

Liner notes for cd Etcetera KTC 1344, december 2007
Also in Dutch, French and German.

Theo Verbey: Clarinet Concerto, Piano Concerto and Fractal Symphony

In art and in music in particular there is always a synthesis between preconceived structures and intuition. If structure is the body of music, then intuition is its soul. One is not possible without the other. Music without order is formless, whilst music without fantasy is soulless – although this last has become self-evident, now that we have computers for composing music. Matters are more complicated with structure and order, for these are not always audibly perceptible. The isorhythmic patterns that the mediaeval composers used were often imperceptible to the ear, but they guaranteed an inner unity. The arrangement of the notes in some pieces of strict twelve-tone music can lead audibly to almost amorphous results, yet the serial technique employed guarantees the unity of the result.

Theo Verbey has been conscious of this dichotomy from the beginning of his career as a composer and has kept his structured and free imaginative elements quite clearly separated. In a certain sense Verbey needed these structural walls, as he needed to keep the *mer à boire* of his many sources of inspiration under control. These walls therefore became a source of inspiration for him in their turn. If only as a way of rethinking the structural exigencies of the fifties and sixties, which by the time Verbey came to musical maturity had been safely canonized in theory books, but nevertheless was fresh in people's memory.

Verbey continued to test and reject until he finally remained with one technique for allocating time, one that he has used since 1985 and has termed fractal technique: in fact this is a continuation of serial techniques, one in which rhythmic proportions govern the large-scale structure of the piece as well as the rhythm and the musical syntax. 'My self-chosen limitation to these two parameters', said Verbey, 'has to do with the fact that music-generating algorithms on their own have always given primitive results. We do not know enough about composition and cognition to use these algorithms truly successfully.'

As a result of his consciousness of the cognitive element, tonality became an increasingly important anchoring point in his music, even though he has simultaneously harvested the fruits of the 20th century's total emancipation of dissonance. He has much in common with the American composer John Adams, twelve years older than Verbey, for Adams's musical style is also a true melting pot of influences. Both composers write music that can take on another colour from one composition to the next, whilst their musical fingerprints nevertheless always remain completely recognisable. Verbey and Adams belong to the group of musical magpies that includes Bach, Stravinsky and Louis Andriessen, their – unspoken –

motto being 'better well stolen than badly devised' (beter goed gepikt dan slecht verzonnen).

Verbey has composed more than thirty works since 1985, these being primarily orchestral and chamber works. Vocal works are very much in the minority and are limited to his Whitman for soprano and orchestra (1992) and the Rilke-Lieder composed four years later, although he has made orchestral transcriptions of a number of songs by Ravel and Mussorgsky. The three recent works brought together on this CD are his most important works from 2004-2005, two decidedly fruitful years for Verbey.

The Fractal Symphony was composed at the request of the Residentie Orchestra on the occasion of the orchestra's centenary. It was premiered on 28 January 2005 under Etienne Siebens in the Dr. Anton Philipszaal in The Hague. The performance time of its five movements is linked to the ratio 7:5:6:4:8; in accordance with the fractal principle, these proportions are also used at micro-level. Verbey strove in this symphony for the balance and elegance that he found in Haydn's symphonies; he also consulted Bartók's Concerto for Orchestra and Berlioz' Symphonie fantastique, both of which are also in five movements. The Fractal Symphony nonetheless calls up completely different associations: the rapid fourth movement is reminiscent of Gustav Holst's The Planets and even of Rawhide, whilst the central movement with its pulsing percussion parts that are woven around one note resembles the windblown sound of a distant gamelan orchestra.

Symmetry rules throughout the work: the tempi of the rapid second and fourth movements and the slow first, third and fifth movements mirror each other, whilst within the movements themselves, with the exception of the third one, the musical structure retraces its steps at the halfway point. The piece is also so arranged that one of the sections of the orchestra takes the leading role in each movement, with the strings, the wind, the percussion and the brass in succession. In the fifth movement, a wonderfully calm and collected coda, Verbey pays homage to his French colleagues; he at first combines Vallée des cloches, the fifth movement from Ravel's Miroirs, with Viderunt omnes, a 13th century organum work by Perotin. At the centre of the movement we hear the song Au travail suis by the Renaissance composer Barbingant.

In comparison with the preponderantly tonal atmosphere of the Fractal Symphony, the Piano Concerto has a noticeably rawer sound. The piece was composed at the request of Jan Zekveld, the artistic director of the ZaterdagMatinee in the Amsterdam Concertgebouw and was first performed on 13 May 2006 by the Radio Philharmonic Orchestra under Jaap van Zweden. The soloist was Ellen Corver, with whom Verbey had discussed the piece often as it was being composed and whose ideas had an important influence on the final result.

The composition of the orchestra for the Piano Concerto is also worthy of note: since the work was first performed alongside Stravinsky's Rite of Spring, Verbey made use of the occasion to use the same orchestral forces for his own work, less the strings. There are still nevertheless approximately forty winds and six percussionists.

The four-movement form is clearly deployed by Verbey, as is usual for him. The first and third movements are dialogues between the piano and the orchestra, the second and fourth movements are toccatas in which the soloist and orchestra share equally in the passages of notes that fly swiftly by. The whiplash-like chords with which the piece opens are decidedly dissonant. In his own introduction to the piece Verbey refers to Varèse, but there are also typically Stravinskian harmonies and woodwind combinations, whilst a passage in two-part counterpoint for the piano halfway through the first movement has much in common with the jubilant melisms of Steve Reich's Tehillim. The acrobatics of the second movement are, according to the composer, modelled on toccatas by Ravel, Debussy and Prokofiev, with Berio's iridescent harmonies and trills resounding in the last movement. The third movement makes use of elements from Scriabin's Vers la flamme, with which it shares its centrifugal harmonies that try to escape the gravitation of tonality.

The Clarinet Concerto was composed between the two above works and was first performed on 13 January 2006 by the Rotterdam Philharmonic Orchestra under Markus Stenz; Sjef Douwes was the work's soloist and is also the concerto's dedicatee. The length of the movements is in the ratio 3:2: 1, the weight of the piece being therefore principally in the first movement. It is almost classical in form with its two contrasting themes that are decorated and developed in the highly acrobatic clarinet part. The second movement is related to the Japanese gagaku music Etenraku. Verbey here creates the sounds of Japanese music on Western instruments, but gives them an extra lustre through his skill in orchestration. The form is once again symmetrical, with a middle section in which the fundamental chord that until then has remained static begins to shift. In the concise third movement, harmony becomes the work's driving force. While the orchestra leaps from one harmonic plateau to another, the solo instrument blossoms forth with luxuriant garlands of sound enriched by a wayward swing. Here too, the music returns, this time almost unexpectedly, to its starting point.

Verbeys musical lay-outs may display clarity and straightforwardness as their main characteristics, but they nevertheless include small pathways and alleys that can lead to new and unexpected perspectives.

(translation: Peter Lockwood)

© Frits van der Waa 2008

