

How the Form Forms Itself

Recent Developments in the Work of Composer JacobTV



The start of the clip looks like a home-made YouTube movie: a guitarist with a cool little beard, armed with a worn-out Fender guitar, is standing with his back to the window of his apartment. Night is falling. You can tell from the sky-high water tower in the background that the film must have been shot somewhere in downtown Manhattan. (During the ten minutes of the clip, more and more lights flicker on in the highrisers behind. Or is that just how it seems?)

Then, a rough voice shouts out, *'Speak it up... I said speak it up...'* This voice is the cue; it's the starter's flag that sends the cars squealing away from the grid, leaving behind them the scent of burning rubber. The American guitarist Kevin Gallagher races through his riffs with total concentration in much the same way. Sometimes he is seated in the side car of the voices, at others he is steady behind the steering wheel. The guitar, loaded with distortion effects, meets its match in the words. Seamlessly Gallagher shadows the voices, with the same jerking, swinging patterns, syllable for syllable. The voices, chopped up via cut and paste into aphoristic slices of sentences, form counterparts to the raw, but highly idiomatic guitar licks, at times reminiscent of Eddie Van Halen, or Stevie Wonder ('Superstition'), or the ultimate guitar icon, the late Jimi Hendrix.

Still from 'Grab it':
guitarist Kevin Gallagher.
Photo by Jan Willem
Looze (courtesy of JTV).

'I tried to explore the "no-man's-land" between language and music,' says composer Jacob ter Veldhuis about this composition, called 'Grab it!' The pop idiom of 'Grab it!' would tend to make the listener forget that Jacob ter Veldhuis, or JacobTV, as he currently styles himself, is a genuine classical composer, one who writes concertos for solo instruments and full symphony orchestra, string quartets and the like. But JacobTV is also a genuine 'contemporary' composer – 1951 vintage – who views music with uninhibited eclecticism. As with many musicians of his generation, his roots lie in the pop music of his youth. Composition lessons from Willem Frederik Bon and studying electronic music with Luctor Ponse taught him all the necessary in compositional craftsmanship. Ter Veldhuis brings together the whole broad spectrum of musical forms and influences to create meaningful syntheses. As a result, listeners who like to pigeonhole things may find it hard to classify what they are hearing. Is it pop? Is it jazz? Or could it in fact be 'classical' music?

The use of sampled voices has become one of JacobTV's trademarks. The way in which he uses these samples bears some resemblance to the work of American composer Steve Reich. Both employ samples in a documentary-like setting, but whereas in Reich's work the voices tell a story that relates to a tightly directed series of questions, the narrative of Ter Veldhuis' compositions is based more on the serendipity of the *objet trouvé*. Political and media phenomena are a fertile source of inspiration for Ter Veldhuis, but the proverbial man in the street also fascinates him, as do legendary musicians. JacobTV's oeuvre includes voices from, among others the *Jerry Springer Show* ('Heartbreakers') and an evangelical preacher delivering his message in Times Square ('Jesus is coming'). Jazz greats such as Billie Holiday ('Billie') and Chet Baker ('May this bliss never end') also put in an appearance, as do many other figures from the past and present, both familiar and less well-known.

'Grab it!' features the sampled voices of prisoners on Death Row, talking about their fate. Among the macho cries of 'Motherfucker' and 'I'll bite your fucking nose off', we hear a desolate 'You lose everything' or a defiant 'he went out the backdoor wrapped up in a green sheet'. Of a suicidal prisoner we are told: 'He tied one end around the pipe, and he hung himself.' Ter Veldhuis has explained that this world of the condemned 'on the fringe of society, with its heartbreaking verbal assaults, moved and inspired me'.

Images of Manhattan emerge as the video clip progresses, with cops and yellow cabs appearing and, repeatedly, railway tracks in a tunnel. Pictures of the prison worm their way between the guitar riffs with increasing insistence: a network of cells, the worn faces of – mainly black – prisoners. In regimented lines, in obedience to an order we do not hear, they file out of their caged enclosures, all at the same time. In a way, they are like animals. A further visual narrative layer is introduced: snatches of sentences from the samples flash in white capital letters across the documentary images: supertitles in their most stratified form.

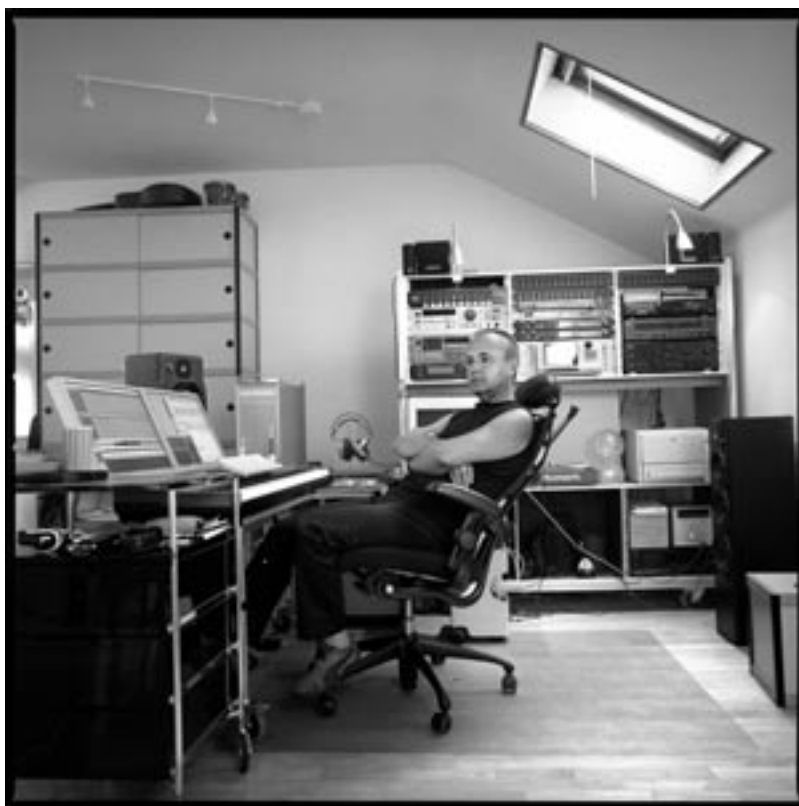
The clip of 'Grab it!' (one of the tracks on the recently issued second box in a series of three presenting the work of JacobTV in over seven hours of audio and three-and-a-half hours of video recordings) features a sophisticated mix of images. Michael Zeegers created these documentary pictures as a background projection for a performance of 'Grab it!' by the Dutch Metropole Orchestra dur-

ing the Nederlandse Muziekdagen in 2003. Dutch jazz saxophonist Hans Dulfer was the soloist on that occasion, but it was a performance that is perhaps better forgotten. The film, however, made a succesful reappearance in the video, combined with Jan Willem Looze's footage of Kevin Gallagher, which despite appearances was not actually recorded in his Manhattan apartment but on the stage of The Monkey.

The infinite variation of content

Ter Veldhuis is generally regarded as a Dutch proponent of ultra-tonal composition, a kindred spirit of composers such as Arvo Pärt, Giya Kancheli and John Tavener. And there's certainly a case to be made for this when you listen to Ter Veldhuis' multimedia oratorio *Paradiso*, with its scales that climb up and down in jubilant triads, in an account of a space voyage through Dante's paradise. In Ter Veldhuis' opinion the dissonant, traditionally a musical metaphor for conflict and tension, has become devalued as a means of expression. This, combined

Jacob ter Veldhuis
(1951-).
Photo by Klaas Koppe.



with the sickly-sweet images that Jaap Drupsteen created for the visual accompaniment to this work of just under 75 minutes in length (part of the first box in the series), could indeed make you think that Jacob ter Veldhuis is a composer who has lost all his sharp edges, a musician who is prostrating himself before a larger audience. Ter Veldhuis has even been accused of being a 'regressive' composer. Nothing could be further from the truth. There is ample reason to



Still from 'Grab it!',
edited by Kristien
Kerstens.
Photo courtesy of ITV.

argue that JacobTV is proving to be the very model of an avant-garde composer, a creator of music who, increasingly, is calling composition into question from an ontological point of view – as 'Grab it!' perfectly illustrates.

What then exactly is 'Grab it'? It's on the one hand Kevin Gallagher's screaming riffs, accompanied only by the ghetto-blasters playing the samples and the occasional touch of percussion. On the other hand it's also the version on the CD/DVD series featuring Kevin Gallagher and additional solos with his band Electric Kompany. And it's also the XXL version by the Metropole Orchestra. And it all started with the version for alto sax and ghetto-blasters, written for the virtuoso Aurelia Quartet saxophonist Arno Bornkamp in 1999, which premiered in the classical music temple in Amsterdam, the Concertgebouw. Since then there has been a massive demand for different arrangements of the piece, so you may come across versions for electric violin, for trumpet and for percussion all under the same title. Traditionally all these would be described as arrangements or adaptations, or, in the case of the video clip, even as a 'remediation', based on the 1999 original. But such descriptions do not do justice to the compelling originality of, for example, the Gallagher version – as if that could be described as anything other than original!

What JacobTV has done with 'Grab it!' closely parallels a recent development in television, where the concept of the TV genre appears to be giving way to the new phenomenon of the 'format'. The format of *Pop Idol* – to give just one very appropriate example – can now be seen in countries all over the world under similar titles and in different languages. But is the German version any less 'original' than, say, the Dutch or the French or the British? They all feature dif-

ferent performers, who follow local conventions and behave just that little bit differently from their counterparts in neighbouring countries, but the format remains the same, and, even though this is flexible, it fits the local conventions and cultures perfectly.

'Grab it!' shares similarities with this approach. It is not a *forma formata*, to use the terminology of the late Frits Noske: it is not music with a definite, fixed form to be performed on the same fixed set of instruments. It is instead a *forma formans*, a 'form forming itself', or maybe even an *argumentum formans*, content that is constantly finding a new form. Not so due to the fact that the work develops conceptually in a structural sense through improvisation, but because the form offers a framework, an outline within which the content is capable of infinite variation. Incidentally, in his day Bach did something very similar. In his work we frequently find the same notes appearing on different staves. (Is it a coincidence that at the time Bach too was derided as a regressive composer?)

Over the course of music history, the *forma formata* has achieved supremacy. JacobTV's current work calls this into question. 'Grab it!' is not a composition in the traditional sense; it is more of a performative concept. Ter Veldhuis thusly aligns himself with the true innovators from musical history. Whereas a groundbreaking composer such as Luciano Berio repeatedly enriched the virtuoso solo performance in his *Sequenzas*, Ter Veldhuis is now augmenting music with an adaptive format, like an artist who chooses to depict the same landscape in pencil, oil paint, watercolours, pastel, photographs or video. Reproducing the same image in a variety of materials can suddenly create new dimensions with many different meanings. I would gladly cope with that if I were a concert programmer. But how does it grab you? ■

www.jacobterveldhuis.com

JacobTV's music is available in three boxed sets (*Rainbow*: Basta 3091732 / *Shining City*: Basta 3091742 / *Suites of Lux*: Basta 3091752)

Emile Wennekes will hold a lecture entitled '*Grab it, Motherfucker, Grab it!*' *Multiple appearances of a single composition* at the annual conference of the International Musicological Society (Amsterdam, 10 July, 2009. See: www.iamlconference2009.nl)