

**Red hedgehog loved to read blue books.**

**Red hedgehog got eaten by a yellow lion.**

**The yellow lion had to throw up.**

**Out came a peacock with the tail of a mermaid.**

**Out came a mermaid with the tail of a peacock.**

**Left was a little lion.**

**Little lion knew little.**

*Jelle Meander  
Homo barbaro, de natione vilissima de Fiandria*

# ARTISTIC INVASION

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## BELGIANS IN DARMSTADT



This year's Darmstadt Festival showed that Belgium, with its population of barely 11 million, has truly great artistic potential. There is no country that manifested its presence so strongly at the Courses for New Music as Belgium. The young generation of composers and performers today speaks with a distinct voice that echoes loudly on the international music scene.

For several years now they have been led by Stefan Prins, who is well known in Darmstadt; two years ago he won the Kranichstein Music Prize for Composition. But this year, Belgium was also represented by the following groups: Nadar Ensemble, Besides Ensemble, Ictus Ensemble, Zwerm Electric Guitar Quartet. Each of the concerts stood out against the background of the other events in Darmstadt and was an occasion in and of itself.

**STEFAN PRINS**  
—  
**BODY OF  
ELECTRONICS**

Stefan Prins returned to Darmstadt as a star. Well known on the German music scene, honored with a grand prize, quizzed many times for various interviews and radio programs, he had a difficult task: he had to confirm his class. He brought with him a freshly released double album (*Sub Rosa*, 2012), containing compositions from the last few years – above all, three works from the *Fremdkörper* cycle, which is a peculiar artistic manifesto. It is epitomized by the confrontation between body and machine – so, electronics and the acoustic instrument parts contrasted with them. Prins philosophizes on the place of technology in the life of contemporary humanity, poses questions on the quality of the relationship between them. Criticism of technology in Prins' rendition does not, however, boil down to a simple cultural pessimism, if only because he

himself moves perfectly well in the world of new media. He has computers at his fingertips, as can be heard from the first contact with his music. He is an electronics virtuoso, utilizing frenetic cascades of sounds, often overdriven, contaminated by digital errors, defects from which he is able to conjure up miracles.

The album leaves no doubt that Stefan Prins is an original, brilliant composer, very technically accomplished and possessing a sense of humor. His new work, which was premièred on 17 July at Frankfurt LAB in Frankfurt-am-Main, also proved this. *PARK* turned out to be a performance on the borderline between concert and music theater. Prepared in collaboration with the Zwerm guitar quartet, along with theater artists Shila Anaraki (concept), as well as Adva Zakai and Lars Kwakkenbos (dramaturgy), it again took up Stefan Prins' favorite subject matter. What is humanity's place in an era of universal computerization? To what extent do elements of digital logic infiltrate culture and language? Serving the purpose of depicting these issues, Anaraki created a theater of sound, body and speech, peculiarly subjected to time, space and thought matrices.

Six computers formed a communication network managed in real time by six musician-actors. The guitarists of Zwerm, along with Prins and Anaraki, all appearing in dual roles, became part of an invisible network of correlations. They not infrequently moved like computer game figures devoid of free will. Their overlapping, chaotic statements using vocabulary drawn from informatics sounded like information noise.

Language and the thought associated with it is changing at lightning speed under the influence of new technologies; similarly, our perception, hearing and feeling is changing... Watching and listening to *PARK*, one could get the impression that reflection on the linguistic character of these transformations dominated the entire performance, subordinating the music, listening and sound to itself.

Based on Prins' *Infiltrationen (Memory Space #4)*, the purely instrumental introduction for four prepared electric guitars in horizontal

position with which *PARK* opens promised much. Even just the physical 'struggle' with the guitar, sound production using various objects, was able to create a peculiar bodily counterweight for the cerebral dimension of a composition subordinated to language (programming) and its structure. Electronics à la Prins is the complete opposite of sterile, ideally pure studio electronics utilizing abstract sound. Even if it is based on algorithms, it has its texture, its weight, its power, its body. This time it was the human being who had the chance to establish control over the machine, which could have resulted in greater virtuosity of playing, a broader spectrum sounds, a yet bolder and more sensual approach to electronics. Why did it not happen this way, why did Stefan Prins stop halfway, jump up on stage and turn into an actor?

### NADAR ENSEMBLE — A HYBRID ELECTRONICS

The concerts in Darmstadt – especially those at the Orangerie – were of predominantly conventional form: an ensemble appeared on stage and played a set of more or less aesthetically independent works by various composers. Never mind that a program comprised of stylistic, generational, geographical monads neither builds new content nor provokes a layered manner of listening. Darmstadt is a mecca for composers from all over the world and a great music 'fair' at which everyone wants to 'promote' their 'product' as well as possible. Composers await their big break, which is the inclusion of one of their works in the festival program. This is not conducive to the construction of original programs, nor to experimentation with the concert form itself.

The ensembles from Belgium managed to overcome this dominating and overwhelming concert practice. The long evening of 18 July at Centralstation in Darmstadt had a clear dramaturgy – and that, in the theatrical sense. Two ensembles performed: Nadar Ensemble

(under the baton of Daan Janssens) and Besides Ensemble (without conductor) – as it were, competing with each other in the area of originality in their program, the manner of its composition and presentation.

The first to perform was Nadar, which is consciously building its own artistic and generational identity. It can boast of collaboration with today's most interesting composers from the 30- to 40-year-old generation, among whom are – aside from Stefan Prins – also Simon Steen-Andersen and Johannes Kreidler (both of whom won the aforementioned Kranichstein Music Prize



for Composition – in 2008 and 2012, respectively). Nadar Ensemble prepared a music-film show for Darmstadt, arranging its program on the basis of a continuum. The combination of music with cinema is, obviously, an extraordinarily charming idea, virtually guaranteeing success. However, for a program continuum to succeed, each work must be at an equally high level and correspond with the rest of them.

Most of the pictures – Norbert Pfaffenbichler's *Intermezzo* (2011), Nicolas Provost's *Long Live the New Flesh Part I/II* (2009) and Martin Arnold's *Haunted House* (2011), as well as Jorge Sánchez-Chiong's music-film mix *Used Redux (from Autocine)* (2012, première) – made use of a 'found

footage' technique, processing and deconstructing, among others, Charlie Chaplin films (Pfaffenbichler), cartoons (Arnold) and horror film scenes (the daring Provost!). The remaining music-film compositions – Stefan Prins' *Piano Hero #1* (2011/2012) and Johannes Kreidler's *Die »sich sammelnde Erfahrung« (Benn): der Ton* (2012, world première) – utilized rather concept and musical rules at the image level.

Among the composers, only Alexander Schubert did not use video; on the other hand, in his work *Point Ones* (2011/2012, première), he did serve up a rock energy drink with distinct percussion, electric guitar and electronics parts correlated by means of sensors with the gestures of conductor Daan Janssens. Played at the beginning, directly after Pfaffenbichler's two-minute film, his work and Jorge Sánchez-Chiong's *Used Redux...* together formed a peculiar rock bracket for the ensemble's performance.

In the middle were works by Prins and Kreidler. *Piano Hero #1* for keyboard and video, by Prins, updates the relationship between pianist and instrument with new elements, such as programming the sound of a digital controller keyboard, separating the sound from its source and assigning it to a virtual performer. The composition forms a peculiar hybrid of human and machine (Frankenstein monster?), capable of inhuman feats. The work utilizes samples of the harsh, overtone-rich, percussive sounds of piano strings being struck by the hand, structured with the aid of, among other things, such means as cuts and loops.

Also standing under the banner of technology and the effects of its use Johannes Kreidler's new work *Die »sich sammelnde Erfahrung« (Benn): der Ton*. Known for his affirmation of the capabilities that the computer gives an artist, the composer boldly transfers them to the ground of music. This yields a result similar to the case with Prins – an instrumental-electronic hybrid, except built on a somewhat different principle ('music with music' / 'Musik mit Musik'). Here, as well, we have a play with the limited capabilities of performers and the un(?)limited capabilities of electronics – especially when we are talking

about speed of data transmission and of task performance. The work is a self-organizing chaos of snippets of musics, a sound splash generated with the aid of algorithms (?) which, however, fascinates the listener from the first sounds with its ghoulish humor and casualness relative to the concept of original composed music.

The term 'hybrid' appears to describe the Nadar Ensemble's entire project, and comes to the fore on at least a few levels: combination of music and video, instruments with electronics, samples (including film) and 'newly' generated sounds (images). This leaves no doubt that the concept for Nadar Ensemble's concert turned out to be a good one.

### BESIDES ENSEMBLE — PREDATORY AND MINIMALIST

Doubts did appear, however, during the second half of the evening of 18 July at Centralstation Darmstadt in conjunction with the performance of another Belgian group, Besides Ensemble.

Before the audience took their places, light music, played *sotto voce* and *da capo* by the ensemble itself, was already wafting from the stage. As it turned out, the concept consisted of a peculiar threading of successive works onto a string of these café music sounds. Played back from offstage between the individual compositions on the program, they gave the musicians time to reorganize the stage; they did not, however, give the listener any rest or even a moment of concentration before the next work – not to mention the opportunity to enjoy the music just heard – for a round, melodic, harmonious song immediately took the upper hand.

But there was also nothing to enjoy. The main attraction of the program turned out to be Matthew Shlomowitz, who was to become the Trojan horse of this year's Darmstadt courses. Probably no one rushed onstage in Darmstadt with such momentum and with so many works. Neither, probably, did anyone leave such an

ambivalent impression. Three works on Besides Ensemble's program seemed to be more than just a bit much – all the more so that they were so lacking in content. *Letter Piece no. 5 (Northern Cities)* (2012), *Letter Piece no. 4 (Adams)* (2012) and *Avant Muzak* (2010) were a mixture of cheerful John Adams-style minimalism and mediocre wit in the style of a teenager of average intelligence. The musicians played out a comedy onstage rather than playing their instruments. This did not in any way create convincing instrumental theater.

On the program of Besides Ensemble's concert were two more works: Larry Polansky's *She is Full of Patience* (2012) and Jagoda Szmytka's *For Travelers like Angels or Vampires* (2012). The first of them could have reminded of Morton Feldman's music. Though delicate, recurring and gradually thickening sound progressions have become part of the minimalist concept of Besides Ensemble's program, it would be difficult to say this about the composition of Jagoda Szmytka. Her work clearly diverged from the rest of the compositions with its very scrupulous approach to sound and its careful construction of sound complexes. While *For Travelers* contained a tribute to the ensemble in the form of a discretely rock-type edge and rhythmic sequences, it did not flirt with any of the 'Newest Simplicity'. In reality, Jagoda Szmytka's aesthetic interests lean towards very subtle and complex issues – at the level both of philosophy and of the sound itself. Her ideas normally relate to gesture; she derives them from the musician's work with his or her instrument, which links her at the aesthetic level with Simon Steen-Andersen.

No doubt there was some sort of misunderstanding, that a composer writing a work as part of the Staubach Honoraria 2012 was assigned to an ensemble with such distant aesthetic propensities. Finally, we should also mention the amplification of Besides Ensemble's concert, which was characterized by overdrive and *de facto* sound distortion, not always favorable to the music. It was no doubt dictated, however, not so much by the good of the compositions being performed, as by the ensemble's predatory rock image.

### LIQUID ROOM — LISTENING AND DRIFTING

The culmination and, at the same time, crowning of the Festival in Darmstadt took place on 28 July in the Darmstadium with a performance by Ictus Ensemble and guests: Jennifer Walshe, Matthias Koole and Stefan Prins. If the concerts of the Nadar Ensemble and Besides Ensemble were a manifestation of different, original thinking about music and the manner of its presentation, then Liquid Room was additionally a fulfillment of the idea of music in a space (as in a gallery?) which permits the audience to move about freely, permitting it to decide independently when and where it will join in the musical stream.

It is also an invitation to another kind of listening, more diversified, fragmentary, of differing intensity, full of associations and free drifting of thoughts. By contrast, the concerts at the Orangerie demanded a completely committed form of listening, which sometimes took on the hallmarks of repression (for example: the complete set of Cage's *Freeman Etudes* in the rendition of Irvine Arditti). The artists of Liquid Room accentuated the difference in mode of listening, citing in the program notes Peter Szendy's rhetorical question:

***“And once again we can ask ourselves whether the vaunted total [structural] hearing isn't really a form of deafness on the part of the listener. Listening without the least deviation, without ever being distracted by the noises of life – is that even listening at all? Mustn't listening permit certain shifts in focus?”***

In the expansive space of the Darmstadium, four stages were arranged facing the four corners of the globe, while in the middle stood a mixing table and the sound engineers' stations. The audience took their places on portable cardboard seats in the space between the four stages and the sound engineers. Constantly changing sound vectors, flowing from different – and sometimes several – directions, immediately obliged the audience to become mobile.

It is difficult to reconstruct all twenty works performed at the Darmstadium in their detailed structural and aesthetic properties. The idea of Liquid Room's artists did not consist, however, in dividing up, differentiating or pigeonholing music. The artists created a space which in and of itself became a work. The diversity of the elements forming it (among them, compositions by Clinton McCallum, Magnus Lindberg, John Cage, Bernd Alois Zimmermann, Benjamin de la Fuente, Alvin Lucier, Eva Reiter, Jennifer Walshe, Leopold Hurt, Larry Polansky, Alexander Schubert et al.) yielded a surprising unity of musical idea. In Liquid Room, stylistic, genre and generational boundaries have dissolved. Classical composition, musical conceptualism, postmodernism and experimentalism, minimalism and maximalism, with an edgy avant-garde rock as a finale, turned the concert into a total sensual and intellectual experience. This kind of 'experiments' with a different mode of listening, as well as a different, non-obvious contextualization of music, open up one's perception to new experiences and sensations; they permit one to perceive the subtle relationships in art and enjoy it more fully.

Where did the Belgians get their ideas; where does their musical vitality come from? This year's Festival and Courses for New Music in Darmstadt showed that today, they are a force to be reckoned with. Belgium is growing into an important center of contemporary music which, in the future, will have yet many surprises for us.