

“Musical Terrorism”

Examining *Cities Change the Songs of Birds* and the

“Proper” use for Harp

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This paper examines the stereotypes of harp as a historically angelic instrument and how these prejudices threaten its evolution. Using the premiere performance of Dutch composer, Jacob Ter Veldhuis's piece, *Cities Change the Songs of Birds*, I explore attendees reactions to this work which challenges the boundaries of the instrument.

## Background

Ter Veldhuis aka TV captures American culture with a jaw-dropping tonal bluntless. Growing up in post WWII Netherlands Ter Veldhuis's music education began in primary school. He continued on to study composition and electronic music at Groningen Conservatoire.<sup>1</sup> A self described hippie coming of age in the sixties, Ter Veldhuis found conservatory composition courses fell short in challenging the boundaries of his musical expression. Exposure to American music and culture growing up, left an impression on him.<sup>2</sup> The America of his childhood was "colorful and fun - everything came from the states. [It was the] promised land for me."<sup>3</sup> After three decades listening to and being told what was and was not acceptable, Ter Veldhuis emerged in the nineties with a sound he felt was strongly his own.<sup>4</sup> According to Roberts, he uses

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<sup>1</sup> R.V.B. "A celebration of people involved in music." musicguy247.typepad.com, <https://musicguy247.typepad.com/my-blog/2016/08/jacob-tv-interview-dutch-composer-jacob-ter-veldhuis-the-news.html>, (accessed February 6, 2021)

<sup>2</sup> "Composer," <https://www.jacobtv.net/composer.html>, (accessed February 5, 2021).

<sup>3</sup> Jacob Ter Veldhuis, interview with Amelia Romano, February 10th, 2021

<sup>4</sup> Roberts, "The "Avant-pop" Style of Jacob Ter Veldhuis."

“American pop culture as the muse for which he creates his pieces.”<sup>5</sup> Willem Looze in discussing Ter Veldhuis, says, “[m]ost contemporary music is very safe, and they don’t want to offend, they want to try to fit in, and Jacob doesn’t care about that, he doesn’t think about the consequences, he does what he wants.”<sup>6</sup> From the *Parkieten Kwartet (Parakeet Quartet)* written in 1982, to *The News* 2020-11, a popular reality opera with its most recent run months before the 2016 election in the United States, Ter Veldhuis’s boombox compositions have placed him on the international stage as a sought after composer.

### Ter Veldhuis’s Boombox Repertoire

Drawing from speech-based audio he composes works for soloists, chamber groups and orchestra. During an interview with Ter Veldhuis on February 10th, he said “my work is similar to what Marcel Duchamp termed a readymade art.”<sup>7</sup> I take something from the world and add a live component. Ter Veldhuis modifies the readymade to convey the message he aims to communicate. “[A]ll of a sudden I could isolate a word or a sentence . . . manipulate it . . . splice it . . . and through midi-trigger it, says Ter Veldhuis.”<sup>8</sup> In this vein, he has been titled the “Andy Warhol”<sup>9</sup> of new music using language from pop-culture the way Andy Warhol used

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<sup>5</sup> Sarah L. Roberts, “The “Avant-pop” Style of Jacob Ter Veldhuis,” (PhD diss., University of North Texas, 2015). <https://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc804835/>, Pg. 2

<sup>6</sup> Looze, Jan Willem, “JacobTV-Show Reel-Box Set Trilogy” April 29th, 2007 video, 4:08, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=luNtpG1zqeg>

<sup>7</sup> Jacob TV, interview with Amelia Romano, February 10th, 2021

<sup>8</sup> R.V.B. “A celebration of people involved in music.”

<sup>9</sup> “Composer.” Composer.

images. Using tonal melodies and speech-based audio, he surprises audiences with a performance “straight from the heart.”<sup>10</sup>

The subject matter of his boombox compositions have created much controversy as he “attempts to bridge the gap between high art and low culture.”<sup>11</sup> “. . . [L]ike Warhol, Ter Veldhuis focuses his attention not only on the glamor of celebrity and media advertising -- as in *The Body of Your Dreams* (2003-05), . . . but also on the grim and abject realities of American life. *Grab It!* (1999) . . . [using] sampled conversation to form the basis for his music.”<sup>12</sup> His fascination with the human voice and speech-based audio was sparked during a visit in 1995 to Musée d’Art Moderne de la ville de Paris. He vividly recounts coming across a pre-recorded speech component in a work on display. This use of the human voice to convey emotion and an artistic idea struck his curiosity. “If you go back to language and to human speech, you will probably find light motifs in music . . . sound bites that are so beautiful to use to make music.”<sup>13</sup> He hears melody in these emotions be it crying or laughing. For him, the human voice expresses the rawest of emotions. He couples this rawness with tonal music. One article on Ter Veldhuis’s website describes his viewpoint on 20th century music. “He feels that composers of the 20th century went overboard with dissonance and atonality, and with excessive seriousness.”<sup>14</sup> During an interview with R.V.B., Ter Veldhuis speaks to avant-garde composers excessive use of

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<sup>10</sup> “Composer.” Composer.

<sup>11</sup> Roberts, “The “Avant-pop” Style of Jacob Ter Veldhuis.”

<sup>12</sup> Johnson, Steven Daniel, “The Misfit Pop Art of JacobTV” NewSounds.org, accessed February 24th, 2021, <https://www.newsounds.org/story/172822-portal-jacobtv/>.

<sup>13</sup> R.V.B. “A celebration of people involved in music.”

<sup>14</sup> “Articles.” Articles. <https://www.jacobtv.net/articles.html>, accessed February 5, 2021

dissonance and atonality saying “I [try] to write very, very sweet music . . . I wan[t] to express beauty . . . what a world would sound like without suffering. There was no dissonance . . . only harmony.”<sup>15</sup> Daniel Johnson captures Ter Veldhuis’s intent as a composer saying “[h]is music scrutinizes American popular culture, using it as an entry point for a nuanced critique of American democracy and capitalism.”<sup>16</sup> In choosing subjects from American media and society, Ter Veldhuis’s extensive boombox portfolio has brought international recognition and much inadvertent controversy.

Korean-Dutch harpist, Lavinia Meijer, praises Ter Veldhuis as a composer. “This way of writing music is something Jacob has an absolute talent for, using voices that also have melodies in themselves and choosing topics that shape our societies, but are not often highlighted.”<sup>17</sup> In 2007, Meijer approached Ter Veldhuis: “I asked him if he wanted to write something that has never been done before . . . I’m fed up with my instrument being sweet and heavenly. . . Can you write something different?”<sup>18</sup> *Cities Change the Songs of Birds* [henceforth CoB] was born from this invitation. A three movement work featuring speech of drug-addicted women in New York City alongside solo harp, Meijer’s premiere in 2008, at the World Harp Congress [henceforth WHC] in the Netherlands sent shock-waves through the online harp community.

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<sup>15</sup> R.V.B. “A celebration of people involved in music.”

<sup>16</sup> Johnson, Steven Daniel. “The Misfit Pop Art of JacobTV.”

<sup>17</sup> Lavinia Meijer, email interview by Amelia Romano, February 28th, 2021

<sup>18</sup> R.V.B. “A celebration of people involved in music.” [musicguy247.typepad.com https://musicguy247.typepad.com/my-blog/2016/05/lavinia-meijer-an-interview-with-the-talented-harpist-from-the-netherlands.html](https://musicguy247.typepad.com/my-blog/2016/05/lavinia-meijer-an-interview-with-the-talented-harpist-from-the-netherlands.html), accessed February 10th, 2021

Inspiration for *Cities Change the Songs of Birds*

Visiting the United States on numerous occasions over the course of his career, Ter Veldhuis spent several months in New York City where homelessness and addiction were a visible crisis (not too different from other cities around the globe). This exposure left an impression on him. Ter Veldhuis says, “[I had a] beautiful youth.”<sup>19</sup> My sheltered childhood left me in shock witnessing the outcast urban culture abandoned to the streets. “[I] cannot stand injustice.”<sup>20</sup> The scientific article, “Cities change the Songs of Birds,”<sup>21</sup> which examines the impact urban noise has on bird song became the title, a metaphor for how urban environments shape addict life. I interviewed Ter Veldhuis February 10th, 2021. During our conversation he made mention of his unique position - a Dutch citizen illuminating American addiction. “I never would’ve written if I were an American.”<sup>22</sup> At first listen, the opening line, “Lying piece of shit” is quite jarring. Using profane street conversations from female drug addicts comes off as an in-your-face sample of addict life. For Ter Veldhuis, this phrase captures the women's struggle. His intent, to highlight melody present in the human voice, not promote profanity. CoB is a “tribute to [addicted] women who have nothing to lose....”<sup>23</sup> An acknowledgment of their humanity, Ter

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<sup>19</sup> Jacob Ter Veldhuis, interview with Amelia Romano, Zoom, February 10th, 2021

<sup>20</sup> Jacob Ter Veldhuis, interview

<sup>21</sup> Hans Slabbekoorn and Ardieden Boer-Visser, “Cities Change the Songs of Birds,” *Current Biology*. [Volume 16, Issue 23](#), 5 December 2006, Pages 2326-2331, accessed February 22nd, 2021

<sup>22</sup> Jacob Ter Veldhuis, interview

<sup>23</sup> Jacob Ter Veldhuis, interview

Velhuis says. “I composed it out of empathy . . . I didn’t intend to offend anyone.”<sup>24</sup> Meijer recalls her initial reaction to hearing the work. “It was definitely a shock when I saw the piece . . . At first I thought I could not play this piece,”<sup>25</sup> “[but] as soon as I started to study the work I was drawn into the reality of these women and felt part of these stories, it came to life and made total sense to perform it this way.”<sup>26</sup> Neither were quite prepared for “Musical Terrorism,” the conversation posted on Harp Column. In an interview with R.V.B. Ter Veldhuis says “[CoB] was performed at the 10th World Harp Congress in Amsterdam and it caused a huge scandal.”<sup>27</sup> Meijer recalls playing the work. “[W]ithin half a minute people stood up and left the hall.”<sup>28</sup> Ter Veldhuis acknowledges he uses profanity quite casually in conversation or in some cases as a form of greeting, such as “hey motherfucker.” Both himself and Meijer were unaware of the ramifications such speech might have on an international audience.<sup>29</sup> I will summarize each movement of CoB to contextualize the conversation, “Musical Terrorism,” that transpired.

A three movement work, CoB opens with “Lying Piece of Shit,” a phrase yelled by a homeless female addict. Repeated in succession, the dialogue continues, “You mean you finished shooting your crack right . . . twice you left without telling me nothin’ . . . You won’t disappear if i have two hundred fucking bucks in my pocket . . . where is my bag. . . ?” The tonal

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<sup>24</sup> Jacob Ter Veldhuis, interview

<sup>25</sup> R.V.B. “A celebration of people involved in music.”

<sup>26</sup> Lavinia Meijer, email interview by Amelia Romano, February 28th, 2021

<sup>27</sup> R.V.B. “A celebration of people involved in music.”

<sup>28</sup> Lavinia Meijer, email interview

<sup>29</sup> Jacob Ter Veldhuis, interview

harp part accompanying audio settles the listener and anchors the anguished voice, which ends with, “where is my bag” repeated in succession.

“From the Time She was a Baby” recounts a tenuous relationship between an ex-convict and her daughter. “[How] can you come back after all this time and try to be my mother. . . .you haven’t been around for seventeen years . . .” Illuminating the consequences of prison time on family life, Ter Veldhuis emphasizes the daughter’s speech rhythm with chords and sparse glissandos. “That shit hurts me. . .that shit hurts me . . . ,” leaves the unresolved nature of their relationship hanging like an ominous cloud.

“That’s it, Your Honor,” closes work. A woman’s testimony and plea for redemption from her past life of crime, she recounts her journey. “ I broke the chain . . . and started going to church.” A child of the projects, religion became her saving grace. “You don’t know what I have been through but I don’t expect you to understand. . . .that’s it your honor.” In this final movement the harp elevates the story.

### “Musical Terrorism”

I now turn to the online “scandal” that ensued following the premiere. This conversation illuminates how the historically proper use of harp has tainted the instrument acceptance in contemporary contexts. “Musical Terrorism,” erupted on Harp Column’s “coffee break,” following Meijers premiere. A platform featuring discussions of interest to the harp community, I have selected quotes from “Musical Terrorism” to highlight offenses I find particularly compelling.

The primary offense, the “improper” use of harp. Why was great offense taken by premiere attendees to the composers' choice of placing the harp alongside speech of drug-addicted women? Some felt the instrument had been offended. Meijer says “[in] reading the strong beliefs of many harpists that the sacred harp was being tormented this way and that it should stay the instrument of King David, my jaw dropped.”<sup>30</sup> Innovative Norwegian harpist, Sunniva Rodland in her paper, “Let the Harp Sound!” offers her own take on the origins of these prejudices saying:

Among many Norwegians, [and the international harp community,] the harp is associated with angels...many harpists have earned their living performing in a white dress and even with angel wings on their backs. Using the harp in such a way builds a myth around the harp...[that] can artistically become an obstacle...If the audience[s] learn that harp performances are angelic and soft, it becomes difficult to present music that does not answer to their expectations.<sup>31</sup>

Kathleen Elarte who initiated conversation, “Musical Terrorism,” holds firm to these historical notions saying “[t]he harp as we all know, is an instrument of beauty, of worship (as depicted in the Dun Huang caves in China & in the Bible). To see it in the centre of this atrocity just goes towards promoting more hate toward American society and is, in my opinion, just another form of Musical Terrorism!<sup>32</sup> Katerina Antonenko feels similarly saying “[the harp] is [a] healing and peaceful instrument...There [is] too much shit in [this] world and there's NO reason to express it with the only instrument, which is the incarnated tenderness even in physics and

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<sup>30</sup> Lavinia Meijer, email interview

<sup>31</sup> Sunniva, Rodland. Let the Harp Sound! Trondheim, The Norwegian Artistic Research Fellowship Program, 2014. Accessed February 6th, 202, Page. 5

<sup>32</sup> “Musical Terrorism,”(coffee hour), Harp Column, July 20th, 2008, <https://harpcolumn.com/forums/topic/musical-terrorism/>, Pg. 2

lyrics both.”<sup>33</sup> Elarte and Antonenko hold tight to Ravel and Debussy’s romantic portrayal of harp as a soft voice with lush chords. With a minimum of modern works written for the instrument, ingrained prejudices hold the instrument hostage.

A second offense was taken to Ter Veldhuis use of New York City addicts as the subject for the work. “Let the Harp Sound! quotes saying “[t]he liner notes touch upon [CoB’s] controversial content . . . ‘The harp comments, plays a dialogue or just accompanies the recorded voices of the women.’<sup>34</sup>”<sup>35</sup> Despite this contextualization Elarte and others found great displeasure towards use of American addict voices saying:

“... while in Amsterdam, Holland's own drug addicts are in blissful oblivion of what's happening while they snort, sniff or inject by needles also provided by the Dutch Gov,... This kind of ‘shitty music’ only propagates hate towards Americans by targeting their fringes of society...She does not stipulate whether this in fact, reflects all of North While there is truth to American society or mainly the USA! But as the Lying Piece of Shit points out, it is in the "streets of New York.”<sup>36</sup>

Laura Smithburg Byrne continues along these lines saying, “I do not find any artistic merit in the concept of ‘exploitation of a drug addict's agony’ as a subject for a musical composition for the harp.”<sup>37</sup> Critics missed the transformative story Ter Veldhuis brought to life, a journey from addiction to redemption. Ter Veldhuis chose the voice of New York City addicts because they moved him. Bringing their difficult story to light is Ter Vanhuis’s mission. Is it not

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<sup>33</sup> “Musical Terrorism,”(coffee hour), Pg. 9

<sup>34</sup> “Articles.” Articles. <https://www.jacobtv.net/articles.html>, accessed February 5, 2021

<sup>35</sup> Rodland. “Let the Harp Sound!” Pg. 23

<sup>36</sup> “Musical Terrorism,”(coffee hour), Pg.12

<sup>37</sup> “Musical Terrorism,”(coffee hour), Pg. 23

the role of performing arts to illuminate “low culture?” Ter Vanhuis and Rodland noticed American and Canadian harpists expressed the strongest negative reactions. “Americans . . . learn to discuss/express self . . . Dutch [are] shy to offend. . . .”<sup>38</sup> This tendency towards openness in part led to “Musical Terrorism.”

### Appreciators

Fortunately appreciators contributed their voice. Kimberly Houser says:

It interests me that several people have called this Ms. Meijer's music. Please, separate the performer from the composition. As for this music seeming to show a poor concept of America, well, we have been glorifying the inner city, gangster, hip hop culture in our popular media for some time. It is starting to look to other countries that that is what America is all about. I know that is not the case, but it is the image that is being sold right now. Maybe we, as a nation, need to look at this. I agree that the first movement can be somewhat abrasive, because the f-word is repeated (on tape) several times....however, I did not get the impression that Veldhuis intended to denigrate American society at all.<sup>39</sup>

While the subject of CoB is painful to acknowledge, Americans must recognize populations living on the fringe. Ter Veldhuis chose this subject to pay tribute to addict women, *not* point fingers at America. Michael Rockowitz presents some worthy points saying :

I'm a little disturbed by the sensationalist term “musical terrorism.” No one, so far as I know, is blowing anything up, extorting governments by holding hostages, killing innocent civilians. They're just playing music you don't like, or with messages you don't like or agree with. Next, there is nothing inherently sacred about the harp. It's based on your associations. Hey, I love harp playing. But it's a kind of machine designed to produce sound, with aesthetic and hopefully pleasing acoustic qualities. There is nothing

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<sup>38</sup> Jacob TV, interview

<sup>39</sup> “Musical Terrorism,”(coffee hour), Pg.14

that says that you can only use the harp to play certain music, at certain volumes, and that you must not modify or alter the "pure" sound.<sup>40</sup>

Tony Morosco continues in the same vein saying,

It's a piece of music. It may be garbage (to be honest when a critique is as emotion laden and over the top as the one that started this thread I have a hard time taking it seriously) but it is just music. People have taken pot shots at others through music through the history of music (even if you want to call this a pot shot. Having lived in several major US metropolitan areas including NYC the fact is that there IS a higher incidence of drug use in these places) and to suggest that it can be a direct lead in to terrorism is just going too far in my opinion...America has a lot of issues and problems. If a non-American wants to make a statement about those problems I have no problem with that so long as they are being truthful.<sup>41</sup>

If a statement is truthful why judge and criticize? You may not like a work but that does not give you the power to label it musical terrorism or garbage. I admit the opening movement of CoB is sonically abrasive. However, a beautifully poignant narrative unfolds. One harpist says it perfectly:

There was one point midway through the piece, which really blew me away, when the harp line was perfectly supporting the taped vocals, and the impression I got was that the harpist, Lavinia, was a sort of guardian angel to these troubled people, listening to their problems, completely, not interrupting or interfering, but just being there, and acknowledging them. And I was very touched. I also liked the last movement, because it seemed like a bit of grace after everything that had come before it.<sup>42</sup>

Rodland offers her own take. "I really liked the piece . . . . It offers a rare glimpse into the desperate life of a drug-addict, a glimpse that engages me on an emotional level and that

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<sup>40</sup> "Musical Terrorism,"(coffee hour), Pg. 9

<sup>41</sup> "Musical Terrorism,"(coffee hour), Pg. 13

<sup>42</sup> "Musical Terrorism,"(coffee hour), Pg. 33

provides a powerful sight in the complex problems of drug abuse. *Cities Change the Songs of Birds* is a very moving piece that I perform with great care and respect.”<sup>43</sup>

I had the fortune of interviewing Rodland on her experience attending the premiere. Taking a seat near the front, Meijer’s powerful body language when introducing and performing the three emotional movements was striking. Her internalization of the work was evident. In several sections she joined the female voices screaming along with the recording. I instantly remember thinking “I have to play this piece!”<sup>44</sup> Completely immersed in performance, Rodland was surprised to find the theater partially empty when the piece ended. Unbeknownst to her, many harpists chose to walk out during performance. In reading the conversation “Musical Terrorism,” Rodland was disappointed by attendees’ prejudices and reaction to the use of harp in this context. We both see CoB as a “coming out” for the instrument. If more innovative works were performed, audiences might expand their notion of what is acceptable for the instrument. Ter Veldhuis acknowledges “[s]wearing is different in America.”<sup>45</sup> Americans take profanity surprisingly personally. Rodland found Ter Veldhuis’s use of sound bites alongside the harp very intriguing. She performed CoB for a Norwegian colleague prior to her own premiere recalling, “my friend was moved,”<sup>46</sup> they didn’t find the work particularly surprising or shocking.

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<sup>43</sup> Sunniva, Rodland. Let the Harp Sound! Trondheim, The Norwegian Artistic Research Fellowship Program, 2014. February 6th, 2021. [https://nmh.brage.unit.no/nmh-xmlui/bitstream/handle/11250/2374921/Sunniva\\_Rodland\\_Critical\\_reflection\\_2016.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y](https://nmh.brage.unit.no/nmh-xmlui/bitstream/handle/11250/2374921/Sunniva_Rodland_Critical_reflection_2016.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y), Pg. 24

<sup>44</sup> Sunniva Rodland, interview by Amelia Romano, Zoom, February 15th, 2021

<sup>45</sup> Sunniva Rodland, interview

<sup>46</sup> Sunniva Rodland, interview

In familiarizing myself with work, I referenced Rodland's former student, Norwegian harpist, Uno Alejandro Vesje's recording. I had the additional pleasure of speaking with Vesje who included work on his solo harp album "[Poems from a City](#)," alongside all original works. Vesje appreciates Ter Veldhuis compositional process. "[It is] fascinating to think tonally and present conflict."<sup>47</sup> The "tonal element of [Ter Veldhuis'] work relaxes the listener."<sup>48</sup> Tonality offers a safe sonic space to shed light on a difficult story. At first listen, CoB left him with a stomach ache. It was as if he had internalized the strangers lives, the sorrow and frustration expressed by the female voices. Removed from homelessness in his home country of Norway, his attention, similar to Ter Veldhuis, went to the music expressed in the speech of the addicts. Vesje was particularly struck by Ter Veldhuis's use of rhythm and speech repetition to accent and highlight the storyline while inserting cues for performer to yell alongside addict voices. These elements helped him connect with the women and deliver a compelling and personal performance. For him, the harp is an instrument found in the opera or ballet. Too often it is "used in a way that feels stuck."<sup>49</sup> Paving his own path for the instrument, he composes and performs works that expand the instruments voice, drawing inspiration from CoB for his latest composition: [Our Planet, Our Future](#) premiered in July 2020.

## Conclusion

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<sup>47</sup> R.V.B. "A celebration of people involved in music."

<sup>48</sup> Uno Alejandro Vesje, interview by Amelia Romano, Zoom, February 5th, 2021

<sup>49</sup> Uno Alejandro Vesje, interview

Placing high art alongside low culture is no easy task. Ter Veldhuis does so brilliantly, yet, at what cost? As Meijer eloquently points out, “[t]here will probably always be a core of harpists that want to stay in a certain closed off style and that’s okay with me. It’s an ‘and and’ not an ‘or or.’”<sup>50</sup> Rodland and Vesje’s quest to re-image the harp will present participants of the blog, “Musical Terrorism,” and the international harp community, with the opportunity to examine their prejudices. A more current and inclusive image of the instrument is what the times demand. Irrespective of outcome, it is the job of innovative harpists and composers to write works that invite listeners to experience a sound that celebrates innovation while honoring the instrument's ancient origins.

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<sup>50</sup> Lavinia Meijer, email interview

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