

The international career of Jacob ter Veldhuis - according to a conversation in the composer's garden, July 2007

### **Chance, perseverance and the right notes**

“How come I didn’t know this guy?”, that’s almost the standard reaction from an American, expert or unsuspecting listener, who hears Jacob ter Veldhuis’ boombox music for the first time.

These muscular pieces, with samples from Jerry Springer shows, a speech by President Bush or TV commercials for slimming products, go down well with the American public. And yet, Ter Veldhuis didn’t celebrate his first international successes in the United States, and not with the stirring boombox repertoire. It all started in Russia with melodious music, after a more or less inappropriate artist-in-residenceship in Darmstadt, thanks to the piano composition *Toccata* for ten fingers and a nose.

Jacob ter Veldhuis was a pop musician in Groningen in more or less successful bands when he entered the Groningen Conservatory in 1971 to study composition and electronic music. He might have become world famous as a keyboard player in Herman Brood’s band, but the rehearsals with Holland’s best rock singer from Zwolle came to nothing. Ter Veldhuis still likes rock and jazz, but he got fed up with the rowdy life of sex, drugs and rock ‘n’ roll, and in 1980 he played on a pop stage for the last time. Since that year Ter Veldhuis calls himself a full-time composer, trained at the conservatory by Willem Frederik Bon and Luctor Ponse, where he graduated with the Composition Prize in his pocket. And, according to reports, in spite of the critical comments by Louis Andriessen, invited by Ter Veldhuis himself to the graduation committee, out of admiration.

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### **Warsaw**

Being awarded the Composition Prize by the Groningen Conservatory in 1980 was Ter Veldhuis’ first milestone as a composer. In order to qualify for the ten thousand guilders prize money, all he had to do was write a new work, content to be completely decided by him. Ter Veldhuis, ambitious as he was, decided to compose his *First Symphony*, a piece for five percussionists, synthesizer, electronic organ and orchestra. It turned out to be a rugged piece, with steel plates and large hammers in the percussion section, piercing whistles and contrary rhythms. With thanks to Penderecki and Varèse, although at the time the young composer lacked the control, stylistic consistency and refinement of the great masters who were his models.

Nevertheless, Polish conductor Andrzej Markovski (1924-1986) of the Noordelijk Filharmonisch Orkest, nowadays the Noord Nederlands Orkest, was very enthusiastic about the piece. He presented it several times in the Netherlands, and planned to play the symphony that very same year in Poland, during the Warschauer Herbst festival. Ter Veldhuis himself drove to

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Warsaw with a car full of percussion. There, he found Markovski in the hospital, brought down by a heart attack and in critical condition. Conducting was out of the question, and the performance was cancelled.

Back in Groningen Ter Veldhuis set about developing a new, personal style, he drastically changed direction. His *Second Symphony* from 1986 is not rugged but melodious, not contrary but supple, less cerebral, and contains more influences from pop music and jazz. He himself characterizes this work for synthesizer and orchestra as super harmonious. The Rotterdams Philharmonisch Orkest under British conductor Paul Daniel performed the piece, with Willem Wijnbergen as soloist, but for the time being Ter Veldhuis' *Second* wasn't heard outside the national borders either.

### Darmstadt

More or less by accident pianist Kees Wieringa, who Ter Veldhuis often worked with, provided the composer with an interesting contact in 1991. Wieringa was living in the garden house of Walter Maas' villa in Bilthoven. Maas, founder and for decades director of Gaudeamus, was the spider in the web of Dutch musical contacts abroad. Around Christmas Friedrich Hommel, director of the Internationale Ferienkurse für Neue Musik Darmstadt, was staying with Maas at the villa. Hommel heard Wieringa, in the garden house, practicing a piano piece that appealed to him very much. It was Ter Veldhuis' *Toccata* from 1988, in reality a blunt criticism of what he saw as the barren complexity of modern German music.

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In the *Toccata* the pianist's nose serves as an eleventh finger. Hommel took this fancy seriously, and without hesitating invited composer and pianist to be artists in residence at the Ferienkurse the following year. In Darmstadt both the recital and Ter Veldhuis' subsequent lecture on the use of the nose in piano literature went down well. As did *Insonnia* for mezzo soprano, accordion, bass clarinet and percussion, the latter played by Dutch resident Tatiana Koleva. But the composer didn't feel at home among his German colleagues and the other visitors to the Ferienkurse; conversely, it quickly became apparent that most of them were not interested in the self-willed Dutchman.

And yet this visit to Darmstadt didn't do Ter Veldhuis any harm, he met Russian composers there who, just after the fall of the Berlin Wall, came into contact with Western confreres for the first time. Because of their spiritual, instinctive and open attitude towards new music, they didn't feel attracted either to the academic German kind, but they did like Ter Veldhuis. The pleasure was mutual, and a true friendship was born, with the result for Ter Veldhuis that soon after his music was heard in Odessa, in Moscow and everywhere in Russia. His *May this bliss*

*never end*, an homage to trumpeter Chet Baker, graces the repertoire of the Moscow Contemporary Music Ensemble.

### Malaysia and Japan

Jazz and rock, Steve Reich and John Adams – Ter Veldhuis' musical interests were mainly focused on the United States, so it was time to try and get a foothold there as well. In 1993, once again thanks to pianist Wieringa, Ter Veldhuis came into contact with composer Robert Pollock, not especially to exchange ideas about the craft, but rather to exchange houses for two months. Pollock was the founder and artistic director of the Composers Guild of New Jersey, which counted about forty members; in collaboration with Gaudeamus he had arranged lectures, workshops and small concerts for Ter Veldhuis, also in New York. Through Pollock's network Ter Veldhuis met composers, musicians and ensembles here and there in the United States. And because, later in the year, he was able to live in artist Wijnanda Deroo's Manhattan loft for a while, he started to know his way around and became known in the musical life of New York.

In the years that followed the first cd's of Ter Veldhuis' music were released by BVHaast, the record label of Willem Breuker, composer and leader of the Willem Breuker Kollektief. Out of necessity, because at the time Ter Veldhuis and Donemus, the Dutch publishing house for records, cd's and sheet music, didn't hit it off yet. Cd's served as a musical calling card for the composer, the 1997 recording of *Goldrush* by the Danish Safri Duo on the Chandos label became a hit. After this, the Safri Duo played *Goldrush* more than fifty times all over the world, and subsequently the *Goldrush Concerto* for percussion duo and orchestra, with the Gelders Orkest, the Ulster Orchestra or the Danish National Radio Symphony Orchestra. Performances in Hong Kong and Malaysia followed.

Ter Veldhuis' international reputation was further nurtured when choreographer Hans van Manen created three ballets around his music between 1999 and 2001. For his *First String Quartet*, *The sighs of Rameau* (harpsichord, video images and audio track) and *Lipstick* (flute, alto flute and audio track) Ter Veldhuis received honorable mentions from, among others, the International Rostrum of Composers and from the Bourges Festival for Electronic Music. In 2000 the Aurelia Saxophone Quartet took *Pitch Black* to Japan. Since 2003 the British label Chandos has been distributing cd's and dvd's, worldwide, of *Paradiso*, a heavenly and melodious video oratorio with visuals by Jaap Drupsteen.

### New York

Ter Veldhuis' triumphal progress in the United States and Canada began in 2000, with the premiere of *Jungle Heart* for flute and percussion duo, first performed in Copenhagen by James Galway

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and the Safri Duo, followed by an American tour. The Other Minds Festival in San Francisco invited the composer to the American premiere of his *Third String Quartet*. Arno Bornkamp presented *Grab it!* for saxophone and boombox during the World Saxophone Congress in Montreal, Canada. This aggressive, intense duet for alto saxophone and edited speech samples from a criminal convicted to death hit like a bombshell. Since then the piece has been popping up everywhere, from New York to Chicago, and next to *Goldrush* it is without a doubt Ter Veldhuis' most often played composition – and not just in America.

Musicians from the Prism and New Century saxophone quartets were present at the World Saxophone Congress, and impressed by *Grab it!* both ensembles decided to add music by Ter Veldhuis to their repertoire. Other American musicians also threw themselves into the boombox pieces with great dedication, including Kevin R. Gallagher, guitarist and leader of the band Electric Kompany, and flautist Margaret Lancaster. They appointed themselves ambassadors of this Dutchman whose music was based on American patterns. In 2005 the Prism Quartet played an entire evening of Ter Veldhuis music in a sold-out hall of the New York music and arts center Symphonic Space in 90<sup>th</sup> Street, Manhattan. Limor Tomer of the Whitney Museum also attended, and on her invitation the three-day Jacob TV Festival took place in the spring of 2007, in the Whitney Museum of American Art at Altria.

Ter Veldhuis' international triumphs were sparked by an inflammable mixture of chance and planning, productivity and self-motivation, delight in the work, passion and perseverance. And especially of course by the right notes, which make musicians and orchestra leaders, promoters and listeners all over the world fall for this Dutchman. Hundreds of times a year, from Birmingham to Tokyo and from Ljubljana to Hawaii.

Ter Veldhuis publishes his boombox pieces himself. Especially since 1998, Donemus publishes an important part of his other works. Donemus also contributed to the realization of the audio and video recording of *Paradiso*. Since 1995 Gaudeamus has often been giving the composer financial support for his travels abroad.

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*A breach in the dike – the promotion of Dutch Music Abroad*  
Stichting Gaudeamus, Muziekcentrum Nederland, 2007  
ISBN/EAN 978-90-812526-1-4

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