

Radiant with Soul and Inner Fervour

Alphons Diepenbrock (1862-1921)

After the death of Alphons Diepenbrock in 1921, it was soon discovered that the composer had lived exactly three hundred years after Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck. This could not possibly be a coincidence. It was after all abundantly clear that Diepenbrock was the best composer the Northern Netherlands had produced since Sweelinck. And even now, when this point of view has been somewhat adjusted as a result of research in recent decades, Diepenbrock remains a composer who was unrivalled during his lifetime and is still considered the most prominent Dutch composer of the period from 1890 to 1925.

Alphons Diepenbrock was born into an important Catholic family in Amsterdam; his father was of high-minded Westphalian origin, his mother's family included both the Catholic leader Joseph Alberdingk Thijm and the Catholic architect Pierre Cuypers. The young Diepenbrock was introduced to the arts (music, architecture, literature) and the humanities at an early age. After his schooling at the gymnasium (± grammar school) he studied classical languages in Amsterdam, moving in circles that included poets, writers and thinkers (including the *Tachtigers*) and wrote his doctoral thesis on Seneca. At the same time it was clear to him that he was equally passionate about wanting to be a composer. But he did not study at a conservatory. This meant that, as a classicist, to many people he remained an amateur composer. He taught himself the craft, avoiding well-worn paths and rigid educational disciplines. Until 1895 he earned his living teaching classical languages at the gymnasium in 's-Hertogenbosch (in North Brabant) and after that by giving private lessons in Amsterdam.

With a career like this, he had to 'learn' to compose by actually doing it (score after score, and endless series of corrections), by listening (innu-



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merable concerts, fortunately sometimes of his own works) and by devouring one book of theory after another. He almost always had the feeling of falling short, was rarely content, complained of the toil that was his lot, and even more about the misfortune of having been born in the Netherlands. He detested the lack of culture in the Netherlands, hated the sombre and often cold weather, and frequently considered his own life a failure. His private life was also a struggle, both in his marriage to a strong protestant wife, Elisabeth de Jong van Beek en Donk, who gave him two daughters, and, on the other hand, his great love for the much younger pianist Johanna Jongkindt, who was his muse for more than ten years.

It was to Johanna that, in 1912, at the height of his fame, he wrote the following about his almost compulsive need to revise his compositions again and again: 'For me it's the only way to finally create things, even if only a few, that are utterly radiant with soul and inner fervour. What I have expressed in these works is my property and my life too.' Two years later, on 14th June 1914, he confirmed this in another letter to her: 'If I don't want to have worked for nothing all these years,

and have the feeling of having failed completely, I have to raise those early works of mine that remain, and which I consider worthwhile, to the same technical standard as I am capable of now.'

In 1888 a new concert hall with its own orchestra was established in Amsterdam: the *Concertgebouw*. In 1895 the young Willem Mengelberg became the conductor of the orchestra, which soon became world famous. Diepenbrock became a friend of Mengelberg, was in certain respects able to guide him and, in his turn, had the opportunity to work with the orchestra himself after a few years. In this way his career as a composer ran largely in parallel with the successes of one of Europe's best orchestras, and he was able to make the acquaintance of such fellow composers as Mahler, Strauss and many other great masters, who like him were asked to come and conduct the orchestra.

Diepenbrock's oeuvre can be divided into music for the concert hall, for the theatre and for the church. What is more, almost everything he wrote is directly connected with language, with singing. His most remarkable composition, the *Missa in die festo* for tenor, male chorus and organ, consists of a mixture of Palestrina-style counterpoint and Wagnerian chromatics; it is exalted, intense in its faith, and has a unique sound. His best-known works are probably the compositions for the plays *Marsyas*, of *De betooverde bron* (*Marsyas*, or the Enchanted Spring, by the Dutchman Balthazar Verhagen, after Xenophon), *The Birds* (Aristophanes) and *Elektra* (Sophocles).

The majority of his oeuvre comprises songs accompanied by piano or orchestra. Each of his piano-accompanied songs, with words in French, German and Dutch, displays his exceptional sensitivity to language. He follows every turn and nuance of the language closely and provides it with a well-conceived interplay of lines and harmonic colour. The orchestral songs are at least as enchanting. The *Hymne an die Nacht* 'Gehoben ist der Stein' for soprano and orchestra (1899), the *Hymne an die Nacht* 'Muss immer der

Morgen wiederkommen' for alto and orchestra (1899), *Im grossen Schweigen* for baritone and orchestra (1906) and *Die Nacht* for mezzo-soprano and orchestra (1911) are true symphonic poems with an *obbligato* vocal part and not just orchestrated piano songs. Even today, each and every one has the same eloquence and hymnic animation that they were praised for after their first performances.

In his major works, Alphons Diepenbrock tacked between his love of German culture (Brentano, Goethe, Nietzsche, Wagner, Mahler), French culture (Verlaine, Debussy) and Latin culture (Palestrina and the great Catholic thinkers). But ultimately what he left us is the always recognisable and unique music of Alphons Diepenbrock.

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Translated by Gregory Ball

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2012 saw the issue of a new CD box: *Alphons Diepenbrock - Anniversary Edition*. It contains 8 CDs with almost 100 works, an extensive booklet and a bonus DVD with a live recording of the *Missa in die festo* at the *Concertgebouw* in Amsterdam (see www.etcetera-records.com).