

Shedding light on forgotten music

Playing lost flute repertoire from the Netherlands in World War II

by AVNER GEIGER

In March 2020, I found myself, as many of us did, with ample spare time on my hands. With no concerts in sight, I saw this unusual free time as a creative opportunity to explore forgotten, but fascinating flute repertoire. A musical treasure box which had remained closed for decades was opened, and I started a process of exploration and discovery, shedding new light and bringing forgotten music to life.

A GROWING INTEREST

In the past two and a half decades, there has been growing interest in the music composed by the so-called “Holocaust Composers”. The focus has often been on composers such as Schulhoff, Haas, Klein and Ullmann (the “Theresienstadt composers”), who left behind some exceptionally powerful pieces which have been researched and performed more and more in recent years.

Inspired by this, I started asking myself: “How could I, as a flute player, contribute to this important effort of bringing lost music to life?”

As I began searching for unfamiliar music I came across a wonderfully informative online catalogue of music and biographies called *Forbidden Music Regained* by the Leo Smit Foundation. This is a remarkable organization, founded in 1996 by the prominent flute player Eleonore Pameijer and pianist Frans van Ruth.

The organization’s aim is to research, discover, regain and distribute “lost” musical works by Dutch composers who were persecuted for racist and political reasons by Nazi Germany in the Second World War, and to tell the story of those composers.

This vast source of information, including biographies, as well as numerous recordings and links to the sheet music, is available online free of charge (<https://www.forbiddenmusicregained.org>).

Thanks to the activity of this organization this music is now being played more often in the Netherlands, and I believe it should also become better known worldwide.

BANNED COMPOSERS

This was a generation of interesting composers, some of whom were already established, while others were just at the start of their career as the war started. Their works were banned and often remained highly unknown both inside and outside the Netherlands for decades after the war.

Generally speaking, Dutch composers have never quite enjoyed very high recognition. The Dutch giants of painting—the Golden Age artists of the 17th century such as Rembrandt, Vermeer and Frans Hals, and later painters like van Gogh and Mondrian—are some of the most influential figures in art history. Concert halls around the world frequently welcome famous soloists, conductors and orchestras of the “Orange Kingdom”. For some reason, it is a different case when it comes to this country’s composers, which are, in the main, unfamiliar to most music lovers.

THE NETHERLANDS IN THE 20s & 30s

In the 1920s and 1930s, the Netherlands, especially Amsterdam, had a vivid cultural and musical scene. There were excellent musicians, ensembles, conservatories and orchestras, as well as a blossoming theatre scene.

Dutch composers have often been greatly influenced by their larger neighbouring countries. Whereas in the 19th century, the Netherlands embraced more of a German influence, the French style took over in the 20th century. The musical revolutions in Paris in those decades resonated strongly with many of the pre-war Dutch composers. Stravinsky’s revolutionary ballets, Ravel’s mixture

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of jazz and classical style, and the unmistakable buoyancy and suaveness of *Les Six* (including Milhaud, Poulenc and Honegger) had great impact. This French influence might also be the answer to why Dutch composers, too, wrote so much for the flute!

This French influence became even more of a political statement as the war approached, a cultural counteraction of sorts to the German-Nazi regime.

Before the war, Dutch Jews were well integrated into society and were not directly confronted with much antisemitism. Jews were an integral part of cultural life in theatres and orchestras. Composers such as Leo Smit, Henriëtte Bosmans and Dick Kattenburg often had their works performed by orchestras and played on the radio, thus allowing them to forge promising artistic careers.

THE NETHERLANDS UNDER THE NAZI OCCUPATION

After the Nazi invasion in May 1940, new discriminatory laws were made by the occupying regime, which gradually limited the freedom and rights of Jews.

Jewish composers, as well as anyone who refused to cooperate with the Nazi occupation, became banned and their music was forbidden. In 1942, as deportations to concentration camps started, some composers were able to evade capture by going into hiding. Many of those who were deported to the camps were murdered, and both their stories and their music were lost.

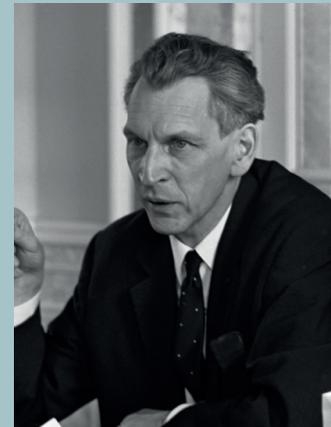
In my search I came across numerous pieces which I believe should find their way into our often too finite repertoire. I felt sheer joy in discovering pieces I had never heard or played before. My excitement was enhanced by the touching life stories of these composers.

It took many decades and dedicated research by the Leo Smit Foundation for some of this music to be rediscovered and played



WIKIPEDIA

Leo Smit in 1918.



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Marius Flothuis in 1967.

again. Here I wish to highlight the stories of just a few of these composers whom I personally find particularly interesting and touching and whose musical works I recently performed and recorded.

Leopold “Leo” Smit (1900–1943) was born in Amsterdam to a Jewish family and studied both piano and composition at the Conservatorium van Amsterdam. In 1927, he moved to Paris, where the music of Ravel and Stravinsky made a deep impression on him and where he had close contact with the famous group of composers, *Les Six*. In late 1937, he and his wife returned to Amsterdam, and Smit started making a name for himself in the local musical scene. As the Nazi occupation started, Smit did not go into hiding. In February 1943, he completed the second movement of his last work, his Sonata for flute and piano. Shortly afterwards, in April 1943, he was deported to camp Sobibor, where he was killed three days later.

Recording this second movement, I felt the heavy weight of this tragedy in the written notes. In fact, the first and third movements are still very joyous and Milhaud-like, but the second movement is something completely different: at times a broken prayer, at times a broken song sung over troubled waters. I was deeply moved by the embedded foreseen tragedy as we recorded this sonata.

Marius Flothuis (1914–2001) was a composer, musicologist and the artistic director of the Concertgebouw Orchestra in Amsterdam.

At the young age of 23 he became the orchestra’s assistant artistic director, but in 1942 he lost this position due to his ideological refusal to register with the Kultuurkamer, the regulatory cultural agency installed by the German occupation forces in the Netherlands.

Flothuis was active in the resistance until his arrest and imprisonment in 1944 in the Vught Concentration Camp, from which

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LEO SMIT FOUNDATION

Fania Chapiro.

he was later deported to Sachsenhausen. Despite all these hardships, he not only managed to survive but even to compose during his imprisonment! After his return to Amsterdam and his recovery, Flothuis held numerous positions including as the artistic director of the Concertgebouw Orchestra from 1953–74.

His piece *Aubade* (morning song), was composed in Vught in 1944 for the birthday of his friend and fellow prisoner Everard van Royen.

Van Royen performed *Aubade* himself at the camp and later near the barbed wire fence separating the men's and women's camps. Tineke Wibaut-Guilonard described that event:

“ At the corner, just a few meters from the fence, on the women's quarter side, a crowd of women was standing, breathlessly listening, close to each other, surrounding Guusje, Everard's wife. After the last tones there was silence, a deep silence. Then from the women's camp the *Ave Maria* is heard, sung by the bright girl's voice of Louise de Montel, 'the Nightingale of Vught'.

This was one of those moments, that we as prisoners of Vught forgot the reality of our situation. A moment of hope and confidence.

Source: Text by Joyce Kilian

Fania Chapiro (1926–1994) was born in Indonesia (a former Dutch colony).

At the age of 9, she wrote in her diary: “I have decided to become a composer and a wonderful pianist”. The eruption of the Second World War changed everything, yet she composed many works despite the surrounding chaos, using traditional forms and boisterous virtuosity. The war years were highly challenging for her family as well as for her teacher Sem Dresden. Nevertheless, she survived and continued developing a career as a pianist and as a composer.

We recorded the *Nocturne* from the flute sonata, which I am looking forward to playing in its entirety soon. This movement is so unique, a depiction of a dark and mysterious night with a feeling of threat and dread awaiting, a composition full of patience and tensed emptiness between the flute and the piano.

RECORDING THIS MUSIC

In order to make this project more accessible, I have made video recordings, together with the pianist Yannick Rafalimanana (<https://yannickrafalimanana.com/bio>). We spent a day at an old Berlin Brewery which was transformed into a concert space. In this dark, atmospheric surrounding we created a few videos which are distributed by the Dutch label, Donemus Records, and are accessible online under the title *New Life* on most online music and video platforms.

The project will continue this year with live concerts, recordings of additional repertoire, interviews and also the “loss and survival” story of my own family in the Netherlands during the days of the Nazi occupation. All of this information will be made accessible online.

In many senses, I feel that playing music which has been forgotten can bring back something of the human spirit which was silenced.

I wish to thank the Leo Smit Foundation, www.forbiddenmusicregained.org for the valuable information, as well as Andre Boers, Benny Geiger, Marcel Tröger and Francesco Camuglia for their help in writing this article.

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