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Koninklijk Conservatorium Den Haag  
**Colloquium The Age of Boulez**

## **The Fertile Land –Programming from Flothuis to Boulez**

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There is no better metaphor to think of than that of *The Fertile Land*<sup>1</sup> by visual artist Paul Klee, who is extremely admired by Pierre Boulez, to represent the utopia of a flourishing musical life from the perspective of the 'Ars Combinatoria' called programming. To a large extent, the 'land' owes that fertility to what the French – and by Boulez regularly mentioned – philosopher Gilles Deleuze called 'rhizomes'. This term, originating from the agricultural world, refers to the knowledge that plants not only grow their roots down into the soil but also in other directions. These are therefore the secondary roots from which in turn new plants may grow. This involves a subterranean expansion that may cover a vast area. However, to ensure all of this, that land should of course be farmed at regular intervals. Sustainability is a very important keyword here. Only those who sow and then continuously farm, shall reap. Not only in the short but also in the long term.

All this shows that plants that are found growing on the surface thrive merely by the grace of those subterranean connections. Without them everything will be up in the air and will eventually result in nothing. Here, connections must be fully understood as phenomena that clean up all limitations no matter what they are. For us, this is the crux of the matter.

As it happens – I generalise because it is obvious that there are, although very few, exceptions – in today's musical life and more than ever, the 'rhizomes' are conspicuous by their poignant absence. It is not only due to the financial crisis and its implications from which we suffer up until today, but also to the character of musical life. Especially the way in which it developed in our country ever since *Actie Notenkraker* (being a group of angry young composing and writing men) in 1969.

Siewert Verster, manager of the Orchestra of the Eighteenth Century, believes that no country in the world has such a generous musical repertoire as there is here in the Netherlands. Where, after all, he says, are to be found more excellent musicians, ensembles and orchestras than here and this despite all cuts? Verster's conclusion is correct in itself. That is, as long as his conclusion is limited to the quantity of what is on offer. After all, the quantity of the musical offerings says little to nothing about its quality, let alone the context in which it is presented: the programming. It is obvious that this is of a decisive influence on the reception of no matter what repertoire. Programming, therefore, is indeed an art in itself and actually a form of composing, which is often forgotten. 'To compose' literally means to combine, or to create something and that is exactly what a programmer does. We are talking about an extremely creative activity here because it is clear that there is more to high-level programming than continuously producing boring clichés or, to put it into musical terms: overture-concert-symphony, an established pattern still frequently used by a vast majority of the orchestras.

Ever since the *Notenkrakers* the idea that a symphony orchestra is an outdated institution that no longer fits into today's trends is often stated and for a good reason: especially the role that

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<sup>1</sup> See the recent book publication of the same title (Dutch: *Het Vruchtbare Land*) by Ety Mulder (March 2015).

orchestras play has lost a considerable part of its importance as a result of the emancipation of the specialised ensembles. Subsequently, this led to the unwritten rule that many areas of repertoire became taboo for the symphonic sector. On the one hand the repertoire involved the seventeenth and eighteenth, but also the early nineteenth century music, so roughly the repertoire from Bach up to and including Beethoven and if the hard-liners have their way: Bach up to Brahms and Bruckner and even beyond. Plus, on the other hand the then contemporary music.

And what do we see now? Indeed, the repertoire has increased enormously. But, what does it say? On the other hand, at the same time the audience is clearly split. For instance, we have an audience for the Orchestra of the Eighteenth Century, one for ASKO | Schönberg, the Netherlands Wind Ensemble, the Netherlands Chamber Choir and for the New Ensemble. And, of course, there is the symphonic and traditionally large audience that – partly as a result of these developments – is confronted with an ever limited choice, lacking the much-needed diversity. At the same time however, the repertoire and also the orchestral repertoire is, of course, constantly expanding. More than that, many of today's composers are increasingly writing for the symphonic formation. This also goes for the Netherlands, evidenced by the fact that orchestral works by for instance Robin de Raaff, Willem Jeths and others are regularly published. Is the orchestra an outdated institution? That remains the question. Take, for instance, the German composer Helmut Lachenmann who often resorts to a symphony orchestra for his most ground-breaking compositions

However, due to old-fashioned political and cultural views in a time when technical media developments have boomed, an absurd situation has arisen bit by bit. Not only is it possible to listen at home to every composition within the musical canon of the established repertoire, but also to all twentieth and twenty-first century music. And all this, through the computer and just one mouse click away. So all those works which one hardly ever hears in the traditional concert hall, if at all. This while – speaking of connections! – the internet era in which it is possible to have access to this, that and other music in a fraction of a second (Bach, Funk, Debussy, House, Boulez, Mozart, Gagaku, Beethoven, Raga, Gregorian Chant hardcore rock music, Stockhausen, Jazz, Monteverdi, electronic music, you name it), offers great possibilities. Many of those involved in musical life, let alone our cultural policy makers, do not realise this. In his book 'Happy New Ears', conductor/composer Hans Zender talks about the frankness with which we should learn to listen and, furthermore, that listening implies more than just hearing. At a time when we are being bombarded by all sides with unstructured information we never asked for, this is something to think about! However, the current situation of our musical life with ensembles and orchestras usually working alongside each other instead of working together in a long-lasting way will, apart from the famous concert series of the Dutch public-service broadcaster, the NTR Saturday matinee, not lead to a concert where one can hear for instance Mozart as well as Ligeti or Beethoven and Boulez or both Gregorian Chant and Messiaen and also Josquin and Debussy. Only in this way, however, one is able to acquire the skill of listening with 'happy new ears'.

In 1968 Boulez wrote his essay 'Where are we now?' so even before *Actie Notenkraker*. He too was (and is, let there be no misunderstanding about it) full of criticism on musical life and also attacked the prevailing sclerosis and deprivation in that domain, unlike the other arts, not sparing the orchestras whatsoever. However, already at that time, the unselfish and rather universal 'tone' of his indictment in which he emphatically pled for a new aesthetics and a breaking with all those rigid structures that were (and still are now) standing in the way of a creative and flourishing musical life, made him different from the *Notenkrakers*. It would go too far to explore all details of this view, but that its contents are still very relevant to our times, provide us with a dramatically clear picture of our present musical life, without sharing knowledge and collaboration and in which the drying up of the creative source is becoming a real danger. However many orchestras are striving for modernisation in a cosmetic way by crossover productions, rap sessions, film accompaniment, the search for alternative concert venues, jazzing up season brochures with glossy colours and tasteless audience-drawing one-liners in American English, as long as there is no lasting underlying artistic philosophy, this, in time, will end in failure. And we may run out of time unless we radically change our course. But how?

In order to answer this question, we must leave the *Notenkrakers* – apart from of course Boulez – and need to look at an important predecessor of his. Someone, who is up to this day, derided and not to say reviled by the still living *Notenkrakers*. However, in 1995, when Boulez finally once again, conducted a high-profile programme with the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, he spoke of him as ‘the greatest living musician’: the late Marius Flothuis (1914-2001), former artistic director of the aforementioned orchestra and among others, former committee member of the Foundation Pierre Boulez.

Already we see the outlines of *The Fertile Land* emerging in many of Flothuis’s programmes. I shall briefly discuss only a small but significant number from them. It is typical that not only various different style periods are covered, but also formations that one is more likely to hear in our days with specialised ensembles rather than with the ‘established’ symphony orchestras. Furthermore, without exception they are programmes from the regular subscription season, and, with the exception of two, they relate to productions from before *Actie Notenkraker*, a time in which the then contemporary and avant-garde music was far from shunned.

The most striking though, is the enormous range of repertoire, varying from Mozart and Schubert through Debussy up to and including the latest and ground-breaking music of that time: Boulez, Carter, Nono and Lutoslawski. And, once again, a repertoire not presented in a specialised and modern series, let alone isolated, but exactly as it should and in a way that unfortunately it is not presented these days: as a standard repertoire. That is to say however, this goes for the far majority of the symphony orchestras (and not only in our country, but all over the world). Genre diversity is also remarkable. Not only do we find concert and symphony – which do not fit the aforementioned boring clichés, quite the contrary – but also a mass, vocal solo works (including the first time that music of Boulez was performed in The Netherlands, being the two ‘Improvisations’ of his five-fold *Pli Selon Pli*), oratorio and musical drama with a huge contrast in musical strength: a regular symphony orchestra versus a chamber ensemble, wind ensemble and a mixed choir. In view of the time I can single out only one example, the Dutch premiere of what is still one of the most complex concertante works in the history of music up to today, the in 1965 finished *Piano Concerto* by the American composer Elliott Carter, whose works were deeply admired and often performed by Boulez. The *Notenkrakers* noticed a contrast between symphonic music and the ensemble culture, however, it is highly characteristic for the orchestral works by Carter that this alleged gap is seamlessly crossed over thereby creating, as it were, both an orchestral and ensemble like approach of the matter, either alternately or simultaneously. The *Piano Concerto* is a classic example of this. It also involves the relation between ensemble and orchestra (and if it is not enough: the orchestra simultaneously operating in terms of a large ensemble) as the work has three protagonists: firstly, the piano soloist of course, secondly, the orchestra and thirdly the concertino consisting of flute, cor anglais, bass clarinet, violin, viola, cello and double bass. It is a true stroke of genius to start this programme – in which the concert, being the last act, is the pièce de résistance – with one of the most impressive ensemble pieces for the wind section, the *Gran Partita* by Mozart and after the interval with a ‘classic’ highlight from the first half of the twentieth century, the *Variationen für Orchester* by Anton Webern. Indeed, in the heart of the matter this is also a piece in which the orchestra operates as an ensemble because for the greater part the texture lies within its soloist performances. Needless to say that not all the programmes dating from that particular period – the sixties and seventies of the last century – were equally ground-breaking, certainly not. However, there were more of them per season compared with today’s programmes of the major part of the top orchestras (including the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra).

It was therefore Flothuis who brought Pierre Boulez to the Netherlands. Up until that moment it had been mostly Hans Rosbaud who was responsible for the contemporary music of the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra. When he fell ill, he recommended Boulez who indeed was known as a composer and an ‘angry young man’, yet not as a conductor. These days it is difficult to imagine, but somehow Flothuis had an almost clairvoyant ability to spot an upcoming talent also evidenced by the appointment to the orchestra of the then very young Bernard Haitink. After his debut, Boulez was regularly asked back in Amsterdam and subsequently he made his appearance with the The Hague

Philharmonic at the time that Hans de Roo and Hans Citroen were its general and artistic directors. Here, together with Bruno Maderna, he was entrusted with the then latest musical expressions. Programme examples of the companies he conducted, once again show a huge diversity in repertoire and an evident aversion to whatever 4 twill4ation. There was also no lack of ancient music as exemplified by the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra and the Hague Philharmonic. Also unusual is that with the performances of the Haydn symphonies, Boulez worked with a greatly reduced string formation and this in a time in which there was no sign yet of Harnoncourt. Music by the *Notenkrakers* and their sympathisers had also not been forgotten as evidenced by compositions by Schat and Van Vlijmen which were performed at the regular subscription concerts and, which is the case with Van Vlijmen (his *Gruppi* being played no less than six times!), were combined with compositions by Webern, Bach and Haydn. Who of the older audience present can still remember the legendary concert in Rotterdam, during which after the interval, Debussy's *Jeux*, - frequently performed by Boulez but otherwise rarely heard – was performed as a double bill with a truly phenomenal interpretation of Schumann's *Second Symphony*?

One could write volumes on such programmes, but let us go back again to this magnificent metaphor of 'The Fertile Land' and if I may make so bold as to share a utopia, a utopia of revolution or even better perhaps, evolution in opposite direction of the *Notenkrakers*. Well then, a symphony orchestra is an institution with which one, and I do speak from experience, can have a love/hate relationship. In contrast with the flexibility of many ensembles, a symphony orchestra is, apart from being a large, also a slow and according to the nineteenth century standards a standardised institution. Nevertheless, in principle, it is one of the most beautiful inventions created by mankind. It is not one or the other, but both. So, this matter is far more complicated than suggested by the *Notenkrakers*. Which brings me to the real utopia, namely motivating the symphony orchestra as such to become as flexible-minded as many of the now active specialised ensembles. In other words: if the *Notenkrakers*-revolution would have moved from the centre of those days (the symphonic arena) to the periphery (the ensembles), now it would be the time (to maintain the metaphor in this view) to clear the land in terms of renewing the orchestra from within. A renewal in the broadest and most universal sense of the word. Only then integration of all these music genres, which now mainly exist in isolation from one another, can be achieved and only then continuation of a transfer of musical culture which now seems to falter, will be guaranteed. Of course, this is not just a long-term investment but also the way to a fundamental change in mentality on both sides. So not only the orchestras, but also the ensembles need to change. This, in retroaction, will result in an increasingly artistic output that – if the artistic content is properly facilitated by the management – eventually will attract a broad audience. This evolution cannot be forced by squishable frog toys (*Actie Notenkraker*), but only by a firm belief in quality. Above all, it requires the ability from all parties concerned not only to respond to a need, but far more important: to create a demand! As already stated in my introduction: only those who sow, shall reap. And in this context it especially means stimulating the imagination, challenging the listener to explore the unknown even if the unknown seems so far away. The challenge of all art, and not least the music, lies within. It seems to me that the way in which in particular the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra created a programme at the time of Marius Flothuis and which showed many similarities with Boulez, who he admired so much, may serve as an important source of inspiration, except that it must be adapted to today's new possibilities. The foregoing shows by the way, that this is something different than to pander to whims, because all great art is at odds with this. This reflects Boulez's statement that he is not interested in composers who conform to the spirit of the time but in those who create a spirit of time.

In this context a hand-out with some, for the moment, 'utopian' programmes of my own, which I deliberately tried to create starting from Boulez's *Rituel* because this, after last night's performance, is still very fresh in our minds. Is *Rituel* an orchestral work or an ensemble piece? No, it is a composition for more sub-ensembles that perform either simultaneously or not. In terms of strength *Rituel* is most fascinating because of its interdisciplinary character. It is neither a piece for a 'regular' symphonic formation, nor does it fit within the scope of the specialised contemporary music ensembles (as many twentieth and twenty-first century pieces it fits somewhere in between). Therefore, it is unique that it was being performed by a symphony orchestra (in this case the Hague

Philharmonic) all the same, which is quite exceptional these days. This somewhat clarifies the ideal I have in mind in order to explore *The Fertile Land*. Without copying Boulez or Flothuis I must confess that both artists are and remain my most important role models when it comes to programming, or better still, 'Dramaturgie' as our neighbours in Germany so eloquently say and where it has an even higher standing as yet. One of Boulez's most important rules of thumb is that a good programme is especially recognisable for its fusion of contrasts and similarities. Provided that the contrasts, and in particular the musical ones rather than anecdotal ones, always have to be larger than the similarities, otherwise the same contrasts are levelled out.

However, what is especially important, and finally once again the metaphor The Fertile Land is used, is that the most important and fundamental principle of the 'Ars Combinatoria' called programming, provide the possibility of exploring and tapping unexpected and therefore new potential. A potential that is left untapped as long as the listener is confronted only with the familiar repertoire belonging to the rock-solid canon. Good programmes especially lead the listener to the conclusion that in essence any piece – it is obvious that this is parallel to Boulez's own composing! – remains 'a work in progress' as long as it does not divulge its last secrets. Boulez is the first to recognise the fact that in this the listener is no different from the composer, or as he says in his aforementioned essay: 'The composer is simply each person's image. In every listener there is a creator, who asks to express himself by means of another personality, only because he himself lacks the creative gift'. Nevertheless, the creativity of the listener must be stimulated which is what a creative programmer does by performing the supposed well-known work each time in a different context. Subsequently, it will conclusively prove that no matter what famous monument from the rich musical tradition, it will generate new meanings over and over again and therefore, in that sense, it will remain 'a work in progress'. Why? Because by doing so it is ideally the active listener who 'temporarily completes' the opus according to his own conditionings and the ones established by the programme. This basically transforms him into the co-creator of the work of art. So mote it be!

#### **Programs discussed in the lecture by Maarten Brandt**

- [\*\*Pierre Boulez Programs RITUEL \(proposals Maarten Brandt\) \(pdf\)\*\*](#)
- [\*\*Programming Pierre Boulez \(pdf\)\*\*](#)
- [\*\*Programming Marius Flothuis \(pdf\)\*\*](#)