

# SIX BELGIAN COMPOSERS

Maarten Beirens & Maarten Quanten

## ON MUSIC TODAY



After a turbulent 20th century full of innovations, interesting turns, currents and evolutions, new music is no longer the self-evident, prestigious and trend-setting art that it may have been once. Aesthetic premises have become more and more diverse (and in some cases even explicitly antagonistic), 'classically' composed music has to find its position in a landscape in which music genres that are not-composed and not-'classical' become increasingly prominent. The making of aesthetic choices, the assimilation of influences or the development of 'a musical language of its own' has become a more complex question.

Technological evolutions offer new ways to generate musical materials, to manipulate and use them, concurrently influencing the mode of thinking about the constituent elements of music. In a contemporary praxis which ranges across

the whole gamut from laptop virtuoso to author of symphonic scores the profile of a 'composer' becomes ever more versatile. Connected to this, the question of the commitment of the composer comes to the fore: what is the societal relevance of a commitment to the creation of music? There, too, the whole field is open, from withdrawal into autonomous beauty and 'art for art's sake' to active involvement in contemporary societal developments and challenges.

With these considerations in mind we approached a handful of Belgian composers with a view to picking their brain about their opinions, dreams, complaints and desires concerning these themes. In other words: What does composing mean to them in Flanders or Wallonia at the beginning of the 20th century?

From the answers of the composers always emerged by and large the three great themes

that are distinctive of composing in the early 21st century. However, the attitude vis-à-vis these themes is very varied, which may be small wonder for those who are familiar with the wide range of stylistic characteristics that typify the compositions of these six divergent composers. If you expect to find an unequivocal image of 'the' Belgian/Walloon/Flemish music, you will be disappointed. It does not look like stylistic chalk lines or even common underlying aesthetic principles with a kind of 'national identity' inherent in them are applicable to this generation at all. But perhaps this is exactly what characterizes the young generation of Belgian composers: a diversity of stylistic and aesthetic points of contact, a field of possibilities where a young composer, without the constraints of coercive dogmas or musical aprioris, is in a position to develop his own frame of reference and to prove his mettle by doing so.

### Cédric Dambrain (b. 1979)

#### **Studies**

- Electroacoustic composition at the Royal Conservatory of Mons with Annette Vande Gorne
- Courses in computer-aided composition (Centre Acanthes, IRCAM)
- Courses in real-time processing (Benjamin Thigpen)

#### **Recent compositions**

Home (dance production with Louise Vanneste), Tales of the bodiless (music theatre with Eszter Salamon), plq for 4 guitars, drums & live electronics

#### **Performed by**

Ictus, Françoise Berlanger, Arne Deforce, Zwerm, Bart Maris

#### **And also**

human-machine interface developer

### Stefan Prins (b. 1979)

#### **Studies**

- Electrotechnical engineer (specialization: applied physics & photonics)
- Composition at the Royal Flemish Conservatory in Antwerp with Luc Van Hove
- Sonology at the Royal Conservatory of The Hague
- PhD in composition at Harvard University under guidance of Chaya Czernowin (2011-2016)

#### **Recent compositions**

Infiltrationen (Memory Space #4), Fremdkörper #3 (mit Michael Jackson), Piano Hero #1-2, Hybridae

#### **Performed by**

Klangforum Wien, ChampdAction, Nadar Ensemble, Ictus, Nickel Ensemble, Ensemble Mosaik, Zwerm Electric Guitar Quartet, Jean-Guihen Queyras, Matthias Koole, Mark Knoop

#### **And also**

- Composer in residence, live-electronics-specialist and member of the artistic board of Nadar ensemble

## SOCIETY

The relationship between the arts – including contemporary music – and the surrounding society has always been ambiguous. Of course a purely musical level can be discerned in music – a major third is a major third and that's it – and certainly for more abstract compositions it is hard to conceive how they can concretely relate to society at all. Even so, the composer takes a stand in that society. What is the locus of a composer who does nothing else but 'creating beauty' in a society where productivity and economic return are valued high? What are the impressions and the impulses like that inspire a composer; is it possible for a piece of music to be to a certain extent a reflection of the world in which we live; and is it a duty of a composer to deal critically with this? Even though some of the composers interviewed cherish very pronounced vantage points about the social dimension of their artistic work, the complex question of the societal legitimizing of contemporary music keeps provoking questions and, perhaps, also doubts.

"A difficult point is the societal relevance of music", **Daan Janssens** says. "The crux is the term relevance. Is new music relevant? How can it acquire this relevance? Probably society can keep going without new music. Admittedly a couple of hundred people in Flanders would become very unhappy. But in economic terms this number is negligible..." Janssens also mentions the curious position of so much contemporary music that reaches only a relatively small audience, while its intrinsic attraction should ideally appeal to a much larger public. "New Music often has a much more numerous potential public than it often actually gets access to. It seems to me that a piece by Alexander Schubert such as the one we recently played (with the Nadar Ensemble) in Darmstadt would in all likelihood be as successful on a cutting edge rock stage than during the Darmstädter Ferienkurse. So there are still many opportunities to be explored in that respect."

**Bram Van Camp** links this up with the idea that the status and position of a composer (and by extension a musician) have become totally different from the situation in the past. "Societal changes in the past century have resulted in the impracticability (with only a few exceptions) to double up in the composer-performer combination that was once so self-evident. Only the well-paid jobs that a performer can secure (soloist, conductor) enable him to subsist on the basis of those fees and to save *sufficient* (hardly paid) time for composing purposes." For him this is not an economical question, but also a limiting condition for the *métier* of the composer: "I stick to my guns that a composer should be a performer, or at least play an instrument to the extent of understanding the mechanisms of the rehearsal process, of differentiating between the feasible and the impracticable in his composition process. However, it is not an enabling condition anymore to perform on stage every week with a view to achieving results as a composer. What is really needed, though, is the restoration of a better rapport with the public to make up for the increasing absence of the composer-performer." With a view to counteracting the isolation that the contemporary composer so often ends up in, Van Camp recommends first and foremost a role as educator: "Exactly to secure the privilege of absolute freedom – both financially and artistically – a pedagogical function is ideal for the composer as well as for the world surrounding him. Composers should not adapt their style to the public, but the public has to be educated in such a way that it is eager to listen to new music. Therefore the societal function of the composer is to be found in education. Not only at the conservatories, but even more so at music schools and in general education, where our future concert audience has to be prepared by strong composing personalities inspired by clarifying passion.

On the one hand this societal duty is not only essential for the survival of our discipline, on the other hand it is a matter of integrity to provide a return to the same community that subsidizes us with the taxpayer's money."

Whereas Van Camp and Janssens boldly establish a link between composer and public, other composers are more prudent in their statements about societal and certainly political dimensions in their work. "Moreover, I don't feel that it is the role of the artist to wonder about his utility or his function in society. Such concerns could even interfere with the creative activity", as **Cédric Dambrain** explains that in his view what lies outside the creative musical domain is not necessarily an important source of solicitude.

"With my music I attempt in the first place to develop a coherent musical discourse", **Annelies Van Parys** says about the primordial artistic dimension as her driving force. "Art for me is essentially apolitical. It tries to transcend its era." Nevertheless the potential critical dimension of music is a possibility: "This does not imply that music cannot *concurrently* be a critical reflexion on its epoch. All the same, the most important thing is for music to be as good as possible. A good message with weak music is no interesting match. As you can guess, I'm not a barricade hopper."

Much more outspoken in that critical dimension are **Gilles Gobert** and **Stefan Prins**. The former firmly maintains: "It is our role in society to suggest new ways of thinking, acting, expressing ourselves, of interpreting the world in which we live, of proposing kinds of music that are today unprecedented, if not impossible." According to Gobert contemporary music must encourage reflection: "It is vitally important both to offer pleasure and concurrently to unsettle people with uncertainties, alternatives, contesting, questioning with a view to causing the audiences, the listeners, the spectators, to confront themselves with the essential questions about the meaning of our contemporary society. (...) As far as I am concerned, composing, like in all previous periods for that matter, creating today is above all feeling the pulse of one's own epoch. It means refraining from rejecting the contemporary era and the art forms of today, and capitalizing instead on whatever our epoch offers in terms of formidable sonorous and visual

- Composer in residence of ChampdAction
- Performer of improvised music (laptop), a.o. with collectief reFLEXible; an ensemble that focuses exclusively on free improvised or instant composed music

## Gilles Gobert (b. 1971)

### Studies

- Composition at the Royal Conservatory of Mons with Claude Ledoux
- Courses with Lachenmann, Murail, Lindberg and Harvey
- Musical data processing at the IRCAM

### Recent compositions

Pièce pour piano et électronique; Pièce pour piano, percussions et dispositif électronique; Pièce pour deux voix, flûte, violoncelle, piano et électronique; Pièces pour duo de laptop

### Performed by

Quatuor Danel, Musiques Nouvelles, Nao Momitani, Arne Deforce, Izumi Okubo, Kwartludium+ ensemble, Syntax ensemble, Nahandove, Tallin Sinfonietta

### And also

- Professor in electronic composition at the Royal Academy of Music of Liege
- Lecturer in composition and computer-aided composition at the the Royal Conservatory of Mons
- Musical director of ensemble OI\I and member of the laptop duo KNAPP

## Daan Janssens (b. 1983)

### Studies

- Composition the Royal Conservatory Ghent with Frank Nuyts
- Lessons and masterclasses with Godfried-Willem Raes, Filip Rathé, Peter Eötvös and Luca Francesconi
- Conducting lessons and seminars with Ensemble Modern, Johannes Kalitzke, Marco Angius and Lucas Vis

adventures, to be unceasingly renewed and rethought." Stefan Prins, too, sees the critical involvement of the artist with the surrounding society as a real responsibility, taking his cue from Marshall McLuhan:

***"Now that our specialising technologies have created a whole new set of new environments, one becomes aware of art as an 'anti-environment' (...) giving us the tools to become conscious of the environment itself. Because (...) people never are aware of the basic rules of structure and culture of their own environment. Art as 'anti-environment' is more than ever a tool to practice our perception and judgement. Art as an object to consume without the purpose to practice our perception, is as ridiculous and snobbish as it has always been."***

For Prins one of the keys for this purpose is the use of technology and new media: "I am with McLuhan when he differentiates between art that "challenges perception" and art that doesn't do that (entertainment?), and when he says that it is the responsibility of the artist to produce art that is not merely a (sophisticated) 'consumption product', but art that instead builds an "anti-environment". The latter kind of art makes our technological environment, albeit almost become invisible, perceptible again, questioning it and subverting it: art that in other words engages in direct interaction with the world in which we live."

## AESTHETICS

If topics such as the position of a composer in society and the role played in it by him or her, whether it be active or not, yield already a varied series of stands, this is even more the case with the question about aesthetic premises. The connection with the tradition(s) from the past, the options of composition techniques, idioms, instruments, playing techniques and technology are perhaps greater than ever. As a consequence *aesthetic* choices are often personal choices, but for each of the composers that we confronted with this question it transpired this was a problem that they deal with very thoughtfully, though also in different ways. "From an aesthetic point of view I believe in composing on the basis of personal fascination with sound", says Bram Van Camp. "No matter how broadly this can be defined, it remains a personal fascination that only the composer himself has to account for individually." However, this does not imply that sound is merely an autonomous given, for – as he indicates – the relationship to tradition keeps playing a crucial role: "A composer has to be serious about his discipline and its tradition, realizing that transcending all styles and periods some universal principles have persisted (principles such as layering, dealing with limited materials, the transmission of a core message – whether abstract or not...). A composer only makes himself master of these principles through a solid training in music history, analysis, harmony and counterpoint. Meantime it has been made possible to concurrently take composition along with the course in harmony and counterpoint, a good evolution indeed. Another asset is that electronic music composition is offered as part of the coursework.

However, a drawback is the diminishing importance of the classes in harmony and counterpoint in terms of quality and contact hours, even to the extent of being considered irrelevant by the contemporary composer. Only a thorough, in-depth knowledge of these fundamentals can enable a composer to transcend the 'old rules' and to grasp the great story that the

composition of music is all about. The training in harmony and counterpoint deals essentially with 'learning to think musically', not with the making of pastiche compositions. Only after sound formative years including writing and counterpoint courses will a composer be in a position to deal with the endless possibilities and stimuli that we are inundated with today. It seems to me that this basic option will make a difference in the long run, separating the wheat from the chaff."

For Daan Janssens too a conscious relationship to the past and to tradition belongs to the core of composing: "Also today a composer is obliged to make choices. The most evident choice is perhaps the stylistic one. A composer chooses to use some elements, or not. Basically such decisions can be seen as *political* or at least *ideological*." To deal with these choices in active and intelligent ways is one of the crucial challenges for a composer today. "The twentieth century has generated an abundance of new musical techniques", Janssens specifies. "These techniques are certainly not a reservoir a composer can take his cue from in an unbridled way. Because everything refers to something else: a period (scratching on string instruments à la Lachenmann), a musical style... As a composer you have to be aware of your choices of your materials, of the intrinsic references and of its significance for music history. I'm afraid this consciousness is often absent, which may result in some techniques coming across as new music clichés. Something becomes a cliché if it refers to a style or a composer without being properly put in a framework, something is pasted into a new context without being integrated, so the pasting remains conspicuous."

The question is also whether a composer can elaborate on elements with a past inherent in them. "And what's more, the 'testing of materials' which was on top of the checklist in the modernist project has been largely completed today", Stefan Prins says. "At least as far as the traditional instruments are concerned. Of course there are still new playing techniques, instrumental preparations or combinations conceivable,

## Recent compositions

(Paysages – études) IV & V, (Douze écrits), (trois études scénographiques), Les Aveugles

## Performed by

Spectra Ensemble, Arsis4, Goeyvaerts string trio, Aton & Armide, Ensemble Orchestral Contemporain, Neue Vokalsolisten Stuttgart, Ensemble Musiques Nouvelles, VocaalLAB, Jean-Guihen Queyras, music theatre LOD

## And also

- Principal conductor of Nadar Ensemble since 2006
- Research assistant at the University College Ghent (former Conservatory) since 2007

## Annelies Van Parys (b. 1975)

## Studied

- Composition at the University College Ghent, Royal Conservatory with Luc Brewaeys
- Masterclasses and seminars with Jonathan Harvey, Thierry Demey, Luca Francesconi, Jean-Baptiste Barrière, ...

## Recent compositions

Second Symphony *Les Ponts* (orchestral), An Oresteia (music theatre), Drifting Sand (string trio), 5 Frammenti (vocal ensemble)

## Performed by

Asko|Schönberg Amsterdam, Ensemble Recherche Freiburg, Spectra ensemble, SMCQ Montreal, Cantus Zagreb, NYNME New York, Sian Edwards, Otto Tausk, Brussels Philharmonic, Belgian National Orchestra

## And also

- Teaching formal analysis and orchestration at the University College Brussels, dept. Royal Conservatory
- Honorary ambassador for the Ghent Royal Conservatory
- Laureate of the Royal Flemish Academy of Belgium for Arts and Sciences

but structurally speaking that project has been essentially completed since Lachenmann. The search for 'new materials' is to be found today in different areas, as the visual arts have already realized quite some time ago. The battlefields have shifted to the new media, to the new technologies, to new ways of dealing with information, imposing a new mode of making and handling art (and in the case of music: composing)."

But is the radical search for new and consequently as yet unheard material a necessity? Annelies Van Parys is very much aware of the specific style that she wants her music to align with: "As far as my musical language is concerned, I'm not a revolutionary. My language places itself in the direction of the spectral/French school. I am trying to connect to a tradition rather than toppling everything or fastening my teeth into the newest technologies, which I look at somewhat diffidently. On the one hand because they change with lightning speed (and consequently age equally rapidly), on the other hand because they easily get bogged down in tricks and some superficial 'cosmetics'."

As important as the composer's choice to align himself with certain traditions and idioms is the question about what his music wants to achieve. Daan Janssens does not beat about the bush in this respect: "The music that I write does not intend to impress musically (for example through virtuosity, radically new techniques and sounds, the creation of volume or a combination of these elements). In the first place I want the listeners to listen (in this respect I may be close to Nono's last phase): to listen to subtleties, minuscule sound shifts as well as 'references' both to other works by myself and by other composers." However, like with the question about the societal context there may be a danger of paralysis in thinking too much about the aesthetic question. Cédric Dambrain indicates how a radically different way of thinking can have a pleasantly liberating, creative effect: "I love to approach creation as if music never existed before. Like if someone told you: 'There exists something called music, conceived on the basis of sounds and capable of generating terrific pleasure and

excitement." It's this type of creative energy and of pursuit that interests me. I believe that this 'primitivist' point of departure can produce the most surprising kinds of music, as well as the most speculative and authentic ones."

## TECHNOLOGY

We have already mentioned the topic several times in passing: the many technological developments and the new media of the last decades have dramatically changed the possibilities for composers. Computer technology has brought electronic elements within easy reach. From traditional writing with pencil and paper for acoustic instruments to direct programming in Max/MSP (and everything in between): the opportunities are dazzling. But the opinions about what technology can offer intrinsically are widely divergent. Cédric Dambrain relativizes the function of technology as a panacea: "From this point of view, all the tools – whether new technologies or not – are interesting to use: I believe that a mixed piece can be extremely academic, while an acoustic piece can be gripping and brimming with inventiveness. Technology does not answer any question per se." But on the other hand the new technological possibilities result in a totally different way of dealing with musical materials, and by extension of thinking about music. Witness Gilles Gobert's statement: "Certainly technology is important in my work as a composer. The electro-acoustic techniques available today enable me to conceive instrumental music differently, 'playing the laptop' also put me in a position to re-think the traditional instrumental gestures." Moreover, Gobert says, this situation increases the composer's autonomy: "I feel more at liberty to compose for a reduced ensemble with electronics than for an orchestra, for example. To be sure, not because an orchestra would be less interesting, for it is a tool that still possesses an infinity of resources, but because the present socio-economic situation does not allow for the creation of really new pieces, I feel. Indeed, how could you justify taking some risks in the

knowledge that you will get only two or three rehearsals before the concert? Whereas for me taking risks (and consequently the courage to fail) is essential for making progress."

While Gobert still approaches this question on the basis of the prior conditions of the classical music world in which the composer functions, Stefan Prins connects the embracing of technology to the function of social criticism mentioned already above. Direct interaction with the world in which we live presupposes interaction with the media that both reflect and shape the world. "Such interaction will be optimally facilitated by specific uses of those technologies (or their underlying concepts), as they shape our society today. In the world of the visual artists this is already the *modus operandi*. It is vitally important for an artist to engage in an active dialogue and confrontation with those technologies, to search for the 'blind spots' in those specific technologies, and to operate subsequently from that locus, the same way that a computer hacker uses the vulnerabilities of a system to send his virus, infecting the system. My artistic trajectory today can be put into that kind of framework. An important focus in my work targets the interaction and tension between humankind and technology, between reality and virtuality." Technology is for Prins not a purpose for its own sake (as Gobert said too), but an existential means to maximally empower contemporary music to take up its critical function: "This way the artist can reclaim an individual freedom that (deterministic) technologies had screened off from him. By structurally and subversively engaging in the confrontation with the new technologies of today, the artist (hence also the composer) can demand again a societal relevance that had crumbled away during the past decades, because many composers were entrenched in a testing of materials which mainly referred to the past and to tradition."

## Bram Van Camp (b. 1980)

### Studies

- Violin and Chamber Music at the Royal Flemish Conservatory of Antwerp
- Composition, analysis, counterpoint and fugue at the Royal Flemish Conservatory of Antwerp with Wim Henderickx
- Composition and conducting at the Conservatory of Amsterdam with Theo Loevendie

### Recent compositions

The Feasts of Fear and Agony (after Paul Van Ostaijen), Improvisations for violin solo, Music for three instruments, Violin Concerto

### Performed by

deFilharmonie (Royal Flanders Philharmonic), Hermes ensemble, Het Collectief, I Solisti del Vento, Hommages Ensemble, Wibert Aerts, Nikolaas Kende, Piet Van Bockstal

### And also

- Composer in residence of Het Collectief and Hermes Ensemble
- Harmony and composition teacher at the music academies of Schoten and Merksem (Antwerp)
- Coaching young composers in composition projects