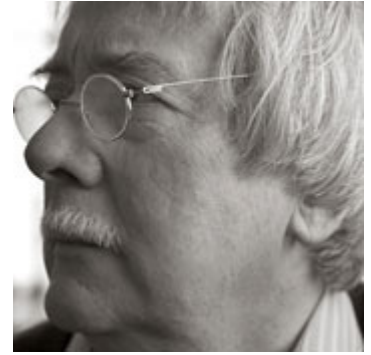


OTTO KETTING

Dr David C F Wright

Otto Ketting was born in Amsterdam on 3 September 1935 and is, without doubt, one of the finest Dutch composers of our age and a complete musician. He is a multi-prize winning composer.

He is the son of the important Dutch composer Piet Ketting who was born in 1905. Otto studied the trumpet at the Conservatory of The Hague and composition with the distinguished composer Karl Amadeus Hartmann in Munich.



Ketting was active for about six years as a trumpeter in the Residente Orchestra in The Hague to 1958. He was professor of composition at the Rotterdam Conservatory from 1967 to 1971 and at the Royal Conservatory of Music in The Hague from 1971 to 1974. He is accomplished conductor not only in his own works but the works of other contemporary composers.

In 1983 he was artistic director to the Utrecht Symphony Orchestra

Some of his earliest compositions are the Concerto for organ solo (1953), Sinfonietta (1955), Sonata for brass quintet (1955) and a Piano Sonata.

His Symphony no. 1 dates from 1957 -1959 and is cast in one movement lasting about 17 minutes and was premiered by the Concertgebouw Orchestra under the excellent Hans Rosbaud on 1 February 1961. The programme also included Handel's Concerto Grosso op 3 no. 1, the Orchestral Pieces by Berg, having their Dutch premiere, and Beethoven's Piano Concerto no. 5. It is said that the Symphony and the Due Canzoni were the first works by Ketting in the serial mode and an incredibly fine work the symphony is. It has a tremendous power and a perfect structure. The whole work is coherent and utterly satisfying. Some believe the music recalls Berg. The orchestration is rich and lush and absolutely faultless and this symphony is regarded as one of the milestones in Dutch symphonic music.

The Due Canzoni is more repressed music showing the clear influence of the master, Anton Webern and was written about the same time as the symphony. The first canzone is an adagio and the second alternates adagio and allegro twice. The orchestration is less complex than the symphony and the music is generally restrained although there are those who repudiate this.

Due Canzoni won the Gaudeamus Composition Prize in 1958 and was successfully performed at the 1963 Warsaw Festival. His Passacaglia had won the Gaudeamus Composition Prize in 1957.

Like his father, Otto was interested in modern music and new developments. Piet Ketting was a pupil of Pijper and a tireless advocate of contemporary music introducing many new works to Holland often piano works as he was a very gifted pianist himself. He taught at the Rotterdam Conservatory and was excellent at educational talks on the radio.

The years 1963 and 1964 saw four ballets namely Barriers, Choreo-struction, Interview and The Golden Key.

One of his most successful works is Time Machine of 1974 which received performances during the ISCM Festival of 1974 and further performances in New York, Philadelphia, Washington DC, San Francisco, La Rochelle, Liverpool, Munich, Hanover, Vienna, Hong Kong and various locations in the Netherlands. Time Machine won the Kees van Baaren prize of the Johan Wagenaarstichting.

There are many different characteristics in Ketting's music and yet they are inclusive. They are never out of place. There is seriousness and humour; there is playfulness and sublimity.

His gift for orchestration was helped by being a trumpeter in the Residente Orchestra and there is a real joy in

his Concertino for two trumpets of 1958 which he composed in two weeks for his trumpet diploma examination which may explain the brevity of this six movement work. One movement lasts for only 65 seconds yet none of the movements are trite. You may detect the neo-classicism of Stravinsky. The third movement has pre-echoes of Ketting's Symphony for saxophones and orchestra of 1978 and the lyrical climax seems to reappear in his music drama Ithaka of 1986. In the Concertino's finale there is a martial theme with blazing horn figures. The Concertino is a delightfully enjoyable piece.

The symphony for saxophones and orchestra was broadcast over radio stations in 25 different countries within a short time of its successful premiere. It was conducted by Ernest Bour at the Warsaw Festival.

It won second prize in the UNESCO Rostrum of Composers and won the Matthijs Vermeulen Prize.

The Variazioni for orchestra were composed in 1960 being a commission from Dutch Radio. Here is a juxtaposition of the highly disciplined serial technique and the more traditional and therefore predictable tonal elements. The theme itself is a passacaglia and there are hints of the slow movement of Berg's Chamber Concerto particularly in the choice of instrumentation. The rhythmic integrity of the piece is a helpful guide for the listener.

Collage no. 9 caused a sensation if not a riot. It dates from 1963, six years before the demonstrations at Notenrakers when a group of angry men disturbed a concert at the Concertgebouw with Haitink conducting. The protest seemed to be over the future of Dutch music. Ketting, like Hans Werner Henze, believes that changes in music could not be forced upon people by simply overthrowing tradition but by the combination of tradition with new styles as shown in his Variazioni.

Collage no. 9 has been likened to Haydn's Farewell Symphony. It begins with only the timpanist on stage attending to five bongos from which a rhythmic figure appears and the audience is getting restless and does not realise that the piece has begun. Several musicians and the conductor take their places on stage without being noticed and the stage fills up with strands of music from 22 performers that becomes a serious drama. Then the piece goes into reverse and the percussionist, who started the piece, is the last to leave the stage.

At a recording of this piece the audience noises are retained. There is a screaming woman at the beginning and insincere clapping in ridicule. The work will be deemed avant garde but it fulfils its title.

Ketting has written three operas: Dummies (1974), O, gig, rhinoceros (O, thou rhinoceros) (1977) and Ithaka (1986) to his own libretto, which was premiered as the opening performance of the new Amsterdam Opera House (Het Muziektheater) in September 1986. In October 1990 he conducted the premiere of his Symphony no. 3 with the Radio Philharmonic Orchestra in the Amsterdam Concertgebouw. It was awarded the American Barlow Prize. In 1991 he conducted contemporary music ensembles at the Rotterdam Conservatory.

He published a series of essays on music, De Ongeruste Parapluie, in 1981. He has written programme notes and other literary works especially about Matthijs Vermeulen including the scenario for the film about that composer, De laatste Reis. He also wrote Highlights of the Dutch Repertoire 1930- 50.

In 1994 he completed a four-piece composition for ensemble: De Overtocht (The Passage, 1972), Het oponthoud (The Delay, 1993), De Aankomst (The Arrival, 1993) and Kom, over de zeeën (Come over the seas, 1994).

The year 2007 saw the completion of his Symphony no. 4.

Copyright David C F Wright. This article, or any part of it, however small, must not be copied, used, reproduced, downloaded or stored in any mechanical or retrieval system without the prior written consent of the author. Failure to comply is illegal, being theft, and in breach of International Copyright Law and will render any offender liable to action at law.