

Wim Henderickx (1962)

Le Visioni di Paura (1990)

BY MAARTEN BEIRENS (2006)

Wim Henderickx composed the orchestral piece *Le Visioni di Paura* (The Visions of Fear) in 1990 for the Nieuw Belgisch Kamerorkest, which commissioned it. Although this is one of Henderickx's earliest efforts for the orchestra, a medium he would subsequently explore in more ambitious works – most notably the three *Ragas* – *Le Visioni di Paura* displays a sense of structural clarity and a tight control of the available array of playing techniques and effects, taking this piece beyond the level of a mere exercise of a young composer mastering the orchestral medium.

As the composer indicates in the score, this piece is inspired by the vision of Hell depicted on the right panel of *The Garden of Earthly Delights* by Hiëronimus Bosch. The lively tangle of creatures that crowds Bosch's painting may account for the remarkably large variety of compact musical episodes in Henderickx' rather short (ca. 13') composition. However, the slow tempi and the pervading sense of stasis (harmonically as well as rhetorically) seem far removed from the visceral activity of Bosch's Hell, warning against a too simple interpretation of this composition as essentially programmatic. Instead, Henderickx appears to provide the listener with a general impression of the feelings summoned by the painting – the fear that the title hints at - although the link with the painting may be even more far-reaching than that. Bosch's Hell, when 'read' from top to bottom, is clearly divided into four separate zones. Considering the four sections of this composition as a reflection of this arrangement seems a plausible hypothesis, which would imply that for Henderickx the structural aspects are by no means inferior to the programmatic content.

The four movements of this work are marked A through D and follow each other *attacca*. Within each movement, several short sections can be discerned, standing out because they introduce different musical material and often also different tempi. Movements A, B and D feature a binary division into sections, whereas in movement C no less than seven distinct sections can be found. However, despite the obvious quick succession of short musical fragments, it is possible to discern three major categories or types of musical material that appear in different shapes throughout the composition. These are (1) a static field of held chords or tones, often coloured by alternative playing techniques, (2) rubato-like melodic lines consisting of modular motifs, mostly in a contrapuntal and even canonic texture, and (3) rhythmic patterns of tutti chords. These three types should not be understood as thematic material but rather as abstract musical categories, that in spite of the large variety of musical elements grants this composition a sense of unity. Indeed, the structure of the piece contains a cyclic closedness, where the end of movement D corresponds to the beginning of the work; likewise, within movement A the end returns to the material from the beginning.

The most prominent feature of the work is the profusion of playing techniques and musical settings. Each section can be said to have its own character, which is reflected in the musical (harmonic, rhythmic and/or melodic) properties of the material, often combined with particular alternative playing techniques. Thus, glissandi and random notes, microtones, harmonics and multiphonics appear in the course of the work. In that respect, the exploration of different musical and technical

possibilities in each section suggests that trying out different aspects of orchestral technique may have been one of the composer's main concerns. There is much less variety on the harmonic level. Henderickx explores a modernist harmonic language that contains a considerable amount of chromaticism, both in the modes used (such as the C#-E-F-F#-G-Ab-B-C mode that produces the first melodic material on p. 4 of the score) as well as in the chords that often consist of chromatic complements. An example of the latter appears already as early as the opening measures, where the chords in the first violins (F-G-C and G-A-Eb) are combined with their chromatic complements in the second violins (C#-F#-G# and Ab-Bb-D, respectively).

There is no hell without a devil. It may therefore come as no surprise that the familiar 'diabolus in musica' – the augmented fourth or diminished fifth – occupies a prominent place in this work's harmonic and melodic material. Not only the interval but also the pitch classes C and F# (that together form an augmented fourth) stand out at structurally significant points in the score. The piece opens and closes with a held F# in the timpani and lower strings that gradually evolves in glissando towards other pitches (and ultimately random notes). The F# is also prominent in the first part of movement B and at the beginning of movement C (where it also appears in multiphonics). Likewise a pedal point on C in the big accelerando passage of movement C (p. 17-20) is extremely clear. This tritone-tension not only affects the larger structure of the score (beginning – movement C – end) but can also be found on a smaller scale, most particularly in movement B, where the roots of the chords that make out the rhythmic patterns follow the same interval F#-C-F# (see music example 3); later on in the course of this section, chords with pitch classes F and B as roots are added to this pattern. This tension is resolved in the final bars of the piece, when the perfect fifth C# is played over the F# in the bass.