

Joep Straesser **The Narrow Path Of Jacques Bank**  
translation: Stanny Verster

**Writing an article on a composer's music is not the best way to acquaint others with it, particularly not if the discourse is restricted to the constructive aspects of compositions in general, the organisation of note series, or the application of rhythmical procedures. Such analyses reveal little about the sound of the music at hand, its impact, its emotional content, how a listener might react and what the composer wants to achieve, if that be his aim. An analysis of a compositional technique only is significant and contributes to a more profound comprehension of a work of art after it has become part of a greater entity and is considered as a means to achieve an 'aim'.**

In my opinion, Robert Schumann's approach to Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique* is still topical. He argues that one should analyse a composition from four different points of view: '*je nach der Form, je nach der musikalischen Komposition* [compositional technique, J.S.], *nach der besonderen Idee, die der Künstler darstellen wollte und nach dem Geiste, der über Form, Stoff, Idee waltet.*' Besides, if one really wants to get to the bottom of things, extensive and frequent listening is an absolute necessity. This rather trivial remark seems less self-evident when looking at the analyses from the 1950's and 1960's, periods characterised by an over-estimation of the technology of composition and an under-estimation of the sounding results yielded by technology.

These were the very problems Jacques Bank (born in 1943) had to face when he began his compositional career after having finished his studies with Ton de Leeuw at Amsterdam Conservatory in 1974. It is true that he had acquired a better understanding of a number of aspects of compositional technique, but he had no answers to questions like: how does my music affect people; what associations and emotions are aroused. Actually, thoughts like these had hardly ever crossed his mind. As a result of this, immediately after having finished his studies, Bank plunged into an artistic crisis, one which already bore the germ of the radical changes in his approach to the act of composition. It appeared no longer to be sufficient to answer the question: how do I compose a piece? (and after that I'll wait and see...). From now on it became vital to find answers to questions such as: how can I arouse a lasting interest in my listeners; how can I make them respond emotionally? What tools does a composer have to guide the emotional response brought about by his music?

There is a twofold answer to these questions. 1. It is possible to combine music with language, which is an other, more distinctive meaningful system. 2. Use can be made of a number of existent 'archetypes', which have emanated from our musical culture (a process that is still going on) and have proved their effect.

About the effect of certain musical clichés in general, and more specifically, how they could be used in a composition, Bank observed in a recently held interview for KRO Radio, which preceded the première-broadcast of one of his most impressive compositions, *Requiem voor een levende* (1985):

'In this composition I used a number of musical archetypes that arouse emotions in people resembling a Pavlov reaction [in this context he previously mentioned the use of the diminished seventh chord in the opening of his work on the word *Requiem*, connecting it with *Barabbam* from Bach's *Matthäus Passion*, pointing out, however, the complete difference in use between this famous chord by Bach and himself, JS]. For example, the use of the descending minor second renders an atmosphere of lament which remains present throughout the piece, and which is deliberately exaggerated in the final part in order to achieve a distinct ironic undertone, which is perhaps not always abundantly clear, but, anyhow, clear to me. Another example is the threatening crescendo which is frequently used in this composition. I think this fascinating as well. In my opinion music should be brought back to this, what I mean to say is that music should carry an emotional directness which, I think, can quite well be heard in this

composition. [...] I am first of all, of course, a composer, a blacksmith working with notes and in fact engaged in cerebral processes; coming out of the 1960's and 1970's, I did have a serial period, but I have always had the idea that mere concentration on serialism [...] meant the neglect of a work of art as a whole.

Merely focusing on the interior, though it certainly must not be neglected, means neglecting the *exterior*, which is what the listener directly hears. Perhaps this aspect was given too little attention in the sixties and seventies, but from the very moment that I finished my studies, I have been firmly determined to do something about it. [...] I think that in the ideal composition both the interior and exterior are equally well looked after.'

(Jacques Bank received the Matthijs Vermeulen Prize 1989 for this composition. Quoted from the jury's report: The commission is of the opinion that *Requiem voor een levende* occupies a prominent position in Jacques Bank's oeuvre. The commission particularly appreciated the highly original choice of material upon which the *Requiem* is based: the medieval church's banishment ritual for lepers in which they were cast from society and declared dead. We were moved by the means used by the composer to work out this very unusual mass for the dead in four movements, with the expressive and frequently dramatic choir part, as well as the exceptionally individual instrumentation bearing witness to great compositional ability. Jacques Bank has thoroughly succeeded in avoiding those clichés that, considering the historically loaded nature of Requiem texts, must have stalked him at every turn.')

I think that this extensive quotation tells us more about Bank's music than the information that, when striving for sobriety and effectiveness, he usually applies a six-note series, replacing an 'old' with a 'new' tone, until he has used all twelve. The quotation referred to the second part of the answer to the above-mentioned question; the first part, referring to the use of the text, has become significant of Bank's music.

It would be beyond the scope of this article to enter into the problems inherent in the combination of the two meaningful systems (language and music), a subject that has occupied many publications, but I hope anyway that it will be clear by now that a composer who is so keen on the administration and, if possible, checking of the emotional response in his audience, bids fair to gain his point if he resorts to the use of texts. Consequently Bank employs text in most of his compositions, nay, it is even texts and their side-line effects that are the very starting-point for a composition. Even in the piano work *The minimal means of Carl Unthan* (1981), Bank employs a text which is to be spoken by the pianist while he is playing (1). From this it follows that if a listener wants to 'grasp' a composition by Bank, he has to know the underlying textual starting-point, for although Bank employs his texts mainly with the emphasis on their *meaning* - unlike many compositions from the 1960's and 1970's in which the sound structure of a text was stressed - regrettably, complete intelligibility is seldom feasible.

I think that the following description of the characteristics of a number of texts which have been inventively selected by Jacques Bank will be more revealing of his musical world than an observation about the repetitive quality of the rhythm in his work, or, for that matter, the remark that repetition features importantly on several levels of compositions, which nevertheless are not minimal music, due to the great number and the kind of changes and dramatic contrasts in his work. Strikingly, the texts employed by Bank, though coming from different sources, show common characteristics. They always feature a person, or a group of persons in abnormal circumstances and mostly in conspicuously tragi-comic situations. It must be noted, however, that the relationship between these two aspects is never the same and that each composition uses its own blend of the above-mentioned aspects.

In *Last Post* (1975), scored for bass clarinet and piano, in my opinion the first *real* Bank piece, we find a text taken from *The Observer* of June 15th, 1975, which runs as follows: 'Italian-born Alfredo Campoli still winces when he reminisces about his hundred concerts for wounded soldiers in the First World War. He was eleven years old. "Oh my God. They

died in front of me. I remember two died before I finished the Ave Maria".' The text, functioning as an introduction, is to be spoken by the two instrumentalists; so apart from a small fragment for piano, the piece begins purely vocally. The introductory part evolves into a longer section in which the focus is on the instrumental aspect, although the vocal element is not completely absent. The name Alfredo Campoli and the text between quotation marks, which has the greatest dramatic weight because Campoli is literally quoted, remains influential. The words 'Oh my God' are interlaced with the instrumental parts - both performers have to play and sing, either at once (pianist) or alternately (clarinetist) (2). This technique is intensified in a later stage. ('They died ... Ave Maria'). In the final section the clarinetist is to sing (hum) and play at once as well, which, as it has to be done in octaves, yields a horrible off-key effect. As it is, in fact, hardly possible to perform this passage in tune, we touch here upon another aspect of Bank's compositional work which will be discussed later, that is, his demand of the (almost) impossible in certain musical situations.

With this composition Bank has, at one go, set the tune for the rest of his work. The morbid drama of the text is completely backed up by a music which enchants by its very plainness and which might remind one of the expressionist work of painters like Munch and Kokoschka. At the same time the way in which, notably, the words 'Ave Maria' have been worked out in the composition, creates an ironic counterbalance, bringing the work at that moment very near to kitsch (3). The musical impact of moments like these confuse the listener as to his appropriate reaction. He does not know if he should laugh or cry. It is most likely exactly this effect that makes circus clowns so fascinating, and it can hardly be by chance that the violinist Carl Unthan, figuring in the above-mentioned work for piano, who played with his feet because he did not have arms, performed in a circus as well.

In *Mesmerised* (1977, rev. 1980), scored for mezzo-soprano (tenor), three trumpets, piano and extensive percussion, which had its première in Israel in 1980 during the ISCM Festival, and in which texts are used from the diaries of the English Jesuit Gerard Manley Hopkins (1844-1889), we cast a glance at the character of this tragic personality that might be described as a piping hot iceberg. The second part of the five-part composition is entitled: May 5 - 1868, text: 'Cold. Resolved to be a religious.' That is all, but it reveals a lot. The music following in the first and later in the second trumpet with wow-wow mutes, constantly alternating between playing with and without mutes and interrupted by a couple of beats with a metal hammer on an anvil, is a clever transformation of a literary idea into a musical one, for iron is cold by nature, but it can be forged on an anvil after heating (4). The icy loneliness that is sent out by this 'frustrated' trumpet music, based on merely four tones, is equally horrible as the short and deadly information given by Hopkins himself. Yet, even here, irony comes in again, albeit in a rather morbid form. Part 4, May 11 - 1868, text: 'Dull; afternoon fine. Slaughter of the innocents. See above, the 2nd.' Backed up by a persistent tremolo on the vibraphone, first on D', later on D' - E flat, an amazingly daring duet with vocal glissandi and flexatone comes into being. The tension evoked by, on the one hand, this strange duet and, on the other, the beautiful vibraphone sound produced by soft sticks, is another clever translation of the tension between the words 'fine' and 'slaughter'. It may be clear that this tension is not merely brought about by the way in which the lively glissandi are set against the static tremolos, but also by the sophisticated instrumental colouring (5).

I cannot refrain from acquainting the reader with one more work in which the balance between comic and tragic aspects is at issue, but in *Muziek voor een slaapstad* (Music for a dormitory town, 1979), scored for three-part amateur choir and chamber orchestra, the scales are tipped in favour of the second element. The text was taken from a little brochure which was spread in the new housing estate Bijlmermeer near Amsterdam and in which, in commemoration of its 20th anniversary, the ups and downs are told of the local drumband, which still nowadays, occasionally comes marching along Bank's study. The work has the following parts:

1. Speech by the chairman: 'At the approach of spring, when nature is in full bloom, one begins to feel better too. Our drumband is also growing and blooming. Only equipment and uniforms give a lot of trouble. What has to be purchased and so on. Anyone can see that we need lots of money.'
  2. In the Concertgebouw: '27 June, 1966, was a memorable day, because the band, our band, played, just imagine, in the *Concertgebouw*.'
  3. The death of Aunt Bep - in reality a very tragic, but because of the naivety of the text a rather comic account of the death of the treasurer and one of the founders of the band, Aunt Bep: 'only Mr. B, Mr. D, and Mr. K, and some members of the drumband were present at Aunt Bep's funeral; the rest was on holiday. Let us remember now'. Here follows, significantly, the ensuing passage for E flat clarinet on top of a three-part muted chord for brass and oboes (6).
  4. The ten rules, the old people's home, and our goal: 'Look well after your feet, wash your feet after every march', and, for example: 'Mind and wear very white gym-shoes, socks, skirts, trousers and shirts', or: 'Be always in high spirits.'
- At the rehearsals of this work it turned out that some members of the choir had great difficulties with these, at first sight, rather innocent texts. Like in similar situations, it was impossible for them to frame their bewilderment and the aroused aggression lying deeply hidden under the surface of the texts and - this is definitely the case in the third part - pointing at human inability to penetrate the meaning of the mystery of life and death. I am well aware that this may sound melodramatic, but I am convinced that in his compositions Bank sometimes succeeds in touching upon the roots of human existence in a very personal and very original way. All this has to do with the fourth item of Schumann's approach to a musical work of art: '*und nach dem Geiste, der über Form, Stoff, Idee waltet.*'

To complete this portrait of Bank and his motives, I will mention some of his more characteristic compositions together with their textual contents. *Minutes of Lives* (1982), scored for soprano and clarinet quartet, is based on writings of the English author John Aubrey (1625-1697). It is a mixture of stories about more or less famous persons from the 16th and 17th centuries and remarks about the author himself and about his writings. The work has been performed many times, in the Netherlands and abroad, and some years ago it was honourably mentioned during the annual Rostrum of Composers. *Coda* (1983), scored for mixed choir, wind instruments, piano and double-bass, is based on fragments from letters by G. Verdi, written during the last few years of his life, in which he complains about old age, forcing him to a useless existence. *Requiem voor een levende* (1985), scored for saxophone quartet, 9 accordions, 3 double-basses, percussion, mixed choir plus speaker, is based on texts that were used in church during ritualistic services attending the expulsion of lepers from society. The practice which has its roots in the Middle Ages, existed in France up to the 18th century. *Een Tanthologie* (1986), a one-hour opera, scored for 4 soloists, choir and chamber orchestra and based on tales by Erich Mühsam, deals with things that can go wrong when expecting an inheritance. *Een taaie winter* (A tough winter, 1988), scored for mezzo-soprano and alto flute, is based on one of Willem Pijper's last letters to his mother.

An attempt to summarize the main characteristics of Jacques Bank's music might look as follows:

1. There is always a text.
2. This text always deals with one or more persons in abnormal situations.
3. The musical material is extremely restricted.
4. The possibilities within these restrictions are exploited to the limit, which sometimes leads to exaggeration and irony.
5. This exaggeration may lead to demanding the utmost, even the hardly possible, from the performers.
6. The result of which may be that the music displays nearly anti-vocal and/or anti-instrumental characteristics, in relation to accepted standards.
7. Bank's music shows a special talent for finding musical equivalents to situations that

are described in the texts he uses.

The great success of the première of *Requiem voor een levende*, 15 January 1989, in a packed Paradiso in Amsterdam, might mean a great stride forward in the career of this remarkable composer. Perhaps he is not honoured in his own country, but Bank has succeeded, while following his own course, in finding an individual style, in a time in which the search for personal methods of musical expression is of vital importance, as it is no longer possible to shelter behind a display of would-be learning with regard to compositional material queries. It is a narrow path, but it is undoubtedly Jacques Bank's path, and his alone.