

Wim Henderickx

by Jan Vandenhouwe, for MATRIX (2001)

Biography

Wim Henderickx was born in Lier in 1962. He studied composition at the Antwerp Conservatory under Willem Kersters, earning his first prize for percussion, solfege, harmony, counterpoint, fugue and composition. He also took part several times in the Internationale Ferienkurse für Neue Musik in Darmstadt. Henderickx was for many years the timpanist for the Beethoven Academie orchestra and the Eugène Ysaye Ensemble. Today he teaches notation, analysis and composition at the Antwerp Conservatory and at the Lemmens Institute in Leuven. As a composer he has been the recipient of numerous awards, including the Youth and Music Prize Flanders in 1995, the International Composition Prize for Contemporary Music in Quebec for his composition *Mysterium* in 1989 and the tri-annual E-Baie I prize 1997-1999 awarded by the Province of Antwerp. In 2000 his first opera *The Triumph of Spirit over Matter* was premiered as part of Brussels 2000 European Cultural Capital, in a performance by Muziektheater Transparant.

Work review

The music of Wim Henderickx finds its inspiration mainly in non-European cultures. His predilection for Eastern thought led early on to a great interest in Indian music. He is also fascinated by African music. His works are by no means a pure imitation of such music, however. Henderickx does not favour the word "multicultural", seeing as inappropriate any kind of miscellaneous mix of different cultures under the label of "multiculturalism". He prefers the term "intercultural": "Every culture must be able to maintain its own identity, so that we can learn from one another in a respectful way." Henderickx thus remains a Westerner who often draws on non-Western sources of inspiration.

In this sense Wim Henderickx may be seen somewhat in the line of (the late) György Ligeti, with whom he shares other characteristics as well, including a preference for subtly shifting clouds of sound and highly rhythmic passages with a mechanical precision. Like Ligeti, Henderickx occasionally draws on extra-musical ideas as sources of inspiration (such as, for instance, the *Inferno* triptych by Hieronymus Bosch, used for his *Le Visione de Paura* of 1990), and he is quick to point out the influence of other Western composers on his work, although there is no question of direct imitation. During the process of composing, Henderickx distances himself from all these models. As a percussionist he was, not surprisingly, attracted early on to the music of Igor Stravinsky and Béla Bartók. He is similar to Bartók not only in his love of the rhythmic element in music, but also in that composer's strict sense of structure, a quality which was only strengthened by his confrontation with the work of Iannis Xenakis. He also admires Olivier Messiaen's highly differentiated sound-palette and tendency towards the meditative. Indeed, for Henderickx, music is a means of arriving at a Western form of meditation.

Henderickx is a virtuoso orchestrator, with a strong feel for the most subtle combinations of timbre. As a percussionist he usually makes use of an extended arsenal of percussion instruments in his

works, often calling for unusual instrumentation. His Raga III, for instance, requires various cymbals, tubular bells, Japanese temple bells, Thai gongs and roto-toms, while Raga I includes a major percussion section featuring the Japanese dobachi and hyoshigi, Indian bells, Pekinese gongs, finger cymbals and crotala (castanets), as well as African drums and European percussion instruments. In terms of form, his compositions are usually simple and clear, and are often generated from a growth principle. Starting in 1989-90, Eastern influences are increasingly found in Henderickx's work. Different elements refer to Eastern music, as, for example, in Raga III with its Indian turns of phrase in the viola part and its use of micro-intervals and quarter-tone trills recalling the Indian division of the scale in shruti. The Indian modes are applied not only horizontally but also vertically in the construction of chords, creating a strong sense of unity. In Om for string quartet, there is a clear reference to the monotone Buddhist form of prayer, as use is made of c-sharp as a tonal centre. Despite the Eastern mood, the general sound remains thoroughly Western. Henderickx's work is marked by a rapid musical evolution in combination with a strong rhythmic basis, both of which are clear characteristics of Western music.

In the opera *The Triumph of Spirit over Matter*, which Henderickx composed in collaboration with librettist Johan Thielemans, profound questions are wrapped in a light-footed allegory. This "opera buffa" combines a comic element with the treatment of heavier themes such as the quest for meaning, purity and beauty. In this music, driving, rhythmic motives set up a continuous feeling of liveliness. The rattling, rousing percussion parts betray the composer's background as a percussionist as well as his predilection for Stravinsky. In this work, Henderickx departs from his oriental path for the first time in many years. The extremely virtuoso orchestration is immediately striking, which together with the highly recognisable motives and a few jazzy and pop-like passages give the opera Schwung. Despite the fact that different moods follow upon one another in quick succession, the music maintains its sense of coherence.