

## Maarten 't Hart and music

*Michiel Horn*

Music is central to the work of novelist and essayist Maarten 't Hart (b. 1944). He plays the piano and organ creditably, and he has written with great insight about two of his favorite composers, J.S. Bach and W.A. Mozart. This article focuses on the role of music in his novel *Het woeden der gehele wereld* (1993), a *Bildungsroman*, murder mystery, and Holocaust tale told from the point of view of Alexander Goudveyl, who escapes from a background in which music has no place to become a pianist and composer.

Key terms: Maarten 't Hart; *Onder de korenmaat*; *Het woeden der gehele wereld*; Bach; Schubert; Mozart; Fauré.

Best known for his best-selling novels, collections of short stories, essays, and volumes of memoirs, Maarten 't Hart (b. 1944) has also written knowledgeably about Johann Sebastian Bach and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart ('t Hart 2000, 2006a).<sup>1</sup> He is a committed musicologist as well as a serious amateur musician who plays organ and piano. When I first visited him in Warmond ten years ago, I was amazed to see a Bösendorfer concert grand in his living room. That is an instrument any professional pianist would be glad to use.

One result of Maarten's musical interests is that music almost invariably plays an important role in his fiction. A recent example is *Het psalmenoproer* (2006b), which uses a musical dispute within the eighteenth-century Reformed Church as a key plot element in the story of a Maassluis shipowner, Roemer Stroombreker. It contains an enjoyable set piece in which Stroombreker encounters the touring young Mozart in The Hague and overhears him as he is practicing (62-4). In the even more recent *Verlovingstijd* (2009), a chance exposure childhood to classical music, in this case a Concerto grosso by Händel, shapes the life of the novel's central character (53-5, 106).

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<sup>1</sup> This paper was presented at the annual CAANS-ACAEN Conference in Waterloo, Ontario, on May 27, 2012. All translations are my own; page numbers refer to the original Dutch text.



*Maarten 't Hart playing the organ in the Evangelische Kirchengemeinde in Cologne.  
Photographer unknown. March 20, 2011. Courtesy Maarten 't Hart.*

The two novels in which music looms largest are those in which the composer Alexander Goudveyl is the protagonist. The first is *Onder de korenmaat* (1990), which explores the course of a doomed love affair between the 45-year old Alexander and a woman fifteen years younger. The second is *Het woeden der gehele wereld* (1993), a *Bildungsroman* that deals with Alexander's life from age eight into his twenties. A prologue describing a series of incidents in May, 1940, and an epilogue that takes the novel into the early 1990s, help us to understand not only him but also the background to his life.

I want to use *Het woeden der gehele wereld* to show how music helps the plot along and helps us to create an image of Alexander as a would-be composer and a man. He takes his first musical steps as a child who, with the help of a book of instructions, teaches himself to play piano on an old Blüthner he finds in the warehouse of his scrap-dealer father:

As I burrowed deeper into the volume, I knew with growing certainty that another world existed, ... a world peopled by names never heard in my part of town: Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert. The book contained a piece by that Bach, ... with the title *Allegretto quieto* that you could play and play without ever becoming tired of it. You could whistle it in the street, and it really did seem as though it protected you... And the book contained a piece by that other man, Schubert, with the simple title of *Trio*, a piece in A-flat major and devilish hard to play. It didn't protect you at all. On the contrary: it made you defenseless, it stripped your skin off. Every time you whistled it, it filled your eyes with tears. Then it seemed as if the whole world was dissolving into sweet sadness, as if it would always be November and you would have to wander forever along drizzle-gleaming streets at dusk.

(t Hart 1993, 36)

These are the first of a series of epiphanies in which music is central and which are crucially important to the direction that Alexander's life takes.

That Alexander, at age twelve, finds a piano teacher, Alice Keenids,<sup>2</sup> is serendipitous. That he gains access to a Bösendorfer after his father has sold the Blüthner is not serendipitous, although he does not understand at the time why the pharmacist Simon Minderhout offers him the use of this magnificent instrument. But both Alice and Simon provide the occasion for further insights into music and its meaning. They also unintentionally lead him closer to the answer to a question that has haunted him from December 22, 1956, when he becomes an aural but not an eye-witness to the murder of the policeman Arend Vroombout: who was the murderer? The question is all the more important because Alexander suffers from an obsession: from the age of seven he has feared that God is seeking to kill him, and he has come to believe that the murderer may be the agent of God's plan.

A few years after the murder, Alexander and his friend William, who is Alice's younger son, are spending New Year's Eve in the company of Minderhout. The pharmacist speculates about the reasons why music does what it does, why

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<sup>2</sup> This is a made-up name that I changed to Keating in my as yet unpublished translation of the novel.

it means so much to people, expressing the view that it is because hearing is the first of the senses to work:

A child can already hear in the fourth month of pregnancy. Touch, smell, sight – these don't function yet, can't function yet. But hearing is already at work; the child hears its mother's voice and seems to recognize it very quickly. In the womb there's hearing, nothing else. There's the familiar rhythm of the mother's heartbeat, and her voice, and when she sings ... My theory is that people are musical if they had a mother who sang a lot during pregnancy.

(t Hart 1993, 144)

Alexander and William both protest that their mothers don't sing. Minderhout suggests that each of the boys was subjected to music in other ways, then puts on the turntable "the most beautiful piece of music" he knows: the closing scene from *Le nozze di Figaro*:

A male voice sang 'Contessa, perdono, perdono, perdono,' and a woman sang something in response, and after that the choir resumed. At the time I thought the music was actually not all that special, while now, many years later, I, too, regard those twenty-seven bars as among the most beautiful inspirations ever to enter a human heart.

(t Hart 1993, 145-6)

Even greater than Mozart among Alexander's musical loves is Bach. Just before going to Leiden University to study pharmacology he is visiting his piano teacher. Seeking to end an argument with one of her sons, she puts a record of Bach's Cantata No. 104 on the turntable:

Up to that moment ... I had always been vaguely convinced ... that Bach's cantatas were occasional pieces ... Then those opening bars of *Du Hirte Israel, höre* rang out, and a red mist came over my eyes. ... How strange that someone who has been dead for more than two hundred years can mean more to you than any living person. How puzzling that you are able to look up with such deep veneration to someone who exists for you only by way of sounds made not by him but by instruments or by the voices of other people. And yet I knew, after that cantata, with its immortal opening chorus and that still more immortal bass aria, that all my life I would love Bach above all else, with all my heart and all my soul and all my strength and all my mind. In a certain sense I, too, made my profession of faith that Sunday, I also found my God. Only my God's name was Bach, and the fact that other gods later joined him or were there from the beginning – Mozart, Schubert, Verdi, Wagner – will not make him jealous, for my deepest, greatest, and longest-lasting love is for Johann Sebastian Bach,

and especially the Bach who revealed himself to me that Sunday, the Bach of the cantatas, the Bach who composed the most beautiful melodies in existence, one of the high points of that awe-inspiring body of work being the bass aria from the Cantata No. 104.

(’t Hart 1993, 181-2)

A piece of music by Mozart introduces him aurally to the man whom he later comes to think of as the murderer he has been fearing, the violinist and conductor Aaron Oberstein. Alexander has been invited by one of his pharmacology professors, Bram Edersheim, to join him and his wife in a trio while their usual pianist is away on a visiting professorship in the United States. Afterwards, as they are drinking wine, Edersheim plays a record of Mozart’s *Mauerische Trauermusik*, performed under the baton of Oberstein. Deeply moved, Alexander decides he wants to have this work in this version played at his funeral (’t Hart 1993, 194).

Yet another piece of music leads him to his wife. He is accompanying the conductor’s daughter Joanna, a mezzo soprano, as she sings Gabriel Fauré’s *Au bord de l’eau*:

The way she sang, effortlessly, virtually without vibrato, and with the most beautiful legato one can imagine, oh, words can’t describe it. And then to think that, even in the oeuvre of Fauré, “Au bord de l’eau” is of an incomprehensible and unequalled beauty, and yet of a wondrous simplicity! But perhaps it was also the text that deeply affected me. ...I heard the text word for word, Sully Prudhomme’s words that speak of murmuring water at the foot of a willow tree. They took me back to the abandoned nursery with its waving white morning glory in which I had been a visitor for one summer, had fished for one summer, had escaped for one summer from the quarrels of the world. Thanks to Prudhomme and Fauré, I saw that stream before me again, flowing slowly and dotted with swirling circles, and it seemed as if I were being promised that I could once again disregard the quarrels of the world if in my life, too, I could make room for love. I looked up at Joanna from the keyboard and conquered my fear of that God who had sought to kill Moses by the way in the inn, and I got up and said: “You sang that incredibly beautifully.” She smiled gratefully, and I put a cautious arm around her.

And so it came to pass that I married Joanna.

(’t Hart 1993, 253-4)

Perhaps surprisingly, music does not play a central role in the epilogue, which centers on the first meeting between Alexander and his father-in-law. This meeting fails to answer the questions that have been nagging Alexander for years and instead raises possibilities that he is altogether unwilling to deal with.

The one piece that is mentioned is an arrangement of the Mozart soprano aria *Ruhe sanft, mein holdes Leben*,<sup>3</sup> that Alexander has prepared for his friend Hester Edersheim and that has become the object of Oberstein's scorn. It is tempting to interpret this arrangement as a metaphor for Alexander's own existence, since we become aware in the course of the epilogue that he is not the person we, and he, thought he was. But I gladly leave this matter to professional critics of literature. What is clear is that music is central to the novel, and that a knowledge and appreciation of classical music enhances one's appreciation of this and other books by Maarten 't Hart.



*Maarten 't Hart in his back yard. Photo Patricia Nauta. November 16, 2010.  
Courtesy Maarten 't Hart.*

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<sup>3</sup> From Mozart's incomplete and rarely-performed opera *Zaïde* (1780). I have heard it in concert performance; the aria is gorgeous.

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## About the author

Born in Baarn, in the Netherlands, Michiel Horn came to Victoria, B.C., in 1952. He has a Ph.D. from the University of Toronto and has taught Canadian History at York University since 1968. He is the author of many books, scholarly articles, and reviews; recently he has also become a literary translator, Dutch to English. In 2002 he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada.