

WILLEM PIJPER

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At the end of 2011, a CD was released including violin music by Willem Pijper. All of the reviews referred to him as an unknown composer or a lesser-known composer.

What is the matter with the listening public? I have known and admired Pijper's music for 50 years! He is the most important Dutch composer of his generation and a very fine composer.

Is it because we are saturated with the standard composers and those who are promoted by the BBC and record companies? And that is unjust.

Pijper's five string quartets are as good as those by Bartok and Bartok's quartets are probably the best since Beethoven.

The world of real music is fickle. There are great composers who are ignored and poor composers who reach our ears every day.

Pijper believed in the genius of old Dutch composers from the Middle Ages onwards. He was interested in their polyphony and such styles he made his own but in a modern guise. It has been said that his music is definitely Dutch.

He always had a coherent form in his music. He was highly intellectual and self critical possessing an acute analytical mind. As a teacher, he taught the importance of Dutch composers of the past. Many of his students became well-known composers benefiting from Pijper's tutelage and these include Rudolph Escher, Piet Ketting, Guillame Landre, Kees von Baaren and Henk Badings.

As a teacher, he did not impose himself upon his students but allowed each student to pursue their own individuality. It was he who brought contemporary Dutch music into international recognisance and he enjoyed a well-deserved reputation for himself. He was often a member of the jury on International Music Competitions.

His name comes from the word piper indicating that there were musicians among his ancestors when the piper was the town's musician.

He came from an immediate family who were not interested in music but who held strong Calvinistic views. His father would play psalm accompaniments on the harmonium.

Willem was born in the village of Zeist near Utrecht on 8 September 1894. His health was poor, so he could not attend school. He was an only child and had to use his own determination to learn. Being in isolation formed within him a great independence. The harmonium in the house Willem improvised upon. He also had a fascination with plants and animals and this interest was taken over in his composition methods which he called germ-cell music.

He had formal piano lessons from the age of ten and developed into being a fine recitalist.

When he did go to school it was at a Grammar School and he was far in advance of all the other students. He did not kow-tow to the authority of others but pursued his interests with an uninfluenced mind. He became an authority in psychology, philosophy and psychoanalysis.



At the age of seventeen, he went to study with Johan Wagenaar (1862-1941) learning some basic musical skills but still maintaining his own paths which Wagenaar supported. In his String Quartet no.1 of 1914 he uses a mute violin and the work is often bitonal such as in the use of E flat minor against C minor. He was not going to be a composer writing in the wake of others. He composed some musical portraits for the piano in which he imitated a few pieces of his fellow students such as Bernard Wagennar (1894-1971, no relation to Johan) for whom he was to write his Piano Sonata of 1930 and Alexander Voormoolen.

After the completion of his studies, he became interested in the music of Debussy and Mahler. Some say that Debussy can be detected in Pijper's orchestral song cycle *Fetes Galantes* and that Mahler is behind his Symphony no. 1 (*Pan*). There may be a hint of Mahler's *Lieder eines fahrenden Geselles* in this symphony which uses a large orchestra. However, Pijper's symphony seems to draw us to nature and to the animal world. The finale is very exciting.

By 1918, he broke away from the shackles of bar lines and convention. Why should we conform to traditionalism? What he did was to increase rhythmic tension and excitement. He was determined to be original which, after all, is one of the essentials of a great composer.

Having imbibed Debussy and Mahler, his music developed into a very personal style. Despite the stupid things that people say, and music reviewers and musicologists do say some inane things, he did not abandon tonality although his emphasis was on polytonality. In his Third Piano Sonata of 1925 he established A flat with D. In his Piano Concerto of 1927, criticised for its brevity, the chords of A flat and D is the first chord in the piece.

The quality of music does not depend on length, but it is true that some works of other composers are far too long and outstay their welcome.

In his works between 1919 and 1926, we must emphasise that tonality is not dismissed as evident in his First Violin Sonata and the Cello Sonata. There is also some polytonality and polyrhythm The Cello Sonata, a very fine work, has a type of habanera rhythm and a sultry atmosphere in the second movement. The Septet for five wind instruments, double bass and piano is built on the tetrachord A B C D and it is a satisfying and very dramatic piece. His germ cell principle is also evident in his String Quartet no. 2, the Piano Trio no 2, the Violin Sonata no 2 and the String Quartet no 3. His most fascinating work of this period is the Sonata for flute and piano of 1925 another marvellous work unjustly unknown to the majority

To return to his notion of germ-cell music, Pijper believes that all the music blossoms out of the germ of a few elements which he called the composer's ideas.

Pijper had become the music critic for the *Utrecht Dagblad* which, like all musical critics meant that he wrote some hard-hitting stuff. He was vitriolic, although nowhere near as offensive as Elgar and Britten. Pijper was particularly unkind about a fellow Dutch composer, Jan van Gilse (1881-1947) and was responsible for removing him as the conductor of the Utrecht Municipal Orchestra in 1921, although it was the directors than told him to resign. Van Gilse had responded by banning performances of Pijper's work.

In 1926 with Paul F Sanders, Pijper founded the periodical *De Muzick*.

The next development in Pijper's musical life was his interest in Greek drama. He composed music for *Antigone*, *The Bacchants* and *The Cyclop* and laid down meticulously in the scores the precise timing and rhythm for the voices.

His Piano Sonatinas are very concentrated and in single movements. In his remarkable Piano Sonata and the Sonata for two pianos the material is often slender and lithe like Scarlatti sonatas

He was simply magnificent in sound production in his scores. In his mediaeval ballad Heer Halewijn he wrote for a large a cappella chorus which music was stunning and has gone down in Dutch music as a rare and major achievement. He returned to this subject in 1933 with his opera Halewijn, although he called it a symphonic drama in which he expressed the need for tension and drama in all music, or a 'visually perceptible symphony'.

The material is derived from an old folk song.

In the last years of his life he was engaged in a new opera Merlijn, based on the Arthurian legend. Only the first act was completed.



Pierre Monteux and Willem Pijper

In 1926, Pijper wrote his impressive Symphony no 3 for his friend Pierre Monteux who performed it many times in the USA. It is in one movement in the usual classical sections...allegro, adagio, scherzo, and allegro. The composer said that in this symphony he felt like Orpheus who, by his playing, was able to tame wild animals and move stones. It is a work of great conviction.

For the fortieth anniversary of the Concertbouw Orchestra in 1928 he composed his Symphonic Epigrams inspired by an old song, O Netherlands, heed thy cause.

His last works include a highly original Violin Concerto. The opening movement has two tempi. The orchestra moves in slow crotchets and the solo violin in fairly quick quavers.

There is also a late Cello Concerto and a Sonata for solo violin.

From 1930 until his death, he was the principal of the Rotterdam Conservatory.

After his death from cancer on 18 March 1947 in Utrecht, his Six Adagios for orchestra, composed in 1940 for his Freemasons Lodge, which were never performed in his lifetime, created a deep impression. It is unashamedly tonal and its rhythmic content is briefly connected to Mozart's Overture to The Magic Flute. It should not be taken that this work is six slow and tedious movements; it is an exalted work.

Time permitting an essay on his amazing string quartets must be written. He also wrote two piano trios and some exquisite choral and vocal music.

He was his own man, decisive, intellectual and individual, a very great composer.

Unknown? Lesser known? If that is so, it should not be. He is to the Netherlands what Sibelius is to Finland.