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INTERNATIONAL GAUDEAMUS MUSIC WEEK,
HOLLAND SEPTEMBER 3-7, 1976

FLANDERS FESTIVAL, GHENT, BELGIUM
SEPTEMBER 7-8, 1976

RICHARD WITTS

Now and again I receive a news-sheet through the post that looks like the weekly handout from the nearby Spar grocer, except that it's written in an eccentric English. This news-sheet contains an out-of-date diary of contemporary music, blurred photographs of winners of obscure prizes, and . . . well, Spar has more to offer.

Yes, it's the infamous bulletin from the Gaudeamus Foundation of the Netherlands.¹ It intrigues me that someone somewhere has money to spend on free newsletters about new music, so last summer I attended the International Gaudeamus Music Week, held mainly in Utrecht, Rotterdam, Hilversum and Amsterdam, to discover what Gaudeamus is all about.

We move it from the large level to the high level.

The 'Music Week' turned out to be a three-day competition of compositions for (officially) any medium by composers under 35. There were 19 composers (all male) and 21 works in the competition. These pieces had been selected by an all-male jury from a couple of hundred submitted the previous January. The jury were then to award four prizes on the evidence of a single concert performance. The five members of the jury were David Bedford

(UK), Klaus Hashagen (W.Germany), Tomas Marco (Spain), Otto Ketting and Enrique Raxach (both Netherlands). Here's the schedule: FRIDAY 8pm 4 works (orchestral & choral), 10.30pm Italian pieces; SATURDAY 10.30am Italian & Dutch pieces, 2.30pm 5 works (chamber), 8.15pm 4 works (chamber); SUNDAY 10.30am Italian pieces, 2.30pm 4 works (chamber), 8pm 4 works (chamber orchestral & vocal).

The Italian and Dutch pieces were not a part of the competition though some of the audience thought they were. As you can see, the schedule was quite cramped. It surprised me that the jury were able to issue prizes one hour after the last concert, having heard 37 unfamiliar works in 50 hours. At least one member of the jury was worried by this haste, though nobody took a stand and the winners were announced on schedule. The timetable was tighter than it had been in previous years for financial reasons: composers used to have a better deal before subsidy slipped — the concerts were spread over five days and works were publicly discussed in the morning after their performance.² Although I admire the Foundation's attempt to offer so much new music in a limited time, such a schedule is not fair to the competitors or the performers (e.g. the cellist Max Werner appeared in almost every concert).

The biggest mountain in the Netherlands is eighteen metres high. You can go on foot or helicopter.

The Gaudeamus Foundation is housed in a jokey grand-piano-shaped building at Bilthoven. This small, sleepy town is a retreat for tired business people, far removed from the lively and youthful activities of Amsterdam. But Gaudeamus isn't so much spatially dislocated as conceptually and practically out of touch. This also holds true for its partner, the Donemus Foundation, which is housed in Amsterdam.

I visited this documentation centre for new music before the competition and was the only visitor there the whole morning. I asked to see scores of works written for children by young Dutch composers; I was shown one or two works written for school orchestra (i.e. for parents) that were, I learnt later, totally unrepresentative of the Dutch music education scene. Tapes of these pieces were played to me on request, but through speakers in the library (no headphones) so that a typist had to listen too, and I had to listen through the typing. It seems to me that Donemus functions to look good on paper and in annual reports, giving the state a good conscience over its arts support. In practice it's ill-informed and unrepresentative of Dutch new music, too full of money and inertia. If you want to find out what's going on, try the Bim-Huis,³ or contact Cliff Crego and the Asko Orchestra, or the very interesting group De Volharding (Perseverance).⁴ This band, founded with Louis Andriessen, is a socialist group that plays at outdoor and indoor concerts, demonstrations and socials. They're a 'classical' relative of the British band Red Brass, and have a repertoire that includes Milhaud and Eisler, as well as Andriessen writing like Milhaud, Eisler et al. They've produced an LP and an EP, both worth hearing. I hope they'll tour Britain soon.

The Queen of the Netherlands flies in a helicopter. If you see a helicopter, It may be the Queen of the Netherlands.

During the competition some of the jury and competitors stayed at the Gaudeamus House (OK for tee-totallers) while the others were put up at plush hotels in nearby towns — if you're supported by Gaudeamus, the trip is certainly worthwhile for this alone.

To reach the various concert venues everyone travels in the same coach, and this is where we all meet the small but strong figure of Walter Maas, the founder of Gaudeamus. He's now 66, but acts like an octogenarian grandfather to everyone. An emigré German Jew, textile engineer turned estate agent, he began the Foundation to promote new Dutch music in 1945 as a tribute to the Netherlands' fight against Nazi racism. He's an amazing man, hard-working, though a touch too harsh on his employees; what he says and how he acts epitomises the Foundation.

When the competition finished, I met several visitors to previous Music Weeks. They told me exactly the same anecdotes about Walter Maas that I'd already noted. For instance his patriotic love for the Netherlands leads him to grab the coach microphone and educate us in Gaudeamus news-sheet-style English: 'On the left you haf the cars. The cars in zummer all time are out.' (I.e. the cows do not go indoors during the summer.) These pearls of wisdom are apparently delivered year after year in the same manner, in the same quirky language. The air of a school outing and education trip becomes overbearing: 'It is now half-past six. You are free to leave the bus to eat. You must be back by half-past seven.' It's funny to watch middle-aged composers having to take this purposeless treatment (Goeyvaerts and Bedford sniggering behind teacher's back).

In other words, Gaudeamus has become a ritual that has lost its aim. It started with the post-war ethic that produced the United Nations. Both have now forfeited all influence and relevance in our world. A symptom of Gaudeamus's insignificance lies in the fact that those of us in the coach were its peripatetic audience. Although the concerts were public affairs, there was no public but us, who had been paid to attend. At Rotterdam I met a student from Leiden who had come along out of curiosity. He said that it was like seeing a family that breeds through incest — 'musicians applauding each other'. He said he didn't understand fully what

was happening, and believed that Gaudeamus didn't seem to want Dutch people to know about new music: the advertising was very poor and gave the impression of being very exclusive, not wanting to attract or help new audiences; it was typical of a State that was happy if the arts events took place quietly, without incident.

On the right you have houses for vegetables. Here we have ring-fart.

Although Gaudeamus claims that there are no restrictions on the type of material considered, the competition was dominated by late-1950s-style free serialism and Polish minimalism, most of the pieces blandly derivative. Further, there was a tendency to write academically dull testaments of proficiency (like the mid-19th-century vogue for Op. 1 sonatas), sectionally structured with careful symmetry and contrast, lasting roughly 15 minutes. Where was the New Tonality? Why no music-theatre or allied trades? What had happened to all of those Riley/Glass/Reich sound-alikes that are surfacing around Europe? Why such an uncommon absence of works employing live electronics, or even tapes?

There were only two pieces to remind us that we were now in the 1970s. One was Jürgen Beurlé's *Kontra* for three pianists, an over-complex score that generated a swirling cross-current of what a friend called 'boogie-romantic' vitality, tonal bass-lines thrown around and submerged among the three pianos. The other was Nigel Osborne's setting of two poems from the 1917 Soviet Revolution, scored for soprano (amplified) and a large chamber orchestra. This piece, *The Sickle*, one of two items by Osborne to be played during the Music Week, was totally assured in its construction and sonority. Its tonal affinities and clarity of texture recalled Shostakovich; the second song in particular (Mayakovsky's 'Our March') had a sweep and self-assured air that we hadn't experienced in two days (it was the last work in the competition). Two members of the jury advocated it for first prize, but due to the absurd voting procedure, where works are nominated prize by prize, Nigel Osborne received nothing. This Londoner, incidentally, won a second prize three years ago in the Gaudeamus competition; it shows the level of influence that Gaudeamus has that he should still need to enter and that despite his evident ability we hear very little of him in Britain (there was no BBC scout present during the competition, I believe).

The predictable winner was *Les Soupirs de Geneviève* for nine solo strings by the 27-year-old Italian, Fabio Vacchi. Rigidly schematic orderings into 6x6 sections of durational, timbral and harmonic parameters were disturbed and undermined by arbitrary

(notated) decisions of the composer. Fixed durations were progressively lengthened by a *rallentando* that destroyed and transformed the calculated relations. Little of this was apparent to my ear, but Vacchi produced sensitive and harmonically rich processes involving rather conventional sonority. Both Vacchi and Osborne received fine performances from the Netherlands Radio Chamber Orchestra under Ernest Bour. Some other competitors were not so lucky.

On the left we have the sea. You understand? No?! On the left! Ten kilometres on the left.

Fabio Vacchi's piece was of the sort I expected to win: the library at the Gaudeamus House is full of this kind of thing from past prizewinners. (Are any of these winning works ever played again?) Gaudeamus has projected an image to be reinforced year after year: composers write Gaudeamus pieces to win Gaudeamus competitions. In this way a false view of the present state of musical creativity is given and large amounts of money are expended to maintain a certain aesthetic and academic style of 'craftsmanship' (actually, mere mechanical labour) already 20 years out of touch.

Below are some of the notes I made during the competition. These specific points may give an impression of inclinations:

1. The tendency to delegate pitches arbitrarily to instruments as though colouring a pitch chart. A treatment of timbre that appears carefully distributed on paper — use of finely-shaded dynamic indications and precise articulation — is rarely related to instrumental capabilities or spatial location. (Of course, when it doesn't work you can always blame the performers.) E.g. Andrew Hodgson (Canada), *Mutations* for orchestra; Claudio Bilucaglia (Italy), *Sospiri* for string quartet and orchestra.
2. Treating wind instruments like keyboards. Precision of pitch in harmonically androgynous chords can never be assured. Many players refer pitch tuning to the *direction* of line implied in their own part. Anything harmonically static or slow-moving shouldn't be a simple transfer of chords realised via piano sonority. E.g. Davide Anzaghi (Italy), *Alena* for winds.
3. The tendency for stagnation to set in when density (e.g. chord-cluster of varied widths) replaces a less vertically-limited harmonic syntax. Movement by small degrees in either direction loses its identity as a change of state. E.g. Cornelius de Bondt (Netherlands), *Wind Quintet*.
4. The tendency to replace precise pitch indications by direction of hand movement in string notation. The predictable sequence of

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harmonics that results is now as gripping as a major scale played step-by-step. E.g. Antonello Allemand (Italy), *Ideogrammi* for contrabass and piano.

5. There's a general lack of feeling for pace: everything is very rushed or very static, usually one then the other. It's either A or Z; B to Y are left out. E.g. Hans Darmstadt (W. Germany), *Hainuwele*.

6. It's symptomatic of Gaudeamus that they can find someone who in this day and age can write: 'the instruments are treated in a purely soloistic way, written with no reference to each other . . . They were then transcribed to the score and analyzed for vertical implications. As a result of the process of independence of lines, certain normally undesirable structures, such as octaves and triads occurred at several places. Some of these anathemas were corrected and some allowed to remain intact.' E.g. Richard Amromin (USA), *Nonet*. Some clichés:

1. Expanding and contracting string clusters.
2. Some sounds, some silence, some sounds, some silence etc.
3. Minimal gestures that to avoid stasis have to make direct neighbours of *ppp* and *fff*. All or nearly nothing.
4. String scordatura that (naturally?) ends a piece. You know the end's near when you hear those squeaky pegs.
5. Works that are simply catalogues of timbral possibilities: it's like reading the telephone directory.
6. Pedal held down until the sound dies away.
7. Pitch bending. ('Any microtonal distance will do.')
8. Minor third followed by minor ninth or augmented fourth followed by perfect fourth or minor seventh followed by major seventh.

Even if it's musically disappointing, the Gaudeamus Music Week does have some positive values. Given that, to please conservative palates, it must be a competition (though nothing during my stay convinced me that it had to be) then its good points are:

1. The prize money is very good.
2. It manages to interest composers from a range of countries. This year countries represented included Finland, Japan, Rumania and USA. There was also a special emphasis on new Italian music (and not a note of Berio, for a change). Next year the focus will probably be on French music.
3. A few journalists, publishers' representatives, radio producers and festival organisers visit the competition, and they do apparently follow up pieces that interest them.
4. Valuable contacts can be made with other composers and promoters. An element of bitchy competition is bound to exist, though competitors are inclined to be on their best diplomatic behaviour. The staff are hospitable and helpful. The fact that we're

in Holland helps a lot.

5. Each competitor is likely to receive an adequate to good performance of his work. A tape is made and sent to the competitor afterwards.

6. To be a Gaudeamus prizewinner may be prestigious as far as job applications go, though previous winners have told me that it didn't lead to more performances or commissions.

It would have been useful to have had a concert of works by the jury. Very few of the competitors that I spoke to had heard anything by Klaus Hashagen or Tomas Marco. How can we accept what criticisms or advice they may offer in the two days of post-mortem that follows the competition if we don't know what their sound world is like? It would be very interesting to see Walter Maas's reaction to Bedford's latest space-rock epics.

Finally, it was evident that Cliff Crego's Asko Orchestra, who played the chamber works on the Sunday afternoon session at Amsterdam's Shaffy Theatre, have a large and sympathetic following. It's an 'amateur' group, partly of students, which, judging by Crego's opening speech, was quite critical of the Gaudeamus institution. It seems to me that Crego might be able to inject stimulus and purpose into this stale competition. As the Music Week still has so much going for it, perhaps Crego could be allowed to shape it into something more relevant. (After all, he has the right qualifications — his Americanised Dutch is as incomprehensible to the natives as Maas's German-Dutch.)

Now we are below the sea. We are under the land level: two metres under.

Further south I managed to catch a little of the five-month-long Flanders Festival, that bit of it that included the only contemporary music to be heard.

Obviously this festival is a tourist affair, centred on Ghent ('An Historic City'), though as it's promoted by the Belgian government, the events have to circulate a little, like the Spring Holland Festival. It seems also to be aimed at attracting the tourists in from the coast, as none of the events appear at Ostend or Blankenberg.

The bias is towards imported artists. About 70 companies and groups were booked, 70% from outside Benelux. Too few local activities are promoted: surely when they've grabbed the tourists' attention they could show a little of their home-grown culture?

I managed to see two Belgian events. One was a second chance to attend a concert performance of Henri Pousseur's *The Trials of Peter the Hebrew*.⁵ As the festival organisers seemed to have so much money to play with, it's a pity they didn't arrange a Belgian

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premiere of the full theatre production (it was billed under Opera). This performance, in Ghent's Floraliapaleis was another radio recording, but by a different section of the national radio system, and is probably an improvement on the 1975 RTB recording (BBC please note).

Pousseur has recently altered the tape part for the last section. It's now much clearer and the live instruments are no longer obliterated. Pierre Bartholomé, director and pianist/organist of the Ensemble Musiques Nouvelles, has now taken up directorship of the Symphony Orchestra in Liège. There was, therefore, a switch-around in the group, the ring modulation/tape supervision and conducting being divided between Pousseur (tape) and a young conductor who looks set for a good career, Georges Octors Jnr. It's a shame, though, that there are now 14 in the group!

This performance was much more confident than the previous one. However, I feel that *Peter the Hebrew* loses some of its value the further away we move from 1974 and the Schoenberg centenary. At Ghent it didn't seem to be as sharp and antidotal as it was when surrounded by the grudging, half-hearted contributions to the centenary. Certainly, if it comes to Britain (and it ought to, if only to counteract the weak impression of Pousseur received in London last year)⁶ it needs to be preceded by a big dose of echt-Schoenberg.

The other event was on the following afternoon. Maurice Béjart's Ballet of the 20th Century visited Ghent from its home base in Brussels. Béjart, a committed member of the Belgian Communist Party, employs a medium-to-large company of young dancers ('Where does he find them?' gasp the drooling ballet critics) that he enjoys placing in unified actions that seem to me to confuse solidarity with regimentation: Belgian Trotskyists that I met regarded Béjart's work as the epitome of fascist mass-spectacle, devoid of humanness.

At Ghent I saw his version of Boulez' *Pli selon pli*, danced to a tape. The analytical nature of Boulez' Mallarmé settings was paralleled on the stage by ambiguous images of arcane ritual. The common source of imagery was Mallarmé, even though Boulez focuses on phonetic and syntactical relations rather than allusive evocation. The effect was of Boulez pulling many strands in several directions, and Béjart pulling twisted strands in an opposed one; the composer aiming for the pluralistic and multi-directional, the choreographer for the narrative and chronological.

The performance was attended by many schoolchildren. The few reactions of which I was told confirmed my impression that the stage action narrows the multiplicity of thought and duration onto a one-dimensional and mundane level, feebly rectified by making the trivial actions contain some ritualesque and esoteric value. Béjart

reduces *Pli selon pli* to mere anecdote. It all seems to endorse Cage's belief that the only successful collaboration between musician and dancer can occur when they go their own ways at the same time.

Away from all the official culture, it was good to see that in Ghent there was a lively alternative. Godfried-Willem Raes is a stimulating, energetic 26-year-old musician and organiser who operates with an improvisation group called Logos.⁷ He and colleagues, including Monique Darje, work from a corner house that acts as office, workshop, rehearsal room, a place to sleep and eat — the door seems always to be open. At present he is organising a Workshop for Creative Music-making (electronic, jazz, mixed-media the poster proclaims) at the Paleis voor Schone Kunsten (!) in Brussels on the first weekend of each month, starting on Fridays at 5pm. There is a cheap coach and hovercraft service between London and Brussels that will make it worth the trip.⁷

The disenchanting hitch-hiking students that I met in Paris, who believed that Belgium had bugger-all in the way of culture, and thin chips, would have had a happier time had they known of activities such as those operated by Raes. The Flanders Festival needs to be a little more open-minded (it may cost less to be so) and less obsessed with haute couture; after all, the Lucerne and Salzburg set will never flock to Ghent ('An Historic City'). They should be less nervous of using local talent, especially with informed and active people like Raes around.

NOTES:

¹This is obtainable from the Gaudeamus Foundation, P.O. Box 30, Bilthoven, Netherlands. Write to get your name on their mailing list.

²See David Bedford's account in *Composer* No. 50 (Winter 1973-74), pp. 11-12.

³Address: 73-77 Oude Schans, Amsterdam, Netherlands.

⁴Write for further details and the discs (you'll have to pay) to: Jan Wolff, De Volharding, J. van der Helststratt 7, Amsterdam, Netherlands.

⁵See Richard Witts, 'Report on Henri Pousseur', *Contact* 13 (Spring 1976), pp. 13-22.

⁶The composer's recent visit to this country, which did not include a London concert, will be discussed in *Contact* 17.

⁷Check on dates by phoning Godfried-Willem Raes at 091.23.80.89. The address of his headquarters is 2 Posternestratt, Ghent, Belgium.

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