

**INTERVIEW WITH KOEN VAN MEEL
FOR KWADRATUUR (OCTOBER 2012)**

These days it's hard to find a composer who's not clearly inspired by or has not clearly grown up on rock, dance, beats etc. In your work I can hear traces of popular music, but not as clear as with, let's say, Fausto Romitelli. What music did you grow up on exactly and does it still find a way in your own work?

At my school in suburban Australia the teenage schoolyard was divided along musical/subcultural lines. There were the hard rock kids (ACDC, Led Zeppelin), the Indi kids (The Cure, The The) and some boys who were into bands like Pink Floyd. At some point I got into all of that; I didn't know about dance or rap music then. When I was sixteen I got into classical music thanks to a *turn off the lights and lie on the ground whilst listening to the last movement of Shostakovich's fifth symphony* type music teacher. She was great. Then I started listening to lots of classical and contemporary classical music as well as writing it. I never stopped listening to bands, but until a few years ago I kept classical music and pop music recordings in different draws of my CD cabinet and in different parts of my brain. For me that was a mistake. Some composers I love create music that makes its own rarefied aesthetic space, takes you away from this world into their world, but I realise now that I want to explore the music of my past, potentially all the music that interests me, and the music/world around me.

Instrumentation is one way this finds its way into my work, e.g. electric guitar, drum kit, sampler, etc. Another way is a negotiation of musical idiom. For instance, I wrote a piece for the Ives Ensemble called *Joy Time Ride for Ives* that moves between different popular music idioms and in turn sets up certain stylistic expectations that I try to go beyond and subvert. More recently I wrote a piece for midi guitar and three drum kits, which investigates the indi and post-punk music I liked as a kid, e.g. exploring the sonority of the characteristic INDI 'jangling guitar strum' (mixture of up and down strokes) as opposed to the angular punk strum. (all down strokes).

What instruments did/do you play (rock/classical) and how does that effect your music?

I played drums and keyboards in bands. I was good at running the rehearsals (!), but my instrumental skills are really limited. I guess these experiences gave me some feeling for the act of music making and insight into instrumental roles, but I wouldn't want to overstate it.

Running through your list of works, I see the first one mentioned is dated 1998. Are there any earlier pieces you withdrew, eliminated as not relevant any more or is that really the first time you wrote something?

I wrote my first piece in 1991 (*Fantasia on a Duel* for string quartet (!), which by the way was half Bartok and half Debussy), but it like many others do not appear on my work list. The most recent piece that didn't make the cut was from 2008.

With the 'Letter Pieces' and 'Popular Contexts' you work in series. What's attracts you to this kind of working?

It's a way to work through a basic core concept in more than one work, looking for new things and directions within the concept in each piece.

How did the idea came about to combine movement and music in the 'Letter Pieces'?

First some back story. From 2005 to 2008 I co-directed a monthly series called Rational Rec at a working men's club in East London. Each event presented works from different art forms as well as audience activities and games. Seeing lots of stuff from other art form, particularly live-artists, got me thinking outside the pure music box. Likewise, around the same time I started going to dance and performance shows and got inspired by work that questions and extends the boundaries of what is possible in the theatre, which led me to ask: what is possible in the concert hall? Finally, before I made the first Letter Piece in 2007 I had made three pieces with the video artist Rees Archibald. One of our main interests in these pieces was to make different image-sound combinations. For instance, we'd couple one short visual sequence with one bit of music, and then recouple it with another bit of music to see if the visual sequence feels and signifies differently. This kind of idea is at the heart of the Letter Pieces.

The first Letter Piece was performed by David Helbich and Mark Knoop. The three of us did a show under the name of The Calculators at a musicology conference at the University of York. Mark played keyboard for a few pieces but mainly the works were text and physical-action pieces (by David, Tom Johnson and Gerhard Ruhm). I'd seen David perform his own physical pieces before and one piece called *Schnipsen* in particular had made a big impression. The piece is for right arm only and it has two elements: 1) swinging the arm and 2) clicking the fingers. He plays with the relationships between these two elements, e.g., moving his arm in a circle he clicks at the bottom of each circle, but then the circle gets faster but the tempo of the click stays the same so the click happens at different places around the circle. I was really attracted to the reduced means of the piece as well as articulating quite musical ideas in the physical realm. So when I came to make a piece for the show it was kind of natural for the context, both in terms of David's performance abilities and making something that fit with the show. I had a super fun experience working on it with David and Mark and then the audience was into it so I continued with it.

David Helbich - Schnipsen

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W4m0cOLH-ak>

Do you consider the different 'Letter Pieces' as "just" variations on the same concept, or are they fundamentally different for you? Did you adjust the general concept during the process and do you consider them finished now?

I think each Letter Piece feels pretty similar. Although the material can be 'anything', the material is always made up of short physical actions, short sound-events, and single text words that are organised into sequences. I should explain that I say 'anything' because the performers create their own material - they are 'open scores', which means that as scores they are not finished - the performers need to make creative decisions to 'complete' them'; two enactments of the same piece will look and sound entirely different. Each score defines a concept, e.g., asking a performer to tell a story (any story) in five short physical actions (which is a similar task to playing charades). The score also defines the structure, how the actions and sounds are ordered.

In each piece I look for something (one thing) new to explore within this 'language'. I'd like to write more pieces, but only if I have new ideas.

These pieces (and other works such as 'Popular Contexts') have a playful element to them. Do you feel like that's lacking in modern music?

Yes, and hopefully humour too. It's strange to me that humour is so absent in most new music and when it is it is disregarded as NOT SERIOUS. It's not like that in the visual arts, live arts, theatre or dance where it's usual for work to be funny as well as conceptually rich. By nature I find playful and funny things are more likely to make a profound impact on me than the heavy and grandiloquent.

Why do you think humor is so rare in music and more accepted in theater, visual arts etc?

I think this is a really interesting question and that it would be a great topic for musicological research. I can't give any kind of definitive answer to this, but my sense of it is that 'new music' defines itself in opposition to the 'entertainment' and 'profit' motives of commercial popular music, and because commercial popular music so completely dominates 'music' this marking out of an alternative territory has become especially extreme. To that I'd simply say: I'm on board that new music should be challenging, difficult, innovative etc, but I think it can be humourful along the way, and perhaps even be innovative with humour! There must be a historical dimension to this question too, as I have the sense that the particularly humourless species of 'seriousness' that defines new music is a twentieth century development, solidified by the modernist composers working after the second world war and possibly relates to the issues around making art after such a war. I'm sure there are other theories one could posit; maybe it's simply that formalist aesthetics are dominating, or 'sublime' aesthetics, or ...

I still regret missing 'A to Zzz' in Ghent, so I only know the performance by the clips. Some episodes seem like 'Letter Pieces', while others look rather different. What's the relation between the 'Letter Pieces' and 'A to Zzz'? And were the first studies for the latter?

They weren't studies, but Shila Anaraki and I always dreamed of developing the language and making a longer piece. The basic language ideas and the 'language' is the same, but now framed by a larger context - a journey through the alphabet and a consideration of how people use letters.

Having a larger time frame also allowed us to try and draw on a broad and hopefully unexpected range of subjects. That is, the Letter Piece language is the constant but we try to find the biggest range of inputs.

The last years, your music seems to be focussing on short motives, sometimes repetitive with a clear structure, even easily accessible for the less trained ear. Is that something you feel as well, something you are aware of and really wanted to do? Do you have a certain affinity with the Reich's and Feldman's of this planet. (Although your music doesn't sound like theirs at all, just the idea of repetition and minimalism).

I love early Steve Reich (I'd put him in the 'fallen genius' category along with Woody Allen!) and late Feldman and for sure learned things about repetition and composing with limited means from both of them, along with Bernhard Lang, Aldo Clementi, Tom Johnson and choreographers such as Burrows/Fargion. I think repetition is a way of investigating musical substance. I mean this in at least two ways. Firstly, as a way of illuminating sonic properties (e.g. repetition allows us to focus in on aspects of sound we might have 'missed' the first time. And secondly as a way of showing (and transforming) how a given material is usually experienced, understood and how it "communicates" something like an emotion or an idea. This needs further explaining! I think it's particularly interesting to repeat musical materials that are not typically something repeated; looping a chord progression or a Reich like melodic/rhythmic pattern is not so interesting as as we hear that all the time, but if we take a lick from a Eddie Van Halen hard-rock solo and looped that, well that's interesting as we hear that phrase in a whole new way. We take that phrase out of its continuum (out of the solo) and contemplate the phrase alone - its sonic and its expressionist (how it excites feelings and emotions in the listener) qualities.

You seem to have a special connection to Belgium: the music on your website is played by Champ d'Action, bESidES en Tom Pauwels. 'A to Zzz' was created in Ghent and you were an artist in residence at the Centre Henri Pousseur. Where did this Belgian connection come from?

I met guitarist Tom Pauwels in 2000 when he came to Stanford University (where I was studying) with Champ d'Action. We stayed in contact and started working together and then I started working his friends and a network of relations with new friends leading to more new friends. Thanks Tom. Also, in the Belgium new music scene there are lots of composers, musicians and programmers interested in work that connects to the dance and performance scene, which is pretty unusual, and which has been good for me.

It's hard to find recordings of your music on cd. Lack of interest from the business or do you prefer to offer your music on your website? And how about publishers? I don't see any publishing companies on your website: do you avoid the legal stuff of copyrights?

There has been a lack opportunities. I'm not too bothered by this as it seems the era of buying recordings has largely passed; I rarely buy recordings and do most of my listening online. That said I am excited that a CD is coming out shortly on the Sub Rosa label with pianist Mark Knoop performing my *Popular Contexts* and a selection from Peter Ablinger's *Vocies and Piano* series. I've never been approached by a publisher, but again I don't think this is a major issue since I can easily look after the distribution of materials (e.g. scores and parts) electronically. Don't get me wrong (!), I'd be glad to have more CD recordings and would consider an approach from a publisher, but I'm more concerned that people want to programme and perform my work.

You graduated with Brian Ferneyhough, but your music sometimes sounds almost like the opposite of his.

Its not really surprising that my music doesn't sound like Ferneyhough given that we've had different sets of experiences I grew up 35 years later. I learned a lot from him that continues to be helpful to me – from technical tricks to ways of thinking about musical material and ways of organising it. I don't want to abandon my training, but I do want to broaden out its application and apply it to things that are personal to me.

There's a contrast between the complex polyphony of 'Line and Length' or the abstract puzzle of 'Slow Flipping Harmony' on the one side and the (relative) clear and more simple line of working for 'Five Monuments for Our Time' and the 'Letter Pieces' on the other. Do you consider these recent pieces as contrasting to your older work, or do you see them as a logical step in your oeuvre?

There are certain connections if you really look for them, but I think I made quite a big shift when I began the *Letter Pieces* in 2007 and wrote *Fast Medium Swing* in 2008.

In 'Slow Flipping Harmony' you said you wanted to get away from the composer having more to say than the performer. Is that still something important, after decades of aleatoric music, graphic scores etc?

I still write completely notated and fixed works (like *Popular Contexts*) so I don't have an ideological position on this, but yes I think it's interesting and important to continue with open scores and look for new ways for open scores to create an interesting collaborative model between an 'unfinished' text that defines some kind of creative role for performers. That's centrally important to the Letter Pieces too.