

Frank J. Oteri - conversation in New York, May 2007

A pluralistic view on music

"There is definitely a two-way stream between old Amsterdam and New Amsterdam", says composer, music journalist and radio maker Frank J. Oteri. He is the founding editor of New Music Box, a web-based magazine about American contemporary music, published by the American Music Center. Oteri visits festivals, meetings and symposia in the States and abroad, often as a representative of American orchestras and ensembles. The following day he will do an on-stage interview with Jacob ter Veldhuis in the Whitney Museum at Altria, but Ter Veldhuis isn't the only Dutch composer Oteri is interested in, he may well be the best informed person on Dutch music in the United States. "I probably wouldn't know this much about it, if it wasn't for the promoters of Dutch music from Donemus", he states. "Fantastic combination of cd's, sheet music and expert information."

Oteri's modest office is in Manhattan, 26th Street, just a few blocks from his favorite lunch restaurant Eisenburg. There he orders an egg cream, this classic New York blend with neither egg nor cream: chocolate syrup, milk, and soda water. "I've noticed a lot of common ground between Dutch and American composers", he says. "Bang on a Can composers like David Lang, Michael Gordon and Julia Wolfe, and a lot of young composers, went to Holland to study with Louis Andriessen. Louis himself has been strongly influenced by American jazz and minimal music.

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"My own way of composing, of putting sounds together, my way of thinking about music was definitely changed by another Dutch composer whom I deeply admire but is no longer with us, Peter Schat. I learned about him when I was an undergraduate studying music at Columbia University. I remember reading an essay in a magazine called Keynotes, published by Donemus, about Schat's tone clock, this ingenious system for constructing scales and chords. I was fascinated. So when I went to Utrecht in December 2002 to visit the Nederlandse Muziekdagen, I just had to meet with Peter Schat. Luckily I got to see him just a few months before he died."

improvised solo

"I have a very pluralistic view on music, I don't believe in "the best". There are so many interesting things happening, composers in the Netherlands are doing very exciting things. Some years ago I got very excited by hearing the music of Guus Janssen. I loved the way he was playing jazz on the harpsichord, super, super good idea. His violin concerto played by the American violinist Mark Feldman was extraordinary and tremendous: the solo was entirely improvised.

"Then I heard Ned McGowan from Amsterdam, he recently had a big thing in New York. With his Dutch group Hexnut he played his piece *Tools* consisting of very short movements, some no more than a few seconds long, and each imitating the sound of different power tools. It was totally new for the audience, they loved it, they went crazy. Theo Verbey is a composer whose music I'm really excited by. I heard him live and also on recordings. And then Michel van der Aa of course, exciting music. Multi media is big everywhere now, and van der Aa's use of electronics and visuals is very innovative.

"One of the exciting things about Donemus is that, for years and years, they have been issuing recordings, so anybody can hear music from the Netherlands. Cd's are indispensable, if somebody gives me cd's I'm like a little kid in a candy store. I say more, more, more, I can't get enough of this stuff. In a way I became an expert on Dutch music because I was getting all these recordings. That's how things started with Jacob ter Veldhuis as well, I first met him in 2002, here in New York. We had lunch together and he gave me cd's of his boombox pieces, *Heartbreakers*, *Paradiso* and the *String Quartets*.

"Back home I put one in my player and then all of a sudden this voice was shouting 'motherfucker'. It rather shocked me. What is this, I wondered? The music is very exciting, very physical with lots of energy. I thought this was quite confrontational, at the same time disturbing and dissonant - or maybe that is the wrong word; it's aggressive. I did like what I heard, it pushed my buttons the right way. And then I put on *Paradiso*. This music is so extraordinarily beautiful. Here's this guy writing attacking, almost violent music, and then this extremely beautiful, deeply moving... I almost wanted to say old-fashioned music, but it is not old-fashioned. It takes you to another world, it's heavenly. So I thought: this is a man full of contradictions, and that was very interesting to me. I liked the music, I played it every now and then for people, it became part of my collection and part of my life."

bigger audience

"There is a true connection between what Jacob is doing in terms of referencing samples of speech, and American music. Steve Reich has prerecorded interviews with people, for example in *Different Trains* and in his video-docu-operas like *The Cave*. Scott Johnson, who was a rock guitarist with Laurie Anderson, composed a piece with samples called *John Somebody*, and Philip Kandinsky in Utah has done a lot of music with recordings of people playing slot machines in Las Vegas. Recently I went to hear a concert by an alternative rock band called The Books. They combine guitar and bass playing with video projections of films they made. One piece featured projections of an elder woman divided into four screens, then sixteen screens, then 64. I thought: my god, it's Jacob, it's *Heartbreakers*, there it is! But I'm

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sure Jacob has never heard of The Books, as they probably have never heard of him. It is what we call the Zeitgeist. It's exciting.

"Jacob's music is of course different, and what is important: it's made by someone who lives outside America. Therefore it is a comment on what Americans do, and that is special. This makes people curious in the same way students of American history are fascinated by the nineteenth century writings of historian Alexis de Tocqueville. This Frenchman came to America in the nineteenth century, spent a few years here, and wrote his book *Democracy in America*. Because he was an outsider he had a different perspective; this book tells you more about American democracy than any book ever written here. So I suppose Jacob has this perspective too. Now, it's hard to say to an audience: you should listen to this music because it might tell you more about yourself; that will never work. But just by hearing it people might come to this conclusion by themselves.

"Another strong point is Jacob's making use of different repertoires and musical styles, so he may be able to reach beyond the classical music community, to reach different groups and young people. But this is where it gets weird: there isn't a broad audience anymore, there is no mainstream for anything. Everybody lives in his or her own little world, especially here in America. They dig themselves in and no longer communicate with each other. But maybe Jacob has found the ideal approach.

"Here he operates under the name Jacob TV, much better to pronounce, it sounds a bit poppy. I have no problem with that. Poppy means a bigger audience. What's wrong with a bigger audience?"

Peter van Amstel

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