

Retrospective confirms Matthijs Vermeulen as revolutionary but 'playable'

During his lifetime, Matthijs Vermeulen (1888-1967) was better known for his musical criticism than for his music itself. Later, it turned out that the Dutch had neglected one of their greatest composers. In the course of the 1997 Holland Festival, all seven Symphonies and most of his chamber music works were performed under the direction of several distinguished conductors. **Maarten Brandt**, reporting on this unique project, asked them for their opinion on this remarkable and still controversial composer.

# The extraordinary musical language of an un-Dutch Dutchman

**M**ATTHIJS VERMEULEN harboured an unshakeable self-assurance, a trait that often brought him to blows with the musical Establishment. Jan van Vlijmen's parting gesture as director of the Holland Festival (celebrating its fiftieth anniversary in 1997) was to offer a large-scale Vermeulen retrospective, and judging from the wide range of reactions in the press to Vermeulen's musical legacy, the jury is still out. Misgivings and admiration are both recurring sentiments in the lexicon of views offered by musicians regarding Vermeulen's work. Moreover, opinions are divided as regards the hope of an international audience for Vermeulen's music. Reinbert de Leeuw (who, one gathers from his collection of essays *Musical Anarchy*, once championed Vermeulen) said at the Vermeulen mini-symposium that while the composer's uncompromising self-will commands respect, it gets in the way of universal acceptance. As an example, De Leeuw pointed to the *Second Cello Sonata*, graciously but pontifically pronouncing the work technically unplayable. But the 'Great Helmsman of Dutch Contemporary Music' was painfully put in his place by cellist Quirine Viersen and pianist

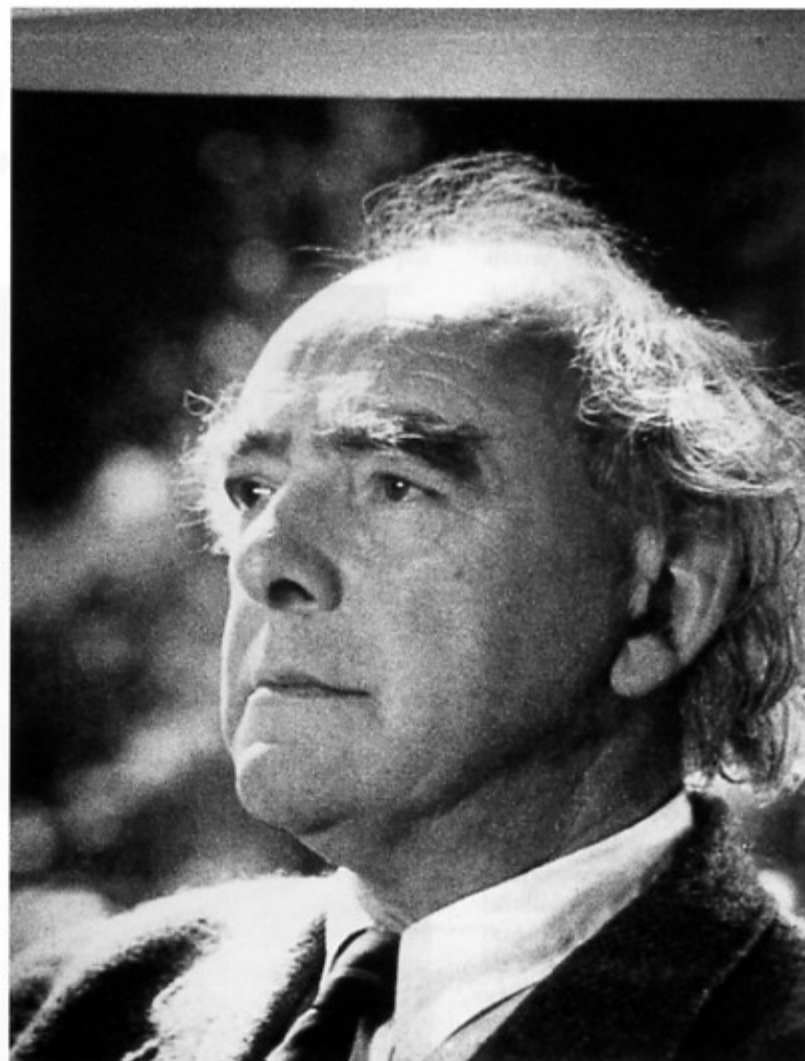
Silke Avenhaus, who brought this work, alternately mystical-modest and stormy-scorching, to life as though it were an everyday repertoire piece. Technically not easy, to be sure, but firmly under control and in the service of the spiritual rapture - something Reinbert de Leeuw and Anner Bijlsma could only dream of in their day. Nothing wrong with that as long as they refrain from issuing blanket vetoes of this music: were not Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, Debussy, Boulez and many others once dismissed as 'unplayable'?

**P**ERHAPS DE LEEUW was annoyed by Vermeulen's thoroughly untrendy posturing. Vermeulen never made a single concession in the direction of the 'Establishment', whether that meant conductor Willem Mengelberg or, later, the 'Nutcrackers', e.g. Reinbert de Leeuw. De Leeuw's rebuff was disproved not only by Viersen and Avenhaus, but by many other musicians who - including a number of prominent conductors - appeared to place above-average faith in Vermeulen's compositions. More than a few listeners were clearly transported by the extraordinary musical language of this un-Dutch Dutchman,

whose works were further highlighted by their placement alongside those of his contemporaries.

The Russian conductor Gennadi Rozhdestvensky unreservedly considers Vermeulen's *Second Symphony*, which he and the Hague Philharmonic presented in all its uncompromising, broad and sonorous glory, a sort of Dutch *Arcana*, utterly playable: 'You only have to do what is written and you will automatically achieve a perfect balance. Vermeulen knew exactly what he wanted. I did not have to make dynamic alterations anywhere, except for a few measures in Szymanowski's *Second Symphony*.' The German conductor Ingo Metzmacher, further, asserts that Vermeulen's notation is exceptionally precise: 'As beautifully executed as the new edition [edited by Ton Braas, MB] is, I prefer to work from the manuscript - even the way in which it is written down tells us something about the person. There's something impersonal about such a computer edition. Moreover - perhaps this sounds paradoxical - that in forming a concept of the sound one must not get too misled by the score's appearance. The problem with a conventional analysis is that a score is generally approached in terms of a piece of architecture, a building, and that has absolutely nothing to do with reality. Some scores look gorgeous and sound horrible, and vice versa. My concept of the sound of Vermeulen's *Fifth Symphony* emerged only during the rehearsals with the Radio Philharmonic Orchestra. What a formidable ensemble, incidentally. The way in which this orchestra unconditionally stood behind the production as one man is something one doesn't often encounter.'

**T**HE ROTTERDAM PHILHARMONIC Orchestra's chief conductor Valery Gergiev recognized in Vermeulen, judging from his rendition of the *Fourth Symphony*, a sort of Dutch Shostakovich. He was spectacularly off the mark. Spectacular, in that the RPO played the daylights out of this debatable vision and effectively transferred that spark to the audience. Only it was based on an entirely misjudged perspective, because Gergiev compartmentalized the rhythmic impulse and thus undermined the harmonic and



Matthijs Vermeulen

melodic continuity (one can draw a comparison on this point to the still-unsurpassed interpretation of Ernest Bour and the Hague Philharmonic). But one can also concur with the RPO's first cellist Marien van Staalén, who commented, 'Like it or not, Gergiev's choice is just that: a rock-solid choice which works because he believes in it with all his heart. That is how he gets all the musicians to stand behind this music.'

The Arnhem Philharmonic Orchestra tackled the *Seventh Symphony*, not a particularly attractive work compared to Vermeulen's other symphonies. It caused the Australian conductor Christopher Lyndon-Gee a few sleepless nights. 'Often you have three, four, even seven different, simultaneous contrapuntal layers. It's nearly impossible to make everything audible. One has to then prioritize. On the other hand we are dealing with a colossal originality, music that constantly gives the impression of being about to come apart at the seams.' Lyndon-Gee and the Arnhem Phil-

harmonic carried the work off magnificently. In the first place thanks to a meticulously faithful rendering of the composer's tempo indications, so that the 'dithyrambic impulse' that must have wafted before Vermeulen's eyes was excellently realized. Granted, this came sometimes at the cost of sound quality, but the question remains as to whether it is really possible to make this music sound much better. Perhaps it is, but that is also a choice that carries its own set of consequences. 'As the conductor of such a piece, one must balance halfway between the job of executing what the composer stipulates and the challenge of producing in practice the result he was after. Intervention, especially in the area of dynamics, is thus at times necessary,' says Lyndon-Gee, a composer himself. 'But I have become quite fascinated by Vermeulen, whose *Third Symphony* I consider a masterpiece, one that can also work well with a large audience. Should I get the opportunity I will certainly conduct this work abroad. Vermeulen is a composer of whom the

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Netherlands can and should be proud.'

Hartmut Haenchen, conductor of the Netherlands Philharmonic Orchestra, is all too well aware of the above-mentioned quandary facing conductors. 'Vermeulen says he does not want to afford any single voice a dominant role. Why then does he tell one voice to play *mezzo forte* and another *piano*? It's something, moreover, that he does in a much less structured way than, for example, Berg in his *Orchesterstücke*. There's no escaping the fact that Vermeulen's music is highly original, although in my opinion it has insufficient international allure. Still, I enthusiastically applaud Jan van Vlijmen's idea of performing Vermeulen's entire oeuvre in a Dutch music festival.'

Haenchen's doubts concerning Vermeulen's 'international allure' were in no way evident from his performance of the *Sixth Symphony*. He displayed a brilliant affinity with this,

Vermeulen's most subtle and poetic work, achieving a gratifying clarity in the richly-coloured polymelody and producing a moving intensity. The musicians of the NedPho superbly translated Haenchen's intentions into sound. The same orchestra had masterfully acquitted itself under Ed Spanjaard in Vermeulen's *First Symphony*, a work oozing echoes of Diepenbrock's *Marsyas*.

**W**HAT ONE CONDUCTOR might label as 'over-orchestrated' or a 'wall of sound' - in effect an objection that Vermeulen's style gets in the way of the music's dissemination or general acceptance - is, according to Metzmacher, perhaps the clue to unlocking Vermeulen's secret: 'How obvious it may be to strive for a transparency in the voice texture, it is for me just as obvious that the entirety must possess a constant and overt tension between the various and simultaneously occurring lines and events. Ergo: the trick is to clarify the compact density without sacrificing the effect of that very density and massiveness, which is of course the essence of Vermeulen's music. If one does sacrifice it, one delivers a violent blow to



Gennadi Rozhdestvensky Photo Wladimir Polak



Ingo Metzmacher  
photo Werner Neumeister



David Porcelijn  
Photo Pan Sok

his musical argument.' In a practical defense of his opinion, Metzmacher conducted the *Fifth Symphony*, the most ambitious of Vermeulen's seven symphonies, in a performance that leaves all previous renditions in the dust. The outer movements contained the requisite blinding ecstasy without collapsing under their own weight, while the spiritual, slow middle movement possessed just that yearning for the intangible, but also the nearly erotic passion, that this stirring music demands. 'The energy in Vermeulen's music, the driving force behind the notes, reminds me of Hartmann,' muses Metzmacher, 'a composer whose late symphonies also exhibit that tightly-woven texture. And Henze as well. Take the first movement of his *Seventh Symphony* - there you also see that ecstatic and panoramic rapture.'

'Vermeulen is a typical outsider. I have a thing for outsiders. His music is not presented on a silver platter. One must really dig into it to extract what it has to offer, which is a great deal. It is curious that his notation is French-oriented, while his expression approaches that of Berg, Schoenberg, Hartmann and Zimmermann. And of Nono, especially his penchant for extreme registers and dynamic gradations. I can easily imagine Vermeulen and Nono on a single programme. Both composers were, moreover, similarly aligned politically.'

ONE CAN CLEARLY hear that conductor David Porcelijn's approach to Vermeulen is in line with that of Metzmacher. His interpretation of the *Third Symphony*, combining the forces of the North Holland Philharmonic Orchestra and the Netherlands Ballet Orchestra, was (like Metzmacher's *Fifth*) deservedly hailed from all quarters. Porcelijn not only produced a completely balanced symbiosis of melodic continuity and rhythmic pulse, but also finessed the pitch-black, 'heavy-metal' - and at the same time Bergian - explosiveness into a fearsome aspect. In an intelligent review of this unforgettable performance, Paul Janssen wrote in *Het Parool* that Vermeulen was not so much carrying on the tradition of the medieval/Renaissance *cantus firmus* - as he himself believed - but was rather a creator of gigantic textures, which aligns him with Schoenberg and especially Berg (the Berg, in any case, of

the above-mentioned *Orchesterstücke*).

A few critical comments regarding the programming of the Vermeulen retrospective are in order. Firstly, I think they missed a golden opportunity - even if it was only to put Vermeulen's artistic credo to the test - in not contrasting a Vermeulen symphony with a Josquin mass (for instance, the *Sixth Symphony* alongside the *Missa Hercules dux Ferrarie* or one of the *L'Homme armée* masses). Indeed, the context of a festival affords the luxury of more easily realizing a logistically cumbersome programme than under normal circumstances. Secondly, the symphonic concerts for the most part opened with Vermeulen, resulting in the occasionally anticlimax. In the case of the Rotterdam Philharmonic it was certainly a mistake to follow Vermeulen's *Fourth Symphony* with a soporific piano concerto by Ustvolskaya, which most resembled a cross between bad Shostakovich and an unsuccessful arrangement of the 'Warsaw Concerto'. But then programming hasn't exactly been Rotterdam's forte in recent years. Much more can be said for the Porcelijn evening, as Schoenberg's seldom-heard orchestral songs (op. 22) are indeed typical 'texture' compositions, resulting in a sort of atonal polyharmony. Ed Spanjaard's combination of Ives-Debussy-Vermeulen was also a winner - one thinks particularly of the similarities between Vermeulen's *First Symphony* and Ives' *Holidays Symphony*, both of which possess an unadulterated hymn-like tone.

ROZHDESTVENSKY considers Haydn perhaps the most avant garde composer of all time. I found the link between Haydn and Szymanowski easier to grasp than between Haydn and Vermeulen, especially considering that the finales of both Haydn's *Symphony No. 87* and Szymanowski's *Second* contain a remarkable fugato episode. As I said earlier, I have never heard Vermeulen's *Second Symphony* brought across with such colourful sonority as under this Russian conductor. He conducted it like a full-blown Klempererian-articulated and granite-hewn Varèse. In all likelihood Vermeulen would have been pleased as punch. Nowhere was there any association (see Gergiev) with Shostakovich: 'Vermeulen has nothing, but nothing, to do with Shostakovich,' asserts Rozhdestvensky categorically.

'More with early Stravinsky and, don't forget, late Scriabin.' He also sees a correlation between Vermeulen and *Art nouveau*. 'I don't know yet how, but I would like to play Vermeulen abroad if the opportunity presents itself. Perhaps first the *Second Symphony*, that I know well now, and possibly later the *Fourth*.' Let's cross our fingers that Rozhdestvensky can convince Chandos to record the *Second* and *Fourth* on CD, considering that this company's rich, deep recording technique is perfectly suited to Vermeulen. And let us hope that the Hague Philharmonic will be the orchestra to do the job!

Haenchen placed Vermeulen firmly amongst the 'Einzelgängers' by performing him alongside Varèse and Zimmermann, whose seldom-heard *Sinfonie in einem Satz* received an exemplary performance. N.B.: this was on the same evening as the magnificent rendition of Vermeulen's *Sixth Symphony* - abundant proof of Haenchen's immense value at the helm of the NedPho. Let us hope that the orchestra can keep their hands on him.

This recollection must conclude with, alas, much left unreported. For example: the superlative performance of the *Sonate pour piano et violon* by Josje ter Haar and John Snijders, Snijders playing a Pleyel piano ('Vermeulen gone Authentic', but the result was indeed clarity down to the last detail); the *Strijktrio*, played by Marijke van Kooten, Susanne van Els and Hans Woudenberg; and the *Strijkkwartet*, played by the Schoenberg Quartet. Performance after performance proved that, given the artistic will and technical proficiency, Vermeulen's revolutionary music is playable, convincing and most of all extremely moving. That profoundly emotional impact of Vermeulen's music explains why Wim Markus (whose two recent groundbreaking essays in the magazine *Mens en melodie* should be required reading) asserts that alongside Vermeulen, all other composers wither into 'stingy formalists'. ★

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