

LEX VAN DELDEN

Dr David C F Wright

Lex van Delden was born Alezander Zwaap on 10 September 1919 the only son of Wolf Zwaap, a school teacher, and his wife, Sara Oliver. He took piano lessons from an early age, first with Martha Zwaga and, later, with the celebrated pianist Cor de Groot. He started composing at the age of eleven when a long illness prevented him from playing the piano. He set poems by Guido Gezelle and remained self-taught as a composer. At the age of fourteen he was accompanying the German dancer Gertrud Liestikow and was often in the company of one of the most famous Dutch composers of the time, Sam Dresden. But it was in medicine that Lex enrolled at the Amsterdam University in 1938. In 1940, the Germans invaded Holland and, as Lex was a Jew, he had to give up his studies to be a brain surgeon and he never took up medicine again due to the explosion of a carbide lamp which blinded him in one eye. He joined the underground resistance movement and was commended for his bravery by both the President of the USA and the Supreme Commander of the Allied Forces. This is remarkable when you think of other composers who fled the war in cowardice since as Benjamin Britten. After the liberation of Holland he used the name van Delden a name he used while in the resistance.

The first public performance of any of his works was in 1940 with the song cycle *L'Amour* written the year before. It is scored for soprano, flute, clarinet and string trio. When the war was over he found his way in Dutch cultural life and was the first composer/musical director of the Dutch Ballet Group *Op Vrije Voeten* which later became the *Scapino Ballet* company. From 1947 he was the music editor of the daily underground newspaper *Het Paroot* where he remained until 1982.

The Music Prize of the City of Amsterdam was awarded to him for his cantata *Rubaiyat* of 1949. During the 1950s and 1960s he was a respected composer and many of his works were commissioned by the Dutch government, Dutch radio and the city of Amsterdam and received many performances with such conductors as Eduard van Beinum, Bernard Haitink, Charles Munch and the splendid George Szell. Van Delden was made a knight of the Royal Order of Oranje-Nassau and received the freedom of the city of Amsterdam where he died on 1 July 1988.

There are three string quartets. The Quartet no. 1, Opus 43 dates from 1954 and is in four movements. It was written at a time of deep depression when his wife was in the early stages of mental illness. It was even more disturbing since their marriage had been idyllic.

The opening movement is a fine allegro in which the beautiful colours of the viola are prominent. This is a possible acknowledgement of Paul Godwin, a Dutch-Polish student of Hubay. Godwin played in the Holland (later Netherlands) Quartet and van Delden's String Quartet no. 1 is dedicated to him. The second movement is marked *Fantasia* and is a lament recalling the Holocaust and also recalling happier days. The horror of the holocaust is here which left the composer bereft of his whole family. There are some astringent harmonies. The third movement is a delicate scherzo and the finale is not altogether successful as the continuity is often lost after a sparkling opening

The String Quartet no. 2, Opus 86 dates from 1965 and is an arrangement of the composer's Symphony no. 8 for string orchestra of the previous year. In that form it had a highly successful premiere by the Netherlands Chamber Orchestra under David Zinman at the 1965 Holland Festival. The work is faultlessly structured with an opening movement *Preludio-Allegro-Postlude* which has a telling atmosphere and serenity contrasting with the agitation of the middle section. The music is clean, open and never claustrophobic and all the instruments share the same importance. The central movement is a brief scherzo marked *con moto* in which the pizzicato section is absorbing and holds the attention. The finale opens with a *lento* leading to an allegro. A marvellous atmosphere is caught and tremendous and various feelings are portrayed but they are not of the cloying variety. It is all written with a sure hand and expert craftsmanship and by a master. Structurally, the music has an enviable poise. As a quartet it was premiered by the New Amsterdam Quartet at the Lincoln Centre, New York on 15 November 1966.

The String Quartet no. 3, Opus 106 dates from 1979 and was commissioned by F. Fopma, an amateur violinist who was an admirer of the apocalyptic and foreboding paintings of Carel Willimnk. Fopma wanted the composer to base the four movements on four Willink paintings and for the quartet to be premiered on a newly completed set of instruments cast in the Guarneri mould.

The paintings were Ant-eaters in Landscape, Superfluous Witnesses, Portrait of Mrs Fopma and The Eternal Scream.

Some believe the paintings did inspire the corresponding movements and that the portrait of Mrs Fopma is a serene and tender slow movement. However, it is the music that counts and it stands on its own feet as four impressive essays. It is expertly written for the medium and presents no aural problems to any sensible listener. The furioso second movement generates fire and the slow movement is both profound and deeply satisfying, beautifully written and showing impeccable craftsmanship. The finale has no eternal scream in it but has an telling atmosphere.

Another string work is Musica di Catasto, Opus 108, dating from 1981 and scored for string quartet and double bass. It is an intrada and slow passacaglia. It was commissioned by the Dutch Ministry of Culture to celebrate the 150th anniversary in 1982 of the Land Registry in the Netherlands. The weakness of the piece is the quote from the 1812 Overture by Tchaikovsky which work commemorated the withdrawal of the Napoleonic armies which also happened in 1812. The work is also suitable for string orchestra and, in that form, it was premiered in the New Land Registry Office in Alkmaar on 11 May 1982. Putting aside the Tchaikovsky quote, it is a good piece and the passacaglia is often very impressive indeed.

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