

WIM MERTENS

The Belgian composer Wim Mertens (born 1953) is an international recording and performing artist who has given countless concerts, as a soloist and with his ensemble, all over Europe, North and Central America, Japan, Thailand and in Russia. He initially studied at the Conservatory of Brussels and graduated in political and social sciences at the K.U. Leuven and Musicology at the R.U. Gent.

Mertens is also the author of *American Minimal Music* (1980), the first book to deal in depth with the school of American repetitive music. His early landmark albums are *Vergessen* and *Struggle for Pleasure* (1982), including *Close Cover*, still one of his classics. In 1998, Mertens became the Cultural Ambassador of Flanders.

Since 1980, Mertens has composed pieces in different formats, from short, accessible songs or Lieder to magnanimous and complex three- and four-part cycles, and for different settings: from solo piano to chamber music ensembles and symphony orchestra. He often writes for unusual instrumentations: twelve piccolos, ten bass trombones, thirteen clarinets. Since his recording debut in 1980, titled *For Amusement Only*, an electronic composition for pinball machines, Wim Mertens has released more than 65 albums.

Vocals, ensembles and cycles

The 1985 album *Maximizing the Audience*, saw the introduction of vocals in Mertens' music, an element that has grown on albums such as *A Man of no Fortune*, and *With a Name to Come* (1986), *After Virtue* (1988) and *Stratégie de la rupture* (1991), *Jérémiades* (1995), *Der heisse brei* (2000) and *Un respiro* (2005). Mertens sings in a high-pitched voice, using a language of his own invention.

Over the years, Mertens has released albums for various ensembles: *Motives for Writing* (1988), *Jardin clos* (1996), *Shot and Echo - A Sense of Place* (1992), *Integer valor - Intégrale* (1999), *Skopos* (2003), *Partes extra partes* (2005), recorded with the Brussels Philharmonic and *Receptacle* (2007), performed by a group of 17 musicians, all women and *L'heure du loup* (2008).

The ambitious 37-CD cycle *Qua* started in 1991 with the trilogy *Alle dinghe*, followed by the tetralogy *Gave van niets* in 1994, the trilogy *Kere Weerom* in 1999 and the tetralogy *Aren lezen* in 2001. The whole *Qua* cycle was released as a box set in 2009. Other special releases included 1997's guitar album *Sin embargo* and *Moment* (2003), a 13-album box set covering the period 1980-1989 with 80 compositions.

In 2002, Mertens released the first of a live series entitled *Years Without History* consisting of recordings completed since the 80s. The series so far includes seven albums: *Moins de mètre, assez de rythme* (2002), *In the absence of Hindrance* (2002), *Cave musicam* (2002), *Not Yet, No Longer* (2004), *With No Need for Seeds* (2004), *The Promise Kept in Advance* (2008, only included in the 6-CD box set *Years Without History vol. 1-6*) and *Nosotros* (2008). In 2006, the first DVD live recording, *What You See is What You Hear*, included 16 compositions selected from his 25-years career.

Movies, theatre and scores

Since July 2003 several scores by the composer have been published. Particular projects include the composition and live performing of original music for piano and voice for the silent movies *La femme de nulle part* by Louis Delluc and *The Land Beyond the Sunset* by Harold Shaw in 1993 and composition for the new men's collection Christian Dior, performed live with the Wim Mertens Ensemble during the Paris fashion show in early 2008.

Wim Mertens also works for the theatre and movies. Scores have included Jan Fabre's performances *The Power of Theatrical Madness* (1984), Peter Greenaway's film *The Belly of an Architect* (1987), *Je pense à vous* by the Dardenne brothers (1992), Marion Hänsel's film *Li - Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea* (1992) and Paul Cox's *Father Damien* (1999), among others.

2009's releases include the box set *Music and Film*, three CDs covering a large selection of Mertens' film music and the re-release of the 1999 soundtrack album *Father Damien*.

In June 2009, EMI Classics compiled the cycle *Qua*, started in 1990 with *Alle dinghe*, followed by *Gave van niets* in 1994, *Kere weerom* in 1999 and *Aren lezen* in 2001. The 37 albums are now available in an elegant box set. At the same time, the Wim Mertens the studio album *The World Tout Court* was released.

Zee versus Zed was released in 2010, ten pieces for strings, brass, harp and guitar. With titles such as *Zusammensetzen*, *Zing'up*, *Zoet'kemiesch* and the vocal *Z's Rival*, the last letter of the alphabet serves as the fil conducteur.

2011: a broader musical scale

2011 was a special year. With the double album *Series of Ands - Immediate Givens* the composer called on a broader musical scale of more than 30 musicians. A complete range of strings, horns, guitars, harp and even a harpsichord gave a hyper orchestral sound and represented a striking development of the composer's palette.

For the Festival van Vlaanderen in Ghent, Belgium, Mertens composed *A Starry Wisdom* and performed two concerts in St Baafs Cathedral (solo piano) and with his Ensemble in the Capitol. He then released the double CD - DVD *Open Continuum*, live recordings with the Tenerife Symphony Orchestra (OST) in de Sala Sinfonica del Auditorio de Tenerife Adan Martin in Spain. Mertens, who played the piano and also sings, presented 19 compositions from his extensive repertoire for this special setting. The composer explored a new relation between the pianist-singer and symphonic orchestra, 'an interaction within the 3 players: soloist-orchestra-conductor'.

For the opening of new research buildings at KU Leuven University, he was commissioned to write a new piece. So on 8th December 2011, he presented *Telles Quelles* with a large ensemble. Mertens is himself a former student of the university. Scientific literature by the researchers Bart Destrooper, Peter Carmeliet and Catherine Verfaillie provided the inspiration. The Spanish video artist Cristóbal Vila created a 3D video for the piece.

In the same year, Mertens was also commissioned to write and present a live composition by the city of Guimarães, Portugal, Capital of Culture 2012. On March 7th he performed the world premiere of *When Tool Met Wood* with the Fundação Orquestra Estúdio directed by Rui Massena at the CC Vila Flor in Guimarães.

From *Double Entendre* to *Dust of Truths*

On the 5th of March 2012, exactly 30 years after the release of *Struggle for Pleasure*, Wim Mertens released the double album '*Struggle for Pleasure - Double Entendre*'. Included were ten previously-unreleased compositions from his archives, all composed between 1980 and 1982. He also re-recorded *Salernes* and *Gentleman of Leisure*. These pieces were all performed on March 15 and 16 2012 by the Wim Mertens Ensemble during the Rewind Series at the Ancienne Belgique venue in Brussels.

Also in 2012 the composer released the album *A Starry Wisdom*.

On October 28th, 2014 in Sint-Maartens Cathedral in Ypres was the world premiere of *Voice of the Living*. The evening's work is carried out by the extensive Wim Mertens Ensemble. *Voice of the Living* is a composition commissioned by the Chancellery of the Belgian Prime Minister in the context of the commemoration organised by the Belgian government for the hundredth anniversary of the First World War 1914-1918. The concert was offered to the citizens of Ypres.

The first part of the triptych *Cran aux Oeufs* (2015-2016), *Charaktersketch* was released in May 2015; the second part *What are we, locks, to do?* and the third part, *Dust of Truths* were released in 2016.

Charaktersketch was performed by the ensemble at the Ancienne Belgique in Brussels in September 2015. The concert was filmed and subsequently released under the title *With a Veldt between them* on the Wim Mertens YouTube and Vimeo channels.

January 2017 saw the release of *Cran aux Oeufs* as a complete set. The musi-fiction triptych questioned the connections between song, poetry and truth using contemporary Brussels, ancient Rome and ancient Greece as backdrops. It combines ensemble work with – for the first time since 2005's *Un respiro* – a solo album for his distinctive piano and voice. This was followed in 2018, with *That Which Is Not*.

To celebrate his 40th artistic anniversary, the Belgian composer released the album *Inescapable* in November 2019. This 4CD Limited Edition Box set includes 61 compositions with 10 previously unreleased recordings, 10 hits revisited in live versions and 2 new compositions.

The *Inescapable* tour which started in-2020 to continue in 2022- Presents a special concert program that covers 1980-2020's period and introduces also the ensemble album *The Gaze of the West* released in 2020.

In March 2022 a new album, *Heroides*, is released. *Heroides* is presented in the form of a double album: the first for piano and voice and the second for an instrumental ensemble (violins, cellos, harp), completed by Mertens on piano.

Wim Mertens currently performs with different settings: solo piano, duo (violin or saxo, piano), trio (violin or saxo, cello, piano) with different ensembles and also with a symphony orchestra.