

Starry-Eyed Merlijn Twaalfhoven:

A Singular Voice

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Scene 1. Amman, Jordan, 2008. To be more precise: the King Hussein Cultural Centre, with its Western-inspired concert hall. Here composer Merlijn Twaalfhoven (born 1976) is conducting an original ensemble consisting of a combination of Western classical instruments and traditional Arab ones. The orchestral soundscape evolves from highly percussive passages and Western wind melodies into florid Arab scales performed by local *ud* (lute) players.

There are children involved as well, some seventy of them. These kids blow bird-calls, beat a roll on an empty soft-drink can or sing simple tunes - for some listeners perhaps reminiscent in both beat and melody of the *Feierlich und gemessen, ohne zu schleppen* movement of Mahler's First Symphony. Other musicians - whether adult or adolescent - strum their violins *pizzicato*.

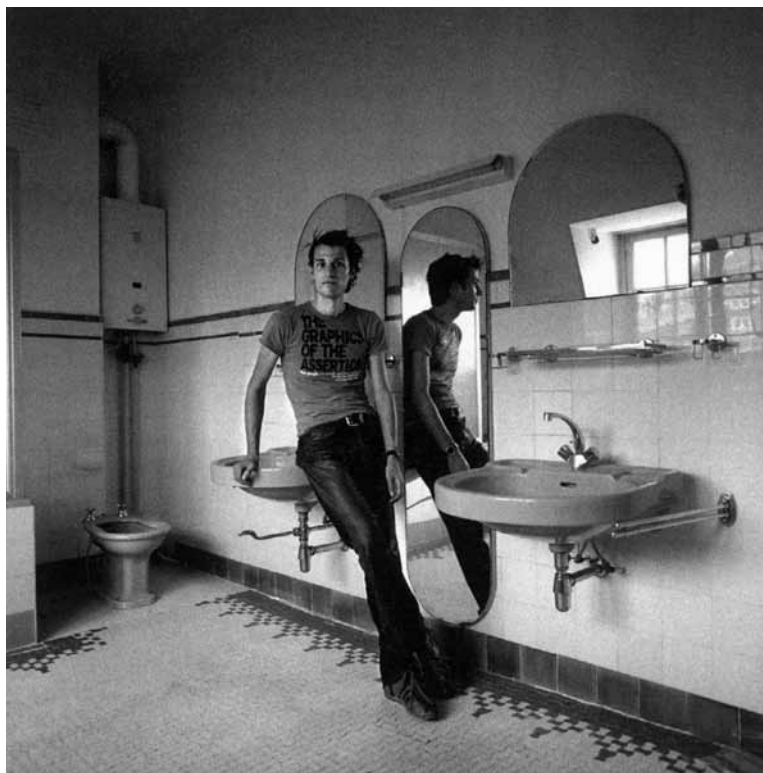
Imperfect, amateur, that's how it actually sounds. But here imperfection is an honest-to-goodness choice. '*The combination of highly-trained specialists with their outstanding polished quality and stage presence*', to freely quote Merlijn Twaalfhoven, '*combined with the imperfection of amateur musicians or children, widens the consonant sound palette and gives depth to the musical work*': a piece appropriately called *Symphony for All*.

Symphony for All is a piece about a fruitful dialogue between dilettantes and professionals, and of course it is also about the dialogue between East and West in a hybrid musical framework. When you see their faces, you can tell that the participating musicians come from all parts of the world. Their passports are not only from the Middle East but also from Sweden, Germany, Italy, Egypt and the Netherlands.

The children, however, share the same soil: they are all Palestinian refugees who migrated to Jordan, to what they envisage to be a safe haven, albeit that they have to live in camps - some of them for years and years now. They also share a dream, the dream of a peaceful society in which one can make an inspiring living. All the youngsters interviewed in the documentary, now available on YouTube, want at least to become a teacher.

Scene 2. Cyprus, 2005. The divided capital of Nicosia, where the Greek inhabitants are separated from their Turkish counterparts by no less than a stone wall, barbed wire, a minefield and strict passport controls. Sound, however, is

Merlijn Twaalfhoven (1976-).
Photo by Klaas Koppe.



not bound by borders. So starry-eyed idealist Merlijn Twaalfhoven seized the opportunity of the sixtieth anniversary of the United Nations – the Blue Helmets operate as peace keepers on the politically and culturally completely divided island – to compose an open-air piece for both Greek and Turkish musicians. Each contributes to the work from their own side of the city; it was baptised *Long Distance Call*.

The musicians were given only one opportunity to rehearse the piece together. On that occasion the UN base, situated right between the opposing sides, served as neutral ground. During the one and only performance of *Long Distance Call* the UN troops had the best seats in the house, directly within the whirling and twirling bits of sound and shredded motifs that drifted from one side of the capital to the other. Sounds of scrap iron, Turkish drums, beaten bottles on a balcony, traditional songs and sighs flew back and forth in a dialogue of musical questions and answers. Mutual understanding is much more easily created through music than through words or governmental directives. *Long Distance Call* does not need a conductor: a series of stopwatches will do. After all, time is a common denominator, not limited to any specific culture, nationality or politics.

The fact that music can freely cross borders, cannot be hindered by walls or barbed wire, that it has the power to bridge hostile relationships is a principle that Twaalfhoven systematically employs. In *Carried by the Wind* (2008) Bethlehem was the playing ground for musicians from either side of the concrete wall that divides the Holy City from the people of Ramallah. In this project, children from local refugee camps were once again invited to collaborate, this time dressed up in beautiful symbolic butterfly costumes.

It isn't always easy to be politically neutral - not even for a starry-eyed composer; this fact is illustrated by the fuss surrounding the Al Quds Underground project, an EU-funded programme with the stated ambition of creating 'a secret space for artistic expression'. Last year Twaalfhoven took on the job of artistic director of this festival that featured more than 150 mini-performances in private homes in Arab Jerusalem. Dance, music, and storytelling at alternative locations: living rooms, courtyards and the like. Its aim? To promote 'not conflict and segregation, but contact and curiosity' via the arts. Unsurprisingly there were some rows during the initial performances, whereupon the organisation - rightly or wrongly, but somewhat contrary to the ideals - excluded Jewish participants and invitees from all following events, with the predictable consequent political commotion.

In the majority of works by Merlijn Twaalfhoven, political statements struggle to gain a hearing within performative and pedagogical ones (the *Symphony for All* concept, for instance, had also proved its merit in primary school projects undertaken by the Netherlands Philharmonic Orchestra). The performative nature of his work is highly original, often even unique in his scenography of a specific space.

Scene 3. Amsterdam, 2004. Museum Square. Anyone going from the Rijksmuseum to the Concertgebouw at sunset on this summer evening is enveloped in a cloud of sounds that, like the full moon rising, seems to follow every change of direction. The deep auditory three- (or more) dimensionality is spacially striking. Over there, percussion rolls in the distance. Next to you, sustained pedal tones surge in a slow chorale. Brass sounds, a little further away, shuttle from left to right. Quarter tones tumble over each other, passing you unexpectedly. Soloists are driven around on delivery bikes, going from one pocket of musicians to the next.

Traffique is conceived for performance by roughly thirty small groups of musicians - yet again both professionals and amateurs - located in different places, positioned in a spatial network. Aside from a handful of percussionists, it's mainly scored for wind instruments; they deliver their notes into the open air, again following the dictates of a stopwatch.

Traffique, *Long Distance Call* and *Carried by the Wind* illustrate that you can literally walk into Merlijn Twaalfhoven's immersive compositions. He also tends to take music out of its traditional surroundings, to confront it with other expressions of culture, be it his own Dutch or Western culture, be it of non-Western origin.

Scene 4. Amsterdam, 2001. Harbour West. Night is already falling when the people disembark from the boats or buses that brought them to the dry dock harbour complex. Twaalfhovens' *La vie n'est pas un chocolat* promises to be an unforgettable event, a total art experience that will eventually expose Wagner's

Gesamtkunstwerk as a creative concept of merely limited scope. Twaalfhoven happens to position himself as a *com-poser* in the literal sense of the word, as someone who *puts elements together*. Here he not only composes specific music, he composes an overall nocturnal experience, one in which the inner ear has to digest music of different genres and cultures.

Works from the classical canon are alternated with newly-conceived soundscapes. Rattles and drum rolls illustrate the musical potential of rusty old motor parts. In another corner a rock band is playing. A DJ is awarded all the honour of the musical apotheosis, doing his swinging thing from a platform hanging from a humongous crane. Twaalfhoven composes intensive nights; the inner man is tickled as imaginatively as the inner ear. A chef prepares a creative supper for all; later even breakfast is served. By then, dawn has arrived and physical fatigue has inevitably sneaked in. Well, life's obviously not a gooey chocolate bar, you really have to sink your teeth into it. And Twaalfhoven's *Vie* is not just a matter of passive digestion: it assumes joining, participating, sometimes even undergoing the intensive experience blindfold.

Designing nocturnal experiences has not been restricted to *La vie n'est pas un chocolat*, which was conceptualised at different locations in different versions until 2006. One needs only a quick glance at Twaalfhoven's oeuvre to see that the 'night' format, entitled *La nuit* with diverse combinations, has proved to be a fruitful one. Starting with *La nuit urbaine*, in 2001 the combination of music and dance with cooking, haircut intermezzos, fashion and make-up shows was eventually further adorned with video projections and bonfires. *La nuit* was good for a series of adventurous nights - both open air and indoor - not only in Dutch cities, but also in Ljubljana and Prague, where collaboration with local musicians provided a special local flavour.

In describing this so intriguing work by Merlijn Twaalfhoven, a wise guy might at some point throw in a term like 'polydiscursive'. That is to say, Twaalfhoven's music narrates different stories and events all at once, is sensory and multi-layered. Although the hybrid nature of his concepts is potentially contradictory, he always remains fully in charge. Twaalfhoven manifests himself as the ultimate puppeteer, a *maestro* in the true classical sense.

Notwithstanding his conceptual approaches to the musical métier, Twaalfhoven is, not surprisingly, a fully-trained classical musician. He evolved from a viola player (preparatory classes at the Royal Conservatory in The Hague), to a graduate in composition at the Amsterdam Conservatory. He also writes 'classical music pieces', or as he prefers to call them, 'performing compositions' (for large orchestra or chamber music ensemble). Although the classical side of his work is usually somewhat overlooked in the general focus on his less conventional projects, Twaalfhoven makes eager use of the classical musician's ability to 'perform a piece of music according to signs on paper. This saves a lot of time and discussion. Especially with a large orchestra, time is expensive and discussion is risky.' 'A rehearsal is brief and the work of building up a piece does not allow you the time you might want to have to sculpt, transform and shape the inner world of sound.' Twaalfhoven manifests himself as a true disciple of Mahler (*Das wichtigste steht nicht in den Noten*) in arguing that 'between the notes lies a world of sound which is impossible to convert exactly into notation.' That is why his scores are always so full of words and instructions, indicating, for example, that 'these notes do not necessarily have to be played in the order as given'.



Part of the score of *Traffique* (2004).

Photo by Klaas Koppe.

Scene 5, a concert hall. It could be in Amsterdam, but also somewhere in Flanders, even Japan. Let's zoom in on the last: Suntory Hall, Tokyo, a well-known contemporary music festival, August 2002. The programme combines works by Estonian Arvo Pärt, German Hans Werner Henze and a young Dutch composer: Merlijn Twaalfhoven. At first it appears that the musicians of the Tokyo Symphony Orchestra are still tuning their instruments; but obviously the piece has already commenced, as conductor Kazuyoshi Akiyama is clearly in the lead. The title of this short orchestral work – obviously freely borrowed from Kant – is *GUSH: Die Mündigkeit des selbstverschuldeten Ausgangs*. It's an original score: silent breaths and full blast screams, bombastic in constant changes of beat. It's repetitious, it's resilient. The musicians have a full-scale flirtation with pop and dance music and humbly suffer the affront Twaalfhoven imposes on classical clichés. Even when he is composing for more conventional sets of instruments, he often adds his own disorderly elements.

GUSH (2000) was generally well received by press and programmers alike. It was honoured with an incentive prize for young Dutch composers and performed at the prestigious Holland Festival. Not all musicians, however, are always amused by Twaalfhoven's unconventional approach. He tears apart centuries-old seating traditions in his desire to get the musicians out of automatic pilot

mode and interacting with their audience; he occasionally surrounds the audience with the players instead of leaving the artists framed on their distant stage.

Merlijn Twaalfhoven wants to deconstruct and de-mystify the enigmatic job of composing. He encourages his colleagues to step down from their assumed pedestals. In doing so, Twaalfhoven defines composing as simply playing with Lego blocks: *'big and small pieces are available, red and yellow ones, sometimes a little puppet or a pair of wheels.'* The quote is taken from his own commentary on another orchestral piece, another with a poetic title (this time taken from Kahlil Gibran): *If you reveal your secrets to the wind you should not blame the wind for revealing them to the tree* (2000-2002).

In his efforts to clear away some of the smoke and mirrors, in trying to make the composer a more accessible personality, Twaalfhoven will also walk on-stage with his viola, ready and expectant, to jam with musicians from other domains.

Scene 6, Concertgebouw Amsterdam, 2004. The venue has the reputation of being the world's busiest classical music concert hall, but tonight MTV Fusion rules. The location's unexpected audience consists of young people aged from 20 to 27 – at least this is the main target group, but older folk are certainly welcome too. It's *1001 Nights Oriental and Dance Party* time. Co-organiser of the event is *Entrée*, the educational foundation of the Concertgebouw and the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, itself run by young people. Regulars would be amazed at the change in atmosphere that the prestigious temple of music has undergone, at the lighting and the other decorative creativity. Even the plush red velvet seats have been removed. Centre stage is DJ Laid Back Luke. His percussive sample machinery has been morphed into an instrument for dialogues between Dance and Classical music. One of the partners in crime tonight is Merlijn Twaalfhoven, swinging, sawing and sighing with his bow and viola. Being critical, one could comment that improvising is a talent and skill known to precious few, but this does not detract from the infectiousness of the initiative or the passion of the performers. It has gone down in the collective memory as a highly successful interchange between genres and generations.

For Merlijn Twaalfhoven, musical expression revolves around communication. *'A work of art doesn't mean anything if the audience is not touched by it'*, he writes in a little book (*Kunst in de wereld*, Arnhem: ArtEZ Press, 2009) that is the result of his, in some ways uncomfortable, term on the faculty of the ArtEZ art academy. *'Of course, a work can be smartly designed, cleverly conceived, and beautiful in realisation – I do indeed then often experience it as smart, clever and beautiful. But to me, that is still not true art. Real value, the quality of an artwork, is defined by the quality of the experience it creates.'* One could add to this on his behalf: the intensiveness of the experience induced. Once you allow yourself to become immersed in Twaalfhoven's compositions the experience will be unforgettable, be it in Amsterdam, Antwerp, Nicosia, Prague or Palestine. ■