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Henry Brant at the Holland Festival

American music, especially of that of an experimental nature, is no stranger to the Holland Festival. For a great many years the Dutch have been fascinated by musical developments in the USA, particularly those aspects that reveal an anti-establishment 'maverick' streak. (Holland is, of course, famous for its openness to new ideas and tolerance of diversity, whether political, religious, or artistic; it may be worth noting here that the Charles Ives Society of Europe was founded in the Netherlands many years before Ives became a musical icon.) The 1984 Holland Festival continued this remarkable tradition by devoting an entire week in June (9-16) to the work of an American composer just as iconoclastic in our time as Ives was half a century ago: Henry Brant.

Brant, who is now 70 years old, has long been a pioneer in the creative use of performance space, placing different players in a variety of unusual locations and creating complex (occasionally unsynchronised) overlapping textures to dramatise their physical separateness. He is also known for a highly personal, even dazzling, approach to instrumental sonority, often exploiting extremes of register

and novel doublings to produce a peculiarly high-voltage intensity. All of the works heard during the Holland Festival's week-long Brant retrospective demonstrated his very special ear for timbres. His fascination with distinctive sonority is just as apparent in the early *Galaxy II* (1954) for a chamber group of wind and percussion as in his saxophone quartet *From Bach's Menagerie* of 1975, or the recent works for a novel quartet of specially built, graduated string instruments. And, as might be expected, the lay-out of the performers within the space was an important element in a great many of the pieces. They included such antiphonal 'classics' as *Millennium III* (1957) for brass and percussion, and *Barricades* (1961) for solo oboe and mixed ensemble.

The most ambitious piece (or event) of the Brant week—both timbrally and spatially—was saved for the final day, and drew upon the resources of the entire city of Amsterdam. The work is called *Bran(d)t aan de Amstel* (which, with the added 'd' in the first word, translates as 'Fire on the Amstel') and requires more than 100 musicians to play while seated in canal boats, travelling through the city down the River Amstel. Four boatloads of performers (25 flautists and one percussionist per boat) followed one another along a predetermined route, traversing many canals and passing by a number of landmark churches and bridges along the way; at each of these intermediate points, other musical levels (land-based) were added to the texture.

A piece of this nature, lasting some four hours, is obviously not designed to be heard in its entirety by a single stationary audience. Some listeners were literally caught by a fragment of it unawares, perhaps while standing at a busy city intersection. Others, who knew of the event beforehand, stationed themselves with like-minded neighbours along the route—creating a rather festive, party-like ambience in the process—while waiting for the boats to pass. Still others decided to follow the route, rushing from one checkpoint to another by city tram, by taxi, or on foot. I was one of this last group, as I decided to observe the work 'in progress' by catching it at three different locations.

At the historic Munt (Mint Tower), about half an hour into the piece, one could hear the great carillon ringing; a brass band was situated at a bridge directly on the route, ready to swing into action at the arrival of the boats. The water-borne flute music, as it passed underneath the bridge, was quite spritely, scherzo-like, and almost electric in quality; it was also an effective counterfoil to the equally quirky brass (not to mention the tram bells and car horns).

More than an hour later, I picked up the action outside the Oude Kerke (Old Church). Here Brant had stationed two antiphonal choirs, each with its own instrumental accompaniment, and had given them quasi-liturgical, medieval-sounding passages to perform. As the boats passed by, one became aware of the church bells ringing. The flute and percussion music now consisted of sustained, slow-moving lines, projecting a solemn, stately character. The mood and pace had obviously changed—so greatly, in fact, that this section brought to mind the concept of a 'slow movement'—perhaps mirroring similar changes in the neighbourhood and the audience of local bystanders. On the other hand, I recognised quite a few of the listeners as the same people who had been at the Mint Tower earlier. Moreover, the few boats containing musicians were now surrounded by a virtual flotilla of other boats: a travelling audience of local Amsterdammers in their own pleasure craft, following Brant and his ensemble in true Pied-Piper fashion.

Still later in the afternoon, the 'Grand Finale' took place at the pier in front of the Carré Theatre. The composer must have realised that a great sense of expectation would be mounting by this time, since many people would be gathering at the theatre's outdoor plaza to await the boats' arrival. Accordingly he created a complex antiphonal texture to channel and control that mounting tension. For an hour or so before the final appearance of the flute convoy, a gradual crescendo was created by a host of balancing and overlapping component levels: a youth jazz band, two choruses, two civic brass bands (the Amsterdam Municipal Police Band and the Post Office Band), and four of the colourfully decorated street organs that are such a hallmark of this city, all spread out over a large outdoor space separated by canals. The ever-increasing counterpoint of crowd noises and car horns worked very naturally into the total mix. In fact the overall effect on my ears (especially when I began walking about within the space) was absolutely unique. On the level of sheer theatre, it was remarkable to observe this mass carnival atmosphere unfold—seemingly spontaneous, but actually shaped and manipulated by a single creative artist. Musically, Brant's awareness of long-range dramatic timing, and his ingenious sense of orchestration and spatial layout, kept all the levels clear (in anyone else's hands this might have deteriorated into sonic mush), and allowed the total effect to 'grow'.

Bran(d)t aan de Amstel, which had begun at 3 p.m., ended in front of the Carré Theatre shortly after 7 o'clock. Appropriately enough, the composer and many of his audience went directly into the Carré for an evening concert, the last major event of the Brant week in Amsterdam. Under the circumstances, a formal indoor programme could have been something of an anticlimax. Fortunately this concert included a number of very strong pieces to hold the attention, and sharp, taut ensemble performances, especially from the Hague Percussion Group under the direction of Reinbert de Leeuw.

Two Brant pieces on the programme were noteworthy: his landmark *Angels and Devils* (1932) for flute solo and flute ensemble, and a vigorous performance of his antiphonal *Origins* (1950) for percussion orchestra and solo trumpet. But the evening's most commanding pieces were American percussion works of the 1920s and 1930s composed by some of Brant's colleagues and mentors. Cowell's *Ostinato pianissimo* (1934) and Antheil's *Ballet mécanique* (1923-5) (complete with aeroplane propellers) were a delight to see and hear, especially for many who had experienced these legendary pieces only through recordings. The most surprising success of all, however, was *The Abongo* (1933) by John J. Becker. This work for large percussion ensemble, based on African folk ritual, is not only absolutely stunning in its own right, but also fascinating as a precursor of recent 'modernisms'—the use of non-Western models, quasi-minimalist repetitive processes, and the expansion of instrumental technique into the domain of theater and speech—some 30 years before the start of current vogue. These pieces were perfect vehicles for exploring the range of that American eclectic experimental tradition, of which Brant is the most vigorous living example.

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