

# Building bridges

Flemish composer Wim Henderickx sees your concert hall and raises you a bridge across a canal with 500 musicians on three stages. He talks to **Kimon Daltas** about pushing the musical envelope

**T**he scene: Grey skies, drizzle. A cable-stayed bridge across the 170-metre-wide Albert Canal between the Flemish cities of Hasselt and Genk. It is Belgium's most impressive white elephant, four lanes wide and spanning over 300 metres, it was intended to be part of a major motorway which never materialised. It now serves local traffic and bicycles.

Three temporary stages have been erected, one at either end of the bridge and one in the middle, with loudspeaker clusters between them. On the south stage is a symphony orchestra, on the north a wind band, and in the middle a massed choir and percussion ensemble. There are children, young people and adults, jumbled up. A grey-haired man, around 6ft 4, jogs between the stages cackling maniacally. 'Het werkt! It works!' he laughs, like a modern-day Dr Frankenstein throwing the switch on his latest creation.

The man is composer Wim Henderickx, and the occasion is the rehearsal for *ANTI-FOON*, a public art-cum-community music project at the centre of a publicly funded celebration of the links between the twin cities either side of the canal. When it comes to the performance later that day, he is hidden

behind a massive sound desk, coordinating everything, communicating with the three separate conductors over headsets and coaxing the 50-minute work into existence. The music itself is radical, experimental, yet also admirably practical. The basic compositional method involves creating blocks of music wherein certain rhythmic and density parameters are set and a number of notes are available – within that framework, following a couple of rules, the musicians are expected to create their own material in rehearsal, either as individuals or as a group, and to the extent of their ability, hence the broad age-range of those involved. What Henderickx manages is to harness these great big chunks of sound, undulating, chaotic, and pin them to a harmonic framework. What his team of techies and assistants manage is to keep the unwieldy thing on track: the three stages dipping in and out of sync with each other enhances the antiphonal effect to which the title refers, but too much looseness would spell collapse. Hence the composer's delight and relief, during the one and only full rehearsal, that everything actually *worked*.

The architecture of the music could be termed minimalist but the result is maximal-

ist, excessive, joyously undisciplined.

Henderickx began his musical life as a percussionist, and sees the disparate influences of that discipline as shaping his later attitudes to composition. 'As a percussion player you are very open,' he says. 'You perform in different styles, in different places and cultures, with all kinds of musicians, from all parts of the world. And you don't always use the traditional strict notation, so you work with oral traditions, you're creating open scores and open forms.'

'And it's always stayed a part of my way of thinking, that a score is not always completely fixed. With what I'm doing at the moment, I'm trying to get more and more investment from the musicians, which is not always easy with the classically trained ones, to get them improvising, to get them more involved with what the musical material is.'

It is this openness and facility to step outside the concert hall, the aversion to ivory towers, that has made him an ideal person to turn to for large-scale community projects.

'I'm happy working with professional musicians, but I'm also very pleased when I can work with good amateurs or music schools and wind bands and amateur orchestras. As a composer, I want to feel part of the world, of the community.'

Though this particular piece didn't start quite as big as it ended up. The organisation in charge of the Unie Hasselt-Genk project, which involved all sorts of public art installations, had initially asked Henderickx to compose a signature carillon tune for each city. Each one would ring out on the hour for a few weeks in its city, and then they would come together in a reorchestrated performance on the bridge where – the coup de theatre – they would interlock as counter-melodies. That aspect has been carried through, but Henderickx had bigger ideas.

'I saw this monument of a bridge and I started thinking about making an instal-



Walking the walk:  
Wim Henderickx

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lation there, but an installation for people, an installation performed by the people – and that’s how it started.’ The performance was a culmination of six months of preparations and rehearsals involving some 500 people in total.

‘On that level, I think it was already a big success even before the performance, that I could convince a lot of musicians, young, less young, older musicians, to participate. Some actually refused to play it, but I accept that. There were a lot of good reactions, showing that people are willing to try new things in music.

‘That’s my search at the moment: for music to compose which is broader than the concert hall. Of course, I love the concert hall, and I work with the concert hall, but even there I try to think about what the concert hall means in the 21st-century.’

And he walks the walk: as composer-in-residence with the Royal Flemish Philharmonic – where he has struck up a happy working partnership with principal guest

conductor Martin Brabbins – Henderickx is about to see the premiere of an oboe and electronics concerto where the action takes place all round the hall, while his upcoming cello concerto, features a ‘world orchestra’ of non-western instruments from as far afield as China, Azerbaijan, Iran. A number of recordings of his music exist, the first of which will be seeing a UK release in March 2015. With Brabbins fighting his corner, there’s every chance we could get to know him much better in the coming years. **CM**

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