

OORKAAN

LEAD ROLE FOR MUSICIANS

In performances for young audiences it's not uncommon to see musicians on stage – and sometimes taking the lead role. But nobody on the Dutch scene, and maybe even in the whole world, places such radical emphasis on the music and the musicians as Oorkaan.

BY **MOON SARIS**

At a quiet spot in Amsterdam, near the Westerpark, an old school building is home to a few creative enterprises, including Oorkaan. The offices are reached via an ancient staircase, whose steps are far too shallow for adults and worn out by the footsteps of countless children. If you listen really, really carefully, you can hear the long corridors echo with the voices of the children who learned their lessons in the light, high-ceilinged classrooms or played games in the sheltered, open courtyard.

These are inspiring surroundings if, like Oorkaan, you are working for a young target group. In this office and the adjacent shared rehearsal space, a professional team of nine permanent staff and people engaged for each production work day in, day out on projects that 'open up big and small ears, in order to discover the infinite world of music'.

Almost twenty years ago, Anneke Hogenstijn, programmer of the Recital Hall at the Concertgebouw, in Amsterdam, and later artistic director of the Concertgebouw, sowed the seeds for Productiehuis Jeugdconcerten. Hogenstijn identified gaps in the Recital Hall's programming on the one hand, and a barely met audience demand for classical concerts for young audiences on the other. From 2000, she occasionally brought together theatre makers for young audiences and leading classical

musicians, to create works for a small tour in the Netherlands.

It was an innovative initiative, and still very modest at the time, says the current artistic director Caecilia Thunnissen. In 2015, she took over from Hogenstijn's sparring partner and successor Jessica de Heer as artistic director of what has been called Oorkaan since the merger of Productiehuis Jeugdconcerten and music theatre workshop Oorproeven, in 2009. 'One week of rehearsing together, a bit of staging and then thrown straight into the tour of concert halls. That's how things went the first couple of years'. So besides the Concertgebouw, the venues included the Muziekgebouw in Eindhoven, Vredenburg in Utrecht and the Philharmonie in Haarlem. It was an instant success. Hogenstijn

had rightly identified that music-loving parents of primary school-aged children had been waiting for this.

In those days, Productiehuis Jeugdconcerten was about the only organisation in the Netherlands, if not in the world, that presented classical music with a theatrical touch for children. Even nowadays, it is still not the order of the day. Yes, some youth theatre companies occasionally make a work with classical musicians for young audiences, such as Kwatta, and one or two even create a children's opera, such as Holland Opera. And Alle Hoeken van de Kamermuziek presents things that look similar to what Oorkaan is doing at first sight. But they seldom place such a strong emphasis on a theatrical way of making music as the group that originated in the Concertgebouw.



PHOTO: EVA PLEVIER



PHOTO: MARIELE DE BOER



CARAVAN (2019) BY OORKAAN. DIRECTOR ROBIN COOPS SCENOGRAPHY TESSA VERBEI LIGHT AND SOUND RENS VAN DIJK PHOTOGRAPHY SJOERD DERINE

Furthermore, Oorkaan does so not sporadically, but in two or three new productions a year, usually for ages 4+ or 6+, sometimes for 2+, and in the future also for 8+, and of course for all ages accompanying the children. In addition, they present three or four revivals of productions, often worldwide. For example, the acclaimed and award-winning productions *Glimpse*, *The Box Brothers* and *Cellostorm* have been touring abroad for years, as far afield as China. The audiences see musicians playing with light, four brothers fighting for their place in line while drumming on every object they can find, and eight cellists portraying a dove's search for friendship while playing beautiful pieces of music. Western classical music forms the basis for the productions, although Oorkaan sometimes looks further afield. *Caravan*, for instance, which premiered in January, is inspired by Eastern influences. Caecilia Thunnissen says, 'What's most essential is a certain degree of complexity and layering, which enables us to give shape to the

material. And that can be found in other musical spheres of influence as well'.

THE OORKAAN METHOD

Over the past couple of years, they have referred to their performances as 'staged concerts'. And not as theatre for children, music theatre and also not as music productions, as in previous years. No – staged concerts. Because Oorkaan has as an aversion to musicians who play their music nicely from a fixed point at their music stand. 'In the early years', says Thunnissen, 'the Productiehuis made concerts with a puppeteer, narrator or group of actors in front of the musicians'. Incidentally, Oorkaan still does so now and then, but only in collaboration with symphony or chamber orchestras and in co-productions with theatre groups for young audiences, like the production *De Familie van Nielie*, with Kwatta. And even in these cases, they try to involve the musicians in the staging. But for their own productions, they have recently taken a more radical

turn, after clearly developing in a different direction over the past ten years.

Slowly but surely, the makers and musicians started experimenting with techniques that allow the music to speak for itself, without using other narrative methods. Since the appointment of Thunnissen as artistic director and certainly since the arts plan period 2017-2020, when she had full reign of the group, they have been using only this 'Oorkaan method' for their own productions.

'In theatre and dance for young audiences, you frequently see live musicians on stage – sometimes involved in the action and sometimes as a separate entity. The starting point is usually the story that the theatre maker wants to tell or a theme that the group wants to address. In our productions, the starting point is always the music, and the performers are all musicians, in principle'.

Besides theatres, concert halls are still favourite venues for Oorkaan, despite the technical and dramaturgical restrictions involved.

Erin Coppens, who has been working with Oorkaan for nearly ten years and is now Head Dramaturge and Head of the International Department, says, 'Those are our origins. We want to bring as many young children as possible into contact with music, and the concert hall surroundings are part of that, complete with concert programme and introduction. Half of our performances are for schools. And what could be better than introducing this special world to children who might otherwise never go to the Concertgebouw?'

In *Cello Warriors*, recently co-produced with Cello Octet Amsterdam, they even incorporated this idea into the basic structure of the performance. It was a dance concert; a triple bill constructed like a classical concert or an evening at Nederlands Danstheater, with three totally independent works created by different choreographers. But they did have one important point in common: the eight cellists not only played music, but also danced and played all the roles needed for telling the story of the music.

In Oorkaan's view, the story of the music is fundamentally different to the story the composer intended. Good music that is interestingly complex, in Thunnissen and Coppens' view, does not need a story in order to be told to young children. Let alone a story from start to finish.

Thunnissen does not understand why classical music is often regarded as too difficult for her target group; a preconception that Oorkaan often comes up against in ticket sales and selling to schools. 'Parents and teachers decide that children don't like it. Which is complete nonsense. Children actually find complexity exciting, as it offers far more to explore than boring simplicity. They do, however, often need something to draw them in to the music. It's up to us to find the doors and windows that open up the music, so they can really listen to it'. At the same time, Oorkaan also tackles this



CELLO WARRIORS (PART 1) (2018) BY OORKAAN AND CELLO OCTET AMSTERDAM. CHOREOGRAPHY JOCHEM STAVENUITER SCENOGRAPHY SANNE OOSTERVINNK LIGHT DESIGN TIM VAN 'T HOF PHOTOGRAPHY SJOERD DERINE

preconception, for example by inspiring teachers and after-school childcare providers. 'If the teacher has experienced something, they can convey it better and the children follow that example'. They also do this with the special CD edition '*Aangenaam Klassiek Kids*', with five audio plays to music by composers like Bach, Bartók, Debussy and Telemann.

The story of the music, in the eyes of Oorkaan's artistic core team, is the story told by the notes. It stems from the structure of the music or from an action prompted by a passage when you play it.

In Oorkaan's productions, the story is hardly ever told through text. 'Text', says Coppens, 'can stand in front of the music – and we don't want that'. Thunnissen adds, 'Occasionally, you need to give something a voice, but then preferably as one of the notes in the language spoken in our work: music'.

More than any other art form, music has the power to speak directly to your emotions. 'The imagination of the audience, especially the younger members, does the rest. It turns it into 'Kopfkino', as the Germans so aptly call it: a film in your head'.

THE SCORE IS NOT SACRED

The artistic director has been interested in directing classical music and musicians since her student days (Directing and Acting at the Theaterkade, in Amsterdam, and Dramaturgy at Utrecht University). In those days, she wrote a statement about it that can be summarised as: music and psychology is a discordant combination; music and movement belong together. 'We consciously choose for a physical performance style and often work with mime techniques'.

As instrumentalists are not automatically theatre performers as well, Oorkaan has been giving their own training programme for years, for musicians who want to gain experience in theatre performance.

They also have their own workshop, where musicians and makers can experiment with material, for a couple of days or up to two weeks, under the guidance of Oorkaan's artistic team. Such a process may develop into a production, although that is not the main aim. The artists are free to experiment and to produce a modest final presentation for a small, young

audience. Material is developed in the workshop, the training sessions and the rehearsals for performances. 'Not by philosophising together for three hours over a cup of tea, but by getting on the floor and seeing what you can create out of what is usually a simple starting point', says Thunnissen.

This generally takes place in collaboration with Oorkaan's performance coaches (Gerindo Kartadinata, Esther Snelder and Ganna Veenhuysen) or with the director, who in most cases has experience with improvisation. In principle, all the productions are created with a director with a background in music theatre, for example, or dance or mime. Oorkaan looks for a director together with the collective they have selected to create a production; sometimes within their own ranks and sometimes elsewhere. It does not matter if the director is not an expert in music. Thunnissen says, 'It's not even necessary to be able to read music. What is essential, though, is the ability to feel a score and to form an idea of the music on paper. Otherwise, you don't see the pieces of the puzzle you have to work with'.

Musicians working with the Oorkaan method know their music by heart and play without sheet music. This is a non-negotiable condition. Coppens says, 'Although it's perfectly possible to produce emotive music from behind a music stand, it prevents you from performing theatrically'. Another thing that takes a bit of getting used to for some musicians is that the score is not sacred. Sections can be taken out or repeated and you can leave out instruments. The music provides pieces of a puzzle, which are fitted together by the director and musicians in their own way.

Sanne Bijker, artistic director of Cello Octet Amsterdam and now a regular collaborating partner with Oorkaan, wanted to create a production for young audiences in 2011. 'We didn't want to play a piece from start to

finish. That would have been too boring. We wanted to portray things theatrically, but hadn't a clue how to do so. Through the grapevine, we came into contact with Dagmar Slagmolen from Via Berlin, who's a cellist and theatre maker herself, and we approached Oorkaan together. Jessica de Heer advised us to set our plan aside and go into the workshop to work freely, with no plan at all, for two weeks. I'm still really grateful for her suggestion. All we had was eight cellos and a few random pieces of music we knew by heart: something cheerful, something with tension – different moods. We'd never done anything like it before and we only knew each other from playing cello together. Now we suddenly had to expose ourselves to vulnerability, playing without sitting on chairs, to see what happened to ourselves and our cellos. And expressing things as if we were animals. Searching, measuring, sweating – working for two weeks without anyone looking over your shoulder. It's extremely good for your creativity to use yourself and your music as material'.

EXAGGERATING A PERSONALITY

Jochem Stavenuiter, from mime group Bambie, who regularly works with Oorkaan and has a new production with percussion group Percossa in the pipeline this year,

experiences the same thing. The point, he stresses, is to think up scenes that are simple enough for musicians to act. For one thing, they are not actors, and for another they have to play their instrument well besides acting well. 'One thing that helps is to exaggerate someone's personality, such as their stiffness or tendency to giggle. Or to exploit a talent you discover in rehearsal, like the fact that cellist Pepijn Meeuws is a keen amateur magician. Problems can often be the key to the funniest scenes, such as the Ebonit saxophone quartet in *The Square of Mr. Sax*. I noticed that saxophonists have a tendency to scowl while playing, staring straight ahead wide-eyed and focused on what they do best: playing saxophone. I kept asking questions. It turned out that two of the four had a brass band background, so walking with the sax was a piece of cake. So I choreographed a brass band piece. Works like a dream'.

Thunnissen and Coppens say, 'Our audience is sometimes very surprised that the musicians play all the roles themselves. Initially, they often don't even realise it, but they soon find out when the performers pop a reed in their mouth and play top-level saxophone'.

Stavenuiter thinks it's great to search for ways to open up a piece of music. 'In my collaboration with Trio Suleika in 2011, long before the



THE SQUARE OF MR SAX (2017) BY OORKAAN AND EBONIT SAXOPHONE QUARTET. DIRECTOR JOCHEM STAVENUITER SCENOGRAPHY HESTER JOLINK COSTUMES JOHANNA TRUDZINSKI LIGHT DESIGN TOM VERHEIJEN PHOTOGRAPHY BOY HAZES

Oorkaan method got its name, I really wanted to work just with the musicians. “Go ahead and play”, I said. The pianist started off. The violinist and cellist smiled at each other when they both entered at the same time. I thought that was sweet, so being in love became the key theme of *The Suleikas and the Mystery of the Sensitive Chord*. Something that starts out as an ordinary concert with two gentlemen in dress suits and a lady in a pretty dress gets completely out of hand. The pianist gets jealous of the other two. In the end, it turns out that it’s the instruments (or actually the notes) who are in love, rather than the musicians, and the musicians convey this by playing with emotion. And how could it be otherwise, with such a supremely romantic piece by Mendelssohn? By opening the door to abstraction for the children, it allows them to listen in concentration for a little while’.

Something similar happened with Ebonit. Stavenuiter says, ‘A girl walks forward to read the love letter she has just found, and at the same time she plays a piece on her “subtle” soprano sax. The other band members cut right through it, tooting on their tenor and baritone instruments, like a kind of argument. Gradually, the argument dies down and they play with her, while the tension stays in the air. This results in six-year-old children listening uninterrupted to Bach for two and a half minutes. They’d even like to shut the troublemakers up so they can hear it properly. Isn’t that wonderful – that together you can get children to really listen to music?’

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