



“As a soloist I am as free as a bird”

Interview with Erik Bosgraaf

Eddie Vetter

Erik Bosgraaf was eleven when he played music by Jacob van Eyck during a church service in his native city of Drachten, in the province of Friesland. At that moment he could not even have imagined that fifteen years later he would be recording three CDs worth of the old Dutch master.

The family has musical genes, particularly on his mother’s side. He tells the story: “My grandfather comes from North Groningen. He could choose between becoming a baker or a blacksmith, but his heart was really in music. Ultimately he became a baker in Friesland. He remained an amateur musician for his whole life, but at a high level. He’s in his late eighties now and he’s still a church organist.”

“I began with the recorder when I was nine. A couple of years later I moved on to the oboe, but that instrument wasn’t right for me. Because it’s an expensive instrument, I had to spend fifteen minutes a day practicing it, but just for my own enjoyment I kept practicing maybe two, three hours a day on the recorder. I felt much more at home with it. I could express my emotions much more readily on the recorder. Say what I wanted to say.”

“I like instruments that are direct. You feel the holes, you can manipulate them too. Ganassi said this about the recorder as early as the sixteenth century: it’s capable of imitating the human voice. The instrument is so direct that it sometimes seems as though it has no mysteries at all, it is so straight to the point. In that sense it’s also very Dutch. That’s exactly what’s so interesting about it, finding out how you can throw a veil over the sound, make it mysterious. You need timing for that, tone color,

articulation, a whole bunch of things.”

“As a child I did have a vague idea that I wanted to become a musician later on, but during middle school I began to doubt myself. But still I started at the preparatory class at the conservatory in Groningen. Then I entered the Princess Christina Competition, really just for the fun of it, and I got bounced right into the national finals. That took away all my doubts. That’s what I was going to do!”

At the age of nineteen, Erik Bosgraaf moved to Amsterdam to study there at the Conservatory with Walter van Hauwe and Paul Leenhouts. His loyalties were never undivided. He had already played the saxophone and other instruments in a rock band. At the conservatory he joined ‘The Royal Wind Music’, a double sextet specializing in consort music of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In addition he studied musicology to expand his theoretical knowledge.

Versatility

After becoming prizewinner at several competitions, including the renowned Moeck International Recorder Competition in London, and having finished his conservatory and university studies, he says that he strove consciously for versatility. “It might sound a bit pretentious, but at a given moment in time I decided to put everything in my life in the service of music and to try and understand all kinds of music. That was in order to achieve the ultimate in performance by approaching it from every possible angle. I used to think that there was only one optimum performance, but I have abandoned that idea completely.”

“For example, Jacob van Eyck’s music. The improvisatory character is very important. You mustn’t make the performance too static. I always try to preserve the freedom of it. Sometimes you see with child prodigies that a particular interpretation has been studied at an early age, and later on they can’t let go of it. For me, that very aspect is the most enjoyable part of playing, doing it differently each time. In addition, as a soloist I am as free as a bird. Otherwise it’s just reproducing something.”

Erik plays more than a dozen different recorders on the CDs. He says: “People think that Jacob van Eyck played everything on a soprano recorder, but well, he didn’t have to record three solo CDs. That would get monotonous pretty quickly. And wind players in those days were at home on instruments of all sizes and shapes. I want every single piece to speak as clearly as possible to the listener. It has to become a person, so to speak, with a definite personality. That’s why I use different types, from soprano to tenor.”

Character

“During the preparations I have dug deep into the origins of each piece and looked for contrafacta, the same music but with another text, preferably with an accompaniment so that I could find out about the harmonic context. In that way I try to get a clear picture of the piece’s character. This piece, for example, ‘Orainge’, is a courante, a French dance. French, for me, means: ‘inégalité’, in other words, that you don’t play a succession of the same note values exactly evenly. And I have added ornamentation to this piece which you can already find in France in the seventeenth century.”

“For this I chose a copy of a baroque flute. That type, it’s true, is of a slightly later date, but I didn’t want to wear historical blinkers. The renaissance type is a model from the sixteenth century. Then the question is: do you choose an instrumental type that is a century older, or one that’s thirty years younger? If you look at it like that then you’ll never do things right. For me it’s about bringing out the characteristics of each piece as clearly as possible, and getting a varied and contrasting result for the listener.”

“For introverted French music, that kind of baroque flute is ideal because of the thinner sound, less rich in overtones. ‘Amarilli mia bella’ I play on a flute with an open sound, more like a diva, so to speak, not like Pavarotti, but yes, more extroverted, with the Italian ornamentation that fits it.”

For the interpretation of this piece, Erik went to get advice from singer Marco Beasley. “He probably thought: here comes someone else who wants to find out how to perform

Italian music. I told him that I wanted to imitate a voice on my instrument. A recorder player has more or less the same problems as a singer with ‘Amarilli’. It starts on a high note with an open sound. The higher you go, the louder the sound becomes. And you have that at the same time as the accent is supposed to fall on ‘-rilli’ and not on the opening note.”

“We talked about things like that. And about the question of how you maintain interest in the themes. Instrumentalists are crazy about those virtuoso variations, but sometimes they sort of fall asleep during the themes and other slow movements. The important thing is to give the themes the elasticity that enables you to play the most rapid variations in the same tempo. In ‘Psalm 9’, after the last variation, I return to the theme. Building up the excitement in that way, from the slow theme to the quickest variation, and then returning, and still keeping the basic tempo, that’s a special feeling.”

Polyphony

For three of the pieces, Erik is accompanied by guitarist Izhar Elias, with whom he also collaborates on the ‘big eye’ project, in which composers and film makers from all over the world create works for the duo. “Sometimes people feel the need to gussy up Van Eyck a little, but usually the polyphony has already been composed into the piece itself, for example with the carillon figures that he uses to suggest a sort of harmony. If in addition you add an accompaniment to that, then you miss the point. You wouldn’t think of doing that to a violin partita by Bach? Then why do it to Van Eyck?”

“But there are a couple of compositions where a harmonic accompaniment doesn’t get in the way of the variations. For example, ‘Repicavan’. It doesn’t work as a solo, it’s a piece in the ‘stop and go style’, with very long notes and then all of a sudden rapid ornamentation, and then long notes again. The tempo has to be fairly slow because otherwise the diminutions don’t come out clearly. So we looked at the

original. It’s an *air de cour* by Moulinié with a kind of Spanish character and accompaniment by a baroque guitar. Then all of a sudden it becomes clear why the piece is so unpredictable. Here the text says: let’s leap and dance, and then it goes back, and then the dancing starts again. For that music you really need a harmonic foundation.”

“I think that a lot of things were clear in Van Eyck’s time because the melodies were familiar. Today’s audience might need a little help now and then. Van Eyck, to that extent, has an image problem because only a couple of his pieces have been played to death. ‘Doen Daphne’, for example, or the ‘Engels Nachtegaeltje’. So everyone thinks that that’s Van Eyck. But there are so many other beautiful pieces.”

“In my opinion, people often make all of this music sound the same when they perform it. It’s not Bach or Palestrina. It’s exactly what Thiemo Wind writes about it: music of a *homo ludens*, playful music that demands a very free interpretation, different ever time, just for fun. That’s how I play with it and I keep trying to surprise my audience.”
