

‘MUSIC CENTRE THE NETHERLANDS: DOCUMENTATION AND PROMOTION OF
CONTEMPORARY MUSIC IN ALL GENRES FOR PROFESSIONALS’

Els van Swol, IAML 6 July 2009, Amsterdam

One of the Netherlands’ most famous poems begins with the inspired line:

‘A new Spring and a new sound’

1.

This line is from *May* by Herman Gorter, which he penned at the end of the 19th century. The poem conjures up the fresh sounds of music ringing out again and again wherever in the world they may be. And it speaks of music as sound. To quote Morton Feldman: “I listen to sounds and do what they communicate to me” – with ever fewer sounds he gradually created more and more composition. Or take John Cage, who preferred sounds in their original state, predictable or not. Sounds that evoke surges of memory and nostalgia, such as the taste of a Madeleine in Proust’s *The Remembrance of Things Past*.

One doesn’t need much imagination for this, here in Amsterdam, so close to the great cruise-ships, their horns conjuring up the visions and smells of far-flung ports.

2.

A step forward in my general outline of the MCN context, to start with, we arrive at the superb book *Bruits* by the French economist Jacques Attali. To my great delight, the Finnish musicologist Torvinen quotes from the book in his very readable and visionary article ‘Can music (libraries) predict our future?’ published in *Fontes* (January-March 2009).

Gorter, Attali and Torvinen – and perhaps Feldman and Cage too – believe so: music *has* predictive possibilities, as a proclaimer of the new Spring. As Torvinen put it in his article, and I quote: ‘As music becomes less the solo domain of the performer and more a form of social activity, music libraries preserve music in its contemporary cultural form and, especially, can preserve music’s ability to [contribute to] social, ideological and cultural criticism.’

3.

Music libraries – just like Music Centre of the Netherlands, another step forward – assemble collections of compositions from both past and present, from home and abroad, in notated form or improvised, and committed to shining little discs. The starting point is what to do with the collections with a view to the future – towards greater pluralism and tolerance. Age, styles, genres, different backgrounds, low-brow and high-brow art begin a dialogue with each other and with the public. No longer Post-Modern with its lack of deeper meaning and context, but in a manner more concerned with content and relationships in which divisions are abolished and replaced by a truly new sound.

4.

Nowhere else do these ground-breaking activities form such an organic whole and are so firmly embedded in musical life as in the Netherlands. This is exemplified by

countless exceptional ensembles in all spheres – classical, jazz, world music and pop – and concert series such as the Proms, Rondon, Carte Blanche, Rumori, as well as various series in the Muziekgebouw aan het IJ and Bimhuis.

You can hear an example of such an ensemble this very week, when De Volharding perform works by Louis Andriessen, their founding father and our composer-in-residence. And the young composer Joey Roukens, whose work incorporates much of the old and new as well as Eastern and Western music into ‘organized sound’ (i.e. music), while remaining open to ideas and influences from multimedia.

5.

MCN, the permanent home for a new institute devoted to the whole music world, was opened in 2008 with the composition *Battle of the Fusion* by Merlijn Twaalfhoven, a young, talented and both literally and figuratively ground-breaking composer. Performed by a combination of the pop group Brown vs. Brown, jazz trio Twitching Eye and a classical brass quintet. The piece itself was a statement: the word ‘fusion’ in the title refers not only to the musical significance of the piece itself, but also to the MCN as an institute formed from no fewer than seven different organisations.

So far I have laid out the general outlines of the MCN context. In the course of this lecture I will be giving a short history of the MCN as a whole and of the Music Information Centre in particular, returning, at the end, to its visionary roots, like, as it were, a snake finding its own tail.

MCN

MCN is an institute embracing a broad sector in which the old demarcations and preconceptions that split different types and genres of music as well as the institutions based on these differences have been swept away. ‘Cross pollination always leads to new sounds’ is a quote from the introduction to the *Policy Document 2009-2012*, perhaps unwittingly echoing Herman Gorter’s poem that is embedded in the Dutch collective memory. Another quote from it: ‘Music transcends frontiers, culture, ethnicity and generations’. [End of quote]. MCN wants to be at the helm of this process. That is what it is about. Prophetic in the sense meant by Torvinen.

If we delve deeper into the *Policy Document*: we read the following:

- MCN is the knowledge and promotional centre for the music profession.
- MCN should play a coordinating and stimulating role both nationally and internationally, providing support, ideas and especially initiatives.
- It is a home to many different groups active in the music scene and thus forms a vital link in the chain of supply and demand. In this regard it is both the memory bank and the nerve centre in the field.
- From its view of the field as a whole, the MCN will direct new activities related to its core themes: **promotion** (both nationally and internationally) and **information** (including education and study).
- MCN will curate, extend and of course *use* the collections of contemporary, jazz and pop music built up by its predecessors. A well thought-out **collection and documentation** policy will contribute greatly to the information that is available and towards preserving the history of music in the Netherlands.

Regarding the latter, the collection should be **evaluated and made available to the public**.

- A smaller role is to be given to the **heritage**. The *Netherlands Music Institute* in The Hague carries more weight in this area. Ellen Kempers and Frits Zwart will deal with this subject in more detail in the next lectures.

So much for the *Policy Document*.

But... I can reveal something new: last Thursday we chose a new cataloguing system that will replace all applications used up to now. It is the Koha open source-system. A MARC 21-based format. We are first going to strip it internally and then revamp it with an interface. For Dutch music libraries this is, as far as I know, unique. And in any case quite a challenge.

The MCN will be responsible for a whole raft of activities. It has two genre-departments: pop/jazz/world music and: classical/contemporary – a publishing house (imprint Donemus) and the Music Information Centre or MIC, on which I shall now elaborate.

MIC

The MIC has a rich and extensive source of information at its disposal, described as 'gold' by Emile Wennekes, Professor of Music History after 1800. In some cases that 'gold' must as it were be excavated, as much of it is not yet digitally available. As staff we are continually astonished by the wealth of information at our fingertips, be it a fragile copy of the pop magazine *Tuny Tunes*, published directly after the liberation of the Netherlands in 1945, photos from the first years of photography (the time of Herman Gorter), or, just as unique, a photo report of the first rock 'n' roll concerts in Amsterdam in 1957. In other words, it is a true cornucopia.

Such a collection is not a goal in itself, but merely a point of departure for all those activities that must be undertaken to bring this material into the public domain. And – appropriately for a 'fusion-institute' – this must be done in the form of 'fusion' and multi-media products.

1.

The first example is of the former is the compact disc re-issue of old recordings by Theo Loevendie, from 1969 and 1972. Theo Loevendie is a cross-over musician par excellence as well as a composer. Born in 1935, he was until 1968 chiefly a jazz musician. Thereafter he taught composition and continues to compose classical-contemporary music. In 2003 he set up Ensemble Ziggurat, which combines both Western and non-Western instruments. Loevendie himself writes in the sleeve-notes of the old recordings [I quote]: 'No restriction to a specific idiom, with its limitations, but an openness that allows integration of various jazz- and non-jazz elements, such as elements of pop-music (...), brass band music (...), exotic music.'

Noteworthy is that the ensemble includes classically-schooled musicians, such as the bass-clarinetist Harry Sparnaay and Rien de Reede, flutist with the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra until 2003.

2.

The second example is a multi-media product: an interface we are developing to connect with a series of concerts by Misha Mengelberg's Instant Composers Pool

(ICP), a group to be featured at the opening of the new BIM-huis season this September. It is hardly surprising that the ICP has been chosen, as it is in the vanguard of pioneering ensembles to which I referred earlier. In addition, like Theo Loevendie, Misha Mengelberg is also an active improviser and jazz musician as well as the composer of several classical-contemporary works. In 1969 he also co-composed the well-known opera *Reconstructie*, together with [here he is again] Louis Andriessen.

The interface will form an upbeat not only to the way we publicize the 'gold' we keep here, but, by expanding the *Pop Encyclopaedia* one of our fusion partners has already put together, create a multimedia *Music Encyclopaedia* for all genres.

The *Music Encyclopaedia* is somewhat reminiscent of the so-called *Story Wall*, located on the 2nd floor of the Amsterdam Public Library. Using a touch screen you can select at this moment some stories, after which a short film starts that tells the story. This therefore carries on the oral tradition of the Public Library. In a similar manner, the MCN's 'gold' will be displayed, both in our building and, for example, on transportable information columns at concerts.

Visitors too may be able at some point in the future to add the 'gold' they themselves have unearthed, as they already do at the Van Abbe Museum in Eindhoven. There they have the opportunity to tell a story, explaining which piece they would like to see from the museum's vault. And this is precisely what happens in the feature entitled *PLUG IN View-Store*.

Such a story relates to another discourse, namely the background of an artwork: why it affects someone in a certain way, either positively or negatively.

How exactly this would work is the theme of the various 'music cafés' being organized by MCN. Planned for November is one called *Music libraries: shelves packed with emotion*. After all, music touches what neuropsychologists refer to as the 'core self'. Whether it be on an emotional or cognitive level, it is clear that music penetrates the inner self and awakens memories in the manner of Proust's Madeleine. It is the listener who gives meaning to sound or rather the *organized* sound that is music.

With that, as the *Policy Document* of MCN states, all frontiers between countries, cultures, races and generations melt away. If that isn't the music of the future then I don't know what is!

To conclude: from this perspective music organisations such as the MCN contribute – to quote Torvinen – to 'social, ideological and cultural criticism.' And they engage in discussion with their audiences, for example during the 'music cafés', or even at five thirty at the end of this very afternoon, when we would welcome you in our beautiful Art-Deco building on the Rokin in the centre of Amsterdam for a further exchange of views. Please just sign your name on the Conference Notice Board in the foyer below.

I look forward to seeing you again later this afternoon and thank you for your interest!