

Duo NIHZ in the Concertgebouw



The Concertgebouw in Amsterdam is a location with a magical reputation for many musicians and music enthusiasts from The Netherlands and far beyond.

This includes me as well. As a school kid of eleven years old, in this concert hall I found out for the first time that the Decca and Philips Microgroove records were not the only source of classical music. I could also listen to this music for real!

In the end of the sixties there was an educational project for the last year of primary schools to enhance the subject of music. Within this framework, a large orchestra would play *Pictures at an Exhibition* by Mussorgsky in the Grote Zaal of the Concertgebouw. As a preparation at school, we heard everything about this music and the paintings by Hartmann -the friend Mussorgsky dedicated this work to- with their background stories. The concert would be the grand finale for this project.

At that occasion, I was deeply impressed by the music as well as the ambiance. Just consider, how often does a primary school kid visit a classical concert?

The music brought us amongst others the *Promenade* in various versions, the *Hut on Fowl's Legs (Baba Yaga)*, *Catacombae (Sepulcrum Romanum)* and the majestic *Great Gate of Kiev*. Particularly in the last piece the percussionist was quite busy with his tubular bells!

I remember being fascinated before by a piece of classical music that my father played at home, the *Peer Gynt Suites* by Grieg. This music by Mussorgsky, however, impressed me much more. As a consequence, I would appreciate both popular arrangements such as the versions by Emerson, Lake and Palmer and Tomita as well as classical versions such as the piano original played by Vladimir Ashkenazy.

The ambiance of the Concertgebouw had something aristocratic and a bit of magic too. The carpets that muffled the sounds, the ornaments on the columns, the names of popular composers written in gold, the finely tooled ceiling. There was an atmosphere of distinction; you felt the excitement while waiting for the orchestra to start playing.

In my teenage years, the Concertgebouw became a part of the skyline of the Museumplein, the scene of my high school years. I attended Grammar School in the Gabriel Metsustraat (just besides the American Embassy on the Museumplein). In our free periods, we often walked past the famous Amsterdam music temple and the well-known Café Keizer just next door.

If you extended your walk a little, you came across the house of Hans Dekker in the Jacob Obrechtstraat (this street is part of the district in the direct vicinity of the Concertgebouw). I do remember this spot quite well in the context of music, because there I fell in love with the guitar when I heard this guy playing together with some classmates. I remember that they played *Lesson for Two Lutes*, *Drewries Accordes*, *Romance d' Amor* (in ensemble) and the well-known *Prelude in D minor* by Bach.

Well, this love for the guitar is still flourishing after 37 years!

The years passed by. I left Amsterdam and I only returned to the Concertgebouw once. The occasion was an unfortunately less enjoyable concert by John Williams. It appeared that guitar amplification actually is an art. If this artistry is lacking, you will have the sound of a tin can in large rooms. Well, that's exactly how Williams' Smallman guitar sounded then, the Grote Zaal appeared quite unsuitable for guitar recitals.

Some of my fond memories of the Concertgebouw came to my mind while reading the announcement that Duo Niet In het Zwart (NIHZ, this name translates as Not Dressed In Black) and Alberto Mesirca would give a recital in the Kleine Zaal of the Concertgebouw.

My wife and I know the Duo Niet In het Zwart -consisting of Bobby Rootveld, guitars and Sanna van Elst, recorders- from their first start in 2004. Since then, we attended quite a number of their concerts, I guess you may consider us as fan club.

Nomen est Omen, that's quite true for Duo NIHZ in the positive sense. Colourful wear combines with colourful recitals that offer ample room for experimenting with ambiance and instrumentation.

In this way, they had thematic concerts based on modern paintings, they organised a children's play around a musical clown and the history of the guitar and they combined their music with the thrilling stories from the Second World War, recounted by the story-teller Loek Boer.

Their instrumentation has lots of original ideas. For example, the use of a Melodica (the well-known "wind-piano", my father used to have one) that is quite suitable for a melancholic Bandoneon-like tone, or a tiny little electric guitar with amp. And we did not even discuss Sanna's recorder collection, from bass to soprano!

Gradually over the years their music got a *leitmotiv*, to be specific the Yiddish music and culture.

The word Yiddish is primarily connected to the Jewish people in the great diaspora that started after the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by Emperor Titus in the first century of the common era and the suppression of the Bar Kochba insurgency in Judaea by the

Romans in the second century. Large numbers of Jews left their country and settled elsewhere in the Middle East and Europe.

In the Mediaeval era, the Yiddish language came into being as colloquial speech amongst Jews in Germany. Since then, it grew as the spoken language amongst many Jews all over the world, including the Jews in Holland. Of course, the Yiddish language has many region dependent dialects. Dutch words like *mazze!* (luck) and *sores* (sorrow) originate from Yiddish.

Very much of the Yiddish culture that could be found all over Europe was destroyed by the disgraceful madness of the Holocaust in the Second World War. The *Shoah* -as it is known by the Jewish people- left a trace of sorrow and disruption, many lost their families and their roots.

This disruption -or better said the search for their roots by the later generations- is one of the most important motives behind the choice of music and compositions of Duo NIHZ.

This *leitmotiv* leads to the programme *Jewish Music* that they would perform in the Kleine Zaal of the Concertgebouw. During their search for their roots, they met the Italian guitarist Alberto Mesirca on a guitar festival in Hungary. They made friends and since then they regularly cooperate in musical endeavours.

Jewish Music does not include traditional Yiddish music alone. Additionally, the programme has compositions of people who are connected to Yiddish culture, such as Isaac Albeniz in Spain and the Italian Mario Castelnuovo Tedesco who moved to America before, as a Jew, he would become a victim of Mussolini's fascist regime in the Second World War.

My wife and I decided to attend this special concert. To my great pleasure, I got a ticket for my birthday. It's quite a drive from our place to Amsterdam, but for this special occasion...

It is a special occasion indeed, particularly for the musicians themselves! The Concertgebouw has a kind of worldwide reputation as "temple of music" and the fact that you can play there may be considered as a career highlight.

We set out for the west on a drizzly Saturday in February. We would combine this trip with a visit to our daughter in the town of Amstelveen, just south of Amsterdam. You can park the car for free near her front door, a clear advantage when you consider the current parking fees in Amsterdam! A ticket for public transport was part of the deal for the concert ticket (good move), so we took Tram Five that took us swiftly from Uilenstede to the Museumplein, our destination.

The Concertgebouw had undergone quite some alterations and renovations since I went there last time. Most noticeable was the new entrance that was located at the beginning of the De Lairesestraat, currently known as Concertgebouwplein. Where we used to walk the pavement all the way to the Valeriusplein, they had built a glazed roof with a foyer and booking offices. It was an annex indeed, because the original external walls were more or less built-in, so that the original structure of the building remained intact.

Upon arrival we saw that we were not the only folks from the east of the country. A good thing.

We had our seats on the balcony of the Kleine Zaal. I had never been there before. It's a nice "little" hall, decorated with the same kinds of ornaments as the Grote Zaal. The elliptical

shape with the stage in the focus has the advantageous effect that the audience in the back can follow the performance too. A matter of optical theory applied to acoustics!

The hall filled up, the lights went dim and the musicians hit the stage. Duo NIHZ in white with azure, according to tradition (no black) -Sanna wore a very stylish dress- and Alberto Mesirca was DIB (Dressed in Black) as a contrast.

They made a joyful start with a *Klezmer mix*. Originally Klezmer was Yiddish wedding- and dance music; nowadays you hear this style in free forms too, like in Jazz. A striking detail in the music was the playful second voice on the guitars. Bobby and Alberto regularly switched between accompaniment and melodic support for Sanna's recorder.

For the second piece Alberto stayed on stage alone for a daring exploit, *Variations on a Moldavian Hora* by Ian Krouse. It's a contemporary piece that requires a few times listening before you understand its structure and can appreciate it. Something like with *Koyunbaba* by Domeniconi. Fortunately, I had heard this piece before.

Alberto Mesirca played the *Variations* in a very poised but virtuoso way. His performance excellently brought forward the message and melancholy of the music.

I consider Alberto Mesirca a phenomenon on the guitar. If you watch him playing, it seems that it takes him no effort whatsoever to bring power and suppleness in his play. His hand movements are efficient and accurate; it doubtlessly enables him to meet any challenge in the music with fervour. His serene and almost philosophical presentation leaves room for the music to flourish and does not distract the listener with the swinging disquiet you see with some players.

After the *Moldavian Hora*, Duo NIHZ was up with a collection of Yiddish melodies by anonymous composers. What strikes me with this music time and time again is the searching melancholy, the diaspora that sounds in the music. In some pieces this mood was later replaced by a sunnier atmosphere, in other pieces the sadness remained until the end.

Bobby Rootveld gave a solo on stage with *Rumores de la Caleta* by Isaac Albeniz and two movements from *Sefer Torah*, a piece by the contemporary composer Gianmartino Maria Durighello. I already knew *Rumores* (even from playing practice). I have to admit that I found *Sefer Torah* a bit vague. Somehow, I missed the transition between the movements. Nevertheless, the piece had its wondrous moments.

After these solo pieces, Sanna made Duo NIHZ complete again. Together they played a composition by Bobby based upon their visit to the synagogue in Mad in Hungary. In melody and percussion, the music aptly pictured the history of this building, from its construction in a far past through its destruction in the Second World War to its rebuilding with the melancholy that the soul of the synagogue -the people who used to worship there- would never return.

The last pieces before the break brought joy. Alberto Mesirca joined the band and together they made a fast and virtuoso performance of a number of traditional dances.

After a nice drink during the break, we were quite ready for the second half of the programme. The three musicians continued the joyful atmosphere with a set of *Chassidic Dances*, music with clear Slavonic influences.

After the dance, Sanna left, leaving both guitarists -Bobby en Alberto- on stage. They played a surprising duo by the Italian composer Mario Castelnuovo Tedesco, the *Sonatina Canonica*. This two-movement piece was completely dedicated to a question - answer

conversation between the guitars of the duo partners. They started slowly and carefully in the first movement and landed in the highest positions in the much faster final movement. An enjoyable piece with many surprising turns and modulations.

After the conversation was over, the guitarist of Duo NIHZ joined his partner backstage and left room for Alberto Mesirca with an impressive solo recital.

Mesirca is a great lover of the music by Castelnuovo Tedesco. This became clear from his choice for *Capprichio Diabolico*, a piece in the style of Niccolò Paganini who was called *Il Diavolo* because of his incredible virtuosity on the violin.

Unfortunate for Paganini, the church treated him like *Il Diavolo* after his death as well; he was not permitted to have a Christian burial. It took quite some effort to convince the church authorities that he deserved to be buried in consecrated ground.

The expression *Il Diavolo* -Diabolico- definitely applied to the technical and musical challenge of this piece. Just try to maintain a slow melody line while having to perform 64th note runs over the complete neck as an impromptu in between.

Alberto Mesirca brought a powerful musical idea that completely integrated speed in the piece without making speed a sole purpose in itself. It was an admirable performance, that's my opinion!

After Castelnuovo Tedesco he went back to the Spanish School with Isaac Albeniz. First we listened to the lyrical *Granada*. Elegant arabesques adorned the melody, just like the ornaments that embellish the halls and courtyard of the Alhambra. Alberto Mesirca excelled with a warm performance of this piece.

Asturias used to be a top hit amongst guitarists in my high school years in the seventies. "Can you play *Asturias*?" it buzzed amongst the classical amateur guitarists on my school. In many cases the answer was negative. Quite right, because it is a challenging piece.

Again, Alberto Mesirca played this piece with a powerful intention and again it seemed that he played effortlessly. OK, we guitarists know better, isn't it? I greatly enjoyed this performance because Alberto told a story with his dynamics and phrasing, he went far beyond the technical difficulties of this piece. The enthusiastic applause after *Asturias* was a clear representation of my own impressions.

After his great performance, Alberto Mesirca could enjoy some well-deserved rest and he was relieved by Duo NIHZ. Guitar and recorder started the humorous *Samson's Tune*, a whistle that is thoroughly connected to the history of the Rootveld family.

After that it was time for the most emotional piece on the concert, as far as I am concerned.

When I was young, the song *Amsterdam Huilt* (Amsterdam Weeps) could not excite me. I used to consider it a tearjerker, a weepy for other people, but not for me. A piece of popular melodramatics. In the seventies, an important period for my musical development, in my opinion and the opinion of other youngsters Dutch-language songs were completely out. So, we did not appreciate Dutch tearjerkers either. It was a pity that it was impossible to fast-forward this music in the Top 40 on the radio, otherwise we had done so.

Amsterdam Huilt is a Dutch-language song which has a typical Dutch setting, so I guess it is wise to add some explanation for the international readers.

Before the Second World War, many Jews lived in Amsterdam in the centre of town and in the eastern part of the old centre near streets like the Weesperstraat and the Sarphatistraat. Particularly the Weesperstraat used to be renowned for its diamond-cutting establishments that were run by Jewish people, just like this business is still run in Antwerp (Belgium) today. In the same district the world famous flea market on the Waterlooplein square was located, plus a large synagogue.

Jewish people were very much occupied with trade in Amsterdam, so the district used to be alive with stallholders who recommended their wares.

Amsterdam Huilt is a three-stanza song, with refrains in between.

The first stanza of the song describes how an old father browses a photo book and tells stories of the life in the Jewish quarter in Amsterdam before the war. He remembers how during week days' life started in the early morning on the streets and how people coped with life with humour and jokes. The Yiddish word for fun -*gein*- is well known in Dutch language.

The second stanza memorizes the Jewish heydays such as the Sabbath and Chanoeka. The last lines of the second stanza, however, suddenly change the mood of the song, referring to the ruthless plundering and killing of Jews in the Holocaust. This painful contrast between sweet and harsh memories forms the strength of the song.

The last stanza is a retrospective in which the old father cries in silence and finally wishes good fortune and blessings to all of his family, the ones that were lost and the ones that are still alive.

Where there are stanzas, there is a refrain too. In fact, the refrain lends the song its name, *Amsterdam Huilt*. It expresses the sadness on the places in Amsterdam where there used to be joy. The *gein* (the Dutch-Yiddish word for humour) will never return there.

The first time that Duo NIHZ played the song -it was in the synagogue of Enschede, a place where all those old memories of the Jewish people who used to live there still linger- something happened to me.

All of a sudden *Amsterdam Huilt* appeared more than just popular melodrama. In a flash I saw the story, the sadness, and the disruption in those four sentences in the second stanza. The painful awareness that the link with the past was cut and the only thing many survivors could do was commemoration and trying to mend the pieces left.

It's the intimate combination of whispered text and the accompaniment with arpeggios and humming during the stanzas and the soft singing in the refrain that causes a trembling deep inside. It is just moving...

The long and deep silence in the Kleine Zaal after Duo NIHZ finished the song was the sure sign that many more people got the message and were moved as well. It is no surprise that Duo NIHZ got a prize from the Jewish Music Festival for this powerful expression.

It was a good thing that Duo NIHZ concluded the programme with a few more cheerful pieces. Yet the thought why Amsterdam wept, I could not forget about that...

The audience was unanimous in its judgement. Standing ovation! I consider this a great concert that was a great pleasure for both parties, the musicians, Duo NIHZ -Bobby and Sanna- and Alberto Mesirca as well as the people who were listening.

Meantime the clock had progressed to half past ten, so it was high time for the trip back. We were lucky with Tram Five; the driver was so kind to keep the doors open for us. We made a little trip with the tram, said goodbye to our daughter in Amstelveen and set out for home. That was not completely without delay, we came across a traffic jam near Diemen. In the middle of the night! Where is the traffic in Holland heading for!?

Sunday morning, we came home, a bit tired but quite satisfied. For my next birthday, a concert ticket like this would be perfect!