

Pieter van der Staak Festival



My victory at the amateur competition during the Guitar Festival Nordhorn yielded an interesting prize, participation in the ensemble workshop of the Pieter van der Staak Festival. A nice opportunity to describe new adventures for this festival.

Back in Time

I think that the name Pieter van der Staak will raise questions with many of us. Who is this man and why a guitar festival has been dedicated to him?

I heard his name for the first time in the beginning of the nineties. Gerda Meijer and me had just established the Granados Duo and played our first recitals. Gerda's husband Frank Meijer, the renowned guitar teacher from Hengelo, Holland and then member of the Segovia Guitar Quartett had some contacts with Radio Oost, the local radio in the east of Holland. He organised an interview about the guitar music in the Twente district and he considered it fun that we would record some live guitar music for the fill-ins of the interview.

We accepted the challenge, so we landed in the stately mansion of Radio Oost at the Beursstraat in Hengelo where the studios were located. There we went *On Air* for the first time with two pieces: *Cavatina* by Stanley Myers and *Oriental* by Enrique Granados

It was no Live registration, by the way, because the complete interview including music was pre-recorded on tape (there was no digital storage equipment in those days) to be transmitted at the very early Sunday morning. I must say that it made no difference for the suspense: waiting for the red lamp On Air that indicates that you have to start playing is a special experience!

At that occasion, we met the guitarist Hans Oosterwal. Frank had chartered him to play a solo piece in behalf of the interview. Hans had just returned to Holland from an eventful Spanish adventure that had lasted for over a year, and he now faced the challenge to build up a living as a guitar teacher again. For that purpose, a bit of media exposure was a good thing.

He played *Bailecito* from *Five South American Pieces* by Pieter van der Staak. I liked the piece, so I asked him after the title and bought the book myself to play the music. This encounter would eventually lead to the establishment of the Guitar Duo DOS Amigos.

Frank Meijer had this thing about organising guitar events like a Recital Evening with *Pop and Chips*, ensemble nights or his beloved campfire evenings at the NIVON camping *De Hoch*. On these occasions, I came across the ensemble music by Pieter van der Staak.

In this way, I got acquainted with Van der Staak's compositions, yet for me he was a name amongst many. A Dutch name, I must admit that it was a rare occurrence in my repertoire of those days.

After the Guitar Duo DOS Amigos made a successful start, I heard some more about Hans' professional career in music. In those stories the name Pieter van der Staak emerged, because he had been a friendly colleague when Hans was a guitar teacher at the Zwolle Conservatory. I never heard how they got acquainted, anyway, Van der Staak was already there when Hans started to work at this conservatory.

It was quite obvious that Van der Staak was well-disposed towards him, because he came to listen in person to Hans' first concert (in Hof '88 in Almelo) after his return from Spain.

At that occasion, I got a little acquainted with him, a friendly old man that wore an artistic beret. After he had heard that Hans had spent a year in Spain, he told many stories about the realm of Generalissimo Franco that was no place for real democrats in his opinion, so he was glad that Hans had returned to Holland. Apparently, the atmosphere in Spain of the nineties had not improved much after Franco's death in 1975. Van der Staak passionately disliked the Guardia Civil: "A bunch of bloody fascists!" he grumbled.

That occasion in Almelo was not really an encounter that enlightened me about Van der Staak's significance for the guitar music in Holland. That's no surprise, I had no factual and practical knowledge of the Dutch professional guitar world in those days. It was obvious, however, that various people from the Zwolle Conservatory scene were present at that occasion. They discussed the Zwolle Guitar Weeks (currently Guitar Festival Zwolle) with great enthusiasm and there I found out that Van der Staak was one of the founders. It really is a pity that the current economic crisis has reduced this festival from weeks to the Zwolle Guitar Days at most. Let's hope that it will continue in its current layout at least.

One anecdote concerning Pieter van der Staak does come to my mind, even though it is an indirect one. It was about Van der Staak's loathing of copying sheet music.

I had been occupied for a while with the DOS Amigos Homepage and my fiddling around with musical notation software like Musicator for Windows. I converted every piece that I had

been playing on the guitar myself to electronic format, to be specific the native format of the music notation software, MIDI format for playback and PDF format for printing. Using the PDFs, I could make my own music collection for my own use. I did the same with Bailecito by Van der Staak, I liked the piece and wanted to keep it for playing later again. I put it in my collection for Latin and Pop music.

I put most of the PDF scores with a little story of mine on the web site. Thus the music became available for guitarists all over the world in both sound (MIDI playback) and on paper (if you possessed a printer to print the PDFs). As soon as Hans found out about this, he panicked. Why? Well, in those days his name was still connected to the DOS Amigos Homepage, I even designed a section to advertise for his guitar lessons that yielded him several new students.

He feared that Van der Staak would sue him with all means if he noticed that one of his pieces was on the Internet accessible to anybody, because he was adamantly against copying of sheet music. Well, I did not worry that much, but I removed the piece from the site just for Hans' comfort.

At that occasion, I saw a few of Van der Staak's original publications with red bars over the page to disorder the copying machine. The result would be that you could not copy the clef and the first notes of a staff. A primitive form of copy protection indeed, I had never seen it before. Trouble was that this method obscured the view on the first notes of a line for the player that had invested good money in the score as well. I wonder if Sony imitated this mechanism to clip the paying customer's wings even more by Digital Rights Management than the folks that copied the music?

I guess that this copy restrictive play of colours also increased the price of the scores, because colour-print is more expensive than grey-scale print. Currently time has superseded actions like this, because Internet and electronic media offers a vast amount of sheet music, both paid, pirated and free.

Years passed by and I heard nothing more about Pieter van der Staak, except in 2007, the year that he passed away. I do not know for sure if Hans, being his ex-colleague, attended his funeral. The same year the Guitar Duo DOS Amigos fell apart, so any connection with Van der Staak was broken.

Ensemble

After 2007, the year of his death, it had grown silent around Pieter van der Staak. In 2012 this changed when a few of his students decided to dedicate a guitar festival to him that would take place in Kulturhaus NIHZ in Nordhorn in June 2013. The event would accommodate an ensemble competition, ensemble workshops, master classes, concerts and last but not least a documentary about the life of Pieter van der Staak. The only requirement was that all music played on the festival had to be composed by the maestro.

The festival had a number of guests that all had been students with Pieter, or had known him well otherwise. As such amongst others his students Annette Kruisbrink, Jan Bartlema, Humphrey Baumann and Saskia Spinder participated. His widow Maria Hol was guest of honor.

I was not present at the first day, yet by the stories that I heard, I got the impression that the ensemble competition was exiting, the Guitar Quintet Hengelo had won the race. Congratulations, folks! I also heard that the evening concert had been fantastic. The atmosphere amongst the participants was so good, that the stay and talk with refreshments lasted till after three in the morning! Surprising that I did not see any sleepy head at breakfast in the morning!

The ensemble workshop was well-prepared, I received the scores of the pieces by email one week in advance. Thus, I found *Three Comedies*, *Lantern Dance*, *On a Mule in Peru*, *Minstrels and Jugglers*, *Julio* and *Happy End* in my Inbox, all compositions by Pieter van der Staak for guitar ensemble.

Three Comedies was the most extensive ensemble, three guitars and two melody instruments. During rehearsal at home I already noticed that I took the wrong staff when changing pages. To solve it, I copied the piece with Sibelius in order to hear how it sounded and to be able to print individual parts. The only disadvantage of my initiative showed during rehearsal with the ensemble, the measure numbers were different from the original because I put all pieces within one sheet. Maybe Sibelius offers some options for custom measure numbering.

I came in the second day a few minutes after nine in the morning. That was right in time, because the first ensemble session started at half past nine. In two sessions of two hours we went through the material together (3 recorder players and 7-8 guitarists) under direction of a conductor. We even had three of them - Annette, Humphrey and Jan – with assistance by Maria Hol who remarked practically (and slightly rebelliously): "Just play what's not on paper". During playing she added a rather loud extra voice on the Kulturhaus gong. Of course, every conductor had his/her own style, so it became a nice lesson in musical flexibility.

By the way, it's a good thing to have a conductor, it is quite difficult to keep your pace in a large ensemble on your own.

Rehearsing at home is nice for a rough overview of an individual part, rehearsal with the ensemble is enjoyment of the complete piece. With all pieces Van der Staak had made a composition in which the complete piece was more than the sum of the individual parts. I did like *Three Comedies* in particular, so on this page you will find a player for a Sibelius generated mp3 file for playback.

Currently I have sufficient space with my web hoster, at least more than the 100 MB it used to be. A nice opportunity to add some photographs.

First the complete ensemble, with Jan as conductor and Maria Hol, the guest of honor in the first row.

Here you see Sanna with two of her recorder students. Well done, guys, because it was a long session with at times tricky parts for the melody instruments. An extra challenge appeared the casual switching between parts within the piece and playing an octave lower or higher at times on request of the director.

Here you see the *Equipe des Guitaristes*, the left wing, from left to right Carla, Mark (that's me, said the fool) and Agnes.

And here the right wing of our *Gitarrengeellschaft*, Eveline, Marry, Nelly and Humphrey

Wherever necessary the special guests Arlette, Annette and Jan assisted with parts that required some support. I also mention Jan another time, because he took care for the slightly tricky guitar solo in Happy End. Four hours of study were sufficient to achieve a nice result in the final performance late in the afternoon. A pleasant project for all of us!

Sound Impression!

The ensemble rehearsal and final performance provided insight in a few aspects of the compositions of Pieter van der Staak. But there was more to it. That became quite clear in the Sound Image, the documentary about the life and work of Pieter van der Staak.

From this documentary, it became obvious that Annette Kruisbrink, the maker of this film, is not only proficient on the Six Strings and skilful in the composer's game on and between the Five Lines, but she is also deft with the world of scenario, image and sound on the silver screen. (Today the silver screen was the white wall behind the stage at Kulturhaus NIHZ.). The result was a honest and well composed sound image of the versatile and modest man that was Pieter van der Staak.

There is little footage of Pieter van der Staak left, but the movement of images in the documentary, quotes of statements, photographs, interviews with students and last but not least the live-performances of his music were a worthy substitution. The presentation was lively and attracted my attention until the very end. I found the text projections of a few of Van der Staak's quotations a strong feature of the documentary, because they provided a good idea of his view on music and life in general. In his statements, he remained acute until the very end.

The story of Pieter van der Staak started with his grandfather, the nineteenth century Jewish-Dutch comedian and cabaret performer Abraham de Winter. As a forerunner of the twentieth century Dutch cabaret artists like Louis Davids, Wim Sonneveld, Toon Hermans and Wim Kan, he performed on stage with comical character roles and ridiculed the then politicians in The Hague, a novelty in those days of the rather authoritarian Dutch political world that quickly considered political wit to be a kid of lese majesty.

Abraham de Winter was the ancestor of a very musical family in which the guitar and the mandolin were quite popular. Thus, Pieter van der Staak's mother taught him the basics of guitar playing. At first Pieter was not quite interested because everyone of the family fiddled on the strings, but the guitar attracted him in the end, so he became an autodidact.

He survived the Second World War, partly because his mother changed their last name to the genuine Dutch last name Van der Staak, causing his Jewish origins to be less obvious on the identification papers, the dreaded *Ausweise*.

Thus an impression developed of a guitarist that studied with Andres Segovia, Alirio Diaz and Emilio Pujol, that became a polyglot during his years in Siena, studied composition, was friends with the artists from the COBRA group (this was a group of artists consisting of amongst others Jorn, Dotremont, Noiret, Constant and Appel), gave the classical guitar a place in the professional music in Holland, founded the festival The Zwolle Guitar Weeks, published many compositions for solo and ensemble with a major role for the guitar and that

above all was an erudite teacher with a heart for his students. He taught them to take a look across the borders of their own skills, their own circle and their own discipline.

In this way, the documentary kept captivating me up to and including the credit titles, because the latter had the both atmospheric and virtuoso guitar duo *Voodoo* as background music. This music attracted me right away and I was very glad that later on this afternoon we heard the Anido Guitar Duo play this piece with a beautiful performance.

In brief: An impressive sound image that gave me a good impression of the personality and the significance of Pieter van der Staak. I would suggest to make this Sound Image available on DVD!