

**CLASSICAL MUSIC**  
*from Flanders & Brussels*

*Essays on early and new music today by*

**Rudy Tambuyser**

**Herman Baeten**

**Maarten Quanten & Klaas Coulebier**

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**TO CONSIDER AND  
TO COMMEMORATE**

*From ancient tradition  
to lively look at the future*

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The importance that Flanders attaches to music is as old as the region itself. In historical retrospect, it is remarkable how, over the years, in Flanders knowing and practicing music has gained as prominent a place in society as listening to it. Since time immemorial, music has not only been used, created and savoured; it has also been developed, considered and studied.

How this came about is a far-reaching question. It may well be related to geographical conditions. Flanders is flat and centrally located and has a rather mild climate. So, it is not coincidental that it has seen its share of conflict. The people live close together, have a Burgundian lifestyle and must now and then suffer some rather drizzly weather: excellent reasons for a thriving social life.

Its historic crossroads function brought in a wide range of different influences and a sort of genetic wanderlust. Having to deal with several languages and significant traffic induced inventiveness and an unmistakable feeling for what state-of-the-art can signify, either literally or figuratively. The crossroads function facilitated an early humanistic disposition, a tendency toward intellectual curiosity and contemplation.

It is not too far-fetched to assume that this historic-geological-sociological cocktail lay at the basis of the evolution and status of classical music in Flanders. The long tradition of gathering together, eating, drinking, communicating – and thus making music – in a sometimes-ponderous manner, continues to leave its traces in what is, any way you look at it, a remarkable occupation with music still known to Flanders today.

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Bart De Baere, curator of the Museum of Contemporary Art Antwerp (M HKA) and a possibly unsuspected progressive voice, once said the following about the visual arts in Flanders: *“In our country, we make art the way other countries make wine. It is something we have done for centuries. [...] The story began in the late Middle Ages, when well-organised workshops exported illuminated manuscripts, altar pieces and tapestries from our cities to all corners of Europe. Artists such as Van Eyck and later Rubens and Van Dyck worked for the most powerful courts of their time. Much of this history remains preserved in our churches, castles and museums. Young people growing up in historic cities such as Bruges, Ghent, Antwerp, Mechelen, Leuven or Brussels see testimony of a rich artistic tradition everywhere. That can put some ideas into the heads of young people that are sensitive to this.”*

These words can be paraphrased perfectly in connection with music in Flanders. It was specifically in the late Middle Ages that the Flemish polyphonists (from Dufay to Josquin and Obrecht to Willaert and Ockeghem), trained as vocalists and composers at our cathedral schools, who worked in the powerful courts of Italy, in particular, thus establishing the formal framework within which southern talent and inspiration was able to develop in the subsequent generations.

Later, from baroque to classical and romantic until the Second World War, Flanders was known more for its performing musicians than its composers – one might say: more for its craftsmanship than for its enthusiasm. From the 1950s onward, Flanders once again experienced highly regarded compositional activity, albeit, as would thereafter prove the fate of the avant-garde everywhere, with a less broad resonance and with more attention to art itself than to its users and witnesses. Minimally flamboyant, with an almost scientific progressive ethic. It wasn't for nothing that popular music emerged during that time – a laudable genre that generated great publicity and willingness to listen, but is not the topic of this text.

In any case, it does not seem illogical that Flemish musicians, ensembles and composers have earned high ranking in the most diverse disciplines of the realm of classical music. Nor does it seem coincidental that this applies all the more to the extremes of the musical realm: 'early' music and 'new' music, the domains of choice in which careful study and structured thinking are the order of the day.

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## Early music

In the late 1950s and early 1960s arose the so-called movement of early music, representing the authentic practice of performance – today referred to somewhat more modestly as *Historically Informed Practice* (HIP). It is no exaggeration to state that Flanders produced significant pioneers for this who continue to be part of the sector to this day. A clear example is the role of conductor [Philippe Herreweghe](#). In 1970, he founded the Ghent choir [Collegium Vocale](#), thus helping determine the sound of Bach in the 20th and 21st centuries. In recent decades, Herreweghe also focused his spirit of research on a more modern repertoire and instruments: in addition to being guest conductor of international orchestras he is also the head conductor of [deFilharmonie](#) (Royal Flemish Philharmonic). Even earlier pioneers were the brothers [Kuijken](#) (violinist [Sigiswald](#), gambist [Wieland](#) and flutist [Barthold](#)), who continue to bravely lead their [La Petite Bande](#), originally established at the request of Gustav Leonhardt.

[René Jacobs](#), who began his career as countertenor and today is one of the most lauded conductors for opera and other vocal works, comes from the same artistic lineage. Oboist [Marcel Ponseele](#) and flutist [Jan De Winne](#), as well, first worked in various groups before establishing their ensemble [Il Gardellino](#) in the mid-1980s.

In terms of the baroque sector, incidentally, the changing of the guard is assured. In recent years, there has been a steep rise for the colourfully named baroque orchestra [B'Rock](#), led by harpsichordist, conductor and composer [Frank Agsteribbe](#), as well as a top-notch Belle Epoque band that has also regularly been part of productions involving new music. In business terms, B'Rock is run by [Hendrik Storme](#) – also director of the [Klarafestival](#) in Brussels – and [Tomas Bishop](#) – who, in his turn, runs the [MAfestival](#) – the former Musica Antiqua, with its competition in which so many highly regarded HIP musicians began their careers.

Among them, the well-known harpsichordist, pianist and conductor [Jos van Immerseel](#). In 1987, he established an orchestra, Anima Eterna (today [Anima Eterna Brugge](#)), to play Bach concerts which, after the necessary expansion, today also plays a classical, romantic and modern repertoire, meaning: to provide them as well as possible with original instruments and stylistics.

In the run-up to the creation of Anima Eterna, cellist [Roel Dieltiens](#) was a valued partner of Van Immerseel. He remains one of Flanders' leading soloists and chamberists.

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All early music was once new, and no artistic discipline remains alive without new forms of expression.

From Jos van Immerseel, it is only a small step to his good friend and fellow traveller [Paul Van Nevel](#), founder of the famous [Huelgas Ensemble](#), due to Van Nevel's field of study with a strong vocal orientation and continuing to be one of the world's most leading Medieval and Renaissance specialists.

In the vocal realm, we also encounter the much younger, more holistic and experimental-minded – and thus more flamboyant – [Graindelavoix](#) that is directed by vocalist, musicologist and anthropologist [Björn Schmelzer](#). They focus particularly on the still fairly undeveloped area of what was once Flanders' most famous export product: Medieval music. The not only scientific but also anthropological and phenomenological nature of Schmelzer means that Graindelavoix regularly enters into partnerships with other traditions and styles.

Equally open-minded is the vocal and instrumental ensemble [Zefiro Torna](#), formed in 1996 from HIP, but having grown just as vigorously into a highly interdisciplinary and poly-stylistic group for whom making music is not a purely artistic one but also a humanistic-social activity. Dialogue with other cultures and collaboration with contemporary groups plays an important role in their operation and philosophy.

## New music

All early music was once new, and no artistic discipline remains alive without new forms of expression. Péter Eötvös once made the astute observation that HIP is simultaneously 'a sort of avant-garde'. In this sense, it is not surprising that Flanders is also represented in the artistic vanguard.

A good starting point for the current situation at the executional level is the legendary group Maximalist! formed in the 1980s in Brussels as a reaction to minimalism. The group was inspired by just about everything, but not in the last place by Arte Povera, in a short but powerful lifespan laying the groundwork for what must still be called Flanders' best known ambassadors of new music.

For example, choreographer Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker and her company Rosas come from this movement – they are not specifically musicians, but have 'provoked' a great deal of music in co-productions. Also coming from Maximalist! was the no longer existing but nonetheless legendary group X-Legged Sally with

clarinetist-composer [Peter Vermeersch](#); today he directs the Flat Earth Society, a wondrous brass band that cannot absolutely be categorised as classical music, but that does not matter – in what category do you think they would indeed fit?

[Bl!ndman](#) – the exclamation mark is a tribute to Maximalist! – was founded as a saxophone quartet in 1988 by [EricSleichim](#). It followed a path of absolute avant-garde via crossover productions (involving, for example, improvised film soundtracks), to remarkable projects involving Baroque (Bach's organ music), Renaissance (in cooperation with Paul Van Nevel) or Medieval (in cooperation with Pedro Memelsdorff). Today, Bl!ndman is a music lab consisting of four quartets: sax, strings, brass and drums, and topped off with a hybrid line-up.

Another derivative of Maximalist! is the renowned ensemble [Ictus](#), led, since its conception in the late 1980s, by [George-Elie Octors](#) that maintains privileged contacts with a great number of leading composers (including Harvey, Ferneyhough, Reich and Aperghis), foreign musicians and concert halls.

Quite a few musicians of Ictus can also be named separately in this summary. Great figures include, for example, oboist [Piet Van Bockstal](#), also soloist with the deFilharmonie and much-sought-after *chambrist* and ensemble player, and [Tom Pauwels](#), a gifted guitarist as well as being conceptually and programmatically very strong. Also from Brussels, but of an entirely different nature, is [Het Collectief](#). The basis of this group is a chamber music quintet that took the Second Viennese School as a starting point in 1998. Meanwhile, it has become a more flexible – expandable – ensemble of absolute world class. Recently, productions with Collegium Vocale and Reinbert de Leeuw have caught the eye; through the leading French magazine Diapason, its nevertheless already older recording of Schoenberg's *Pierrot Lunaire* was rediscovered and praised as an absolute benchmark.

Contemporary music is also well represented in Antwerp. [ChampdAction](#) was founded in 1988 by the strongly electronics-oriented composer [Serge Verstockt](#). While the ensemble initially focused exclusively on contemporary music, today it calls itself a 'production company for new music, multidisciplinary music projects and audio art.' ChampdAction maintains the strong bond formed at its creation with the cultural centre [deSingel](#), literally and figuratively the home base of the company.

Still in Antwerp, pianist-conductor [Koen Kessels](#) – once conductor of ChampdAction – directs his own [HERMESensemble](#) since 1999. Over

the course of time, this has considerably expanded its field of work from what one could call the classic avant-garde of the 1950s and 1960s to crossover productions with other styles, genres and disciplines.

Somewhere between Antwerp, Ghent and the Netherlands, we find the still young, brave guitar quartet that can basically not be compared to anything known as [Zwerm](#), which worked under the wings of ChampdAction for a few years. Avant-garde in its most light-hearted and spirited form. This season, Zwerm enjoyed a smooth collaboration with one of its heroes, guitar legend Fred Frith.

A very important figure in the Flemish new music scene is the cellist [Arne Deforce](#). Once connected to both Ictus as ChampdAction – not only as a performer but also as a developer of artistic trends – he started flying a more distinctive solo course several years ago. Several composers have written for him, among others, Richard Barrett, Alvin Curran and Phil Niblock.

One of Deforce's regular musical partners is [Daan Vandewalle](#), trained by such people as pianist, composer and professional intellectual [Claude Coppens](#) and Alvin Curran. His work in contemporary music has been inescapable for over 20 years. This applies no less to his fellow pianist [Jan Michiels](#), professor at the Brussels Conservatory who, however, rather than being dedicated to the most contemporary music, focuses on the avant-garde gradually becoming classical (including Ligeti, Kurtág and Boulez). Incidentally, Michiels is also very active in traditional repertoire, from Bach to Bartók.

In Ghent, we meet the ensemble [Spectra](#), led by pianist, conductor and composer [Filip Rathé](#) and established by himself and the late Alvaro Guimaraes. The ensemble is named after the Spectra Group, which together with the IPEM (Institute for Psycho-Acoustics and Electronic Music) gave form to the electronic avant-garde in Ghent starting in the 1960s. Both institutions are closely linked with such illustrious names of deceased masters as Karel Goeyvaerts, Norbert Rosseau, Louis De Meester and Lucien Goethals, as well as [Philippe Boesmans](#), today house composer of De Munt in Brussels, musicologist Herman Sabbe and [Claude Coppens](#).

In Ghent, there's always room for more when it comes to originality, stubbornness and contrariness, and this is one of the reasons why it's the home base of [Logos Foundation](#) of [Godfried-Willem Raes](#), ingenious builder of musical automata and unconditional musical progressive thinker, constantly engaged in a relentless struggle for the emancipation of music vis-à-vis virtuoso performers. The description that Logos gives of his mission that is just as precise

as assertive needs no explanation: "*The Logos Foundation is Flanders' unique professional organization for the promotion of new music and audio-related arts by means of new music production, concerts, performances, composition, technological research and other activities related to contemporary music.*"

Still in the Ghent area, we find the vocal ensemble [Aquarius](#), named after (and dedicated to) musical and humanistic thought, interpreted in the eponymous opera of Karel Goeyvaerts. Aquarius is led by its founder, cellist, composer and conductor [Marc Michael De Smet](#), who as leader of the New Music Group conducted more than 100 Belgian premieres in the 1980s.

## Composers

'New music' must be written before it can be performed. Here, we will list the most prominent composers in Flanders, from familiar standbys and deans to somewhat younger ones.

[Luc Brewaeys](#), who died in December 2015 but by way of honouring him cannot be left off this list, was a student of such masters as [André Laporte](#), Iannis Xenakis and Franco Donatoni. He was our greatest symphonic composer, with such accomplishments as nine symphonies, unforgettable ensembles and brilliant orchestrations of Debussy's *Préludes* for piano in his name. Of his students, here we must certainly mention [Annelies van Parys](#), a very original voice that couples metier with fine intuition.

[Luc Van Hove](#), teacher of composition at the [Antwerp Conservatory](#), is still a fixture: a constructivist holding the professional banner high. His colleague [Wim Henderickx](#), in a previous life percussionist, creates particularly ragas inspired by Hindustani music for orchestra and musical theatre. He works closely with HERMESensembel and deFilharmonie, focusing most recently on music pedagogy.

Ghent resident and professor at the Ghent Conservatory [Lucien Posman](#) cannot be compared to anything or anyone. Himself almost retirement age – though you wouldn't think so – he studied with [Roland Coryn](#), the still active head doyen of modern Flemish choral music. Posman is a self-proclaimed (post) mannerist and a great fan and connoisseur of William Blake, to whose texts he has often composed, with an unmistakable emphasis on love for vocality.

Of course, the Ghent connection also includes guitarist and composer [Petra Vermote](#). She studied under such masters as the already mentioned Roland Coryn and Luc van Hove, as well as [Frank Nuyts](#) – another such invincible magician with notes that has certainly

earned a place on this list. Vermote has written in virtually all genres for ensemble, but choral music holds a special place in her heart. Speaking of choral music, we cannot ignore the person of [Kurt Bikkembergs](#). He is first and foremost choral conductor, professor at the Lemmens Institute in Leuven and a great connoisseur of the choral repertoire from the past to today, who also regularly makes contributions that are as clever as they are heartfelt.

A special place in vocal music is held by the much younger pianist, conductor, singer and composer [Maarten Van Ingelgem](#) – son of composer [Kristiaan van Ingelgem](#) – who has long been one of Flanders' leading organists.

[Kris Defoort](#) comes from a completely different direction. He was once a classical recorder player, but became a celebrated jazz pianist and composer (in the artistic lineage of Gil Evans). Subsequently, he was inducted into 'classical' composition and orchestration by Philippe Boesmans. Today, he is one of our leading composers, his most outstanding achievements to date being the opera *The Woman Who Walked into Doors* and the cycle *Conservations / Conversations*.

[Joachim Brackx](#) is formally a student of Godfried-Willem Raes, but stylistically emancipated from virtually any influence. As a vocalist, he is a lover of Baroque and Renaissance music, from which he derives a great sense of rhetoric and subtle gesture.

From the environment of ChampdAction – regarding which we must also certainly mention the founder and inspirer [Serge Verstockt](#) – we regularly hear interesting soundsmiths, two of whom particularly spring to mind: [Stefan Prins](#), as engineer, pianist, composer, technologist and improviser with live electronics as universal as a contemporary musician could be, and [Stefan Van Eycken](#), musicologist and composer with a strong phenomenological approach and interest, who has lived and worked in Tokyo since 2000.

Finally, we will mention here – in the full awareness that we cannot present an exhaustive list – pianist-composer [Frederik Neyrinck](#), still a young man in his thirties that lives and works in Vienna. As a composer, he uses somewhat more traditional means and instrumentation than his aforementioned colleagues. With a great deal of success, as witnessed by the many collaborations and contracts he has in the pipeline.

## Repertoire

Between very old and hot off the press is of course the regular, more traditional repertoire. In that area Flanders keeps its end up as well. Partly supported by a widespread, highly accessible and still rather

elite Part-time Artistic Education (DKO), musicians of a high level regularly make their way to professional stages at home and abroad. At the risk of not mentioning every one of them, here is a bird's-eye view.

Flanders has a rich tradition of chamber music. This is undoubtedly presented at the highest level by the aforementioned quintet [Het Collectief](#). Also from Brussels, and from its history associated with [Het Collectief](#), is the larger ensemble [Oxalys](#), established in Flanders' rather magical cultural year 1993. In terms of spirit and notes, Oxalys had the French chamber repertoire of the late 19th and early 20th centuries as a starting point, but expanded its range of activity in a sensitive manner.

Still very young as an ensemble, but equally promising, is the [Taurus String Quartet](#). Four seasoned chambrists who, after having experienced almost all other repertoires, decided to extensively explore the royal genre of chamber music.

The [Goeyvaerts String Trio](#), with home base in Sint-Niklaas, has charted an impressive course in recent years. It focuses on the large repertoire of mainly the late 20th century.

[I Solisti del Vento](#), the brainchild of top bassoonist [Francis Pollet](#), was originally a woodwind formation that is at home in virtually every style. They have many creations to their name and have been occupied to no small extent with musical theatre in recent years. Most Flemish woodwinds of any significance once worked with I Solisti one way or another. Among them the excellent soloists [Piet Van Bockstal](#) (oboe; see also Ictus, deFilharmonie, and many other ensembles) and clarinetist [Vlad Weverbergh](#) – founder of the Antwerp ensemble [Terra Nova](#) and more recently, often in the company of the Prague Collegium 1704. An exception to that rule is [Benjamin Dieltjens](#), once a founding member of [Het Collectief](#) and one of the most well-rounded musicians in his discipline – he plays baroque on basset horn to avant-garde on modern clarinet, from concertos for orchestral pieces (at deFilharmonie) to chamber music. He forms a duo together with his brother [Thomas Dieltjens](#), and is without a doubt one of the most remarkable and respected pianists of his generation.

Having arrived at the pianist front, here we will certainly mention [Julien Libeer](#), one of those rare young people that appear to be succeeding in the world of pianos without participating in competitions. He can call himself a protege of the great Maria João Pires. A few years older are [Nicolas Callot](#) and [Lucas Blondeel](#), who,

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incidentally, form the aptly named [Pianoduo Callot-Blondeel](#). Both pianists are also fervent accompanists and have been increasingly interested in historic pianos in recent years.

From the same, let's call it Antwerp, vibe comes [Nikolaas Kende](#), son of the Hungarian-Belgian doyen [Levente Kende](#), and professor at the Antwerp Conservatory. He forms a chamber music duo with the excellent violinist [Jolente De Maeyer](#).

With all this emphasis on exponents of the younger generation, we must not forget the more established ones – not seldom the instructors of the former: the already mentioned [Jan Michiels](#); [Piet Kuijken](#), according to his family tradition above all interested in historic pianos; the international Schumann and Brahms authority and fantastic accompanist [Jozef de Beenhouwer](#).

As far as songs are concerned, we will now focus on the Flemish vocalists with some renown. First, we must certainly name soprano [Ilse Eerens](#) (long the protégée of the Dutch contralto Jard van Nes) who is slowly and wisely working on a great career. Also much in demand is the stylistically very versatile soprano [Liesbeth Devos](#) – who also teaches at the Antwerp Conservatory. Let us mention of the up-and-comers, as well, the exquisitely tuned soprano [Hendrickje van Kerckhove](#), who appears to most certainly be on the road to fulfilling the expectations that she awakened as Rising Star 2008.

Incidentally, Van Kerckhove is laureate of the [International Opera Academy \(IOA\)](#) in Ghent, artistically led by our international opera director [Guy Joosten](#).

One small and one large generation earlier, we find respectively the tenor [Yves Saelens](#) and the still active international bass-baritone [Werner van Mechelen](#). The two are both dedicated opera, concert and lied singers.

A regular partner of Jan Michiels, Jozef De Beenhouwer and others is the violinist [Guido De Neve](#), for decades an unconventional and major figure in the Flemish music scene. The multitude of international violin soloists includes [Yossif Ivanov](#), who in 2005 took second place in the Queen Elisabeth International Music Competition and in 2010 was the youngest violin teacher ever at the Royal Conservatory of Brussels.

Quite a few of our great musicians are somewhat hidden in orchestras. We have already mentioned clarinetist Benjamin Dieltjens. His fellow clarinetist [Jaan Bossier](#) is a founding member of the renowned Mahler Chamber Orchestra and a member of Ensemble Modern. Harpist [Anneleen Lenaerts](#) progressed a few years ago to become a permanent member of the Vienna

Philharmonic, while in addition also often playing in the Bavarian Radio Symphony Orchestra. We must not forget to mention the unforgettable trumpet player [Manu Mellaerts](#), soloist in the Symphony Orchestra of De Munt since as far back as we can remember. Here, he represents an entire school of excellent, Flemish brass players, who usually do their perfect work somewhat in the background.

Of the Flemish orchestras we must, of course, mention [deFilharmonie \(Royal Flemish Philharmonic\)](#) under [Herreweghe](#) and Edo de Waart, whose work will soon be heard in the soon to be completely redesigned Elisabethzaal in Antwerp's city center; [Brussels Philharmonic](#) under Stéphane Denève – the former radio orchestra that continued to be connected with former radio choir CRC ([Flemish Radio Choir](#)) and makes its home in the legendary boat-shaped Flagey building in Brussels Elsene; the [Flanders Symphony Orchestra](#) under Jan Latham-König, which in addition to such large venues as deSingel in Antwerp and Concertgebouw Brugge also serves the Flemish hinterland; strictly historically inspired [Anima Eterna Brugge](#) under [Jos van Immerseel](#), with permanent residence in Concertgebouw Brugge; the chamber orchestra [Le Concert Olympique](#) under [Jan Caeyers](#) and smaller [Casco Philharmonic](#) under [Benjamin Haemhouts](#).

Conductor and composer [Dirk Brossé](#) must definitely be mentioned here; he is a professor at the Ghent Conservatory, musical director of the Chamber Orchestra of Philadelphia and a much sought-after guest conductor, not least of all for recording film music.

## Organisers

All that musical beauty must also be properly organised and given a place to shine in the most suitable space available.

The largest concert halls in Flanders do their own programming: [Bozar](#) in the [Centre for Fine Arts in Brussels](#); [Flagey](#), also in Brussels, that houses the legendary Studio 4, world famous for its flawless acoustics; [deSingel \(Blauwe Zaal\)](#) in Antwerp; [De Bijloke](#) in Ghent; [Concertgebouw Brugge](#). An exception is the already mentioned [Elizabeth Hall](#) in the new Elisabeth Congress Center, slated to open its doors in November of 2016. deFilharmonie (Royal Flemish Philharmonic) will be in residence, but the room will not establish its own programming.

A smaller – in the spirit of its predecessor, the de Gele Zaal – somewhat riskier but very high-quality programme can be found in Ghent's [Handelsbeurs](#), managed by the Noordstar Fonds, which has

a pop and world music programme in the same space. Handelsbeurs was in the spotlight in recent years with such events as its blind date concerts, where the public did not know exactly who would be appearing on the stage.

The relatively numerous festivals in Flanders also organise concerts. A number of these are bundled under the name Flanders Festival, still a strong name to far beyond the national borders. Flanders Festival International and the Klara Festival offer a programme of international favourites in collaboration with Bozar and Klara, public classical radio.

Laus Polyphoniae in Antwerp is a well-regarded festival of early music. It is organised by AMUZ, which presents a not very large but definitely ambitious seasonal programme in the prestigious Augustinuskerk – with HIP still the norm in that programme as well.

MA Festival, formerly Musica Antiqua, is the Bruges branch of the Flanders Festival and also a renowned early music festival. Special repute is enjoyed by the competition that is associated with it and has brought many a future international star into the spotlight over the last few decades.

In Leuven, we find Novecento, a festival with a standard repertoire that does not, however, go back beyond the year 1900 and Transmit, a three-day event which is comprised almost exclusively of premieres. In Limburg, there were the Basilica Concerts, a modest little festival that originated in Tongeren – at least chronologically the first city in Flanders. In recent years, it developed under artistic manager Bob Permentier into the more ambitious, much acclaimed B-Classic, which as befits a contemporary festival also wants to be a lab and an artistic breeding-ground. Explicitly in that context, it organises its Pressure Cooking Festival, the name of which speaks for itself.

The particularly glorious one-day festival Day of Early Music in the beautiful setting of the Grand Commandery Alden Biezen, also from Limburg, became Alba Nova in 2014, still a one-day festival which – still with early music as its inspiration – nonetheless focuses explicitly on the future and new music. It is not without reason that it is directed by composer, conceptualist, pianist and musicologist Paul Craenen.

Craenen also directs Musica, the Limburg-based organisation involving music education that organises wonderful projects throughout Flanders.

Whereas Musica is not exclusively, but certainly not least of all, focused on children, on the other side of the educational spectrum

we find the training institution the Orpheus Institute, established in the Ghent urban centre and directed by conductor-jurist Peter Dejans and Luc Vaes, pianist-musicologist in the style and spirit of Claude Coppens. Orpheus Institute is home to the very unique do-CARTES, a veritable doctoral programme for musical performers in collaboration with universities in Flanders and the Netherlands.

In relation to educational projects, here we must also mention Zonzo Compagnie, the production company for children's performances of music theatre-maker Wouter Van Looy, of whom the highly original, interactive, child-sized but invariably outstanding artistic presentation festival BIG BANG (continuation of Oorsmeer Festival) is certainly the best known.

Van Looy is also co-director of Muziektheater Transparant, a production company that provides the great vocal works of Opera Vlaanderen – with facilities in Ghent and Antwerp – and De Munt – the internationally renowned, Brussels opera house under intendant Peter de Caluwe – with a smaller, more flexible counterpoint.

Finally: the Flemish do not programme and organise classical music in Flanders alone. Our expertise is also sought after abroad. In that context, we can mention Serge Dorny, who leads the Lyon Opera and works closely with Festival d'Aix-en-Provence (led by compatriot Bernard Foccroulle); Xavier Vandamme, who manages the Utrecht Early Music Festival; Jan Raes, managing director of the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra Amsterdam; Marc Cléméur, director of the Opéra National du Rhin in Strasbourg; and Lieven Bertels, who after his fourth and final Sydney Festival 2016 became artistic director of Leeuwarden 2018 – the festivities celebrating the Frisian city as cultural capital of Europe in that year.

And although we must stop writing now, dear reader: this is definitely not all. *L'embarras de choix*.



## EARLY MUSIC

### *in Flanders*

**Herman Baeten studied musicology and for a number of years worked as a music teacher and as a conductor and performer of early music. He founded Musica, of which he currently is chairman, and co-founded Alamire Music Publishers. He is also the author of several studies on music theory.**

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The growing interest since 1950 to approach early music in a historically correct manner has thoroughly shaken the music world.

Today, the term ‘early music’ covers a wide range: all music composed since yesterday. That is at least how Jos van Immerseel, a well-known and important figure in the early music scene, describes it. This demonstrates that the term early music comprises an ever wider repertoire. These days, even the historical performance of 20th century

music is already considered early music. Early music – a term more charming than ‘old music’ – has always received attention, as we can see throughout the history of music.

The growing interest since 1950 to approach early music in a historically correct manner has thoroughly shaken the music world. In Flanders, the Musica Antiqua festival ([MAfestival](#)) in Bruges has been a pioneer since 1965. In the seventies, Utrecht followed suit with an even bigger and more diversified festival, while in many places across Flanders smaller initiatives surfaced. In the eighties, the other concert organisers joined in, with Antwerp setting a tone of its own with the [Laus Polyphoniae](#) festival (since 1993), focusing solely on polyphony.

The performers’ world had already started approaching early music in a historically informed manner in the 1950s and 1960s; and in Flanders, the Netherlands, England and Austria ensembles were created that focused exclusively on this kind of music. A number of big names are still setting the tone internationally. In the beginning, the interest mainly went to music from the Middle Ages and

the Renaissance and Baroque eras. English musicians mostly took an interest in the very early periods, while in Flanders and the Netherlands Baroque music gained a special place next to prominent performances of the early repertoire. The historically informed performance practice really boomed and led to many festivals and concert series all over the world. But it mostly resulted in a growing number of recordings being launched. The established performance practice suffered a major setback that also reverberated in symphonic orchestras. When the old music repertoire was expanded to the music of the Classical era, the symphonic orchestras were forced to focus more on the Romantic repertoire, until the historically informed performance practice put a spoke in the wheel of the fixed performance practice. Maybe not with the same level of dominance as in the early days of the historically informed performance practice, but at the very least serious questions were raised about the performance of 19th century (and later 20th century) music. One thing is for sure: since the surge of historical performances (nowadays mostly called historically informed performance) no one can perform an early composition without a critical approach. The merit of the movement is definitely that its adherents have tackled many dogmas and have taken a very different approach to performance practice, from the perspective of sources and testimonies.

The ‘founding fathers’ of this performance practice gathered their knowledge mostly through private study and a self-critical mindset when approaching early music. One cannot underestimate the influence of a number of young musicologists who raised pertinent questions with regard to the approach of historical sources. At both the universities of Leuven and Utrecht (with among others STIMU) pioneering research was carried out, and the influence of these people sometimes remains neglected when discussing the early music movement. The Flemish Centre for Early Music, [Musica](#) – created by a number of musicologists/musicians – developed into an important agent in the early music world.

In addition to organising concert series, festivals (including the Day of Early Music festival in Alden Biesen), masterclasses and all sorts of courses, this organisation gave birth to various ensembles (including Capilla Flamenca). Musica founded a sister organisation, the publishing house Alamire. Starting in 1980, this publishing house went on to release the renowned music periodical Musica

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Antiqua (18 volumes since 1983) as well as a series of facsimiles and professional publications, spread worldwide. After 2000, Musica (now an Impulse Centre for Music) broadened its focus and early music became a subdivision of the organisation. The Alamire publishing house published less and less material and today it only releases sporadic publications and spreads the old, unpublished funds. However, the Alamire Foundation was founded, a joint venture between the University of Leuven and Musica, where research and the spreading of early music are part of its core mission.

Today, this organisation is located in the House for Polyphony on the Park Abbey site in Leuven and it has taken over various of the old Musica tasks. The research they carry out in the womb of the university is gaining more and more international attention and creates a constant flow of new injections into the early music movement. Furthermore, they also organise concert series and provide academic support to performers who need it.

When it comes to Flanders, there was also another very important phenomenon which explains the rise and boom of early music: the role of Pieter Andriessen, musicologist and Radio 3 producer at the time. He stimulated the historically informed performance practice with beautiful and well-produced radio series which he assigned to the performing musicians (e.g. [René Jacobs](#) and [Paul Van Nevel](#)). On top of that he assigned compositions and big financial injections to national and international performers to develop very specific programmes which he then broadcasted on Radio 3. The enormous popularity of his programme Musica Antiqua was legendary in the eighties and nineties. Later, the interest at the radio station dwindled, the budgets were cut and more and more expertise disappeared until the historical music vanished almost entirely from the station now known as [Klara](#). A radio station as a catalyst for an entire music movement: today one can only dream of it in the case of Klara, now only a shadow of what it meant for the sector at the end of the previous decade.

Obviously, it was important that the performing musicians received enough new stimuli. These were mainly provided by the pioneers themselves. The following generations could find stimuli at institutes where the historically informed performance

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Everywhere departments for early music sprung up within the classical conservatories, and there was a boost of the number of musicians working with early music.

practice played a central role. The Schola Cantorum Basiliensis had been working in that field for years and provided, among others, the basis for a number of important forerunners like the Studio der frühe Musik ensemble.

In The Hague, Amsterdam, Brussels, Barcelona, Geneva, Paris, Lyon, Bremen, London, everywhere departments for early music sprung up within the classical conservatories, and there was a boost of the number of musicians working with early music. This resulted in countless new ensembles, all trying to grab a spot within the concert circuit. Many were called but few were chosen. This had absolutely nothing to do with the technical qualities of these musicians, because everyone agrees those qualities have increased over the years. The thing was many of these performers lacked charisma and above all authenticity. Studying the sources and delving into the material was usually lost on them, since they mostly wanted to be on stage. But this way they made the same mistakes of which the classical musicians were accused before.

The concert organisers preferred the well-known names to attract a crowd and this threatened the succession of the pioneers. A number of these big names, like Gustav Leonhardt and Nicolaus Harnoncourt, have passed away since then. And the great Flemish pioneers are all in their seventies by now. Does this mean the early music world will come to an end when these important players are gone? Many are wondering what the future will bring. However, hard work is being done and early music definitely still has a future.

The current perception might have something to do with the slowly fading early music programmes at the conservatories. While leading figures like the brothers [Barthold Kuijken](#) and [Sigiswald Kuijken](#) used to play an important educational role in various institutes, without these teachers there is a void which the conservatories have used to slowly limit the early music programmes or even repeal them.

In Flanders for example, there is no such thing as a proper training in early music anymore. Abroad, some institutes are still hanging on, but there are many complaints about the quality of the teachers who focus too much on the technical side of things and too little on the critical study of the source material. This means early music is destined to become part of the classical conservatory training once again and there is no reason anymore to keep a separate department alive.

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Many are wondering what the future will bring

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Nowadays, musicians often have to invest their own money in recordings and many therefore opt to release their recordings themselves, sometimes including an edition on their own label.

to find a job. This automatically led to a setback for the education programme and the number of people interested in this specialisation. Musicians who did choose to specialise were often not the most interesting performers due to a lack of true enthusiasm and conviction. As mentioned before, this had a big influence on the concert organisers who played it safe by choosing the old established names. It created the perception that early music would suffer a silent death after the loss of these big names and after various performance styles were taken over by classical orchestras and ensembles.

However, it is not all doom and gloom, and such a negative perception is partly exaggerated, depending on the zeitgeist. The record labels that at the time had given a serious boost to the so-called 'boom' of early music also suffered because of the general malaise in the music industry, so musicians struggled to find a label. Nowadays, musicians often have to invest their own money in recordings and many therefore opt to release their recordings themselves, sometimes including an edition on their own label. This is not only a problem for early music, but also for many performing musicians. The absolute top still gets opportunities, but lesser gods have to fend for themselves. However, this masks a true opportunity: those who provide high-quality, original, innovative and convincing work on a steady basis can still get a place on the big concert stages. For musicians wanting to specialise further in historical performance, the demands will be just as high, which can only lead to top performers. We have been seeing them finding their place all over the world, however slowly.

Will Flanders still play a role in this field in the future? It will depend on individual musicians to show the same drive as the pioneers who put Flanders on the map. However, we cannot doubt it: the new generations will show themselves, maybe in a different way, but the best ones will demand their place. We often forget that even figures like the Kuijken family, [Van Immerseel](#), Van Nevel, Jacobs and [Herreweghe](#) had to fight to get a spot within the concert circuit.

What is the future of performing musicians, especially those who specialised in historical performance? While in the 1980s and 1990s there was still a large demand for musicians in the growing number of Baroque and Classical orchestras, these vacancies were filled one by one, and musicians specialising in historical instruments had less and less opportunities

Their approach was considered nonsense and they were called naive and incompetent. Today no one would dare to say this, not even the high priests of the Classical and Romantic performance practice.

The historically informed practice has found its own place in the music circuit. Now it is up to the new generations to build upon this further and to add enough quality and originality. Maybe a lot has been said already about the old masters and there are countless interesting recordings as historical witnesses. Still, it will always be the performance itself to set the standard, and an audience of listeners and melomaniacs will use it as a point of reference. However interesting a recording may be, experiencing a live performance will always be something completely different. And in the future this will remain the indicator for experiencing music.

Most likely, the repertoire will only expand more and the early music narrative will change. But there should be absolutely no doubt that the thousands of years of music history will always have a place in the concert repertoire, just like museums and archaeological sites remain witnesses of the originality and zeal of the past.

# NEW MUSIC IN FLANDERS IN THE WORLD

*a selective look at  
Flemish music  
abroad today*

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When considering contemporary music in Flanders, one of our recurring conclusions is that our composers keep their finger on the pulse of many international trends. It is hard to think of a movement or a form of aesthetics without a Flemish composer riding its wave. In this contribution, however, we would like to reverse the roles and look for Flemish trends that spark an interest abroad. What Flemish music attracts international interest? In what field might our artists even be considered trendsetters?

Obviously, there is no exhaustive answer to this question. There is great diversity within the Flemish composing world. Some composers pursue access to international stages and find it eventually, while others thrive perfectly within the Flemish context. And also among organisers and performers internationalisation is not the norm (nor does it have to be). If we consider this diversity and look for the Flemish artistic creations that are well received abroad, we

find that it are often those productions that can be called ‘transmedial’. In a broad sense, the term transmedia (multimedia and intermedia are related terms) means that different media are combined. It refers to works of art in which one art form cannot exist without the other, they are conceived as a unity from the start.

It should be clear that transmedia productions usually challenge the established conventions of the concert situation to a greater or lesser extent. Compositions (if more than one

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work is scheduled) are not just performed one after the other, but they are arranged in a sophisticated way and they are all connected. In addition to music, other art forms are often part of the equation, such as video, theatre, dance, and lighting. In many cases the staging is very elaborate, giving even so-called classical concerts a certain dramaturgical edge. Transmedia compositions are often close to music theatre or even opera (which might be the oldest example of transmedia art). If we look at the ‘export’ of Flemish music abroad, these kinds of performances play a big part.

On top of the combination of music, drama (dance) and staging, the ubiquity of technology is pretty much a given in the 21st century, and therefore this is especially true in transmedia productions. From simple pre-recorded samples to complex live-electronics and state-of-the-art methods (including live video), many Flemish composers are as skilled with laptops as they are on the violin or the guitar. Often the dramaturgical side and the use of state-of-the-art electronic methods come together, such as in recent productions by [Serge Verstockt](#) and [ChampdAction](#), but just as well in projects by [Blindman](#) or in the works by [Stefan Prins](#) and Nadar Ensemble. Ictus, too, is like a fish in water when it comes to transmedia productions, such as *Avis de Tempête* (Aperghis) and the so-called *Liquid Rooms* that turn 19th century, still well-established classical concert conventions on their head.

## Technology in Flanders

It is hard to pinpoint where exactly this fascination for new technologies, musical dramaturgy and integration of diverse media comes from. There is obviously the international trend of computers and other electronics logically enriching the array of classical instruments. Our composers and musicians have embraced this phenomenon, partly thanks to a long-standing tradition in Flanders and in Belgium.

One of the very first composers who saw the possibilities of purely electronic music was Karel Goeyvaerts. In the 1950s, as a small Fleming he was an important voice during the Internationale Ferienkurse für Neue Musik in Darmstadt, at the time a meeting place for the avant-garde. The extensive correspondence from Goeyvaerts to Stockhausen is a silent witness of Goeyvaerts passionately explaining his utopian vision of electronically generated sounds.

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Other composers would go on to diligently explore these new features, and due to all kinds of circumstances (the availability of an electronic studio for example) they would develop them with even greater success than Goeyvaerts had. One only has to think of Karlheinz Stockhausen and Luigi Nono.

Later, various Flemish institutes – for some reason all based in Ghent, a coincidence? – would explore the possibilities of technology in music in their own manner. At IPeM, research was carried out into the interaction between music and the human body; and many composers were working there.

Up until today, the [Logos Foundation](#) of Godfried-Willem Raes continues to play an important role in the relentless search for technological innovation. In the past, Logos was the main reason for many international stars to travel to Belgium. Think of Conlon Nancarrow, Alvin Lucier, Gavin Bryars, Dick Raaijmakers, Cornelius Cardew, Phil Niblock. Serge Verstockt, art director at ChampdAction, describes it as follows: “Anything that has meant anything for contemporary music made the rounds there.”<sup>1</sup> In addition to Logos, SEM (Studio for Experimental Music), and now ChampdAction, were also an important catalyst in this story.

### Some important players

Contemporary music exists in a widespread network of composers, performers, programmers (who both organise existing productions and commission new works), production companies, audiences, and schools. We will highlight some of the key players without the ambition to be exhaustive. Our selection is based on the international response, without wanting to express a value judgement.

The aforementioned ChampdAction is a clear example of how not only the concert context is redefined, but even the ensemble concept is reimagined. Part of its mission is highlighting the music by Karel Goeyvaerts. ChampdAction entered the 21st century as an ensemble, but slowly (and under the impulse of Serge Verstockt, the driving force) evolved into a type of laboratory (a true ‘field of action’ as the name says) for composers and performers. The transmedia aspect of their productions is expressed through a dramaturgical component and an extensive use of new technology combined with classical instruments. Most likely, the intense collaboration between Serge Verstockt and visual artist/performer Jan Fabre (*Requiem für eine Metamorphose*) has played a big part in this.

Even though ChampdAction has remained at the front of musical developments up until today, [Ictus](#)’s international impact is bigger. Transmedia plays a big part here as well. Ictus is a Brussels-based ensemble that has created an alliance with Rosas, the dance company built around Anne Teresa De Keersmaecker. The ensemble was born out of the sextet Maximalist! and was named Ictus in 1994. [Georges-Elie Octors](#) was the art director from the start, and was later succeeded by Jean-Luc Plouvier and [Tom Pauwels](#). In the same year of 1994, the ensemble already collaborated with the Japanese composer Toshio Hosokawa. Many other international names came next (Francesconi, Oehring, Ferneyhough, Lindberg, Jonathan Harvey, Steve Reich, Aperghis) and Ictus soon found its way to the big international venues. The 2017 agenda includes performances in Lille, Brussels, Paris, Luxembourg, but also in New York (MoMA) and Tokyo. In any case, Ictus is a much sought-after guest at cutting-edge festivals, even outside of the field of ‘new music’. It is clear that Maximalist! contained a lot of potential because of the other ensemble that also evolved into a varied ensemble/production company. Bl!ndman was a saxophone quartet first, but later evolved into a welcoming space for young quartets (saxophone, strings, percussion and voice) and in the last couple of years it has brought us more and more productions with different art forms enriching one another. One example is the trilogy *Kwadratur* (*Globe/Transfo/Cube*), which brings various compositions together in a location project with all members of the Bl!ndman collective.

Bl!ndman often also takes part in other productions, including projects with LOD (cf. infra). The [Spectra](#) and [Hermes](#) ensembles also often end up in foreign venues. In addition to these ensembles, we will mention another remarkable player in the field. Nadar Ensemble celebrated its tenth birthday in 2016, and even though the ensemble is still often announced as a ‘young collective’ or ‘up-and-coming’, their international calendar clearly shows they are a mature representative of Flemish music abroad. Their name refers to Gaspard-Félix Tournachon, who was a great supporter of the multidisciplinary approach under the pseudonym ‘Nadar’. He himself was an illustrator, a photographer, a writer and a journalist, but also a balloonist. This latter aspect inspired the composer Michaël Maierhof to write a composition for four hot-air balloons and an ensemble, performed in Darmstadt no less, the epicenter of musical modernism since the 1950s (cf. supra). The hot-air balloons of the 21st century are drones, which were used very effectively by Stefan Prins, one of the core figures and co-art director (with Pieter Matthyssens)

<sup>1</sup> Serge Verstockt’s expression of support on the website of the Logos Foundation [<http://www.logosfoundation.org/general/support.html>]

of the Nadar Ensemble. After a period in the United States, Stefan Prins, who by the way grew up amid the ChampdAction equipment, now commutes between Belgium and Berlin. As a performer and a composer he is everywhere in the international music scene. His works almost always contain a theatrical component and a boundless fascination for the newest technologies.

### Music theatre in Flanders

Not only ensembles play a role in this story. Flanders also boasts various esteemed production companies that, over the last years, have given a great boost to (young) creators delving into music theatre. Muziektheater Transparant and LOD are probably the most important ones, and both are players on the international market. In order to achieve this, they invest in co-productions, which make bigger concepts financially achievable, but also allow for productions to be performed in different countries. We will provide an example of each production company. The production *Kings of War*, a compilation of three history plays by Shakespeare, blended into one story by the director Ivo van Hove, is a play by Toneelgroep Amsterdam in co-production with Muziektheater Transparant, BLINDMAN, Holland Festival, The Barbican, Théâtre National de Chaillot and Wiener Festwochen. At the moment of writing fifteen performances are scheduled in Amsterdam and Brooklyn (NY).

Last season, LOD created the opera *Bosch Beach* with a libretto by Dimitri Verhulst, in collaboration with the following partners: Concertgebouw Brugge, A Two Dogs Company (Brussels), Jheronimus Bosch 500 Foundation, House on Fire, Teatro Maria Matos (Lisbon), Kaaithater (Brussels), Asko|Schönberg (Amsterdam), Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian (Lisbon), Theater Mousonturm Frankfurt, Frankfurter Buchmesse 2016 and Klarafestival, with the support of the Cultural Programme of the European Union and the Eduard van Beinum Foundation. There were performances in Bruges, Frankfurt, Lisbon, Den Bosch and Brussels.

In addition to these production companies, which often have a wider aesthetic profile than the ensembles or performers, the organisers obviously have an important role to play. The collaboration between deSingel and the Flemish Opera led to Opera XXI, a music festival centred around contemporary music theatre, which brought productions from LOD and Muziektheater Transparant to the traditional opera houses. For an elaborate article about music theatre in Flanders and the role of the different agents in the field, we refer to

Maarten Beirens's contribution to the World New Music Magazine vol. 22 of 2012.

### What about the composers themselves?

Many composers within the contemporary music scene are closely involved with the performance of their oeuvre. Only a small minority can count on the solid framework of a publisher. Wim Henderickx's agreement with Norsk Musikforlag is a nice exception to the rule, and in the last few years Donemus has also been focussing on the publishing of Belgian/Flemish music, including work by Brewaeys and Goeyvaerts. The presence of Flemish composers on international stages is closely related to the programming of the ensembles who take on certain composers, but also to possible co-productions between Flemish organisers and foreign colleagues. This way of working also opens doors for (young) Flemish composers and musicians such as Annelies Van Parys, Daan Janssens, Frederik Neyrinck, and others. They are offered a forum that was much less developed at a time when the previous generation of internationally-oriented top composers started to emerge. We can even say that the international impact of this new generation within the art music scene is bigger than that of established names such as Karel Goeyvaerts or Luc Brewaey. Over the last few years, we are seeing an increasing number of co-productions in which big Flemish players collaborate with leading forums for new music, and this way they provide a strong contribution to the international positioning of Flemish creators. For a few years now, TRANSIT has been in touch with November Music and Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival. De Bijloke has co-produced various transmedia productions, including Nadar productions with the Berlin Maerzmusik, the Donaueschinger Musiktage and Mousonturm Frankfurt. And Concertgebouw Brugge and deSingel don't shy away from co-productions either, especially when it involves big pieces. The aforementioned examples of music theatre productions belong to the most extreme examples when it comes to the number of partners involved, but we see that almost every transmedia production (from opera to more classical concerts) are achievable thanks to collaborations between cultural agents, nationally and/or internationally. In addition to the fact that Flemish music theatre productions and

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other transmedia productions offer international quality, the financial need to find partners for large-scale productions also leads to more international distribution. Last but not least, the travel subsidies provided by the Flemish Community are an extra stimulus for younger ensembles to find the way to less obvious venues (e.g. in Russia or Argentina).

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