

The Dutch Connection: from Utrechtsch Sextet to Hexagon Ensemble

The sextet consisting of five wind instruments and piano is a colourful combination that has inspired many composers. In the 1920s there were even two professional wind sextets in the Netherlands: the Utrechtsch Sextet and the Concertgebouw Sextet. In the Concertgebouw one can still see a large painting in memory of the latter ensemble, portraying the five solo wind players from the Concertgebouw Orchestra and pianist Evert Cornelis who were members of the ensemble around 1920. Besides these sextets, there was an even larger number of wind quintets in the Netherlands. Often these ensembles were made up of first-desk wind players from symphony orchestras. For many years there were ensembles consisting of members from the Residentie Orchestra of The Hague and the Rotterdam Philharmonic Orchestra. The best known Dutch wind quintet is the Danzi Quintet, an ensemble that from the 1950s held a prominent place in Dutch music life for a long time. The ensemble not only performed music from around 1800, but also that of contemporary composers such as Jan van Vlijmen, Ton de Leeuw and Peter Schat. Some of these wind quintets were regularly augmented with a pianist in order to play sextets. The Dutch Connection is a tribute by the Hexagon Ensemble to the Dutch composers who have written sextets, as well as to the ensemble's predecessors who performed the works.

Willem Pijper (1894-1947) wrote his Sextet in the winter of 1922-1923 for the Utrechtsch Sextet, of which he was the pianist. The five wind players were first-desk players of the Utrechtsch City Orchestra. From an early age Pijper took a great interest not only in music, but also in biology. This interest is discernible in his 'germ cell technique'. Like a plant that grows from one small seed, Pijper wanted to create complete works from a single germ cell, a short musical motif usually consisting of four notes. A number of Pijper's works from the 1920s, such as the Septet and the Second Symphony, are based on this germ cell technique. The Sextet is also representative of Pijper's oeuvre from this period. Right at the beginning of the first movement the sextet's germ cell can be heard in the four notes of the clarinet. This motif is taken up by the other instruments. The other three movements are also derived from this germ cell which frequently returns in, to quote Pijper, 'many rhythmic and colouristic forms'. The tone of the third and fourth movements is influenced by Italian folk music, in particular that from Ticino, the region around Lago Maggiore and Lake Lugano where Pijper had spent some happy holidays. The piece was premiered in Utrecht on 23 April 1923 by the Utrechtsch Sextet with Pijper himself playing the piano part.

Already during his lifetime Pijper was recognised as one of the most important Dutch composers of the first half of the 20th century and he kept this status after his death. The music by Leo Smit (1900-1943), however, was forgotten for a long time. The reassessment of his compositions did not start until the end of the 1980s when people began to take an interest in artists who fell victim to the Nazi regime, and thus also in Smit who was killed in Sobibor in 1943. It is not just because of his tragic death that Smit's short life deserves attention. This was demonstrated by the recordings of his, sadly, modest oeuvre that was brought out by Donemus on 4 CDs in 2000 and the recommendable biography by Jurjen Vis that was published a year later. From the close of the 20th century Smit's music also featured more frequently in concerts, among others in those of the Hexagon Ensemble which put his Sextuor on its programme.

Leo Smit wrote the Sextuor in Paris at the beginning of the 1930s, a few years after he had moved there. The music clearly reflects this, as it brings to mind works by Roussel and members of Les Six (especially Poulenc and Milhaud) and early pieces by Jean Françaix. The fast opening and closing movements of his Sextuor show that Smit was especially interested in the light, variety show-ish touch the younger French composers managed to give to their music. Unexpected turns must have appealed to him as well. In the slow movement Smit interrupts his fluent flow with an abrupt transition to a fugato. This fast passage ends in a climax in which a triumphant theme is played. Then the opening tempo is taken up again. There is also a virtuoso fugato in the final movement. Those who have heard the Hexagon Ensemble performing Poulenc's Sextuor live or on CD would like to hear this lighter Dutch counterpart from the same period played with an equally French feel. The Concertgebouw Sextet with Eduard van Beinum playing the piano premiered Smit's Sextuor in the Kleine Zaal of the Concertgebouw on 14 December 1933.

Like Pijper and Smit, Rudolf Escher (1912-1980) had a great affinity with the French tradition. But unlike Leo Smit, who took an interest in the composers of Les Six, he was especially attracted to the more serious music by Debussy whom he admired for his musical development and structure. Possibly Debussy's *Syrinx*, a short piece for flute solo, was a source of inspiration for Escher's more large-scale, three-part *Flute Sonata* (1949). The ascending and descending movement right at the beginning, which Huib Ramaer aptly described as 'a fan that opens and closes again', is a key element of the composition. In the first movement Escher juxtaposes a jazzy staccato theme with a smooth motif. After a subdued *Andante* the ascending and descending movement is light-heartedly resumed in the graceful final movement. Escher's *Flute Sonata* is dedicated to the Amsterdam flautist Pieter Odé who premiered the work at the composer's home. Hubert Barwahser, solo flautist of the Concertgebouw Orchestra, gave the first public performance in the Kleine Zaal of the Concertgebouw in 1951.

Already in his time Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck (1562-1621) was a famous organist. His heritage as a composer consists of vocal works and keyboard music. His best known keyboard work is the variations on *Mein junges Leben hat ein End* which were originally intended for the harpsichord. The great many performances both on the harpsichord and the organ, as well as the large number of arrangements for other instruments show how popular this piece is. The Hexagon Ensemble has selected a beautiful arrangement for wind quintet that was published by Ernest Lubin in 1965.

The title *Ockeghem Variations* by the American composer Judith Shatin (born in 1949) already suggest that her music is more closely related to that by Sweelinck than one would expect based on the great distance in time. For her work Shatin is often inspired by literary as well as musical ideas. Her interest in Renaissance polyphony led her to the music of one of Sweelinck's predecessors, the Flemish composer Johannes Ockeghem. The *Kyrie* from his *Missa prolationum* forms the basis of the *Ockeghem Variations*. In the first and the fourth movements in particular Shatin tries to remain true to the tone of Ockeghem's music. Unlike Sweelinck, she did not write a classical variation work. Elements from Ockeghem's music appear throughout the work that consists of five self-contained movements rather than a progressing series of variations. Shatin writes in a 20th-century idiom that is entirely her own, yet in an unusual way she manages to recreate the Renaissance tone of her starting point. In the first movement the sound of the prepared piano even suggests the bass part on a lute. Shatin makes good use of the specific colours of each of the five wind instruments, but at

times she also blends them into an organ-like sound in which the individual voices are hardly discernable. Ockeghem Variations was commissioned by the Hexagon Ensemble which gave the world premiere of the work in the Amsterdam Concertgebouw on 20 March 2000.

Text: Niek Nelissen

Translation: Hilary Staples