

## Michel van der Aa



Michel van der Aa photo © Marco Borggreve

\_\_\_An introduction to the music of Michel van der Aa\_\_\_ by Michiel Cleij\_ 'Music is only truly exciting when poetry and form are inextricably bound to one another,' says Michel van der Aa (1970). And his compositions epitomize that tension: craftsmanship and eloquence are equal partners, each constantly fortifying the other. Van der Aa's keen sense of clarity and structure betray his background: he studied in The Hague with Diderik Wagenaar and Louis Andriessen. But in breathing life into his compositions he goes entirely his own way, for his music also has a poetic, vulnerable side. One hears living, breathing constructions with human characteristics: loneliness, unexpected humour, detachment and disunity. It is music that elicits extreme reactions, music as upsetting as it is poignant. Listening to a piece by Van der Aa, one might wonder where in fact the music is coming from. In some of his works the musicians are joined by an invisible partner, a soundtrack that enters into a dialogue with them. And where there is no soundtrack, the visible instruments can often reveal an unexpected side. Van der Aa is a dramatist: sounds are for him what actors are to a theatre director. His sounds can be plastic, malleable or recalcitrant; they reinforce or neutralize one another; they dominate or are dominated. This gives the music a strongly visual aspect: Van der Aa's imagery is evident even to the most unimaginative listener. And the confrontation between these images often has the intensity of a thriller. As soon as the 'protagonist' has been introduced – by a soloist, ensemble or orchestra – he is challenged and prodded by external impulses. The antagonist mostly emerges as an alter ego, another version of the protagonist himself: a sampled version on soundtrack, for example, or a live imitator within the ensemble. This interaction with an alter ego, a typical Van der Aa principle, never fails to astonish. The aural images vary continually, and with them the course of the drama. Every composition gives a glimpse of pleasantly relaxed harmony, but it is the assault on it that makes his music so gripping. Van der Aa's dramatic powers reached new heights in the recent *Here-Trilogy*. The three sections – composed for a variety of forces, and which can be performed together or separately – share the common theme of the female singer. Her relationship with her musical environment is different in each piece. In *Here [enclosed]* she is not yet even present: on stage alongside the orchestra is a cabin made of translucent black plexiglas, which reveals a 'replica' of the soloist. This object answers

the live music with sampled snippets of musical material from the orchestra itself and in doing so obliges the musicians to become mime artists: they continue playing, but their sound has been robbed by their alter ego. In *Here [in circles]*, for small ensemble, the singer appears in real life. But again she cannot break out of her isolation, getting caught up in loops, as do the ensemble musicians. The singer makes real-time recordings of the proceedings with a cassette recorder, echoing them back at the ensemble, reinforcing the feeling of hopelessness. Synchronicity between the individual and her surroundings is finally reached in *Here [to be found]*. But the two parties continue to test each other, to complement, trump and repudiate one another – and then go their own way. Likewise, in the chamber opera *One* a single voice grapples with a soundtrack and video projections. The video images are profoundly fused to the music; like the soundtracks Van der Aa applies elsewhere in his oeuvre, they are an extension of the sound itself: an additional instrument, as it were. A typical aspect of Van der Aa's writing is the stark, unadorned way in which he juxtaposes beauty and ugliness. The almost neurotic, disturbed text (penned by the composer himself) and the often highly poetic music form a provocative contrast. By emphasizing 'ugliness' Van der Aa gives beauty a direction and underlines its inexorability. One could call Van der Aa an expert in disorder, derangement and derailment. *Double* appears at first sight to be a run-of-the-mill duo for violin and piano, but the estrangement from its classical appearance kicks in right from the start. The piano is prepared with horsehair (as in a violin bow) in order to imitate the sound of the violin; the violin in turn does his best to shake off the competition. The stormy interaction that follows is a fierce clash, replete with feints and frustrated communication. A variant on this theme is the percussion duet *Wake* – even though the definition of 'duet' is here no more than a purely visual one. One percussionist remains silent throughout, participating by miming, imitating or predicting the gestures of the other, in doing so placing his partner's timing in an entirely different context. Here as well Van der Aa exhibits his ability to conceive and realize a dramatic line: along the way the mime player starts to influence the real musician and even takes control of the musical proceedings. What began as a shadow has become a spotlight. As interdisciplinary as his work appears, music and notes remain Van der Aa's fundamental building blocks. Ten chords form the basis of the 'Preposition Trilogy' *Above*, *Between* and *Attach*. Limited material indeed, but for Van der Aa enough for a complete musical odyssey. A live ensemble and taped samples of the ensemble are the 'characters', and their confrontations are true cliffhangers: as the balance of power shifts, so does the surrounding aural landscape. Capriciousness and bizarre turns are present in Van der Aa's early works as well. *Auburn*, for guitar and tape, yanks the classical guitar out of its introverted, respectable stereotype. This is music as a pressure cooker, in which funky riffs pump the temperature yet higher. Likewise in *Oog* it is the cello that threatens to explode, seduced and provoked by the sounds on tape. Michel van der Aa's music, in short, translates everyday, worldly processes into extraordinary, unworldly sounds. He sculpts with sound; his subjects are drawn from the world around him. And because he always works closely with musicians, his music is always fresh

and vibrant. Van der Aa challenges the expectations of his audience, then manipulates and distorts them. But you can recognize yourself even in the most warped mirror, whether you want to or not. The comments of the Stuttgarter Zeitung about *Here [to be found]* apply to his entire oeuvre: 'Michel van der Aa poses the best questions, both to himself and to the music. For example: how can I best express what I want to say? And, worthy of a true craftsman, not only: how do I build a tower?, but also: how do I then get out of the tower? How can I make something new out of something 'old'?' \_© Michiel Cleij 2004, translation Jonathan Reeder\_

## OPERAS

### After Life

**2005-06, rev. 2009** 1 hr 40 min

Opera for 6 singers, ensemble, video and electronic soundtrack

2S, M, A, 2Bar;

0.1.1.bcl.0-0.1.0.1-positive org(=hpd)-strings(4.4.3.2.2); electronic soundtrack; video projections

**World Premiere: 02 Jun 2006**

Muziekgebouw aan 't IJ, Amsterdam, Netherlands

Michel van der Aa, director; Netherlands Opera / Asko Ensemble

Conductor: Otto Tausk

Availability: This work is available from Boosey & Hawkes for the world

### Blank Out

**2015** 1 hr 10 min

Chamber opera for soprano and 3D film

S-Bar-choir-soundtrack(4channel); film(3D).

Bar and choir only on film

**World Premiere: 20 Mar 2016**

Muziekgebouw aan 't IJ, Amsterdam, Netherlands

Michel van der Aa, director; Miah Persson, Roderick Williams / Nederlands Kamerkoor

Availability: This work is available from Boosey & Hawkes for the world

### The Book of Disquiet

(Das Buch der Unruhe)

**2008** 1 hr 15 min

Music theatre for actor, ensemble and film

1.0.1.1-0.1.0.0-perc(1):vib/glsp/3metal pieces/cabasa/maracas/egg shaker/4Chin.tom-t/BD/bamboo chimes/ratchet/whip(med)/wdbl(lo)/2log dr/tgl(hi)/2susp.cym-4vln.3vla.2vlc.db-soundtrack(laptop, 1player)-film(2screens)

**World Premiere: 02 Jan 2009**

Hafenhalle09, Linz, Austria

Michel van der Aa, director; Klaus Maria Brandauer, actor / Bruckner Orchester Linz

Conductor: Dennis Russell Davies

Availability: This work is available from Boosey & Hawkes for the world

### One

**2002** 1 hr

Chamber opera for soprano, video and soundtrack

**World Premiere: 12 Jan 2003**

Frascati Theatre, Amsterdam, Netherlands

Michel van der Aa, director; Barbara Hannigan, soprano

Availability: This work is available from Boosey & Hawkes for the world

### Sunken Garden

**2011-13** 1 hr 40 min

3D film opera

2S, Bar (M, Bar on film);

0.0.1.bcl.0-0.1.1.0-perc(1)-strings(7.0.6.5.2); soundtrack(4channels); film(2D,3D); may be produced either in a fully staged or in a semi-staged version

**World Premiere: 12 Apr 2013**

Barbican Theatre, London, United Kingdom

Michel van der Aa, director; English National Opera

Conductor: André de Ridder

Availability: This work is available from Boosey & Hawkes for the world

## BALLETS

### Reversal

2016

10 min 30 sec

for orchestra

1.1.2(II=bcl),2(II=dbn)

-4.2.2.btrbn.0-perc(2):vib/glsp/marimba/BD/SD/maracas/bongo/tgl/bamboo  
chimes/glass chimes/gran cassa/log dr/cyms/whip/church bell or  
t.bells-harp-strings(16.14.12.10.8)

## FULL ORCHESTRA

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**World Premiere: 13 Jan 2017**

Staatsoper, Hamburg, Germany

Andrey Kaydanowsky, choreographer; Bundesjugendballett / Bundesjugendorchester

Conductor: Alexander Shelley

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### **Second Self**

**2004**

15 min

for orchestra and soundtrack

0.0.Ebcl.2(II=bcl).0-2.2.2.btrb.1-perc(2)-strings(12.12.10.8.6)-soundtrack(laptop, 1 player)

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**World Premiere: 15 Oct 2004**

Donaueschingen, Germany

SWR-Sinfonieorchester Baden-Baden und Freiburg

Conductor: Roland Kluttig

Availability: This work is available from Boosey & Hawkes for the world

## CHAMBER ORCHESTRA

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### Here [enclosed]

**2003** 17 min

for chamber orchestra and soundtrack

0.0.1.1-0.1.1.0-perc(1)-strings(6.6.6.4.2)-soundtrack(laptop, 1player); theatrical object

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**World Premiere: 30 Mar 2004**

Budapest, Hungary

Netherlands Radio Chamber Orchestra

Conductor: Peter Eötvös

Availability: This work is available from Boosey & Hawkes for the world

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### Imprint

**2005** 14 min

for Baroque orchestra

2ob-hpd-strings(4.4.3.2.1); portative organ to be played by solo violinist; period instruments (415 Hz tuning) or modern instruments played in a Baroque way

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**World Premiere: 27 Aug 2005**

Lukaskirche, Lucerne, Switzerland

Freiburger Barockorchester

Conductor: Gottfried von der Goltz

Availability: This work is available from Boosey & Hawkes for the world

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## SOLO INSTRUMENT(S) AND ORCHESTRA

### Double Concerto

**2018** 20 min

for violin, cello and orchestra

1.0.1.bcl.1-4.2.2.1-perc(3)-harp-strings(10.10.10.8.6)-soundtrack

**World Premiere: 09 May 2019**

Philharmonie, Köln, Germany

Patricia Kopatchinskaja, violin / Sol Gabetta, cello; Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra

Conductor: Peter Eötvös

Availability: This work is available from Boosey & Hawkes for the world

### Hysteresis

**2013** 17 min

for solo clarinet, ensemble and soundtrack

bn-tpt-perc(1)-strings\*; soundtrack(laptop,1player);

string forces: 1.0.1.1.1(all amplified) or 4.0.3.2.1 or 6.0.5.4.2; db with low C strings

**World Premiere: 30 Apr 2014**

Queen Elizabeth Hall, London, United Kingdom

Mark van de Wiel, clarinet; London Sinfonietta

Conductor: Baldur Brönnimann

Availability: This work is available from Boosey & Hawkes for the world

### Up-close

**2010** 30 min

for solo cello, string ensemble and film

strings(6.6.6.4.2)-soundtrack(1player; doubleA player software, from laptop)-film(from laptop)

9790202533536 **cello, string ensemble & film**

**World Premiere: 11 Mar 2011**

Konserthuset, Stockholm, Sweden

Sol Gabetta, cello; Amsterdam Sinfonietta

Conductor: Candida Thompson

Availability: This work is available from Boosey & Hawkes for the world

## Violin Concerto

**2014** 26 min

for violin and orchestra

1.1.1.bcl.1.dbn-4.2.2.1-perc(3)-harp-strings(12.12.10.8.6)

**World Premiere: 06 Nov 2014**

Concertgebouw, Amsterdam, Netherlands

Janine Jansen, violin; Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra

Conductor: Vladimir Jurowski

Availability: This work is available from Boosey & Hawkes for the world

## VOICE(S) AND ORCHESTRA

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### **Spaces of Blank**

**2007**

26 min

for mezzo-soprano, orchestra and soundtrack

1.1.2.2-4.2.3(III=btrbn).1-perc(2)-harp-pft-strings-soundtrack(doubleA player)

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#### **World Premiere: 19 Mar 2009**

Concertgebouw, Amsterdam, Netherlands

Christianne Stotijn, mezzo-soprano; Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra

Conductor: Ed Spanjaard

Availability: This work is available from Boosey & Hawkes for the world



## ENSEMBLE AND CHAMBER WITHOUT VOICE(S)

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### **The Cluster Chord**

for strings, oboe, alto oboe, bassoon, 2trp, 2trb

2014

1 min 15 sec

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**World Premiere: 18 Jun 2014**

Holland Festival, Amsterdam, Netherlands

Dutch National Ballet

Availability: This work is available from Boosey & Hawkes for the world

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### **Mask**

2006

15 min

for ensemble and soundtrack

1.0.1.0-1.1.1.0-perc(1)-strings(1.1.1.1)-soundtrack(laptop, 1 player)

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**World Premiere: 11 Feb 2007**

WDR, Funkhaus am Wallrafplatz, Klaus-von-Bismarck-Saal, Köln, Germany

musikFabrik

Conductor: Peter Rundel

Availability: This work is available from Boosey & Hawkes for the world

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## ENSEMBLE AND CHAMBER WITH VOICE(S)

### For the time being

**2012/17** 16 min

for mezzo soprano, piano, violin and double bass  
9790202534892 **Mezzo-Soprano, Violin, Piano, Double Bass**

**World premiere complete: 19 Apr 2018**

Muziekgebouw, Amsterdam, Netherlands

Wende Sniijders, mezzo-soprano; Gerard Bouwhuis, piano / Heleen Hulst, violin / Dario Calderone, double bass

Availability: This work is available from Boosey & Hawkes for the world

### Here [in circles]

**2002** 15 min

for soprano and ensemble

cl.bcl.tpt-perc(1)-strings(1.1.1.1.1); small cassette recorder (eg Sony TCM-939)

**World Premiere: 03 Sep 2002**

Amsterdam, Netherlands

Barbara Hannigan, soprano; Asko Ensemble

Conductor: Etienne Siebens

Availability: This work is available from Boosey & Hawkes for the world

### Here [to be found]

**2001** 18 min

for soprano, chamber orchestra and soundtrack

0.0.1.1-0.1.1.0-perc(1)-strings(6.6.6.4.2)-soundtrack(laptop, 1 player)

**World Premiere: 20 Oct 2001**

Donaueschingen, Germany

Barbara Hannigan, soprano; Netherlands Radio Chamber Orchestra

Conductor: Peter Eötvös

Availability: This work is available from Boosey & Hawkes for the world

### Here Trilogy

**Here [enclosed], Here [in circles], Here [to be found]**

**2001-03** 50 min

for soprano and ensemble

9790202531709 **Soprano, Ensemble (Score)**

Availability: This work is available from Boosey & Hawkes for the world

## Where the bee sucks

for voice, harpsichord, theorbe and strings

**2014** 2 min 10 sec

**World Premiere: 18 Jun 2014**

Holland Festival, Amsterdam, Netherlands

Dutch National Ballet

Availability: This work is available from Boosey & Hawkes for the world

## PIANO(S)

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### Just before

2000

11 min 35 sec

for piano and soundtrack  
9790202532034 Piano, CD

**World Premiere: 30 Aug 2000**  
Felix Meritis, Amsterdam, Netherlands  
Tomoko Mukaiyama, piano;

Availability: This work is available from Boosey & Hawkes for the world

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### Transit

2007

12 min 35 sec

for piano and video projection  
piano and video projection (via DVD player), amplification (for the video soundtrack)

**World Premiere: 21 Nov 2009**  
Phipps Hall, Huddersfield, United Kingdom  
Sarah Nicolls, piano;

Availability: This work is available from Boosey & Hawkes for the world

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## INSTRUMENTAL

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### **Memo**

**2003** 9 min

for violin and portable cassette recorder  
9790202531730 **Violin**

Availability: This work is available from Boosey & Hawkes for the world

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### **Rekindle**

**2009** 8 min

for flute and soundtrack  
9790202532355 **Flute, CD**

**World Premiere: 14 Feb 2010**  
Kettle's Yard, Cambridge, United Kingdom  
Jane Mitchell, flute;

Availability: This work is available from Boosey & Hawkes for the world

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### **Wake**

**1997** 8 min

for percussion duo  
both perc: vib/5chin.tom-t/chimes/whip/dr/metal

9790202531723 **Percussion Ensemble**

**World Premiere: 12 Dec 1997**  
De Ijsbreker, Amsterdam, Netherlands  
Percussiongroup The Hague

Availability: This work is available from Boosey & Hawkes for the world

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## VOCAL

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**One**

**2002**

1 hr

Chamber opera for soprano, video and soundtrack

**World Premiere: 12 Jan 2003**

Frascati Theatre, Amsterdam, Netherlands

Michel van der Aa, director; Barbara Hannigan, soprano

Availability: This work is available from Boosey & Hawkes for the world

## CHORAL

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### **Shelter**

**2017**

4 min 30 sec

for a cappella chorus

SSAATTBB (24 singers, min.16)

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**World Premiere: 01 Sep 2017**

TivoliVredenburg, grote zaal, Utrecht, Netherlands

Netherlands Chamber Choir

Conductor: Peter Dijkstra

Availability: This work is available from Boosey & Hawkes for the world