

Ensemble Weekend Zwolle 2009



The Zwolle Guitar Festival is one of the famous guitar events in Holland. Long ago the festival was called Zwolle Guitar Weeks, a three-week event intended to introduce the classical guitar with a broader audience and to introduce the guitarist to a broader repertoire. Currently the festival fits within a few days with focus on master classes by renowned guitarists and concerts. It used to be a summer event, lately it is programmed in November.

In my mind the festival -at least the subject of master classes- was intended for professionals and professionals to be, namely conservatory students. In 2006 I went there as a listener, an instructive happening for me as an amateur guitarist.

The organisation, however, did not forget the amateurs completely. A firm fixed part of the festival is the Ensemble Weekend (for amateur guitarists). A guitar friend came up with the idea and we subscribed for this occasion to touch the strings in a broader context.

As the name of the event implies, the Ensemble Weekend is aimed at playing together. Quartett, Trio, Duo and a large Ensemble that basically is a quartet setting where multiple players share the same part.

The major part of the weekend was dedicated to the large Ensemble. Besides, the organisation had made up a number of smaller ensembles, based on a questionnaire that you had to fill in with the subscription.

The last afternoon featured the concert presentation for the large and smaller ensembles for a large audience.

The repertoire for the large ensemble was homework. With the small ensembles, it appeared to be *A Prima Vista* work.

I received the scores for the large ensemble via email. A very practical solution, because failing to prepare is preparing to fail. Thorough preparation is required if you want to achieve results with a large company in short rehearsal time.

The pieces included an arrangement of *Concerto in D* (probably RV 93) by Antonio Vivaldi, three settings of Catalan folk songs by Eythor Thorlaksson (yes, the one from the Iceland Guitar School with lots of interesting free scores) and two small suites by Annette Kruisbrink, *Fairey Tunes* and *Musica Latina Facil*

Unfortunately, there was no homework email for the small ensembles. Probably for reasons of copyright, you could only read the scores during the sessions. Personally, I found it a shame, because after a first sight of the material on the stand, I found that a little bit of preparation would have been helpful. I am a quick score reader indeed, but ensemble playing requires attention beyond score reading and some familiarity with the material. Consequently, my contribution to smaller ensembles was lacking.

The Ensemble Weekend started at a relatively early hour on the Saturday, so we went on our way from Hengelo (Overijssel) to Zwolle by car right after coffee and breakfast. Internet helped us finding a suitable parking place without having to walk all through the town in full marching order with our guitar cases.

The Conservatory in Zwolle – the crime scene for the Ensemble Weekend- is situated on a strategic spot, just inside the old city walls of Zwolle. It clearly shows from the address *Aan de Stadsmuur 88*, which translates as *Near the City Walls 88*. We were amongst the first to arrive. Fortunately, the coffee machine was working 24/7!

Gradually the canteen filled up, about 30 players had subscribed and soon it became clear that the Ensemble Weekend had attracted semi- and full professionals too. The participants did not originate from The Netherlands alone, a few players from Germany, Belgium and France made it a weekend with a slight international touch.

By means of a brief introduction, the organisers explained the ins and outs of the weekend. Not too lengthy, because there was a lot of work to be done.

We started with the rehearsals for the large ensemble. Because I had studied part three of the Vivaldi concert, amongst others, I was added to the Guitar Three team, and I remained at that position throughout. ; -) I did not like to change place every piece. Moreover, the number of Guitar Three and Guitar Four players appeared pretty low, most people had stopped rehearsing with the first two parts. By the way, the part number appeared no measure of difficulty (“the higher, the easier”)! If it was easy, nevertheless, I made up a few notes in between at times! ; -) Shame on me, quite a lack of discipline!

Annette Kruisbrink was the conductor of the large ensemble. I know her as one of the few professional Dutch guitar composers. I met her at the Twente Guitar Festival and listened quite a few of her compositions via Youtube.

Her compositions are contemporary in style and cover a broad spectrum, from very accessible to quite complex and difficult to understand for me. She was the composer of two of the suites for the large ensemble. The suite *Fairey Tunes* consisted of melodies on popular fairy tales: *Cinderella*, *Alladin* and *Rapunzel*. Particularly *Alladin* reproduced the atmosphere of the *Arabian Nights*. The suite *Musica Latina Facil* included a number of Latin American styles: *Danza Maya*, *Bossa do Brazil*, *Cuna Cubana* and *Tango Argentino*.

Annette Kruisbrink turned out to be a skilled conductor who succeeded to motivate the ensemble in a comfortable and joyful manner. She did not refrain from some background information of the music, which is a good thing because a clear context for the music helps with its performance. With practical hints and personal attention, she succeeded in levelling up the less experienced players. The result was a performance with brisk tempos that were considerably higher than my home-rehearsal tempo.

The result was that *Allegro Giusto* in Vivaldi's *Concerto in D* got the right tempo, the soloists would not be bored indeed!

Within the schedule of the Ensemble Weekend there was room for other activities of the Zwolle Guitar Festival, in particular the master classes, the guitar fair and the afternoon concerts. A drawback appeared to be that the Ensemble Weekend itself got less time, in particular the rehearsal time of the small ensembles, because walking between the events in different buildings was quite time consuming.

The Guitar Fair was fun, I met quite a few well-known luthiers and there was a big stand with sheet music and CDs. Land of Plenty for the moneyed guitarist! Because I already ordered a new guitar with a famous Dutch luthier (just a few months of patience!) I took a look but did not feel temptation.

The small ensemble became a let's say weird experience for me. The programme included two movements from the suite *Estampas* by Federico Moreno Torroba, *Remanso* and *Bailando*. In the end only *Remanso* appeared feasible in the given rehearsal time. Both movements were clearly contemporary, a handicap for me, because this music is not my style.

The group that I landed in, had been playing together for a few years. So that became handicap Number Two: From my own ensemble experience I know that after a while a kind of wordless communication develops between members, a kind of speaking the same language. This facilitates playing together. If you are a stranger, you are missing this sense of cooperation, it becomes hard to connect to the general performance. To add insult to injury, the group was not completely "foreigner-friendly". In the end I managed better, but still had the impression that the others considered me a millstone.

Playing *A Prima Vista* was a challenge, because Mr. Torroba loves to implement tiny yet significant variations in the music. So, no browsing back to page 1 for a repeat or *Da Capo*, but wrestling with six pages of score that did not fit on the stand and included repeats on the most unpractical places. Quite a challenge to get your page administration right within one or two measures at most. The company Opera Tres, the

publisher of this work, apparently was no star in browsing ergonomics. Playing by heart would have been ideal, but the rehearsal time was far too short.

The level of difficulty of the piece was slightly too high to be able to realize a fluent and entertaining performance of the piece in just two hours of rehearsal. The other groups had much more suitable pieces for this purpose, a clear illustration of the difficulty of the Torroba piece. Next time I will state that I have had only two years of guitar lessons!

At the Sunday -I was glad it was a bit later than the Saturday- we started again with the rehearsal for the large ensemble. With the same joyful pace like the day before, Annette Kruisbrink made the last adjustments, resulting in a smooth performance of her compositions. Vivaldi got some refreshment rehearsal too.

The afternoon concert with Leo Brouwer as the conductor formed a break in the schedule of about two hours. Many left to attend the concert, but I decided to relax a bit and use the opportunity to rehearse some ensemble material with my guitar friend.

In the afternoon, it appeared that schedules were tighter than planned, so choices had to be made. The last rehearsal of the small ensembles was cut down considerably. For me it became a quite a question mark if I really liked to hit the stage with that small ensemble with an ill-prepared Torroba piece. I decided to join in nevertheless, adding a few notes is better than nothing.

In the final rehearsal, we were all cramped on the stage. It became a pleasant roundabout way to reach the correct seats for your part. The rehearsal went perfect.

It was time for the small recitals and the performance of the large ensemble. The audience slowly dropped in and in some cases the difference between 'rehearsal' and 'for real' could be felt.

During the concerts, it became clear that the small ensembles had prepared well. There was a pleasant variation in pieces, like a guitar trio of the nineteenth century composer Von Call, an arrangement of the famous theme *La Folia* that reminded me of Sanz's version, a Milonga with a nice melancholic sound and an interesting interplay between the first and second guitar and last but not least a number of ensemble pieces by Pieter van der Staak.

Pieter van der Staak and the Zwolle Conservatory have been tightly connected. Van der Staak was the first classical guitar professor at this conservatory and became the founder and promoter of the International Zwolle Guitar Weeks.

I guess that Van der Staak would have liked it to hear his compositions at this very location in Zwolle. I have met him many years ago when he attended a concert of Hans Oosterwal, one of his former colleagues, just for moral support. He was a vivid old man with an artistic beret on his head. He had -as I noticed- a deep aversion to the Franco regime in Spain and he suspected that this country still was ruled by Francoists, even though the dictator had passed away many years ago.

The Spanish history in the last century has been turbulent, from the colonial adventures in Morocco until the Spanish Civil War and the reign of terror of the 'victor' Generalissimo Franco during and after World War 2. Quite a different impression than *Vamos a la Playa* at the Costa del Sol!

What about the Torroba piece? We made it to the end and the audience did understand that well!

There was a little unexpected turn to it. Without warning 'my' ensemble split up, first as a trio and finally as a duo. That's communication indeed! Apparently, those guys had a hidden agenda! Anyway, I guess we will never meet again!

They played reasonably accessible contemporary material (even though I never liked Hindemith's music). The duo pieces showed the importance of the second guitar as facilitator (provide support and room for playing the solo) for the first guitar. So never say that you are 'only' playing second filled in the ensemble.

It was time for the Grand Finale: eleven pieces for large ensemble. Everybody found a place on stage and made a joyful party under the inspiring direction of Annette Kruisbrink. It was no surprise that the last notes of the Vivaldi concerto were met with a roar of applause.

The applause was for the organisers and coaches of the Ensemble Weekend as well, because it took quite some effort to send all the mailings, set up the concert hall and organise the groups. The appreciation was also there for the guitar teachers that managed the large and small ensembles, particularly bearing in mind that most of them had to travel to Zwolle from afar.

Euphoria all around, job completed. A perfect start for some food and drinks, the catering was excellent.