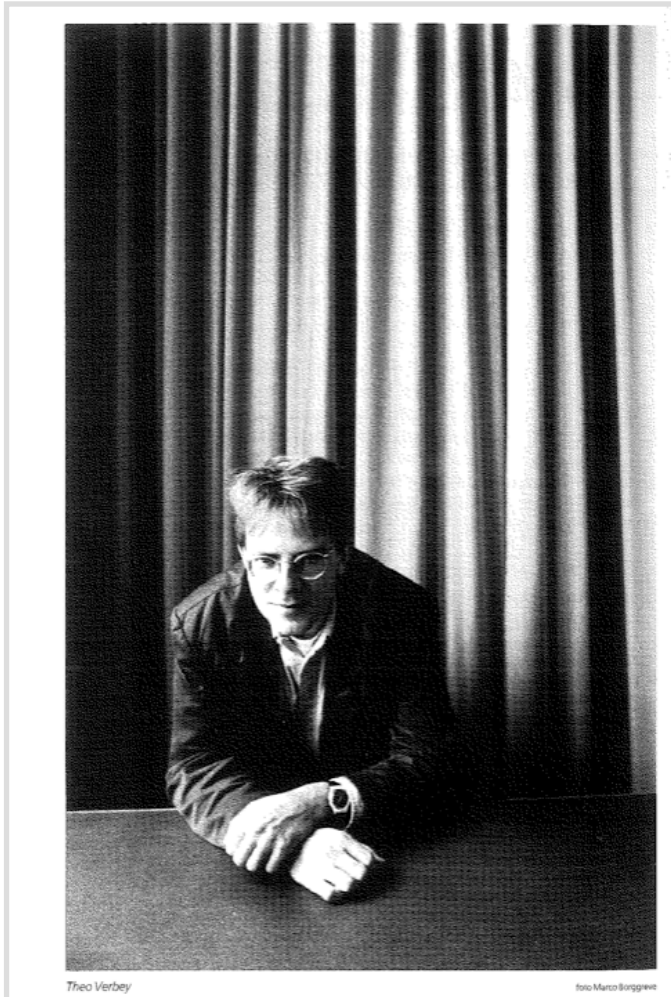


The two faces of Theo Verbey's *Inversie*

An effervescent tablet in water¹



Theo Verbey's composition, Inversie (Dutch for 'Inversion'), places two groups of instruments in contrast with each other. The division reflects the double character of the material, which is tonal on the one hand and atonal on the other. The inversion of the title – turning upside down and inside out – is played out between the two instrumental groups and the two kinds of material.

by Patrick van Deurzen

Photo: 1994 Marco Borggreve

Following my analysis of Robert Zuidam's composition², *Fishbone*, I could not have chosen a more different piece of music than the 1987 work, *Inversie*, by Theo Verbey (1959). It was almost like going from an inhospitable Andriessen

¹ This text originally appeared in Dutch in *Mens en Melodie* June 1994. Translated 2020 by Mike Wilcox

² See *Mens en Melodie*, March 1994

landscape to a Boulez-like oasis from the *One Thousand and One Nights*. In the musical universe of *Inversie*, the notes taking flight are as generous as those in *Fishbone* are grating and spare.

It is immediately apparent that the two compositions are musical opposites. In terms of form, however, we can actually see striking similarities between them. They are each part of a triptych: *Fishbone* is the first part of *Three Mechanisms* (1988 – 1990), and *Inversie* is the first in the series, *Inversie*, *Contractie* and *Expulsie* (1987 – 1990). A singular aspect of the latter trilogy is that each work in the series is written for different instrumental forces³. This means that the individual works are independent pieces in their own right; there will be few concerts in which the whole trilogy can be performed⁴.

At first glance, the trilogy format may not seem geared towards present-day performance practice. Still, the concept does contain a fascinating central idea: a composition, complete in itself, is given – through its connection with other independent pieces of music – a new formal function in which the pieces, when taken together, tell a particular story. The whole becomes something different from the sum of the individual parts. Other Dutch composers have also been intrigued by this possibility. Indeed, the pieces *Diafonia, ...sub node per umbras...* and *De Profundis* (1988-1991) by Klaas de Vries belong together; and Otto Ketting made a trilogy from *De Overtocht* (the crossing), *Het Oponthoud* (the stopover) and *De Aankomst* (the arrival) (1992-1993). Peter-Jan Wagemans

³ *Inversie* for 10 instruments; *Contractie* for flute, bass clarinet and piano; *Expulsie* for large ensemble

⁴ *Inversie*, *Contractie* and *Expulsie* were performed together during the 1992 *Nederlandse Muziekdagen* festival. *Inversie* was released on Donemus Composers' Voice Highlights CV 31, and is available on Spotify, and Youtube.

went a step further, writing a four-work cycle, *Parade, Walk on Water, Alla Marcia* and *The Dragon, the House, the Sun, the Tree and the Pond* (1976-1992)

Back to Zuidam and Verbey. There is a second element linking *Fishbone* and *Inversie* (and the two trilogies they belong to). They are both 'studies' or 'compositional etudes' in which the composer examines and develops a technical principle. You could compare this to a pianist who extends their technical competence by playing Czerny etudes, although a composer can only do this by writing music. With a talented composer, the final result will go beyond the level of an etude. And this is the third similarity between *Fishbone* and *Inversie*: as much as they differ musically, they both have more to offer than their technical principles.

Inversie

The first thing that strikes the ear when listening to *Inversie (for 10 instruments)* are the instrumental forces used (see fig. 1). Strings and percussion, along with instrumentalists who are wildly strumming and fiercely blowing, deliver virtuoso work. The plucked strings especially give the ensemble its typically spiky character. Verbey makes it all sound like an effervescent tablet in a glass of water. Just as the air bubbles in fizzy water playfully seek the surface, so all kinds of melodic festoons rise up in *Inversie*, sometimes on their own, sometimes in combination with each other.

Group 1		Group 2		
sound character: staccato		legato		
stringed instrument	- Vibraphone	struck	Alto flute	Wind instrument
	- Piano		Clarinet (B ♭)	
	- Cymbalom			String instrument
	- Guitar		Viola	
	- Mandolin		Double bass	

Fig. 1: instrumentation

The ten instruments required to perform *Inversie* are divided into two groups (fig. 1). The most important characteristic of Group 1 is that the instruments have a clear attack and a sound that dies away. This constraint is counterbalanced in *Inversie* by the use of tremolos and trills. The instruments in Group 2 are more lyrical in character and have the ability to influence the progress of a sound dynamically. In *Inversie*, the juxtaposition and merging of these two instrumental characters are developed with great care. Moreover, this instrumental division mirrors the way the melodic material is split into atonal and tonal elements. The rendezvous between the two instrumental groups, and between the atonal and tonal, happens in various ways as the five sections comprising *Inversie* progress (the sections are not strictly separated from each other). In this, turning the prevailing order upside down and inside out is an integral part of how *Inversie* is played out (see fig. 2⁵).

⁵ The CD-time follows Donemus Composers' Voice Highlights CV 31

(section) deel:	(A)	(B) ← (C) → (D)	(E)
aantal maten (number of bars)	42	35	56 21
	77		77
CD tijd:	0'00"	1'29"	2'51" 5'53" 8'07"

figure 2: the form

Festoons of melody

'A' opens with the exposition of the atonal: tutti entries start out energetic but soon become tied up rhythmically; they don't reinforce each other, but only repeat while decelerating. The motion, which at first seemed promising, morphs into soft soundscapes crisscrossed by glittering festoons of melody (see fig. 3).

♩ = 112

The musical score consists of six staves, each representing a different instrument or instrument group. The tempo is marked as ♩ = 112. The score is in common time (C) and features a complex rhythmic texture with overlapping patterns. The instruments and their parts are:

- Staff 1:** Cimbalon + clarinet (legato). The melody features triplets and a 7/7 time signature. Dynamics include *ff* and *pp*. A trill is marked in the second measure.
- Staff 2:** Guitar. Features a triplet pattern. Dynamics include *ff*.
- Staff 3:** Harp. Features a complex rhythmic pattern with sixteenth notes. Dynamics include *ff* and *pp sub.*
- Staff 4:** Mandoline. Features a complex rhythmic pattern with sixteenth notes. Dynamics include *ff* and *pp sub.*
- Staff 5:** Piano + pizz. viola. Features a complex rhythmic pattern with sixteenth notes. Dynamics include *ff* and *pp sub.*
- Staff 6:** Vibraphone + altoflute (legato) (l.v.). Features a complex rhythmic pattern with sixteenth notes. Dynamics include *ff*.

Fig. 3: bars 15 – 16, the third tutti entrance in section 'A' where the six different rhythmic layers, 6;5;4;3;2 get 'in each other's way.'

In the first section, Instrumental Group 1 plays a dominant role. The dazzling atonal melodic sequences fit in perfectly with this group's attack-like character. The soundscapes created by tremolos and trills, though, are also perfect for the strings and vibraphone. The musical idea of 'A' arises organically from these instruments' sound character, and could even be said to magnify it.

In 'B,' the contrasting, more lyrical character of Group 2 comes into its own. This section has a modal yet obsessive melody built from the first six notes of G# minor (see fig. 4).

♩ = 120 altoflute + viola

*the same melody
is played by the mandoline
in quintuplets

**the same melody
is played by the vibraphone
in quintuplets

fig. 5: the second half of bar 50 and the first half of bar 51, the G#-minor melody and the atonal counterpoint.

'C' is the largest section and occupies the central position in the composition. It is balanced on both sides by its being the same length as 'A' + 'B' and as 'D' + 'E' (fig. 2). There is a symbiosis in 'C' between what happens in 'A' and in 'B'; the two instrumental groups increasingly merge, and the line between atonal and tonal is obscured as much as possible. Not that the contrast is dropped in aural terms, but the one seems to change effortlessly into the other.

An important new element in 'C' is a passage in which a running sixteenth-note sequence, enlivened by harmonic impulses, provides a strong driving force. In 'C,' this drive is interrupted by reminiscences of 'A' and 'B'; in the following section, 'D,' the drive comes back and is almost unstoppable. In 'D,' the various instruments in Group 1 hand the sixteenth-note sequence over to each other, rather like the baton in a relay race (see fig. 6).

fig. 6: bars 173 (2nd beat) – 175, from the 'D' section. Short, mostly parallel, atonal voices are set against this G#-minor melody.

The ongoing melodic line is in G# minor, evoking associations with 'B'. This relationship is reinforced by the fact that the atonal melodic fragments flank the G# melody. Despite these similarities, 'D' is pretty much the opposite of 'B'. In 'D,' almost everything about 'B' is turned upside down:

'B' Group 2 - G#-minor melody, legato character, metrically free, dynamically rich

Group 1 - added color and atonal counterpoint

'D' Group 1 - G#-minor melody, staccato character, recognizable pulse, dynamically level, atonal counterpoint

Group 2 – added color

This reverse instrumentation and difference in motion creates an inverse character of its own; the instruments, it should be pointed out, remain true to their own sound character.

There is a comparable link between 'E' and 'A'. Both sections are emphatically atonal and, where in 'A' attempts are made to generate motion, in 'E,' everything grinds to a halt with chordal blocks allowed to fall gradually silent (see fig. 7).

♩ = 112 piano-vibr-harp-cimba-mando-guitar

The image shows a musical score for two staves, treble and bass clef, in common time (c). The tempo is marked as ♩ = 112. The instrumentation is listed as piano-vibr-harp-cimba-mando-guitar. The score begins with a dynamic marking of *pp* (pianissimo) and a crescendo hairpin leading to a dynamic marking of *ff* (fortissimo). The music consists of several measures of complex, multi-layered chords with various rhythmic patterns, including sixteenth and thirty-second notes. The final chord is a complex, multi-layered block of sound.

fig 7: bars 227 - 231, the final chord of *Inversie*

Once the final chord has died away, it is clear that *Inversie*, as well as being about atonality and tonality, is chiefly also about motion. A different idea of motion is explored in each section. In 'A,' various rhythmical layers work against each other, neutralizing the motion (see fig. 3; it is as if no one is in agreement about the precise tempo in which to begin). A melody is heard in 'B,' moving freely over the meter (fig. 4). 'C' is all about energy versus cessation, while maximum rhythmic collaboration in 'D' keeps almost constant motion going. In 'E,' the motion finally dries up as the section's chordal blocks slowly die away.



Old woman

For various reasons, Theo Verbey's *Inversie* is a fascinating composition. In the first place, it calls to mind the 'chicken and egg' question – which came first, the notes in *Inversion*, or the instruments which play them? In a nutshell, the instrumentation works well and sounds good. What's more, the play between atonality and tonality and movement unfolds with breathtaking virtuosity, something you can marvel at time and time again while listening to

Inversie.

The way atonality and tonality are used in tandem in this composition calls to mind that drawing of an old woman in which a young woman can also be seen (or vice versa). If you see one face, it is very hard to make out the other. But which is the old face and which the young one in *Inversion*?

With thanks to Donemus for the score.