

KEES VAN BAAREN

by

Dr David C F Wright

One of the many outstanding features of Kees van Baaren is that he was the first Dutch composer to consistently use the serial technique. It is a technique that requires the highest level of skill, discipline and concentration and few there are who are equal to it.

Van Baaren first used it with his Septet in 1952 although the technique had been in existence for decades. In Holland there was opposition to the technique as there was elsewhere an opposition born of ignorance and prejudice. But it was a force to be reckoned with and eventually discerning Dutch composers took it up.

The claim that serial music is merely cerebral is proved wrong with such works as Berg's sumptuous Violin Concerto. This technique can produce some of the most dramatic and exciting music such as the symphonies of Humphrey Searle and some most moving music such as Dallapiccola's *Il Prigioniero*.

As a teacher, Van Baaren did not force his ideas on to his many students and among those who studied under him were Louis Andriessen, Theo Bruins, Reinbert de Leeuw, Misha Mengleberg, David Porcelijn, Peter Schat and Jan van Viljmen.

His own music is highly individual and individuality is an essential ingredient of any great composer. His music has been described as academic, cool and sometimes distant but also spontaneous and playful. Like Humphrey Searle in England, Van Baaren had an amazing capacity of friendship coupled with a conciliatory and mediatorial nature sadly often needed in the field of music and the arts.

Kees Cornelius Leendert van Baaren was born on 22 October 1906 in Enschede, the son of a music dealer. In 1923 he went to Berlin to study the piano with Rudolf Breithaupt at the Sternsche Conservatory and composition under Friedrich Koch at the Staalische Hochschule für Musik. In these student days he earned his living as a jazz pianist and writing music for the *Kabarett der Unmoglichen* and others. He accompanied them regularly. It was in Berlin that he encountered the music of Schoenberg, Webern and Berg. He was warmly drawn to the music of Berg and set about studying the discipline of serial music.

One day in the German capital he met fellow Dutch musician Willem Pijper with whom he was deeply impressed and decided to put himself under the guidance of this distinguished composer. He returned to Enschede in 1929 where he worked as a pianist, chorus master, teacher of piano, theory and composition. In 1933 he began lessons with Pijper in Rotterdam but, as yet, was not interested in writing serial music. However, Pijper saw some of van Baaren's serial ideas and encouraged him. The younger man took exams in all aspects of music and in 1942 became a teacher at the Conservatory in Amsterdam and continued his work in Enschede.

In 1934 he completed his *Concertino* for piano and orchestra which shows some signs of Pijper's influence. In 1936 there appeared his *Trio* for flute, clarinet and bassoon, rich in polyphony but hinting at serialism.

He did not have a successful domestic life. He was married three times, the third marriage taking place in 1946. From 1945 to 1947 he was teaching at the Rotterdam conservatory for a few days a week although living in Amsterdam becoming the director of the Conservatory there in 1948. This encouraged him to compose and there was a steady flow from his pen.

On the death of Pijper in 1947, van Baaren wrote his *Piano Sonatina* in his memory. He used his motto, "I must not have a note too many" in this work. It is a fine, well-punctuated piece and the composer continued to compose in his dodecaphonic style, a style dismissed and, indeed, savaged by many because it calls for the highest skill and technique, which few have.

This is as fine a cantata as you could wish for. Obviously, it is based on T S Eliot's five-part poem which is full of pessimism. The work was written for the Amsterdam University musical society *Sweelinck*, a year after the death of his teacher, Willem Pijper but the work shows no influence of the tutor. Some have said that the colourful orchestration is reminiscent of Poulenc's *Gloria* and *Stabat Mater* and the *Prelude* was later clearly lifted and used by the serial plagiarist Britten in the *Liberation* his *War Requiem*. Baaren's music has



an original type of tonality but it is not serial. It is strikingly emotional and sometimes unashamedly romantic.

His first serial piece was the Septet of 1952 written for wind quintet, double bass and an obbligato violin. Some believe it is a violin concerto in all but name. The slow movement has a violin cadenza. The opening movement is an allegro in sonata form followed by the andante sostenuto and a playful rondo makes up finale. In this work van Baarens uses nine separate twelve note rows, none of which derive from another. It is a work to admire for its infectious spontaneity.

Van Baaren also wrote a symphony for a Haydn size orchestra which follows serial principles. This was during 1956 -7.

He was the director of the Conservatory in Utrecht from 1953 to 1957 and then at the conservatory in The Hague until his death in 1970. He was awarded the Sweelinck Prize in 1969 which is one of the highest accolades for a Dutch composer.

In 1959 he composed his Variations for orchestra, commissioned by the Dutch Ministry of Education, Arts and Sciences. One may discern a sort of neo-classicism here and the work reveals the composer's gift of counterpoint. The dedication says it all: To the memory of Johann Joseph "Gradus ad Parnassum" Fux. There are five variations based on a twelve-note series. The work has a powerful inner energy and the percussion is used brilliantly. There may be a slight influence of Pijper's Six Symphonic Epigrams of 1928 but the work is Baaren's own and is highly impressive.

His Piano Concerto dates from 1964. It is a highly individual work. It is a serial work but not just merely cerebral. Baaren believed that the intellectual and emotional went together as did the finest British serial composer, Humphrey Searle. The orchestration is very colourful and impressive. Some soloists who would be willing to take on this splendid and challenging concerto may be deterred by its brevity at 15 minutes. Equally, impressive is his Music for orchestra which dates from 1966. It was written for the Rotterdam Art Foundation. Every note counts. The music is highly charged. It combines serialism and fragments of melody. The work is varied which makes it even more fascinating. We even have a Latin American dance. There are quotes from other composers as diverse as Wagner and the banal music of Johann Strauss.

During 1964 -1969 he composed his work for carillon, the Musica per Campana. That year also saw the completion of his Musica per organo.

He died at Oegstgeest on 2 September 1970.

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