpt, perc, strings (4.0.3.2.1); laptop (1player); video
FP: 2 Jan 2009 Hafenhalle09 Linz
Michel van der Aa, director / Klaus Maria Brandauer, actor / Bruckner Orchester Linz / Dennis Russell Davies

Transit (2007) 13'
for piano and video projection
FP: 21 Nov 2009 Huddersfield Festival
Sarah Nicolls

Spaces of Blank (2007) 26'
for mezzo-soprano, orchestra and soundtrack; Texts by Emily Dickinson, Anne Carson and Rozalie Hirs (E)
1.1.2.2—4.2.3(III=btrbn).1—perc(2)—harp—pft—strings—soundtrack (doubleA player)
FP: 19 Mar 2009 Concertgebouw Amsterdam
Christianne Stotijn / Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra / Ed Spanjaard

Mask (2006) 15'
for ensemble and soundtrack
fl, cl, hn, tpt, trbn, perc, strings (1.1.1.1.1); laptop (1 player)
FP: 11 Feb 2007 WDR-Funkhaus am Wallrafplatz Köln
musikFabrik / Peter Rundel

After Life (2005–06, rev. 2009) 100'
Opera for 6 singers, ensemble, video and electronic soundtrack; Libretto by Michel van der Aa after Hirokazu Kore-Eda (E)
FP: 2 Jun 2006 Muziekgebouw aan 't IJ Amsterdam
Michel van der Aa, director / Netherlands Opera / Asko Ensemble / Otto Tausk
2S, M, A, 2Bar; ob, cl, bcl, tpt, tuba, positive org (=hpd), strings (3.3.3.2.2); electronic soundtrack; video projections

Imprint (2005) 14'
for Baroque orchestra
2ob, hpd, strings (4.4.3.2.1); portative org to be played by solo violinist; may be performed on period or modern instruments
FP: 27 Aug 2005 Lucerne Festival
Freiburger Barockorchester / Gottfried von der Goltz

Second Self (2004) 15'
for orchestra and soundtrack
Ebcl, cl, cl/bcl, 2hn, 2tpt, 2trbn, btrbn, tuba, 2perc, strings (12.12.10.8.6); laptop (1 player)
FP: 15 Oct 2004 Donaueschinger Musiktage
SWR-Sinfonieorchester Baden-Baden und Freiburg / Roland Kluttig

Memo (2003) 9'
for violin and portable cassette recorder
FP: Mar 2005
Maaik Aarts
On sale: ISMN 979-0-2025-3173-0

Here trilogy (2001–2003)
Here [enclosed] – Here [in circles] – Here [to be found]
(see work entries below)
FP (complete): 14 Sep 2004 Berliner Festwochen
Barbara Hannigan / Asko Ensemble / Schönberg Ensemble / Reinbert de Leeuw
On sale: ISMN 979-0-2025-3170-9 (Score)

Here [enclosed] (2003) 17'
for chamber orchestra and soundtrack
cl, bn, tpt, trbn, perc, strings (6.6.6.4.2); soundtrack
FP: 30 Mar 2004 Budapest Spring Festival
Netherlands Radio Chamber Orchestra / Peter Eötvös

One (2002) 60'
Chamber opera for soprano, video and soundtrack; Music, libretto (E), video, directed by Michel van der Aa
FP: 12 Jan 2003 Frascati Theatre Amsterdam
Barbara Hannigan

Here [in circles] (2002) 15'
for soprano and ensemble
cl, bcl, tpt, perc, 2vln, vla, vlc, db
FP: 3 Sep 2002 Gaudeamus Musicweek Amsterdam
Barbara Hannigan / Asko Ensemble / Etienne Siebens

Here [to be found] (2001) 18'
for soprano, chamber orchestra and soundtrack
cl, bn, tpt, trbn, perc, strings (6.6.6.4.2); soundtrack
FP: 20 Oct 2001 Donaueschinger Musiktage
Barbara Hannigan / Netherlands Radio Chamber Orchestra / Peter Eötvös

Just before (2000) 11'
for piano and soundtrack
FP: 30 Aug 2000 Felix Meritis, Amsterdam
Tomoko Mukaiyama
On sale: ISMN 979-0-2025-3203-4

Wake (1997) 9'
for percussion duo
(also version for solo percussionist with video)
FP: 12 Dec 1997 Amsterdam
Percussiongroup The Hague
On sale: ISMN 979-0-2025-3172-3

For further information on works, bio, forthcoming performances and news, please visit Michel van der Aa's websites at www.doubleA.net and www.boosey.com/vanderaa, or contact Boosey & Hawkes at composers.germany@boosey.com

Press Clippings

'Christianne Stotijn, for whom *Spaces of Blank* was written, has – as a true muse should – roused the singer in Van der Aa. In an idiom that is at the same time sec and sumptuous, and absolutely coherent but seldom tonal, Van der Aa unfolds flexible sound combinations, cool chords à la Stravinsky, pumping Puccinian bass notes and driving repeated notes reminiscent of Schubert's *Erlkönig*. ***** (5 stars)'
De Volkskrant, Frits van der Waa

'Poetic Van der Aa touches the soul. This is modern music that warmly welcomes the listener, but that also takes him seriously ... a beautiful piece.'
Het Parool, Erik Voermans

'*Book of Disquiet* is a true *Gesamtkunstwerk* which captivated from beginning to end.'
Die Presse Wien, Norbert Mayer

'Van der Aa's success is due to the subtlety with which he organises all the ingredients. The music reflects the feelings and ideas described: at times melancholy, at times highly formal, but always dramatic ...'
NRC Handelsblad, Mischa Spel

'Michel van der Aa is the hottest property in Dutch music at the moment ... *After Life* 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 ... As the 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, Andrew Clements

'This is the way of 21st-century opera.'
NRC Handelsblad, Jochem Valkenburg

'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 gave the work the frenetically patterned feel of a Vivaldi concerto, with the leader gradually infecting the whole band with manic figuration.'

The Times, Richard Morrison

'... a rhythmically taut, effective demonstration of collective virtuosity.'
Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, Max Nyffeler

that in *After Life* the conceptual themes of his earlier works are reincarnated as music theatre. It is an opera about memories: memories that, in earlier vocal-instrumental works, Van der Aa manipulated by technological means. With the aid of soundtracks, but also, for example, by having the singer in *Here [In Circles]* record live orchestra fragments with a cassette recorder and then play them back later. In *After Life* the concept of memory is transformed into a symbol of humanity.

After Life takes place in a transit camp, a way station of sorts, between earth and heaven, where a group of recently deceased persons has one week to pinpoint the most decisive moment in their life. Only once this key memory has been chosen – it is then filmed by the staff and shown to the deceased – can they proceed to heaven, accompanied by this one memory. 'I was struck by the humanist quality of Kore-Eda's film,' says Van der Aa. It's about what one really thinks is important in life. *After Life*'s drama is essentially the contrast between the two worlds I present. On the one hand you have the bureaucratic system that produces the memory films; on the other hand are the poignant stories and memories of individuals. In a certain sense the music is just the same. On the one hand fairly foursquare, with hard clicks from one block to the next; but within that space there is room for emotion.'

And that space keeps expanding. In 2008 Van der Aa wrote *The Book of Disquiet* for actor, ensemble and film, based on a posthumously-published text of the same name by Fernando Pessoa. The German actor Klaus Maria Brandauer plays Pessoa's alter ego, the accountant Bernardo Soares, who is confronted by issues of identity and the meaning of life. In him we by now recognize the observant, questioning composer Van der Aa. What do I see, what do I hear, who am I, what do I feel, what do I think?

In watching and listening to *The Book of Disquiet* one is again struck by how consistently and intelligently Van der Aa integrates his 'instrumental' themes into the multimedia context of his music theatre works. The alter egos of his electro-acoustic pieces have become flesh and blood, such as the memories in *After Life*. Most significant, perhaps, is that fact that Van der Aa's visual and musical components have by now become so amalgamated that they assume one another's role. For the on-screen fado singer Ana Moura, who pursues the dissociated central figure like a poltergeist, Van der Aa wrote extraordinarily moving, serenely plaintive music, whose effect is so powerful that the image of their meeting feels like the musical climax of her notes. Decisive moments.

Michel van der Aa is already mulling over a new opera, again with actors and a yet broader role for the medium of film. He is ready, having followed an intensive course of study in stage direction at the Lincoln Center Theater Director's Lab in 2007. The circle has closed, but it keeps getting bigger. The projection screens in *The Book of Disquiet*: round.

One – The composer's world premiere production for Amsterdam (2003) with Barbara Hannigan.

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