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Contact: A Journal for Contemporary Music (1971-1988)

<http://contactjournal.gold.ac.uk>

Citation

Toop, Richard. 1984. 'Gaudeamus Muziekweek 1983'. *Contact*, 28. pp. 34-36. ISSN 0308-5066.

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There were candidates aplenty for instant oblivion. A typical comment on a work that shall remain nameless—'unspeakable—ten minutes after it ended, I could remember absolutely nothing of it (except its utter awfulness)'—could have had many other applications, especially to the orchestral concerts (I missed the final, most promising-looking concert, which included a revival of Ferneyhough's early *Epicycle* (1968) conducted by Ernest Bour). Why, I found myself wondering, are young composers so remorselessly coerced into writing orchestral works before they have the technical resources to do so? Is it because to have an orchestral work performed at a

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Richard Toop

Gaudeamus Muziekweek 1983

International Gaudeamus Muziekweek, Amsterdam,
3-11 September 1983

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major festival is to have 'arrived'? If so, wouldn't it be better to let young composers 'arrive' in their own good time, instead of precipitating miscarriages through premature delivery? Or are orchestral premières such an obligatory feature of the pomp and ceremony of festival time that the securing of works by unknown composers is seized on as a convenient means of combining fiscal economy with ostensible promotional largesse? Whatever the motives, the results on this occasion were mainly depressing. The *horror vacui* that apparently afflicts inexperienced composers faced by empty orchestral manuscript paper led, at times, to a stupefying admixture of conservatism and ineptitude. Thus, for example, Willem Bon's *To Catch a Heffalump* (no joy for Milne fans here . . .) virtually denied the existence of every significant development during the past 30 years of orchestral music, while Bernard Van den Bogaard's *Prisma* for piano and orchestra aped the concertos of Prokofiev and Shostakovich in so simplistic and lobotomised a fashion that it would surely have delighted Stalin and Khrennikov. Paradoxically, in this context, it was Xander Hunfeld's abjectly titled *In retrospectieve zin* that emerged as relatively 'progressive' (and showed at least some talent for composition). Salutary evidence of the essential unpopularity of this 'new Capitulationism' was furnished by the meagre audiences: on at least two occasions there were more bodies on the stage than in the auditorium.

The chamber concerts, mainly held at De Ijsbreker (of which more later), operated at an altogether higher level. For a start there was the pleasure of hearing committed virtuosos at work: double bass player Fernando Grillo, pianist Geoffrey Douglas Madge, tuba player Melvyn Poore, and inevitably the almost legendary Harry Sparnaay, current reinventor of the bass clarinet. What is it that distinguishes players like these from the countless other expert performers of new music? It is not just their superb instrumental technique: equally important is the unique aura that characterises each of them, both in and out of performance situations—Grillo's boudoir elegance, Poore's dogged stoicism, Madge's myopic, professorial intensity, and Sparnaay's gently self-assured informality. The danger of these players lies, if anywhere, in their ability to subsume composition within the act of performance, and thus to make even the third-rate work a source of provisional pleasure, instead of the discontent which is its artistic due. Indeed, when Grillo plays one of his own (by no means third-rate) pieces, such as *Paperoles*, it's hard to accept that one is hearing the *n*th reproduction of a fearsomely exactly notated score; one prefers to cherish the illusion (assiduously fostered by the style of performance) that each extraordinary sound is somehow being gracefully plucked from the surrounding ether.

Not the least impressive aspect of these 'star' performers is the almost fraternal interest they display in one another's work, as witness a workshop given jointly by Grillo and Poore. The aesthetic outlooks of the two players could scarcely have been more discrepant; it was even symbolically manifested (mythologised, Barthes would say) in their clothing—Grillo's immaculately cut waistcoat and dress suit, Poore's jeans and wilfully mismatched socks and sandals. They didn't actually play together, but considerable professional and even personal empathy was evident from the start—even their alternations conveyed a remarkable sense of solidarity.

Madge, true to his reputation, played at least one

fiendishly complex work—Konrad Boehmer's *In illo tempore*—as well as the almost obligatory piece by Scelsi (to my mind a composer who has, of late, been sensationally overrated—a perfect example of the capacity of a well-cultivated mystique to overwhelm rational response), Suite no. 8 'Bot-Ba', which struck me as little more than soulful late-night doodling, painstakingly transcribed. Boehmer's work was both fascinating and frustrating. Obviously the product of a formidable musical intelligence (with equal emphasis on both adjectives), this half-hour of unremitting hypertension ultimately proved self-defeating. Detail swamped form, and for once, the whole was not only no more than the sum of its parts, but perceptibly less. Perhaps Boehmer was too determined to write (unnecessarily) a 'comeback' piece, a conscious *tour de force*. Even so there was more than enough compelling music in *In illo tempore* to make one look forward to Boehmer's next work.

Three ensemble concerts all contained moments of interest, as well as some wastelands. In the first the Delta Ensemble under Jarrian Röntgen did its duty by eminently forgettable pieces from Manneke, Manassen, and De Ruiter, while the intriguingly named Orgella Quartet (eight hands at two pianos) gave appropriately slick performances of works by Bruynel (*Rain*) and the young Robert Nasveld (a member of the group). Nasveld's *Three Pieces for Two Pianos, Eight Hands* managed to combine a depressingly complacent neoromantic idiom with an unusually high level of technical accomplishment (especially for a young composer). Finally there was some real music: Jan Vriend's *Heterostase* for flute, bass clarinet, and piano, played by Het Trio (including Harry Sparnaay). The basic strategies of Vriend's music draw heavily on Xenakis's work of the late sixties; but in this case, at least, the result was fresh, attractive, stimulating, and intelligent: it was one of the few pieces in the whole festival that made me really want to get hold of the score.

Vriend is closely associated with the ASKO Ensemble, a strikingly committed group of young players usually directed (with almost startling expertise) by Cliff Crego. The ensemble has developed a fairly strong 'composition-equals-research' stance in recent years, and the Xenakis-of-years-gone-by focus, mentioned above in connection with *Heterostase*, threatens to become obligatory doctrine (so much so that even the 'post-arborescent' Xenakis appears to be seen as akin to heresy). Still, the composers associated with ASKO can be relied on to produce serious, interesting work: a concert that included Crego's own *Pharos* and Klas Torstenson's *Fläka* was a welcome antidote to the sub-romantic torpor of much other music heard during the week.

A third chamber concert featured works selected by the jury for the Muziekweek. There were no revelations. One member of the jury, Hans Joachim Hespos, had spelled this out at a workshop earlier in the week. Summing up his experience on the jury, he said 'We looked and looked—we found nothing'; and he made it clear that the selected works were the 'least bad' rather than the 'best'. Of course, all judgments of this kind are personal, but where art is concerned objective criteria rarely extend beyond factors of craftsmanship. However much indignation and scepticism Hespos's comments may have evoked at the workshop, the week proved him right: one had the impression (heavily reinforced a couple of months later at the ISCM in Aarhus) that the 'old masters' are still running well ahead of the rest of the field. In Klaus K. Hübler's *Feuerzauber* an excellent formal concept and a novel ensemble (three flutes,

harp, and cello) were let down by the relatively anaemic realisations of the possibilities inherent in both—one had the impression that a very good piece was lurking below the surface, its emergence systematically thwarted by an excess of doctrine. At a more modest level the same kind of understatement afflicted Nikolaus Brass's *Basalt*: some discreet parametric exaggerations could have made all the difference. Gary Greenberg's *Phosphores* for percussion ensemble was a competent but unnecessary 'Persephassa revisited'; the same kind of bland self-assurance typified, to an even greater degree, works by Andrew Newell and James Clarke. Well done, Hespos might have said, but why bother?

If despite all its negative aspects, the Gaudeamus week proved, on balance, worthwhile, that was thanks in no small measure to De Ijsbreker, the café-concert hall where most of the smaller events take place. A recent Gaudeamus newsletter describes it grandiosely as the Ijsbreker Cultural Centre, but in fact it's precisely the lack of the pomposity implicit in that title that makes De Ijsbreker so important. It is not a concert hall with a café—there are thousands of those. On the contrary it really is a café with a small concert hall attached. I don't know of anywhere else where one can sit and talk about new music or whatever else comes to mind in a relaxed but lively atmosphere from 11 a.m. to 2 a.m., or where one can meet composers and performers with such a complete absence of formal protocol. Perhaps it's only possible in Amsterdam, but I can't help feeling that if every city had its Ijsbreker the general situation for new music would be much healthier. One could almost live there, if it weren't for the fear of perpetual hangovers . . .

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