

DUTCH CONTEMPORARIES

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DUTCH music is as unknown in the United States as American music in Holland, for which there are many reasons. It is difficult for the culture of a small country to penetrate a larger. Propaganda abroad for our music has been neglected and therefore Holland has acquired no reputation for new creative talent. During the last ten years several great Dutch interpreters have traveled in the United States, and Willem Mengelberg conducted the New York Symphony Orchestra for nine seasons. But in spite of this, little contemporary Dutch music was performed. Mengelberg gave the first symphony of Willem Pijper, written at the age of twenty (of course not his best work) and the *Gothic Giaccona* of Cornelis Dopper, a cycle of variations on a liturgic theme, a retrospective work, not representative of the musical state of Holland today.

And, for the other side of the picture, the few American compositions performed in Holland have been somewhat old-fashioned. These were the *Requiem* by Rubin Goldmark, the *America* symphony by Ernest Bloch, the *Concertos* of John Powell and Ernest Schelling, and an early orchestral work of Lazare Saminsky. The American music of today had not been heard in Holland until very recently, when the Dutch Society for New Music organized an American concert in Amsterdam during February 1932.

Geographical connections are intellectual connections. Today immaterial values are imported and exported in the same way as commodities. The location of a country often tells us something of its intellectual situation. Holland lies between London, Paris, Geneva and Berlin. These cities have had the greatest influence on Dutch feeling and Dutch thinking. Geneva brought Calvinism to the people (Rome and Athens brought only the

history of their culture to our schools and universities), London and Manchester brought the principles of free trade. The music of Bach and Brahms (the latter somewhat influenced by Dutch folk-music) took much deeper root than the exotic frivolity of Johann Strauss, or the threatening melancholy of Tschaikowsky. And Paris has always supplied diversion, whether by mere entertainment, or on higher artistic levels. Debussy and Ravel, Renoir and Redon, Anatole France and André Gide found their way to us easily. Musical Holland stood quite open to the French impressionists. Perhaps their penetrating and fascinating moods found a reproduction in sound in our own country, where the light is so broken and the landscape veiled.

Impressionism was the starting-point for new music in Holland. When the war came to an end and Debussy died, when the great era of musical impressionism, the juggling with perfume, had passed its peak, Holland produced a generation of composers who neither tried to save the young French tradition, nor followed the mania of dadaism or futurism; they insisted on good-breeding, since they did not need the aid of extravagance to hold their own. Nevertheless they retained something of French taste and sensitive style. This generation has now come to complete maturity. It provides leaders and teachers for the new generation which is experimenting and composing today.



Sem Dresden, Matthys Vermeulen, Daniel Ruyneman and Willem Pijper, though very different in feeling and technic, can be considered as the national *concertino*, Jan Ingenhoven, Alex Voormolen, B. van den Sigtenhorst Meyer and many others, as the *ripieno* of the contemporary Dutch *concerto grosso*.

Sem Dresden, since 1918 director of the Amsterdam Conservatory, has a predilection for the veiledness of impressionism; however, his origin, half Jewish, half German, perhaps exerts a conserving influence that prevents the music from being chaotic and frivolous. He possesses a solid form and his works border on modernity. His music is charged with excessive feeling, notably by a melancholy that rarely gives way to a merrier mood. He seeks musical progress more through rhythm than by melody

or harmony. His best work is a *Sonata for Violoncello and Piano*, written in 1916. A *Sonata for Flute and Harp* is weaker and less telling; his *Quartet* of 1924, reminiscent of Stravinsky, is brief, to the point, and stern; but it is essentially a divertissement. It lives and captivates by its own motor force. Technically it is on a high level, using thematic material sparingly, but never with monotony. Dresden has always been self-critical in his writing.

Matthys Vermeulen lacks the tailored formality of Dresden. He is rougher and more spontaneous, his feeling is deeper, his utterance more independent. Vermeulen is the only Dutch composer whose melodies show exotic influence. He seldom writes along a straight line; generally he cuts short after a few notes and makes a return. Through constant repetition his melody acquires something of the "possessed" quality of the tunes of Northern Africa. But Vermeulen does not attempt folkloristic effects in the cheap manner of much drawing room music. This convulsive contracting and relaxing, this always surprising yet quite logical and intelligible idiom, is his natural language; and in this language he speaks Dutch, a rich Dutch, perhaps the richest we have. Psychologically, he is something of an introvert. Great diversity of moods, of impulses, of inspirations may be found in a chamber work for two or three instruments. His *Sonata* for violoncello and piano is a condensation of the heaviest, most ponderous music, handled with genius in the variety of rhythm and melody. His *String Trio* is similarly good. He is thoroughly versed in the technic of the great orchestra and has written five symphonies as well as theatre music. He lives in the neighborhood of Paris, solitary, concentrated on composing. Aside from composition, Vermeulen is a writer of high quality; his essays on music, classic as well as contemporary, belong to the best of European musical literature.

Of somewhat the same mentality but more speculative, more ingenious, and less sensitive is Daniel Ruyneman. He has an interest in all the new forms which modern composers are bringing forth and seeks everywhere for fresh beginnings and young talent. Secretary of the Dutch Society for New Music, and of the International Exchange Concerts, he is their leading

spirit. As a composer he pins his faith in the future on Schönberg, Berg and Webern. Lacking the romantic spirit of Schönberg and Berg, he is closer in style to the tone-color-variation of Anton Webern. Quite independently, Ruyneman in 1917 brought out a fascinating combination of sonorities in *Hieroglyphs*, a short symphonic work for chamber orchestra composed of three flutes, harps, twenty-five cupbells (copper bells with a range of two octaves) piano, two mandolins and two guitars. Vocal equivalents were *The Call*, and the *Sonatina* for mixed chorus, written in 1931. Both these works are sung only on vowels. His vivacious fantasy found expression also in sonatas for piano, for flute and piano, for violin Solo, and in several fine songs, such as *Alcools* to texts of Appollinaire. Sometimes he writes exquisite divertissements, as in his *String Quartet*, or the work for chamber combination called *Divertimento* (1927). The most enjoyable portion of this score for flute, clarinet, horn, viola and piano, is the *Little March*, with its alternation of odd and even beats: one cannot walk to it, nevertheless it is in character a complete and excellent march. Ruyneman has also written larger works: a *Symphony*, the opera *Brothers Karamazov*, and recently some pieces for chamber orchestra.

Willem Pijper is more closely related to Debussy and Ravel than the other composers. He began to write in the middle of the impressionistic period and even set to music the *Fêtes Galantes* of Verlaine. From this youthful period he preserved a fine taste for sound combinations. In spirit he is less progressive than Ruyneman and says less than Vermeulen. He is by nature melancholy and contemplative. His music has a natural slowness, an aristocratic attitude; in quicker movements he has a predilection for the Habanera-form. He is never aggressive; many of his works have a kind of Spanish grandiloquence, sad and weary. Technically his achievement is very high. In musical form Pijper shows an interesting evolution. After early acknowledging the limitations of the impressionistic technic he developed a method for the clothing of his musical images similar to Schönberg's. He also exploits a set of tones which are found by vertical order as a harmony, in contrast to Schönberg,

who usually finds his sets horizontally as a succession of tones. These become the technical and usually the tonal centre of the work, and are gradually developed to ever changing forms, to ever more diversified and surprising combinations, until the primary shape is no longer recognized. But his method is not so stern nor so exclusive as Schönberg's. He always remains in the neighborhood of tonality. With him, the principle of a central set of tones guarantees the tonality of the work. The coloristic element in Pijper's music has remained very strong and this is of greater significance for the understanding of his music than his technical methods. He has written three symphonies, theatre music for Greek and Shakesperian plays, and much chamber music with piano.



Besides these four men, who are determining factors in Dutch contemporary music, there are many others, old and young. Of the oldest generation Johan Wagenaar, Von Brucken Fock and Cornelis Dopper are still living. Jan Ingenhoven has contributed work that is interesting to the development of modern music. B. van den Sigtenhorst Meyer has written amiable piano music. Alex Voormolen was musically as well as personally a close friend of Ravel. Henriette Bosmans has a facile pen; her latest work, a *Concerto for Flute and Chamber Orchestra*, fluent and full of movement, won one of three prizes offered by the Concertgebouw Orchestra for the best chamber orchestral scores. The other prize-winning composers were Van Otterloo and Jacques Beers. The latter has written an entertaining as well as strong *Concerto for Voice* (without text), *Saxophone and Piano*, with small orchestra. Henk Badings who has a talent for the larger forms, Guillaume Landré, Bertus van Lier, Emmy Frensel Wegener, and Piet Ketting are pupils of Willem Pijper. They have all had occasion to prove their capacities. Hans Straesser, of German origin, but living in the Netherlands since his childhood, is a very fine and gifted musician, writing intimate instrumental works of very personal quality. Altogether there is great promise from these creators for the future of Dutch music.