

turned forty recently and is playing with words and images less and less. You can hear this on his CD *Manhay* from 2009. Gone are the campy electro and allusions to tacky hits from the eighties. Instead you get relatively simple pop with a traditional feel. There's no misunderstanding lyrics like those of *Icon* either: '(...) So don't try to be an icon/con the i inside of you/ that picture you've been painting/doesn't look a thing like you (...).' In interviews, too, Daan says that he has changed. 'I've come to terms with myself. I'm an idiot, but I can be satisfied with myself,' he said in a Belgian newspaper at the end of 2010.

You can get a foretaste of how this new Daan, without musical masquerades, sounds on his latest CD, from 2010, entitled (not insignificantly) *Simple*, where he's given old numbers a new jacket – and by no means always an expensive designer model. It seems we still haven't heard the last, and the best, from this charming chameleon.

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Netherlands Bach Society Celebrates its 90th Birthday

It was conductor Willem Mengelberg who in the early twentieth century established the Dutch tradition of annual performances of Bach's *St. Matthew Passion*. In his interpretations with the *Concertgebouw Orchestra* Mengelberg opted for richly scored choral and orchestral parts. He hardly used original instruments. Instead of the harpsichord, for example, he used a 'nail piano' which had thumb tacks in the felt of the hammers. Besides that, he employed all sorts of excessive romantic techniques to accentuate the dramatic impact of the music, like sudden changes of tempo and huge dynamic contrasts. A severe reduction of aria's and recitatives was considered necessary as a matter of course; otherwise the audience would not sit through the performance without falling asleep.

In the decades that followed, these ponderous productions caused more and more controversy. In 1921 the foundation of the Netherlands Bach Society was the most visible evidence of a tendency to revise the 'massive' performance practice with Mengelberg as its icon. The Netherlands Bach Society took a position that was diametrically opposed to Mengelberg's performance ideals and, as of 1922, performed its own annual production of the *St. Matthew Passion*.

The ambition was to move away from a lavish nineteenth century performance practice back to the 'concert style' of Bach's own era. As a rule the Bach Society performed the *St. Matthew Passion* not in a concert hall but in a church, the *Grote Kerk* in Naarden (a quaint moated city between Utrecht and Amsterdam). The performance of the sacred work in a church was welcomed by many and by opting for a performance on Good Friday instead of Palm Sunday - Mengelberg's preferred moment - the newcomer emphasized the difference with the Mengelberg tradition. In 2011 the Netherlands Bach Society celebrates its 90th anniversary. It is now the oldest early music ensemble in the Netherlands and perhaps even in the whole world. The fundamental principles referred to above are still intact, although the Society has gone through many changes. The musicians do not limit their performances to Bach, since the rep-

ertoire has broadened considerably over the years. Yet its pulsing heart (and irreplaceable money maker) continues to be the annual performances of the *St. Matthew Passion*, now an entire concert series performed at diverse locations in the run-up to Easter.

In its infancy, the Bach Society hardly ever collaborated with baroque specialists. On the contrary, the vocal soloists sang with as much passion with the Bach Society as under Mengelberg. Only when Evert Cornelis became its director in 1927 did a more modern notion of 'authenticity' become part of the Society's profile. To achieve this, Cornelis studied the original manuscripts. He also (re)introduced the uncut *Matthew Passion*, considering leaving out passages as nothing less than a criminal offence.

The Netherlands Bach Society became a well respected and integral part of the musical infrastructure of the Netherlands. In the fifties its leader - by that time Anthon van der Horst - even conducted the annual *St. Matthew Passion* of the *Concertgebouw Orchestra* twice, when Mengelberg's successor, Eduard van Beinum, was seriously ill. Charles de Wolff became the next conductor of the Bach Society and kept his position for nearly twenty years. In the mid-eighties yet another course was set. Inspired by the initiators of the historic performance movement, for example Nikolaus Harnoncourt and Gustav Leonhardt, the new leader

Jos van Veldhoven reorganized the Bach Society into a Baroque orchestra with a smaller choir of specialized singers. At the beginning of the new millennium van Veldhoven even reduced his choir to one or two soloists per part.

Over the years the Bach Society has become a well respected brand with international fame, even impressing the critics of *The New York Times*. Van Veldhoven conducts the series of *Matthew Passions* only every other year; in the seasons in between the Bach Society invites other acclaimed conductors to enrich the interpretation.

The 90th anniversary of the Netherlands Bach Society will be used as a kick off season leading eventually to the festive celebration of its 100th anniversary in 2021 as programming nowadays looks far, far ahead. In this case such planning is an absolute necessity. In anticipation of its first century of existence, the Society has set itself the challenge of performing all the works by Johann Sebastian Bach over the next decade. A major enterprise this, as Bach's compositions include more than 1100 works, of which the *St. Matthew Passion* is but one ...

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Jos van Veldhoven (1952-).

