

Book Review

Helen H. Metzelaar: *From Private to Public Spheres. Exploring Women's Role in Dutch Music Life from c.1700 to c.1880 and Three Case Studies*. Utrecht: Koninklijke Vereniging voor Nederlandse Muziekgeschiedenis, 1999. 319pp. ISBN 90 6375 178 8.

This meticulously researched dissertation, which was reworked for publication, is part of a series published by the Koninklijke Vereniging voor Nederlandse Muziekgeschiedenis (Royal Society for Dutch Music History). The association has already published a number of interesting works, on the art of the organ in Haarlem from 1400 to the present, on the history of the organ in Utrecht, and on the keyboard music of Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck, to name just a few.

The main merit of Metzelaar's study is that she discusses the lives of Dutch female composers during the 18th and 19th century against the background of the social structure of the period. This makes the book very relevant to modern times, in which feminism is constantly discussed in newspapers and on TV. The only conclusion can be that women have come a long way. Not until 1863 was a law passed permitting girls to attend secondary schools (p.28). In the 18th century the price of concert tickets for women was about half of that for men, which was no doubt a welcome relief, but the fact speaks volumes about their being kept in poverty. Indeed, one almost incredible story about an Italian singer, Francesca Cuzzoni, who performed in Holland in the 1740s, confirms this vividly. She was paid so poorly that she was imprisoned as a debtor, with the result that

"she was conveyed each evening from prison to the theatre and from the theatre back to prison" (p.73).

The book is divided into two parts. Part I has two chapters, "From Home to Affiliations" and "Women Musicians Emerge." Part II contains the three case studies: Josina van Boetzelaer, née van Aerssen (1733-1797), Gertrude van den Bergh (1793-1840), and Hermina Amersfoort-Dijk (1821-1892). Part I informs us about the two roles that women could play at the end of the 18th and in the 19th century. Their first role was as vocalists. In this context it is interesting to note that "Mozart's *Don Giovanni* was first presented in Amsterdam in 1793" - thus just two years after Mozart's death - "long before Paris (1805), Rome (1811) and London (1817)" (p.29). "The profession of virtuoso pianist was the second area, after singing, to open up to women performers ... Women, the emotional sex, were considered well-suited in expressing romantic sentiments and piano music was one of the vehicles of expression for such sentiments" (p.78). In addition to Dutch performers, foreign celebrities were also invited, among them Clara Wieck-Schumann, the wife of Robert Schumann, who performed in the Netherlands in 1853, 1855, 1863, 1876 and 1877. In time another area opened to women, namely choral singing, and the 19th century even saw the appearance of female choir conductors.

The first of the three case studies concerns Josina van Boetzelaer-van Aerssen. Belonging to Dutch nobility both by descent and

through her husband, it is not surprising that she was a lady in waiting to both Anna, wife of the stadholder Willem IV (1747-1751), and after her death in 1759, to her daughter Princess Carolina. It was Josina's good luck that both ladies were very much interested in music. "Princess Carolina organized Sunday concerts at the Oude Hoff Palace ... In 1765 she invited Leopold Mozart to bring his children Maria Anna and Wolfgang" (p.112). (In that year Wolfgang was nine years old). Thus, while Josina's husband was pursuing a military career, and although she had to fulfil her duties at court, she none the less started to compose. "She refers to the Italian musician Francesco Pasquale Ricci (1732-1817) as her teacher. Ricci resided in the Dutch Republic for a lengthy period" (p.119). It is therefore not surprising that the arias she composed are set to Italian texts. Although I am not really in a position to judge van Boetzelaer's music on the basis of the short excerpts that Metzelaar provides, I am impressed by the originality of aria 1, op. 4, of which 25 bars are given here. The chromatic line of the theme sounds audacious for a composition of c.1780, especially when you compare it to the music of one of Boetzelaer's contemporaries, Pieter Hellendaal, whose concerto grosso, op. 3 no. 1, sounds very much inspired by Handel.

Gertrude van den Bergh differs from the other two women composers in that she was not financially independent and her musical activities were her source of income. This instance demonstrates not only the prejudices against women in Dutch society of the 19th century, but also the fact that women apparently accepted the status quo. Van den Bergh felt honoured that the Maatschappij tot

Bevordering der Toonkunst (Society for the Advancement of Music) chose her as a member of merit in 1835. Apparently she was the only woman member for the next 24 years. One of the tasks of the members was to adjudicate compositions. In her letter of thanks van den Bergh wrote: "I must openly admit that as a woman I feel too weak to judge over the compositions of others" (p.173). Van den Bergh was a child prodigy, not only as a pianist but also as a composer. Already at the age of nine, in 1802, she composed a sonata for harpsichord. It is also exceptional that she was an admirer of the music of J.S. Bach, when we consider that in 1848 a Dutch critic still dared to write "Bach is great but not a genius" (p.170). Unfortunately, only seven more compositions plus part of an eighth have survived, though we know of other works by her. If I may comment on just one of them, *Lied für Piano-Forte*, composed either in 1832 or after, it is quite obviously inspired by Mendelssohn's famous *Lieder ohne Worte* (Songs without Words). Judging by the excerpts provided in the book, it is a lovely piece but not particularly original.

Of the three, Hermina Amersfoort-Dijk was undoubtedly the most prolific composer. Unfortunately again, only six compositions have survived, but there must have been at least forty, because her full-scale oratorio *Gottes Allgegenwart* (God's Ubiquitous Presence) carries the opus number 40. This considerable musical output is the more remarkable since in 1855, three years after her marriage to Jacob Amersfoort, the latter bought 200 hectares of land in the newly reclaimed Haarlemmermeer Polder, and after three more years he had realized his dream of "construct[ing] a farm mansion

and numerous buildings, including a church house, a cattle shed, a supervisor's house, plus nine homes for his personnel" (p.225). Hermina joined her husband and was supposed to partake equally in the maintenance of the farm, as is evidenced by what Jacob said in a talk to the scientific and cultural society Felix Meritis: "In case a landowner wants to practise husbandry himself, he should own [sic] a wife who does not oppose his wishes and who does not consider it beneath herself to keep an eye on the milking and the garden or the chicken house" (p.225). And indeed, remarkable as it may seem to us, in 1863 this talented composer "submitted home-made dairy products to a contest held by the Hollandsche Maatschappij van Landbouw [Dutch Agricultural Society] in Haarlem, winning second prize for her butter" (p.230).

Judging by the ample excerpts provided by Metzelaar from Amerfoort-Dijk's major composition, the oratorio *Gottes Allgegenwart*, set for four vocal soloists, mixed chorus and orchestra and written in a style reminiscent of Handel and Mendelssohn, it is obviously a well-crafted work and well worth a live performance.

Clearly the march "to Public Spheres" was a slow one. The author considers that not until after 1880 did the public status of women composers significantly change. As an example she points to the commission which Cornélie van Oosterzee (1863-1943) received "to write a cantata for the opening of the Nationale Tentoonstelling Vrouwenarbeid [National Exhibition of Women's Work] in 1898 in The Hague" (p.295).

If I have any criticism to make of this book, it is that the author is prone to providing very detailed genealogies of the composers under discussion, which seem of little relevance to their musical activities. However, this study is a very welcome contribution to an aspect of Dutch music history of which little has been known till now.

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