

HANS KOX

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This article is meant to be just an introduction to a composer that needs to be better known. It is a little out of date.

The Dutch composer, Hans Kox was born in 1930 and was a pupil of Henk Badings and studied piano with Jaap Spaanderman. Kox has written music in every genre from chamber music to opera, from theatre music to film scores, from symphonies to concertos, from unaccompanied choral works to oratorios.

When the modernist period hit Holland, Kox's music suffered unjust neglect, but, in recent times, it has enjoyed something of a renaissance. The saxophonist, John-Edward Kelly, recorded *The Stranger* for reciter and saxophone, the eminent French pianist Philippe Entremont has expressed great interest in Kox's work and the Utrecht String Quartet have done likewise. His fellow countryman David Porcelijn has also taken up Kox's music.

Kox's isolated position was due to the fact that he has always taken a tributary view of musical traditions from Bach to Schoenberg. Kox is a very gifted man, erudite and has a marvellous psychological ability in music and human understanding. He has said that we must never ignore the past lest we shall be ignored by it.

His early works show some influences of Beethoven, Bruckner, Wagner, Mahler and yet in the 1950s and 1960s he was keen to explore new music as were his modernist colleagues. He rejected innovationism in its own right, but recognised that new forms of expression were both needed and served to give a different approach to music. In some of his works, such as the Violin Concerto no. 3 of 1995, the String Quartet no. 2 of 1996 and the Cello Concerto no. 2 of 1997, his music is very 20th century, virtuosic and complex but using neo-baroque figurations and post-romantic ecstasy into satisfying works.

His three violin concertos date from 1963, 1978 and 1993 respectively and are all fine works. The city of Amsterdam commissioned the Violin Concerto no. 1. The orchestra is a small one with two clarinets, horns, trumpets, timpani, two percussionists and string orchestra. It makes for a remarkable clarity in the texture. Some have compared it to Mendelssohn's famous Violin Concerto particularly the opening. I admire the way the concerto begins with a call to attention and how the soloist takes the lead. It is a violin concerto after all. There is a predominant eight note figure and a predilection for the rising fourth. The second theme uses the vibraphone to great advantage in what could be interpreted as a song. The orchestral writing is excellent and the cadenza breath taking. There are some virtuosic fireworks and a fine use of parallel fifths with the old-fashioned harmony teachers like Prout would have objected to. Often the violin part is parlando that is to say in the manner of speech. The slow movement is a real adagio with an elaborate theme in 5/8 time. The flutter-tonguing by the two trumpets is another important feature and there seems to be a hint of a folk music style. The slow tempo does not drag and the music has the style of a rhapsodic fantasy complete with passion. The finale is really a scherzo with a stunning rhythmic figure. There is a passage of relentless virtuosity recalling Khachaturian's splendid Concerto. There are many welcome and novel features and so the concerto never becomes tedious.

The concerto is dedicated to Theo Oloff.

The Violin Concerto no. 2 of 1978 was revised in 1981 and dedicated to the Russian, Wiktor Liberman, who was the leader of the Rotterdam Philharmonic Orchestra, the concerto having been commissioned by the Dutch government. It is also in three movements. The first movement is episodic and yet the concerto is played quite often and is popular. Again the orchestra is small, two oboes, two horns and string orchestra. The solo part is capricious and the many changes in tempo calls for great control. There is a motto phrase... C flat, D and A. The solo part is agile with leaps. The second section marked *largo* reveals the composer's

ability at counterpoint and contains short-lived material which creates a very definite atmosphere. This is followed by an episode which suggests a tarantella before the larghetto is returned. The final episode, which is an allegro marcato, seems to recall Bartok.

The slow movement is like its counterpart in the first concerto in 5/8. The violin part is rhapsodic. There is one theme which is simply gorgeous and as in Shostakovich's Violin Concerto no. 1. A cadenza leads into the finale, a movement of considerable tension which includes a thoughtful adagio before a spirited sprint to the finish.

The Violin Concerto no. 3 was composed in 1993 and premiered in 1995 by Silvia Marcovici and the Netherlands Chamber Orchestra under Philippe Entremont. It has a loose structure and many changes in tempo and so the concerto has the character of a virtuosic fantasy. Thematically there are links with its predecessors. There is a *moto perpetuo* and a lot of music in a slow tempo which tempo closes the work in a sublime serenity but not before a section of new material and incredible virtuosity. There is a real sense in which this concerto is a homage to Bach as the second movement is based on the Presto from Bach's first sonata for solo violin, BWV1001, expanding the material and transfiguring it into something very original. This scherzo is followed by a movement that begins adagio before another perpetual *moto* and a slow passage of introspection and the final sprint.

The concertos are to be recorded by the amazing Silvia Marcovici on Donemus.

There is a massive choral work, *Sjoah*, for soprano, tenor, bass, chorus and orchestra which is a musical realisation of Psalm 89 and sometimes described as an oratorio. It was commissioned by NCRV Radio for the 65th anniversary of the broadcasting company and first performed in Haarlem on the 17th November 1989. It is a work of great spontaneity and drama with seven chorales. It is one of Kox's 'dark nights of history' works. His cantata *In Those Days* of 1969 commemorates the 25th anniversary of the battle of Arnhem. His Requiem for Europe written two years later in 1971 was composed in remembrance of the Second World War with the theme of destruction paramount. In 1984 came the cantata *A Child of Light* comparing the events of the holocaust with an earlier persecution of the Jews in the Old Testament book of Esther. These three works, *In Those days*, *Requiem for Europe* and *A Child of Light* are known as the War Trilogy or the War Triptych.

In Those Days is scored for two mixed choirs, eight horns, six trumpets, four trombones, tuba, six percussionists and string orchestra. The work won the Italia prix and falls into nine sections lasting a little under half an hour. The opening movement is entitled *Days of Calamity*. This is followed by a short chorale and then *Hiliteriana* and another chorale. The fifth section is entitled *Praise of Discord* followed by a third chorale and *Voice of someone calling in the wilderness* and a fourth chorale. The work ends with a *Nunc Dimittis* with the plea *Please, let us go*.

Requiem for Europe last for 45 minutes and is scored for four mixed choirs, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, four percussionists, organ and string orchestra in which the middle and lower strings make up the majority of string players. Again there is no woodwind and the music has a dark and dramatic quality. The work is in two parts, *The Fugue of Death* and *For the Lost Hopes of Humanity*.

The Anne Frank cantata *A Child of Light* is scored for soprano, contralto, bass, mixed choir and full orchestra and is subtitled *Homage to Anne Frank* and is in four movements lasting just under 45 minutes.

It may appear to be pessimistic music with a morbid preoccupation with death and destruction, but I suggest that it is not war music but remembrance music. It is lest we forget and this must never happen again. Kox tells us how things were and one commentator has said that the composer rubs our nose in it. He is sharing his concerns with us. The music of the trilogy shows the composer's development in the course of fifteen years with the clash of traditional composition with the then modernistic ideas. *In Those Days* is a passion without Biblical texts or quotes from politicians and there are moments which sound a little like excerpts

from Bach's St Matthew Passion. This enhances the message: let us never forget.

In Requiem for Europe the music has a romantic style ranging from ecstatic singing and the grief that has deeply touched the composer in his soul. In Anne Frank the music is more direct and goes straight to the point and is impressive for that.

Hans Kox wrote about another tragic but fictional event in his celebrated work Dorian Gray of the 1970s. The young man, Dorian Gray, aged but stayed young and looked the same as the portrait painted of him. But Dorian became even more dissolute and depraved and eventually died and the portrait of a beautiful young man became a hideous picture of an evil creature. In this work, Kox is advocating a morality as opposed to immorality whereas in the trilogy he is showing that war and conflict is immoral as will society be if it does not avoid such atrocities in the future.

Along with many other Dutch composers Kox has written some rather brief and intimate chamber music. The brevity may be a reaction to the works of inordinate length of Mahler, Elgar and others. The Fantasy: Through a glass darkly for alto saxophone and piano dates from 1989 and lasts ten minutes. It is not religious music as the title might suggest. The Sonata no. 4 for violin and piano of 1966 has three movements lasting about 15 minutes whereas the Cello Sonata written between 1987 and 1991 and is also cast in three movements and lasts ten minutes. The Piano Sonata no. 2 lasts about the same time and the String Quartet no. 1 of 1955 last about fifteen minutes.

Kox does not accept that traditional forms are dead saying that there is nothing new under the sun. He finds minimal music to be very conservative, regressive and dreadfully dogmatic. As to composing himself he quotes Blaise Pascal, "The heart has reason that reason does not understand." Kox expounds this by saying that the heart is the core of the human personality and reason and understanding is the rational mind the memory the knowledge and our mental equipment. But it is the heart that triumphs and must triumph in music and other art. Musical form refers to what is rational whereas feelings, the heart, refers to emotions. "Can you empty the form of feeling and heart? Can music ennoble us? Yes. Can music destroy? I believe so," says Kox who adds, "both Beethoven and Wagner were misused for Nazi means but that says nothing about the music. Music can stir in us a passion. We can highly value some works but the pendulum swings and some composers are not influenced by fashion since their genius is timeless."

"There is a lot of fashion in music and, as Leopardi wrote, "Fashion is death's mother." Fashion gives birth to death. Composing is both a mystery and a struggle to express myself. But, as Magritte said, "You cannot talk about mystery. You have to be captured by it."

The Piano Sonata no. 2 and the String Quartet no. 1 characterise Kox's interest in tradition but it is an interest that leads to originality. Both pieces were inspired by Haydn. The Piano Sonata no. 2 is proud and demonic but not proud with the annoying pomposity of Elgar since there is irony in the piece.

Curiously the first movement of the Violin Sonata no. 4 marked *con afflizione* has the rhythmic motif represents pained boredom, or ennui. The tragic character continues in the slow movement and the finale begins as a song based on a theme by Wim Stenz for whom the work was written. The Cello Sonata is a marvellous essay in polyphony with direct, passionate and approachable music.

Kox's music is worthy of investigation and I urge readers to do so.