

‘Cathedrals of Sound’: Wim Henderickx in conversation with Pwyll ap Siôn

The following interview was conducted in Antwerp on 6 June 2015, following the performance of Henderickx’s Symphony No. 1 at the Arts Center deSingel with the Royal Flemish Philharmonic and Edo de Waart on 5 June. Wim and Pwyll wish to thank Bea Steylaerts and Nia Williams for their valuable assistance in preparing the interview.

Pwyll: I thought we might start with your recent Symphony No. 1. Do you see it as a continuation of your previous orchestral music?

Wim: It’s definitely a continuation. Of course, to attend a concert of a symphony is something quite different to other orchestral music – you have to fight those ‘big monsters’ of the repertoire! I also thought I should write a symphony before I was fifty years old! But seriously, for me it does mark a kind of milestone in my activity as a composer. I wanted to write a more abstract work, but I also think it is a real symphony. I changed a lot of things with regard to the standard formula of a symphony. For example, the order is different. It starts with a very fast scherzo. The second movement, which uses a song-like structure, features a long solo on Cor Anglais and relates to the kind of Mahlerian idea of having a solo instrument in a symphony. The third movement, which is in sonata form, is placed in the ‘wrong’ order, as it were. Then the fourth does something unusual for a symphony: I wanted to write something that was completely static, which froze time. Of course it’s an illusion to freeze time in music, but that was my goal in this movement. This leads to another important element in the symphony – its connection with other art forms. My influence here was artist Anish Kapoor. I once performed under Kapoor’s sculpture ‘At the Edge of the World’, which is like a monumental bell. I thought to myself that this would become the structure for the fourth movement of the symphony. I guess it’s in a kind of ‘resonance form’. And the last movement, ‘Leviathan’, is in a kind of sonata-rondo form! I wanted to sculpt the symphony, and I’ve always been inspired by sculpture, so it’s a continuation of my way of thinking. Of course, non-Western ideas come into play, in addition to my fascination with the universe, the planet, the cosmos, and so on. But on the other hand, it’s a very abstract work: it’s really me fighting with the form of the symphony.

Pwyll: You mentioned the cosmos. A lot of your music seems to grapple with elemental, timeless concepts. There’s a strong philosophical and spiritual element that seems to drive forward your aesthetic. Have you always been fascinated by these subjects and concepts and ideas?

Wim: Let me answer like this: Music is, in a certain way, enough. We don’t have to talk about it. We don’t have to use philosophical ideas. We don’t have to use programmatic titles. I completely agree with that view. It’s completely about the notes, rhythms, harmonies and so on. But there’s also something in me that says I want to combine it with things that lie outside music but which are still related to it. The biggest musical element for me is time: musical form is related to time. If I had to answer the question ‘what is music?’ I would say, ‘it’s a time-based art-form’.

Pwyll: Your work is often inspired by extra-musical ideas – I’m thinking especially of art and architecture. How does this relate to your music?

Wim: I started to realise recently that what I do is build big monuments. It’s very amusing in one way, but also very dangerous. It’s ambitious to take on these big commissions. People are starting to ask me for big things. At the moment it’s difficult for me to compose a string quartet because I have maybe five orchestral works and two operas to write! But I have to say that I’m also interested in writing for string quartet. Although I am from the west, I’ve been inspired by many non-western cultures. I have travelled a lot and integrated non-western music with my own music. But I am a western composer. I am completely a western composer who integrates those things.

One of the things I like so much about Western Art is its Cathedrals. I love monuments. Big monuments. One person that I was really fascinated by was the late Gerard Mortier, director of La Monnaie, who then became director of the Salzburg Festival. He came up with a statement that I made me sit up and think: ‘Man has to build cathedrals again.’ This, for me, wasn’t being pretentious – that I could build a cathedral. No. I’m too ‘eastern’ in my thinking and too humble to do something like that. But this idea of trying to make something ‘important’ in a good sense – that’s what I really like. So that’s why I write a big symphony or a large choir piece. I feel connected with these big monuments.

Pwyll: The *Tantric Cycle* is probably your most ambitious cycle of large-scale works, but has never been performed complete. Did you imagine it to be performed in one day as a single event? It’s a concept that has preoccupied you for very many years, which involves not only thinking on a large scale, but also relating lots of different elements to one overarching idea. I’m thinking about differences in instrumentation and orchestration within the cycle – small and large ensembles, different types of musical forms, and so on. But they all are designed to fit into this overriding concept. Is that something that continues to interest and engage you creatively?

Wim: In a sense, yes. And, of course, it would be a dream to stage a complete performance of the *Tantric Cycle*. My first big cycle was the *Raga Cycle*. It happened accidentally. After I became fascinated with Indian music, I wrote *Raga I*, and I found that I had more material to work with, so I then wrote *Raga II*. Here, I used the musical material in different ways and focussed on the concept from different angles. And so that was one cycle. The *Tantric Cycle* also came to me by chance. I was in Kathmandu, Nepal, travelling around the Himalayas and I was so fascinated being there in this holistic environment that I decided to write a seven-part cycle. Immediately I knew it would be in seven parts.

Pwyll: In the CD booklet to the *Disappearing In Light* disc, you reproduce the overall structure of this movement of the cycle, which forms the fifth part. Did you actually map out the entire seven parts of the cycle?

Wim: Yes. I think the order got changed a little bit, but in general nothing really changed. ‘Finding the Gods’ was a working title for a while, but the rest stayed as I imagined it. Because there are different angles to what I try to do, I now want to continue with a symphonic ‘cycle’. So I’m writing a second symphony for the Royal

Flemish Philharmonic for the opening of the Queen Elisabeth Hall in Antwerp. And then I want to combine this with my interest in the voice. I didn't want to do that in the first symphony, but the second symphony will be for voice. That's the direction I want to take with it. I don't know if it will be abstract or a more programmatic work. I would then probably need a text, but this has not always been the case when I have written for voice.

Recently I found myself in a strange situation. It struck me that I didn't have a cycle to work on. I thought to myself 'okay, don't worry! Just compose and let's see what happens.' So I started to work on a commission for a big choir piece called *Visioni ed Estasi* (2015) for mixed choirs and electronics, which was about visions and about my western spiritual background. And then a commission came from a music theatre company before they knew that I'd finished the choral piece. By chance they were also thinking of doing something with visions. I'd just finished this piece and I replied 'ok, great', and by coincidence the next step is a big opera which is also going to be about the same subject. So in this case I had no sketch or plan. Normally I would have a plan set out, but at the moment I'm working without plans, which is both unusual and exciting! I just do it and it turns out that it forms a connecting link through one's repertoire. So the idea of cycles can develop in different ways. With the *Tantric Cycle* it was like a eureka moment when the idea came to me, but at other times it turns out that it's the path you're following anyway.

Pwyll: On the *Tejas* disc you also included three much earlier orchestral works – *Variations* (1988), *Le visioni di paura* (1990) and *Skriet* (1993). At the end of the interview included in the liner notes for the recording you make the point that there are connections between these works that might not seem so obvious. You say that they're clearly the work of the same composer – and I agree – but I also think there is quite a bit of difference between *Tejas* and those earlier works.

Wim: Soon after I signed with my publishers, Norsk Musikforlag, it turned out that they wanted to do my entire catalogue. That made me to look back on my work, because I had to process old compositions on computer. I had to revise others, I had to check and change a number of things. So I had to go back to my early works, which I found very difficult to begin with. But it forced me to accept who I am as a composer. It's a little like looking back on a diary. One might say 'I feel really lonely today', but you can't just change that – you have to accept what you wrote at that moment. It made me accept who I am, and in a way it's funny because as an artist one's always trying to do things better: to continue composing, to refine it, to be more precise in communicating my ideas with audiences and musicians. Simply to do it better. When people listen back to my *Variations* on the *Tejas* disc, they might say, 'You know, I hear Shostakovich there, or in that fragment I hear Stravinsky.' And I say, 'Yes! Of course! I was 22! What do you want? That was my world back then!' I wanted to write *Le Sacre du Printemps*! Everybody wanted to write *Le Sacre du Printemps* at that moment! And of course at that time when they heard it I would get a little frustrated, but now I can accept it because that was the step you have to take as an artist, and *Tejas* in a way is a continuation of this oeuvre.

Pwyll: *Tejas* is like a *Concerto for Orchestra*, and in that sense, I suppose your first symphony was the natural step for you to take after it. You use the orchestra as a kind of enormous single instrument at times, but also there is a sense in which the focus

moves from one section to the other, almost like a concertino-ripieno type of formal approach. It's like an enormous Concerto Grosso!

Wim: I completely agree. That's *Tejas*. It's a big concerto with different parts – solo parts, large ripieno sections and small concertino groups. But I think it's a completely different work to the symphony. The reaction to *Tejas* was, well, I think it was quite successful at the time. It had a nice premiere here in Antwerp and also in the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam.

Pwyll: It's technically a very challenging work to put together, so there's an element of risk, right? The whole thing could fall apart...

Wim: There is a risk, but you have to take it as an artist. If you want to do something, if you want to present something, you have to take the risk. I think an artist has to take the risk otherwise it becomes boring, and there is nothing worse than boring art! So for me, if I fail, I can excuse myself for having failed, no problem. If I should not take a risk, I can't accept it. No. And so I thought to myself, if I was going to do something that went in a different direction to *Tejas*, I had to go in the direction of a symphony. I couldn't do anything else on the level of an orchestra.

Pwyll: We'll get to your chamber music in a moment, but let's finish this part of our discussion with percussion sounds and instruments. They play an obvious role in your recent orchestral music, and *Raga I* is like a concerto for percussion and orchestra too. In the pre-*Raga* orchestral pieces, however, the percussion section is not so prominent. It's almost as if you were quite keen to, well, not so much disown your own upbringing as a percussionist as to try to 'play the orchestral game' equally and fairly. But with the *Ragas* and since then you have highlighted percussion instruments in such an imaginative and creative way that it really has given your orchestral music a very strong identity. One can of course name any number of contemporary composers who make use of percussion, but it seems that your understanding of percussion instruments comes from your own very personal contact and experience of how they work.

Wim: This is true. In the beginning I didn't want to be too 'chauvinistic' about it. I didn't want musicians to think that because I was a percussion player they were only going to get percussion now, or that it would only be the most influential element in the orchestra or the only interesting part of the instrumentation. I often disliked the fact that composers would use percussion merely as an effect. I don't find this when I see my own music performed. For example, I was very happy with the fourth movement from the Symphony. Here you had the flexatone, the bowed crotales, small bells, and so on, and on that level the harmony and structure – and the whole idea I had of working with spectral music – came out of these instruments. So it was not placed 'on top' – the orchestration actually came out of those instruments. And I think often that my harmonic world emerges out of percussion as a sound source. At the same time I'm also very aware of finding melodies again in my music...

Pwyll: ...there's a very strong melody in the second movement featuring the Cor Anglais...

Wim: ...and I tried to dare myself to do it again. There was a period when one was afraid of writing that type of melody. I'm not afraid anymore. I'm relieved to dare to do it now. And maybe that comes also from another aspect of percussion instruments – such as the glockenspiel in the *Raga* – that these percussion instruments also act as melodic sound sources, not just as a timbral element or a harmonic and resonant effect. You can create new melodies by using chimes, let's say. And that's also how maybe I'll try in my next steps to think about how to deal with new melodies or new forms of writing melodies. Because, for me personally, I think that's where we are now in contemporary music in relation to music history. We're going back to thinking about melody again.

Pwyll: The percussion section becomes almost like a mini-orchestra within a larger orchestra.

Wim: It can grow and grow, of course. For example, the Symphony seemed to demand those three timpani players at the end. I have also wanted to compose a Symphony without percussion instruments. Maybe I'll do it in the third. People associate my music with these different percussion sounds, but I try to do it in a way that makes these sounds functional; that is, related to the music not to the effect.

Pwyll: I noticed that on a DVD profile of you there was a drum kit in your study. Have you been influenced by pop?

Wim: Actually I came to composition from a pop/jazz tradition. I started off writing jazz arrangements. My goal was to go to Berklee College, Boston, to study arranging and jazz, but it was financially impossible at that time so I came to the Royal Conservatoire in Antwerp. Later on I became a timpani player in an orchestra so I learned a big repertoire. Then when I got to write my first opera, *Triumph of Spirit Over Matter* for 'La Monnaie', Brussels, in 2000, I stopped playing in the orchestra. It was a hard decision because I loved to be in the orchestra, sitting there, watching and learning. I think that's partly why I'm primarily an orchestral composer. Then after a period of composing and teaching for more than ten years I decided to play again, but more on Arabic, Persian, African and other non-Western instruments. To play and to have connections with playing music is so important. Percussion has been a kind of *fil rouge* in my life.

Pwyll: Going back to that expressive Cor Anglais melody in the second movement of the Symphony and to the question of expression and emotion – is this something that you embrace or avoid? Is it because of your preoccupation with exploring elemental and universal ideas that your music seems not to become too emotionally engaged? Your music could never be criticised for being 'sentimental', right?

Wim: As a composer the most important thing is that you're dealing with communication. First of all there's communication with the musicians through the notes on the score. How it's notated. How clear it is. Even how one uses the most correct and precise way, so that at least the musicians understand what you are trying to say. Then there's communication with your audience. And maybe there's a danger when communicating with a large audience that a composer is tempted to write in a different style – to put some beats in the music or include big, Romantic melodies. For me, melody and being 'right' with the emotions – being in a kind of equilibrium

with your emotions – is an important part of this communication process. That's still my goal. Even when I work in the area of opera or vocal music, I try to avoid it becoming too *pathetic*, too plaintive.

Pwyll: So you generally try to avoid those Romantic gestures because they seem somehow inauthentic or disingenuous?

Wim: I don't think I want to avoid it and I'm also not afraid of Romantic gestures. But I'm trying to do it carefully. My focus at the moment is on true melody. I am trying to find a new approach to this aspect of contemporary music. What is it to write a melody and develop it as a composer? Rhythm is essential, of course, but in Western music, melody is something that's equally essential. I'm searching for that balance between a melody that is constructed and one that can also communicate. But this is true about my music as a whole. I want to write something expressive, something that people understand, but at the same time I want to make it abstract. The music has to be ordered and structured correctly. It has to be in the right proportion.

So I'd say 'yes' to Romantic gestures, especially at the beginning of the compositional process, but then I try to make a bit of a distance from it. I ask: is this really what I need? Is this the right way? When an orchestra starts rehearsing my music, often the comment from the conductor or the musicians is that there is a lot of information in my music. I want to say a lot of things, and I need this complexity for my imagination. It's not just a case of making the music complex by adding layer upon layer. I need this layering for my energy, but I'm always very conscious of how to precisely work these layers into the music's foreground or move them to the background.

Pwyll: This layering process, or the process of adapting, changing and developing your musical material – how do you know when to stop? How do you know when you're reached that point of textural saturation?

Wim: It depends on the piece. One sentence that struck me a lot was from the artist Francis Bacon when he said that every brushstroke had to be right, and I took that so literally.

Pwyll: But there's something spontaneous in that gesture, too, which comes from years of experience and an understanding of the medium?

Wim: Each composer has his own way, of course. Sometimes with a piece I want to be able to see it all. I want to be making the decision on the spot, really directly. I call this 'the Francis Bacon approach'!

Pwyll: You sit by the piano and you come up with a chord or a gesture or a particular sonority?

Wim: Then I start to build up. I start analyse what I'm doing. Sometimes I have a complete plan worked out. Sometimes I hear it but I can't quite grab it. So I then try to put it down on paper, which for me is always the most difficult thing. Then sometimes I will sit at the piano and try things out. I like this physical, psychomotoric aspect. I play a chord and sometimes I trust what my hands are doing because

of that physical connection. I will notate a line almost like improvised composition, always using pencil and paper. I like to compose by hand. It opens up the possibility of dealing directly with one moment. A stroke. This is the case when I create a tension/relaxation curve for the overall form of a piece. For example with the Symphony I knew that the beginning would be very high and spectral-like and the work would end with a big crash.

Pwyll: Let's talk a little about your chamber music, which forms another important part of your oeuvre. Your approach seems to be different here. In pieces such as *The Four Elements* (2011) for mezzo-soprano, flute, violin, clarinet and cello, you deliberately limit yourself in terms of the medium, composing for solo voice, usually a solo instrument, and optional electronics. You're dealing mainly with single melodic lines and therefore the potential to create complex layers is reduced. There's a technique that you sometimes use in these pieces, and it's also there in your orchestral music, of one line closely following – or shadowing – another. Is your approach to composing chamber music different or do they represent flip sides of the same coin?

Wim: I don't think it's a different person writing, but it *is* a different medium. Now that we are talking about my voice pieces – there was a period when I was really concerned with music theatre and with dealing with the voice. I think it's also good to limit yourself sometimes. It's a strange thing to say because on the one hand I want to build these large musical cathedrals but at the same time I want to make a kind of small garden hose! I think you have to have both. I love chamber music and at the moment I'm writing a piece that uses the same instrumentation as Ravel's *Introduction and Allegro* (Harp, Flute, Clarinet and String Quartet). Chamber music is so pure. You can't hide anything. And when you're writing for, say, solo voice or flute, you have to deal with counterpoint and linearity. For me, linearity also works in a kind of relationship to time and form. This idea of creating on a smaller-scale level does not involve a different personality but it does involve a different focus and concentration. Chamber music is an essential part of my oeuvre because it makes me think hard about compositional technique. You're naked, in a way – you have nothing to hide.

Pwyll: Tell me about the role of electronics in your chamber music. Its use appears to be very subtle at times.

Wim: For me the electronic element is always connected. It's not simply an extra element of additional source material to be placed on the music. There has to be a connection there with the music. In fact there have been different stages in my work with electronics. It changed my life when I went to IRCAM, Paris to study sonology, and then at the Royal Conservatory of Music, Hague. Now it's often related to soundscapes, but also harmonic fields. In my recent choir piece *Visioni ed Estasi*, it also tries to deal with a new kind of thinking of how to integrate new media. Sometimes it's there and you can leave it out but sometimes it becomes more essential. For example, in *Visioni ed Estasi* it's quite essential because it connects the groups of choirs and also gives them a kind of pitch relation or cue. So there are different steps with electronics but it's definitely an important aspect in my work. I want to integrate it also in the Second Symphony as I did in the Concerto for Oboe. That piece started from my work with electronics. I wanted to create a kind of 'super

obo' using multiphonics and live harmonisers. It started off as a piece for oboe solo with electronics, and then I added the orchestration on top of the live harmonisers, so the electronic component was an essential building block in the composition. It really depends on the piece.

Pwyll: Let's turn now to your interest in Eastern music and culture. It's an influence that can be seen throughout your work but it's especially there in the chamber music, in the sounds themselves. Tell me how this came about?

Wim: It came by chance. When I wrote *Mysterium* for 10 wind instruments in 1988, I used a Zen quote. Maybe I used it because, as a young composer I was raised here a Catholic environment, still searching for a kind of spirituality, and how that related to other spiritualities. So initially it came as a source of inspiration. Then in the 1990s I went through a period of conflict in terms of my relationship with western music. I have always thought about form all my life, and when I teach composition I always teach about form. I had problems with the formal language of western music and it led to a crisis because I was teaching harmony and counterpoint in the Conservatory here in Antwerp and I had a problem with all these things. And then by coincidence I went to a concert of Indian music where the performers played an Indian Rag and this turned out to be the solution to my problem.

Pwyll: An epiphany?

Wim: Yes! Maybe it was the most important moment in my life as an artist! It made me realise that there was this completely different approach to form than what we have in the West. I started studying North Indian Music very intensely, to the point that I became fascinated with Indology, and started studying Indology as an area too. And this became a very important second part of my search, or research for – or integration of – other cultures. But all this time I never wanted to imitate other cultures. At that time I had Indian friends. They'd listen to my music and say 'but this is not an Indian raga.' And I'd say, 'thank goodness!' It was an inspiration, certainly, but I've always maintained that I'm a Western composer who has a real fascination for these other ideas. The *Tantric Cycle* really came about through my intense fascination with these philosophical ideas. But also this connected with my ideas about time and form. Time has a linear identification but also has a circular identification. Maybe I haven't found a solution for this yet – I'm still searching for ways in which I can do it.

After the *Tantric Cycle* I came into contact with musicians from the Middle East and I wrote a piece where I could work with real musicians from other cultures. I had already written *Confrontations* (2003) for African and Western percussion, where I had to find a way of notating my music. In the West we sing always very direct and very straight, but I was fascinated by what lies between the notes of melodies in music from the Middle East. I found it extremely beautiful and so after this point grace notes and ornamentation became an essential part of my work. The melody comes from what is ornamented. In Western terms this goes back to Baroque music, of course.

Pwyll: Or even further back to Gothic Architecture?

Wim: Yes. On the one hand I'm almost obsessed with finding the right proportions – to try to understand and represent them in my music – because then it becomes easier to understand the architectonic structure of the large-scale works. But on the other hand I'm also focussed on much smaller-scale things, such as ornaments, because it relates so much to the music's micro-structure – it relates to the music at that particular moment.

Pwyll: Your music tries to link together both form and content?

Wim: Yes. It's a very Tantric idea, the notion that the microcosmos is related to one's own DNA. So from many cultures I have gradually started to understand not only their music. My interest came really from other sources, in addition to the music, and more importantly from different parts of the music. From Africa it was rhythm and especially the groove.

Pwyll: By groove, do you mean the combination of rhythmic patterns and pulses that together creates a kind of 'groove'?

Wim: Yes. From India and Nepal I took form and geometry; and then from the Middle East I took the ornamental language. I'm now trying to find a way to integrate all these elements.

Pwyll: There are of course a number of Western composers who have gone down the Eastern route during the twentieth century – Debussy, Messiaen, Stockhausen, Cage – but your music seems to allow those Eastern influences to come through primarily because your understanding and absorption of those influences has become part of who and what you are as a composer.

Wim: For me the point is always one of respect. So when you integrate something you have to treat it with respect to its tradition – whether it's part of an Indian or Western tradition. Messiaen is a composer I admire, although sometimes I find it a little bit rather strange what he did. I understand completely what he did on the level of the music itself and even in terms of his spiritual aesthetic. I understand that he made a choice not to, for example, integrate microtones in his Raga thinking, which makes his melodic and harmonic approach quite unusual. However, he created a system for him that could give a kind of flavour. The rhythms he took quite literally from music theory. One English composer I admire a lot was Jonathan Harvey. We met a few times and I wrote and dedicated the third part of my *Tantric Cycle*, *Nada Brahma*, for soprano, instrumental ensemble and live electronics, to him.

Pwyll: What about Stockhausen? He became very influenced by Japanese culture.

Wim: I admire the Stockhausen more from the earlier period. *Kreuzspiel*, for example, was the piece for me that really demonstrated serial composition. The slightly manic philosophical ideas he then went into weren't really what I was searching for.

Pwyll: But he talked a lot about the notion of 'Cosmic Music'. That isn't too far away from your musical aesthetic, right?

Wim: Of course! But Stockhausen became almost like a transmitter of the cosmos. I want to keep more of a distance from that. I'm more influenced by the Stockhausen of *Gruppen*.

Pwyll: What about Ligeti? He would map out the overall form of a composition in advance, to get an overall view of the work before filling in the details.

Wim: I still do this, in fact, because I think it's the most difficult thing when you deal with larger forms and longer time events. I try to set out everything on one page so that I can take an overview of how it will work. What I also admire about Ligeti's music is its precision. Everything is written down so precisely. Also I admire his sense of structure. Here was a composer who completely understood his material. Actually the third part of my Symphony, again taken from Anish Kappor, is called 'Svayambh' which, when translated from Sanskrit means 'self-generated'. Music can take you in a particular direction. It can take you down a certain course. You can react to it, of course. You can refuse it. But this idea that the music itself is kind of self-generating – not in a cosmic or metaphysical sense – is something that interests me. The material pushes you in a certain direction. I feel that's the case with composers such as Beethoven and Brahms.

Pwyll: So once you've found the right material are you then controlled by the music? Or does the music, in a sense, control you?

Wim: You have to be sensitive to the way in which the music can lead you down certain directions. You're always the boss. You're playing God, in a way. You decide what to do with the material, but you have to be aware of – and open to – what the material can do. That's why I think it's important to analyse the material in detail in order to know what's potentially there. That's especially true with Symphonic form. One has to work from short embryonic cells and ideas. I like that way of composing.

Pwyll: Your orchestral music has to connect with audiences who turn up to hear Beethoven, Brahms, Bruckner and Mahler, for example. How do you think your music can engage with that core listenership?

Wim: I'm glad you asked this question because for me it's an important question at the moment. I still believe in Classical music. I don't see any problem with the notion of the Symphony orchestra. Personally, I don't have any issues with a Brahms or Mahler Symphony. After the concert yesterday evening, which featured the Royal Flemish Philharmonic performing Mahler's Fourth Symphony, I spoke to a few friends who said what a privilege it was to hear the work. On the one hand I believe that the whole world should listen to Mahler Four – it's essential to present and disseminate the standard symphonic repertoire. On the other hand I also believe that we should confront these large masterpieces with what is happening now. Of course, I'm not suggesting that my symphony is the masterpiece that should connect with Brahms or Mahler. Not at all! But at least if you have reached a certain age and people trust your music, you should be given a chance to try to present it in a real concert, and not just as a one-movement overture before going back to the real stuff. And yesterday I was really happy that the Royal Flemish Philharmonic juxtaposed two pieces – Mahler's symphony and my symphony – from two epochs, two different periods, with each other. The Royal Flemish Philharmonic is aware that audiences

find it difficult to listen to new works, but audiences should know that it's really essential.

Pwyll: But for a person hearing your music for the first time – it might come as a bit of a shock to the system...

Wim: But that's not the problem. Orchestras will have their group of people who will come to every concert. Young people will sometimes turn up but they often find the atmosphere too formal. They are not used to that. They want to have new things, but when you give new things to a traditional audience they say 'no, give us Mahler or Beethoven'. We have to find a way.

Pwyll: In a fragmentary world filled with texts, twitter feeds and social media messages, can people still cope with the scale and size of a Mahler symphony?

Wim: When I took up the artist in the residence position with the Royal Flemish Philharmonic I said that I wanted to think about the orchestra, about the concert, and about the formats of the concerts. I wanted in a humble way to help audiences. I don't think it's the music that's the problem. It's not the masterwork tradition either. If it's good there's no problem. But we have to open up the whole format. And if we do that, it can become fascinating again.

Pwyll: We haven't talked so much about your music theatre and stage works. Is opera the way in which to bring together all these different elements?

Wim: I like to work with companies. Right now it's with the Royal Flemish Philharmonic, but another important artistic partner has been Music Theatre Transparant. We've been working together now for almost twenty years. We did everything starting from a very small music theatre piece to my first big opera for 'La Monnaie', called *Triumph of Spirit Over Matter*. Then we did another opera for young people in collaboration with Flemish Opera based on the story of Achilles. Then there's been a lot of music theatre pieces...

Pwyll: ...some of which then have found their way into some of your chamber pieces?

Wim: Yes, such as in *Void*, which forms Part IV of the *Tantric Cycle*. What I did with *Void*, which is a music theatre piece, was that I took the four elements. Yet it lives another life – a separate life – outside the music theatre piece. The same thing happened with *Medea*. This was a music theatre piece with texts and so on. Then I made a shorter version, called the *Lamento di Medea*, which was presented at the 2011 Venice Biennale, so that became a separate piece.

There was actually quite a long period when I didn't write orchestral music and was focussed on music theatre. What I like about music theatre is that it brings everything together. It brings different media together. It also gives a new approach to contemporary music because a lot of extra things are happening. In a way, music theatre helps people accept and understand contemporary music.

Pwyll: A visual and dramatic stimulus can help audiences respond to a new work.

Wim: It can be helpful. Also the notion of the *Gesamtkunstwerke* is something I'm interested in. Sometimes you only have to deal with music in an abstract way but sometimes I think that the idea of connecting art forms is fascinating. That's when different art forms face each other and you have to search for a way to balance them – how to give them their own importance in relation to the other art forms. For me, besides the symphony, a real opera is at the top of artistic expression. After the symphonic cycle I will continue to work with music theatre. Opera is all about human drama. A Symphony is more about abstract drama. And music theatre is somehow in between. It can connect everything. It's a very relaxed art form. You can almost do whatever you want. Music theatre gives you more freedom to try things out. It isn't as set in its ways as a Symphony or Opera.

Pwyll: If you were given *carte blanche* to decide on a subject for a major opera, on what would it be?

Wim: It would definitely be about human relations. In the past I wanted to connect it with philosophy and with spirituality. But it's changed a bit since then. I want to use this topic more with my music theatre pieces. I feel that the human connection – what is happening *inside* someone – I think opera is the best medium to express those feelings. It's even better than film or theatre at doing this. My opera would be about human beings and human emotions – about people, hope and betrayal.

Pwyll: It's interesting that you should see opera as a means of moving away from the Universal and back to the particularities of the human condition!

Wim: But then if you think of Messiaen's *St François d'Assise*, it looks at the relationship between man, nature and the Universe. It's possible to connect the two. But for me it's always about human beings.