

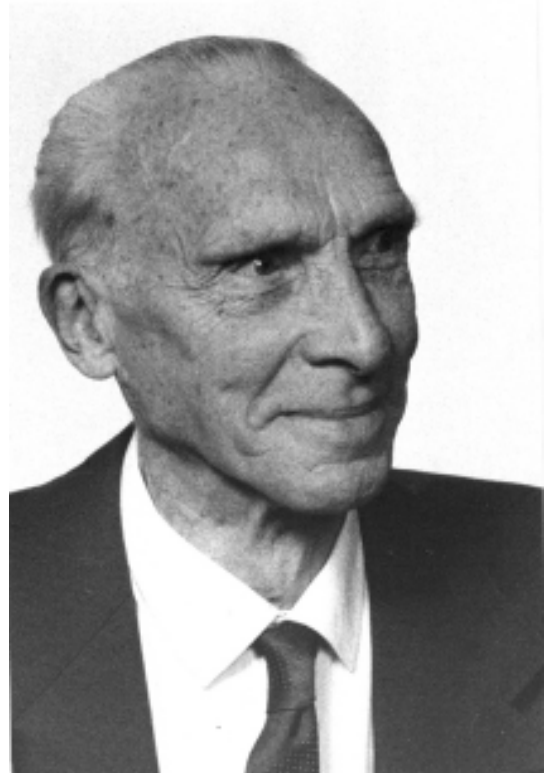
LEON ORTHEL

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Leon Orthel is a Dutch composer, another victim of the fickle music world as he is somewhat unknown outside of the Netherlands, and that is a disgrace.

He was born on 4 October 1905 at Roosendal. At the age of sixteen, he studied with Johan Wagenaar at the Royal Conservatory in The Hague. He also studied with Andre Spoor and Van Beijmin. Then he went to Berlin to study with Paul Juon and Curt Sachs at the Berlin Hochschule. He returned to his studies with Wagenaar in 1930.

He met Sara Gerarda Jostling a fellow student at The Hague who received her degree. She married Leon and taught for a while but wanted to raise a family and, in those days, this was regarded as being incompatible with a career. Frans was born on 18 April 1932 and became a virologist specialising in animal vaccines, and Rolf was born on 18 September 1936 and became a maker of documentary films



When Leon began composing he was fastidious and remained so throughout his life. He withdrew several of his works because they were 'not good enough.' He was also searching for his own style which every composer should do but, alas, few do.

His personal style is probably first shown in his Symphony no. 1 of 1936. He wrote six symphonies. In his Symphony no 2 and in his Symphony no 3 he used twelve note series.

The Symphony no 3 of 1943 had to be concealed from the Nazis as there is a quote in the score from Psalm 140, " Evil shall hunt the violent man to overthrow him. " There is sarcasm in the scherzo and the trio sounds like a children's song while the finale is a march as is the finale of the Symphony no. 1. Holland was occupied by the Nazis, of course.

He was an excellent pianist and performed concertos. Some have said that his Symphony no 4 of 1949 is really a piano concerto and written as a homage to his mother. It is a work that won much praise but how many people know it? He was also an excellent teacher teaching piano at the Conservatory of the Hague for thirty years. He was also professor of composition at the Amsterdam Conservatory from 1949, Chairman of the Royal Dutch Artists Association (1947 -1969) and on the Board of the Johan Wagenaar Foundation (1957-1972).

He was admired by pianists everywhere. His Piano Sonatina no 5 was written for the exceptional Cor de Groot in 1959 who had suddenly become paralysed in his right hand. So the work is for left hand only. Earlier Orthel's Cinq Etudes Caprices of 1957 were written for the pianist Paul Neissing. His ten piano sonatinas were written over many years until 1981. The second sonatina lasts one minute and was originally written on a postcard.

He may not have been wise to write his very short Hommages in the style of Debussy and Ravel. He did not write an opera or any choral work but his 87 songs deserve attention... about 25 songs are from Dutch poets and 54 from Rilke.

And now a few comments on some of his pieces.

His short orchestral piece *Evocazione* is a little masterpiece, concise, brilliantly orchestrated, exciting with an unobtrusive military feel and it is not pompous. It is instantly likable and durable. It could pass for film music in a particularly dramatic scene.

The *Symphony no 3* opens with a moving adagio with luscious themes and wonderful orchestration; it speaks of freedom, freedom from Nazi oppression and the desire for peace. There is also the psalm melody.

The sarcasm in the impressive scherzo is well caught and the Nazi menace is there. One can only admire the orchestration and the memorable thematic material. The simplicity of the trio section is profound and may suggest innocent children affected by the obscenity of war. Then we return to the menace of the Nazi occupation with dramatic and inspiring music.

There follows an adagio of beauty but, again, it is never mawkish or sentimentality adrift. The exquisite oboe solo is a gem and the writing for strings is, as always, first rate. There is tenderness without any hint of weakness. At 3.30 there is music which will melt the hardest of hearts with the persistent one note on the timpani. A rich climax of glorious romanticism is followed by some engaging flippancy suggesting children at play.

The finale is powerful but not overwhelmingly so, and is a message of hope. It may suggest a clarion call to resist the oppressors and a call for unity. Whatever one can read into it, it is music of quality. The psalm melody reappears indicating the promise that all tyranny will cease. The string music suggests Shostokovich's *Symphony no 11* but that Russian symphony was written fourteen years later. At 3.25 there is a shattering but short-lived climax and the repeated one note on the timpani, the heartbeat of the nation. The music becomes agitated and is very exciting yet why is it not well-known? That it is not known is a scandal. The work ends with an adagio coda but the military might of the evil Nazis are there in an all *marcia*.

This symphony gives real satisfaction. It is a veritable masterpiece. I would not be without it. We are bombarded with works of far less quality and fine works like this are ignored.

The *Symphony no 4* has the most arresting opening you will ever hear, the unequalled curtain raiser. Enter the piano with stunning originality and virtuosity. This is red-blooded music and just marvel at those soaring strings. The music is, as I say, original as all great music is. Some of the music is simply breath taking. When you consider much European piano music of the 20th century had nothing to say and was just atmosphere, it is very welcome to have a work which eclipses that.

Some of his works include elements based on his childhood such as the ringing of church bells on his way to school and children's songs. The bells are represented by the piano in the *Symphony no 4* contrasted with a church melody.

Another forgotten composer? Forgotten because he is modern? His music is usually tonal and uplifting. As Frank Martin said there is some music that is beyond words.

Orthel died at The Hague on 6 September 1985. His wife died a few days later,

His works include:

- Scherzo for piano and orchestra Op 10
- Cello Concerto, Op 11 (1939)
- Symphony 1* (1933-1935)
- Sonata for violin and piano no 2

Symphony no 2 (Sinfonia piccola) (1940)
Symphony no 3 (1943)
Symphony no 4 (Sinfonia Concertante) (1949)
Cello Sonata no 2 (1958)
Symphony no 5 (Musica Iniziale) (1960)
Symphony no 6 (1961)
String Quartet, Op 50 (1964)
Viola Sonata, Op 52 (1965)
Organ Sonata (1973)
Trumpet Concerto, Op 68 (1974)
Evocazione for orchestra (1977)
Second Suite for orchestra, Op 88 (1980)
Music for double bass and orchestra (1981)
Cello Concerto no 2, Op 95 (1982)

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