

Mein Gent

interview with Steven Prengels

Steven Prengels can now be called a loyal companion of Alain Platel. Prengels provided the musical score for *Gardenia*, the soundscapes for *C(H)OEURS*, arranged Mahler in a way that nobody realised for *nicht schlafen*, taught tone-deaf dancers Bach chorales in *tauberbach*, conducted brass bands worldwide in *En avant, marche!* Today, he is writing like a madman on *Ombra*, a composition commission for OBV in collaboration with laGeste. The situation for *Ombra* is new. Alain gave Steven carte blanche with the words: "you write a full-length piece of music and I will create a performance on it".

Meanwhile, he provided the music for *Mein Gent*, driving force behind the show that balances on the edge of operetta and revue. Even though he makes light of *Mein Gent*, it is a feat. By the way, he not only wrote the music, but also accompanied the choir consisting of a group of volunteers, from the start, sometime in 2020. During the performance, he propels them from the wings to unprecedented heights.

High time to focus more deeply on his work.



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In the sun-drenched courtyard garden next to our offices, he enthusiastically begins: "Yesterday at the Antwerp Conservatory (where he teaches composition, ed.), I was talking to a Polish student about my work. When I explained how I work, like a DJ, like 2manydjs, piling up samples, the student

Mein Gent

Frank Van Laecke, Alain Platel, Steven Prengels
laGeste & VIERNULVIJER

said: *you are like a curator, you are curating the cathartics.* "

Steven was clearly delighted with that description, which in turn gives him some leverage in his practice of being a composer. Whoever throws samplers together in popular music can reap a lot of success, in the classical genre you have to defend yourself. Whereas for Steven, the essence of composing is just that: putting things together, which he does through collage.

"*The cathartics, I think that should be a word,*" the student had added. I love that plural, whether it exists or not. Cathartics. Things that dissolve. There are several in a performance. Or they come in a different place for everyone. That's what you do with music: you organise the moments where the tensions of chafing, prying, wringing, are dissolving."



Repetitie van het koor - © Sofie De Backere

Musically, *Mein Gent* is a puzzle of many miniatures, many small pieces and chunks. We zoom in on the overture. It was created just before the first corona stop in the rehearsal process. It was music to support a catwalk of grotesque figures, a parade of the three actors (Pascale Platel, Ineke Nijssen and Gorges Ocloo) transforming with each passage. Then the doors closed because of corona (Nov 2020).

Steven says of this: "I kept coming to the studio, alone, and I worked on that composition alone. It involved a lot of elements that we still use today. The sketch by Romain Deconinck, "Living it up" by Bert Kaempfert (the opening tune of Kapitein Zeppos), and other parts. Alain's response was: that's the whole show in a nutshell, but actually we should cut this up again and redistribute it over the whole thing. The first block has become the overture, with as ingredients: bell, "Nouvelles aventures" by Ligeti, a course of Ghent dialect, a choral piece by Tchaikovsky "Hymne to the cherubs", an a cappella choir piece on which we sing an extra part live, the ping of the microwave, Dana Winner, again percussion by Ligeti, "Cats & Dogs" by Johannes Huppertz, topped with conversations from the Schwarzwald Clinic series, a violin concerto by Paganini. Not to mention all the other sound spices. That composition is precision work. I put things together, listen again, look

Mein Gent

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laGeste & VIERNULVIJER

at the set in the meantime, and keep checking what the music needs as a composition. This has to do with an inherent logic: and musical structure that imposes itself. But which you don't always necessarily have to embrace. You may also go against the expectation. Build in delay with respect to the expectations you build up. Break through them.

For Dana Winner, we use a recording on which nobody is allowed to sing along. That too is composing: what you don't do, what you choose NOT to do. The choir sings along on Tchaikovsky but absolutely not on Dana Winner, who otherwise is made tangible and concrete in the here and now. As is presented here, Dana Winner can function as a collective memory, disconnected from the action. Like a Bach chorale coming in. Think of the opening chorus of the St Matthew Passion: variation, variation, and then suddenly that chorale is there. So does this Dana Winner. With the result that the border between high and low is erased, and between difficult and light music. You have Ligeti, Tchaikovsky and Dana Winner within the same composition. One loses the layer of highbrow pretension or the resistance that avant-garde music often evokes, the other loses the layer of cheap entertainment. You just have to be careful when to cut."

"You fall back on a library you have built up in your head. Of things you happen to have heard or seen. In my lessons, I often use that Ligeti as an example. That hit by Dana Winner came up once at a rehearsal, and then you feel how that resonates. I keep track of that, and then I ask myself: what can I relate to that. For me, those are all ready-mades. If I put those together like Duchamp did, then maybe other layers of meaning come to the surface, which were not originally sought but which do surface."



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That library also functions as an archive, re-activating colours and smells from the past. The musical pieces and chunks seem like the archaeological finds from the lives of the people contributing to this, from Frank & Alain, but also Pascale who threw in "Ik wil terug naar de kust" by Maggie MacNeal. Or Ineke who was part of the Edelweizen phenomenon in the late 1980s (along with Erna Van Akoleyen and Jeanne Pennings), three yodelling madams in a dirndl. It is a way of writing cultural history without using text.

Mein Gent

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"Take what we call the potpourri, a collection of Ghent popular songs. In the original, these are largely written in major, for melodion, and give it a go. That's great but out of place in our context. I have drawn those in minor, and 'Schubert-anised' them. That underlying thrust resolves itself the moment Ineke then whistles the original. Opposite the historical layer is a song by Skrillex, from Gorges Ocloo's library. He has a very different library from mine. First we did a Chopin there, but Gorges used that music by Skrillex during a rehearsal. It's a musical shade we didn't have before. Moreover, you could see that it helped Gorges come into his power. Chopin out, Skrillex in. Do it!"

Mein Gent had to be postponed twice due to corona. "The effect of the two corona stops was that there was time to evaluate, even though we were almost ready to premiere at the second stop. Still, massive editing happened. Things were dropped, other things were added. The potpourri with the Ghent songs wasn't in it a year ago. The choir's share is much bigger now than it was then. We have been able to work more with choir and movers. Their presence was initially thought to be much smaller. There has also been room to let the songs click in more; they are now part of the script, form a commentary, a bit like a Greek choir in a Ghent popular theatre version."

Hildegard De Vuyst - dramaturge *Mein Gent*