
CONVERSATIONS

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MUSIC BEYOND HUMAN A CONVERSATION WITH MICHEL VAN DER AA¹

My first encounter with the Dutch composer and director Michel Van der Aa's (b. 1970) music was at the Gaudeamus Music Week, when I heard his most recent piece at that time: *Here [In Circles]* (2002) for soprano, cassette recorder and ensemble.² I remember the soprano Barbara Hannigan in Amsterdam's Paradiso, conscientiously rewinding and fast-forwarding excerpts of her own singing with the ensemble while she continued to sing alongside,

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¹ This conversation was audio recorded in Michel Van der Aa's studio in Amsterdam on 18 September 2019. I am grateful to Katarina Kostić who translated it for the issue of the *New Sound* in Serbian.

² Before studying composition (with Diderik Wagenaar, Gilius van Bergeijk and Louis Andriessen), Van der Aa trained first as a recording engineer at the Royal Conservatory in The Hague. In 2002 he broadened his skills with studies in film direction at the New York Film Academy, and in 2007 he participated in the Lincoln Center Theater Director's Lab, an intensive course in stage direction. From Michel van der Aa's official biography at: <https://www.vanderaa.net/biography/>, Accessed: June 6, 2020.



Michel van der Aa
(Photo by Priska Ketterer [2017])

in-between and against the live and recorded sound. This experience called into question not only the conventional status and function of soloists, ensembles and live performances, but also the engagement and perspective of the listening spectator. I remember the unusual aura surrounding that concert performance, as well as the intriguing sense of disturbance that was felt as if all the clichés of singing, performing and listening were elegantly, but irreversibly, dismantled.

When I later encountered other pieces by Van der Aa I continued to be intrigued by his insistence on reinventing borders and challenging the common protocols of the fields in which he works. His creations, even when not belonging to the genre of music theatre or opera, involve a certain multimedia-based theatricality. A typical example is *Up-Close* (2010) for solo cello, string ensemble and film, in which the film character's destiny seems to be unexpectedly related to the reality of the concert performance itself. In 2003, when I saw Van der Aa's chamber opera *One* for soprano, video and soundtrack (2002) at Music Biennale Zagreb, it felt as though this unique and disquieting piece sharply intensified the live-mediatized divide I had registered in *Here [In Circles]*. There was Barbara Hannigan again, this time enmeshing her live singing with her video/audio double to the point at which it was impossible to say where the boundaries of her voice and body were lo-

cated. The video screen looked like a kind of mirror for the live performer and vice versa. *Here [In Circles]* seems like a study for the opera *One*, just as *One* would later become the prototype of Van der Aa's second and more complex opera *After Life* (for 6 singers, ensemble, video and electronic soundtrack, 2005–06), based on the film by Hirokazu Kore-Eda. The story of both film and opera is organized around the following question: What was the most decisive moment of your life? Protagonists choose their key moment, and only one chosen memory travels forward with its 'owner' to eternity.

After creating operatic works such as *One*, *After Life*, *The Book of Disquiet* (a music theatre piece for actor, ensemble and film based on the homonymous work by Fernando Pessoa, 2008), and the 3D opera *Sunken Garden* (2011–2012), Van der Aa accomplished the *tour de force* of composing, filming, editing, and rehearsing several operas of about one minute in duration, each commenting on certain media and political events. These pieces, commissioned by the Dutch broadcasting network VARA, comprise "With My Ear to the Ground" (2010),³ "Van het Vergeten" (*About Forgetting*, 2010),⁴ "Willem Holleeder" (2012),⁵ "God, Vaderland en Oranje" (*God, Homeland and Oranje*, 2012),⁶ "Vlucht MH370" (*Flight MH 370*, 2014),⁷ all designed to be performed live during their talk show. The libretti are in Dutch and the subjects depicted are public events that attracted strong media attention. These miniature operas can also be perceived as intense and brilliant singing caricatures.⁸

Beyond all multimedia interventions in Van der Aa's oeuvre, his poetics may be characterized as an attempt to interrogate identity and its uniqueness, constantly revealing the elusiveness of our sense of identity and the multiple

³ Scored for mezzosoprano (Tania Kross), actor (Thom Hoffman), positive organ (Jeroen Bal); composition, film: Michel van der Aa, libretto: Nico Dijkshoorn.

⁴ Libretto: Adriaan van Dis; composition, film: Michel van der Aa; design: Maarten Cornet.

⁵ Text: Tommy Wieringa; music: Michel van der Aa; performers: Tiemo Wang and vocalists VocaallAB.

⁶ Libretto: Felix Rottenberg; pictures: Museum Geelvinck Hinlopen Huis aan de Keizersgracht in Amsterdam.

⁷ Libretto: Beatrice de Graaf; baritone: Martijn Sanders; soprano: Nora Fischer; string quartet: Het Dudok Kwartet; double bass: Marijn van Prooijen; music: Michel van der Aa.

⁸ I wrote in more details about one-minute operas by Michel van der Aa in: "Singing beyond the TV Screen: Documentary, News and Interviews as Operatic Material", *Dramaturgias*, 10, 2019, 91–109. <https://doi.org/10.26512/dramaturgias.v0i10>

perspectives from which it might be perceived. This is signalled by the titles of several of his compositions—*See-Through* for orchestra (2000), *Second Self* for orchestra and soundtrack (2004), *Imprint* for baroque orchestra (2005), *Mask* for ensemble and soundtrack (2006)—all alluding to the multi-faceted nature of identity and calling into question its uniqueness. This quest for identity in Van der Aa's output is intensified in turn by his examination of the impact of new media on composition, by his strategic choice of musical language, and by the economy of the expressive means used.

After composing the 3D opera *Sunken Garden* and the digital, interactive song cycle *The Book of Sand* (2015),⁹ Van der Aa intensified his opera-music-multimedia explorations in his most recent piece—the virtual reality installation *Eight* (2018–19)—by 'zooming' in on the possibilities of virtual reality in music theatre. *Eight* lasts for about fifteen minutes, only one person can go through it at a time (you have to reserve a unique time slot to experience it), and there are no live performers. As we enter the curving path of the installation, a virtual woman—the actress and fifties + model Vakil Eelman (who also appeared in Van der Aa's *Up-Close*)—makes an inviting gesture with her hand to indicate that the visitor should follow her. A bit further down the path a younger version of the same character is embodied by a virtual figure based on the appearance of Kate Miller Heidke. Finally, in a scene under the table, the virtual little girl Livia Kolk sings *a capella*. I understood all three figures to represent the same character, but at different stages of her life.

Although it was created before the COVID 19 pandemic, *Eight's* virtual reality, solitary listening / spectating experience and technologically reinvented 'live-ness' strongly resonates with questions that have been raised about the performing arts in an age of isolation.¹⁰ Recently Van der Aa published the album *Time Falling* in collaboration with Kate Miller Heidke. It includes music from *Eight*. This is his first indie-pop album, and it seems to continue the process of questioning those porous borders between popular and classical, human and cyborg, real and virtual, and live and mediatized.¹¹

⁹ *The Book of Sand* is available at: <http://thebookofsand.net/>, Accessed: May 1st, 2020.

¹⁰ I wrote about *Eight* in more details in the text: "Eight, aus Licht, and The Unbearable Lightness of Being Immersed in Opera", *The Opera Quarterly*, 35/4, autumn 2019, 358–371 <https://doi.org/10.1093/oq/kbaa003>.

¹¹ Several songs from the album *Time Falling* are available online: <https://disquietmedia.net/catalogue/time-falling/>; <http://disquietmedia.net/timefalling/>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mdB6cwDCgsE>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E7FhhdyxCD0>; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I3x7xQwgBdg> Accessed: June 21st, 2020.

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Your latest piece is the virtual reality installation Eight, which I saw at Muziekgebouw aan't IJ in Amsterdam in 2019. I knew that it is supposed to be seen by one person at a time, but I didn't expect that I would be kind of alone in the building. There was a lady at the entrance. She told me where to go and then I realized that I was alone there. It became kind of creepy but also interesting. There is often a certain loneliness in your pieces. Where does this come from? Why it is important for you?

I think it really depends on the audiences if you feel the loneliness in the pieces. Often I focus on the individual stories, on the very humanistic stories, stories that are about larger themes in life. Loneliness is definitely one of those themes, for example people who are at the edge of life, like in *After Life*. I think I really like this confrontation with yourself in a piece. When you enter *Eight* there's the woman that you meet and during these fifteen minutes you work out a relationship with her. This journey is part of a larger aesthetics that I have in my work.

So, the 'solitary viewer situation' was definitely pre-conceived for Eight. I was in doubt about it for a day. When I saw Eight it was a public holiday in Holland, so I thought that maybe the building was closed for visitors... Then I asked a colleague who had visited it a few days before and he said it was the same when he was there...

It's such a different way of presenting a work. It's the first VR piece that I did. Of course I did *The Book of Sand*, which was a digital song cycle online. You can see it behind your computer, which is in your own safe home space. When I walked up to the Muziekgebouw to see *Eight*, getting up all these stairs, and then there's this chair for you to wait... I love the whole ritual of getting in there. This is something that the designer Theun Mosk and I thought about a lot. How do we want people to get in? How do we get them into this mindset that will work for peace? That's why everybody is just expected to be there early and sit and read the text and be by themselves for a bit in order to become more open to face what they're about to face.

We had a lot of feedback from the audience, also in France and Aix-en-Provence when we had the piece there. They asked us every day to write down for each visitor what they thought of the piece. So we had a great log of feedback and I think there were a number of people who didn't have any experi-

ence with VR before. They were completely flabbergasted by the possibilities of it, by the fact that you lose yourself into this virtual space. But what I liked about it is that most reactions were about this personal journey and not about technology. I don't want technology to be the main subject of my work. It's just a vehicle that allows me to get my themes across. When you work with new technology, there's always that risk that people will go in expecting to be entertained by the VR and not expecting the actual content. For *Eight* we really wanted to create this world, which is a perfect blend of a virtual space and physical space. We wanted to have this tactile relationship with VR.

We wanted to do a piece about infinity. How can you create infinite spaces? And VR, of course is a perfect vehicle for that. But what we really missed in the VR pieces that we used to see before was that the piece most often makes you sit in a chair, and look around, and that was it. In *Eight* we wanted to walk around freely and to actually touch things and interact with the space. And this creates this very strange sensation of being in a virtual space, as you can actually touch it. In your brain there is a discrepancy because of it, which we find very interesting.

I think you easily accept being in a fictional space – if you're not really there, if you observe it from a distance. But once you're in there, you have to actually physically walk, touch things to move the story forward. That's a whole different ordeal, and it makes you somehow much more connected to the space, much more connected to the story in a way and creates much more confusion about what was real and what was not real.

I almost walked out. I was so overwhelmed that I felt I couldn't deal with it anymore. Not because I didn't like it, but because I was too excited about it.

We had more people like that. I taught a group of students in Aix-En-Provence who were all directors and film-makers and scenographers and there were two of them that found it also overwhelming. I sort of realized that this is where we're heading. This has much more to do with the way we deal with this second layer in our lives now, instead of dealing with it through a window of your computer. Suddenly it becomes this all-around-experience. And I think our children take it for granted, they take their Apple glasses and they are there, they meet with their friends and they do their games and they live through this. I am one hundred percent convinced that it will be like that in ten years' time. I get excited because it gives me so many new possibilities. I think it's important for artists to be involved in this technology as well, to say what we want to say.

On the pathway in Eight I encountered details related to your previous works, like the lamp from Up Close or wandering around in a weird space like in One, or meeting some of your heroines from previous pieces like Kate Miller Heidke... There is one layer of interpretation in Eight for someone who sees your work for the first time and another one for those who do know the context of your previous works. That is intriguing: it is like you are all the time creating one piece but dividing it into separate moments.

I like these hyperlinks to other works on the micro-level so to speak, or meta-level. I have been doing this quite a lot in other pieces too. There are always these objects that are returning: the glass jars and the branches, of course...

There was the moment under the table that was from the Book of Sand. And the ghosts that appear in the cave. I think that they are also from The Book of Sand.

Yes. These are the Nederlands Kamerkoor people and they actually carry branches in the forest and they break the branches. That's something I started doing a while ago and I kind of enjoy building up the pyramid like that...

For me as a music critic it was intriguing how you interfered with my way of being when I was there. Normally I would take my notes, and I would decide what I would like to see and how in any particular moment, but in this case, it was quite authoritarian, like 'take it or leave it', or 'you're in or you're out'. So this disturbed me in a way.

There's no way to have a distance, it appears. Or you are in it or you are out.

I tried to disobey when I was under the table. When the cloth fell down I felt claustrophobic and then I decided to be half under the table and half out of it. That offered some relief. But still I couldn't resist more...

What was really challenging for us is that we had to take into account all these possibilities of the things that the audience could do. Like you say, not everybody will sit down under the table. Some people keep standing next to the table. This was built as a game engine, so we had to make parallel options for all the choices a person could make. Somebody would turn around to walk back in the hallway the other way around and not follow our direction, you know, so we had to have a solution for that. So there are so many routes in a way you could take through the piece. But the 'normal' route is of course the preferred one.

Only later did I suddenly realize that this piece was about me! (not about me personally, but about any of us who saw it). I was the one who was choosing the memory, as in After Life. I was the one who was wandering around as in One. I was the one who was under the table as in The Book of Sand. I was the main character of an opera, and this kind of change of perspective was shocking.

This happens also because we arranged that the characters keep on looking at you. Or they follow where you are with their eyes. If you move, she'll move with you, with her eyes. So there's this connection we tried to create. And on the other hand, one of the most difficult things in *Eight* was how the characters should look. Initially, we tried to make them super realistic and that didn't work at all. The more realistic we imagined them, the more distant they became. That was the uncanny valley syndrome. At a quite late stage we rolled back on that. I told them: ok, now I want you to glitch about this, I want to have these transparent areas that you can literally see through – seeing the inside, seeing through them, and seeing the space... That for me made them almost elements of the space rather than actual representations of someone. In a way this also connects to what you said. I mean, you being subject of the opera is also because of that. You're the most realistic person in there. And these are all reflections of you and where you are in the space. And the space itself is a very important character. It was going from being closed in the cave, to enormous spaces with enormous views, extreme changes in space. The space is a protagonist.

Most of the time I wasn't focused on music; I think I was overwhelmed. But I remember the atmosphere. However I don't remember the music in a way that I normally do because there were so many other things.

I think that's something I learnt from it. Already while making it I started simplifying the music. I started with very complex ideas. A lot of details, lots of choral music, lots of surrounds. It was way too much. You couldn't cope with it anymore. I decided to go back to a very, very simple, almost indie-pop-like-track with abstract moments, *a capella* choral moments. But overall, some of it is quite direct and quite focused. That's something that we knew from the beginning it would be like: this kaleidoscopic amount of information you give the audience. You don't experience every layer every moment.

And Eight is deceptive in terms of space and time. I know that it lasted about 15 minutes, but the feeling was that it was much longer. Also, I know more or

less the dimensions of the space. But it felt much more spacious. And the shape of the path must have been the Arabic number eight?

You do walk around 8, but not all the time. It's only half of a circle in there. Literally half of the circle and a little bit of space in front of it.

I thought about the title. Why Eight? I thought that the girl singing in Eight is probably eight, and that the path might be in the shape of the number eight.

It is also 8 in terms of infinity. And eight choir members are there, so the number comes back in lot of aspects of the piece. We actually started it for an actual shape of 8 and then we thought: do we really need this form of the number eight? Because we are working with virtual reality, we can trick the audience into thinking that they are walking in this enormous space.

There is a strong focus on female protagonists in your pieces. In some of the interviews I read, you said it's about your affinity towards the female voice.

It is almost like an unconscious thing. It has to do with the voice for sure. I think in this case, I really wanted to work with Kate Miller Heidke. She felt like the perfect person for this project. Often I link a project to a performer. I think they're amazing performers and that's why I write for them. The next opera I write is for Roderick Williams and Julia Bullock who are completely different characters again. It really depends on the piece, and on the subject.

There is also a kind of almost post-human beauty that your performers have, distanced beauty. Even the fado singer Ana Moura in The Book of Disquiet - a completely different character – somehow started looking as if she is a genuine part of Michel van der Aa's universe.

Maybe I'm looking for this archetypical person. In *The Book of Disquiet* it had to do with the text of Fernando Pessoa. I really don't have a clear answer to this question. It's very much instinctive. I think in *Eight* we tried to make them really look timeless in a way.

On the other hand, the male characters are also vulnerable and often somewhat tragic characters. In your one-minute television operas unusual male characters are brought centre stage – the right wing politician Geert Wilders, the pilot of the flight MH 370, the Malaysia Airlines plane that disappeared, or the Chilean miner who was trapped underground for weeks.

Also, vulnerable women. Maybe this circles back to the humanistic themes. I want to see a piece where they can relate on a personal level and I would like to bring them to a state where for each one of them I will have his or her own memories or links to what they're seeing here. This sounds maybe like an open door. But I think by being sometimes less concrete, you push your characters to the windows but they have to open the windows themselves. I think that my most successful music theatre pieces are the most abstract ones.

The themes that you use, do they have any relationship with personal experiences?

Not that I know of. They are the subjects that have always fascinated me. You know, it is man versus machine, a balance that we are dealing with on a daily basis. And also mortality, and loneliness. I think that each one of us to a certain extent deals with it in our own life and therefore they're for me interesting themes to connect with an audience, things that I think about a lot or things that I feel honest and truthful to share in a way.

When you say humanist I immediately think about post-humanism. What it means to be human is re-thought in relation to 'others', such as machines, monsters, or animals... Through questioning what it means to be a human today I understand your themes as inclined towards post-human horizons.

My next opera is about that. Maybe by confronting people with what it is to be not human you determine what is human. I look for these limitations in order to find the outline of what is a human being. This can be very extreme, as in *One*. It can be because of VR representations you see of yourself in a way, or it can be because you are thinking about what moment you would choose from your life to take with you to the afterlife. Relating the subject of the opera to the audience and initiating sort of a personal journey for the piece, I think that's the ultimate dream for me as a maker. The subjects of my operas are very much in line with that dream.

*How do you understand the process in which the human voice changes? In *One* I perceived Barbara Hannigan as a kind of cyborg voice where you cannot really decide if the voice is coming from the machine/recording or her body. Can a human body produce that voice? Or can it produce it only with the help of a machine... Are there any other vocal examples that you are intrigued by in these divisions?*

Yes, as in *Blank Out*. In the first part of the opera we see a woman as she sings single words, completely disconnected. And then records herself. And then this is played back. And an alter ego appears in the 3D film and the live person then asks the words. And finally, whole sentences are appearing. It's a recollecting of a memory of the drowning of her child. This is a very interesting sort of structural event. These are very much links to the emotional content of the story. At these moments the technology works. It makes sense in terms of the larger context of the story. I am looking for the edges where technology confronts the human being. But the function has to be clear. It needs to shine a light on something that I couldn't do otherwise, that I couldn't do without technology. That is a very important starting point for me always.

I connect the figure of the anti-diva to what I call postopera, with the singer providing some kind of different relationship between the body and the voice, a different kind of representation between the body and the voice.

Kate Miller Heidke is such an incredible down-to-earth human being, so nice to work with. In that sense she is also an anti-diva. Maybe this is one of the attractions I have to Kate's voice. I mean, when we first worked together in *Sunken Garden*, that was a very difficult film shoot, with incredible time pressure and a sort of bizarre schedule. She was so incredibly open minded and super positive – an amazing singer, but also an absolutely wonderful collaborator. And the same is true for Roderick Williams, who has the same kind of super positive, open-minded attitude to collaboration, which I really need as a creator to feel free to write. I don't want to feel boxed in by the performer. You have to have this understanding.

There is the adjective 'operatic'. We all use it sometimes. It's intriguing that if you ask someone what is operatic, you get unclear answers. What is 'operatic' for you?

Maybe sort of larger-than-life emotions, which I try to avoid because actual life matters are big enough. I think it has to do with the exaggeration of what was needed in the old days, because of the distance to the audience, and the way the opera was staged. That type of performer is still very much needed in that repertoire. But in the new repertoire, we're looking for a different type of performer, and in that sense operatic becomes something different for new creative artists, I think.

And is there anything without which opera cannot exist? Is there any essential element that must be there?

There needs to be singing. It would be nice not to have those restrictions.

Recently you founded DoubleA Foundation. One of its tasks is to reinvent what opera can be today.

In my work, I come across interesting new collaborators all the time. And I thought, well, you've got to formalize that a little bit more. As a maker, you need to be able to do research and to take risks. And I found that when I come up with a new project I already have to decide on the technology that I will use early on. Then you find your partners and you start making it. When you're making it, you run into walls, and sometimes you need to do things differently and things become more expensive or you need to have another team. After some time this became such a hurdle for me that I wanted to disconnect the pre-production process from the actual product, actual performance. So this is one of the reasons I reset as a DoubleA so we can do research and development with a lot of different people and come with ideas that sometimes will lead to an actual production and sometimes not. It's also a schooling system for young professionals to tour internationally and to work on a very high level and to learn from people who have done that already.

I understand some of your pieces as political statements, although they're not overtly political. But for example, Eight in that sense could also be read through the lens of power relations.

We had to find a lot of smaller departments in order to produce it, as it doesn't really fit anywhere. It's not a live performance for my publisher, for example. And it's not a pre-recorded experience either, because it's very interactive...

For the gallery, it might be too performative...

Exactly. And also the music is not 'pure' contemporary, it is indie-pop, or it is too short or whatever, you can find other things. And also there are certain types of reviewers who go to see my work, and immediately they start separating the layers... And I think there's only one way to experience a piece like this: to see it as a whole of interconnecting parts.

This happens also because most often, critics come from one single field, and they might be afraid of getting out of their comfort zone...

If you see the works nowadays, they are more and more multimedia. I don't like the term cross-genre because it implies that you have to actually cross certain boundaries and I don't really see the boundary anymore, so there's no crossing needed. It's all there. So that's an interesting question.

So Eight questions power relations?

Not actively but it's a natural result of the choices I make. And in that sense, the piece starts fitting in less and less. And then this is something I do feel and this is one reason we started the foundation in order to gain control again in our situation. In my perfect world, I would be able to produce my own works and sell them to people who want to have them and not be dependent on opera houses or festivals anymore as co-creators. The same is true of releasing CDs. I'm really wondering whether I should release any more hard copies. This is all because nobody buys them anymore.

I'm now finishing a new album with tracks from *Eight*. It will be an indie-pop sound. I'm very biased. It's definitely contemporary, but not in the way we used to think. I can't send it to classical critics because it's really not up their alley... I've become less and less comfortable with all these divisions. It is about the decisions I made in my works, the types of work I make. It becomes very difficult for this type of work to fall into any particular category. This is their strength and weakness at the same time.

You also made five one-minute operas for television, small but deep pieces. I understand them as critiques, even caricatures of how we live today in capitalist realism. The characters are Geert Wilders, Willem Holleeder, and the former Dutch queen Beatrix, among others. Those one-minute operas are more openly political statements.

Yeah, I think the *MH 370 Flight* is the last one they ever did, which is a pity because it is probably the most watched TV show in Holland. It gave me a new audience also. People saw me and heard me and came to my shows after that. On the other hand when I see those pieces again, being a perfectionist, I am like "Oh my God", we could have done it so much better.

It was a kind of experiment...

Yes, but when you put them online people don't know that. You need to know the context of them in the show.

It was interesting to see this kind of One setting in one-minute opera with the queen character.

They called me and said: Can you do this with the queen tonight? They call in the morning and then we have to shoot it and then edit the film. I have to write the music and then rehearse it in the afternoon live in the studio. And then in the evening it goes live. Nora (Nora Fischer, the singer, J.N.) pretty much had to do it in one go. It is so stressful!

Did they suggest the subjects of the operas, or did you pick them up?

Yes, they suggested it. When I did a few I had a way in and I sometimes suggested something to them. There was Jochem Valkenburg who was still there and commissioned the Chilean miners piece, and I suggested the last one, the flight MH 370. They didn't do an opera for a long time and I thought that was an important possibility, so it was going back and forth.

It seems that more and more people from different art fields are becoming interested in opera. For example Venice Biennale last year gave an award to the operatic installation Sun and Sea, There are many more installations that take opera as their theme, for example Opera of Prehistoric Creatures by Marguerite Humeau. Why do you think there is this increased interest in opera nowadays?

It allows for all these things to happen. Whether you call it music theatre or opera I don't mind, but it's the perfect vehicle to allow for all these layers of media to create a ritual in time together with an audience and storyline that become very personal. I can imagine why people choose it. If you look at contemporary opera, this is going well, in terms of commissions and new productions ...

There are also two different worlds of opera, conventional opera, and postopera if you wish, just as there is classical ballet and modern dance...

I think opera will move increasingly to festivals rather to opera houses for productions of new opera. I think there's a shift that has been going on for a long time. And I think it will be more and more clear, given the situation that

I and other creative artists are in, that if you self-produce your work it's easier to get festivals to take it than opera houses, because you already offer them your whole production trajectory. I think there's a shift probably going on there. Festivals like Opera Forward or Operadagen Rotterdam are way more interesting than the opera houses. That's where the adventure happens. They also in a way move it outside of the normal structure. It's places like the Festival d'Aix, NY Armory, or the Lucerne Festival where super exciting things are happening, not opera houses.

If you are an intendant of an Arts Festival or music festival, you are less restricted in what you can choose. You can react very fast. And in an opera house or in the orchestra you have to plan three years ahead. These kinds of time span encourage a more retrospective approach...

Is there anything from the opera tradition that you took with you as a kind of special memory or influence? I remember seeing you at Stockhausen's Aus Licht last year at the Holland Festival...

I never really enjoyed conventional opera. And also I'm like really not into Stockhausen at all. But in *Aus Licht* suddenly something happens and you think this is the most brilliant thing ever. It moves between these extremes for me but in the end as a whole, I loved being there. It was also an amazing production. It was great to see all these conservatory students, who were working on it for three years. It was so moving to see the dedication of these people. We have to support that, of course. I go to opera regularly, not a lot but regularly, either to see composers that I like or to follow directors that I like – Simon McBurney, for example. When he does something I try to see it. I am aware of what's happening. But I enjoy plays and dance as much as I enjoy opera and film.

How about your film influences?

I'm a huge fan of Charlie Kaufman's screenplays and his films. I love his mind, also David Lynch, definitely, and Atom Egoyan. Those are some of the film directors that I like. But I also enjoy some Netflix binge-watch series. We're watching succession now. I think a lot of interesting stuff is going to move from film to TV series.

Is it true that your parents had a small opera house?

Yes, an operetta house. I sang there when I was between seven and ten years old. I started as an extra somewhere in the back and later I had single roles.

So you were pre-destined to write music theatre?

Oh, definitely, my love for theatre absolutely was born there. It was in a small village in northern Holland. I saw people in the village come together and in their free time paint mountains on the backdrops and make fire from the runner fan with strips of paper and a red lamp, an image I used in *After Life*. That aspect of music theatre when you have very simple objects that become something super-poetic like these moments that are filmed in *After Life*. Or in *Blank Out* the woman recreates her own house, looking not only at the high end part of the film output but also making the physical screen surface and the live creation of the footage another layer of 'reality' in the work. The screens in my work are always more than screens, the same way the VR walls are not only virtual walls but they are actually there. Screens and afterlives are magnifying glasses through which we see the memories of the people.

Let me ask you your question at the end: What was the most decisive moment of your life?

I was nine years old and we lived in an old house in Schoorl in northern Holland. It was at the beginning of the summer holiday. The summer holiday lasted six weeks, an eternity for a child. So there was all this free time and freedom, and my mom always used to make pancakes on Saturday evenings. Our house was on the edge of the dunes. We were playing hide-and-seek with the neighboring children and I was hiding behind my favorite shrub. I was smelling the pancakes already and knowing that there were six more weeks of holiday ahead of me. That was sort of the perfect feeling of belonging: happiness, freedom, uncomplicated sort of possibilities, eternity. If I were to choose a moment to stay in forever and ever it would be that one, with that mindset, with eternal possibilities, and with time suspended.

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