

WIM MERTENS

The Belgian composer Wim Mertens is a singer-vocalist, as well as a pianist, guitarist and musicologist. Mertens 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. He sings in a characteristically high-pitched voice, using a carefully crafted personal language.

As an international recording and performing artist he has given hundreds of concerts, as a soloist and with his ensemble all over Europe, North and Central America, Japan, Thailand and in Russia.

He has worked as a producer at the VRT (then BRT, Belgian Radio and Television) and was nominated Cultural Ambassador of Flanders in 1998.

Since 1980 he has composed many pieces in different formats, from short, accessible songs or Lieder to magnanimous and complex three- and four-part cycles. The formats also vary widely: from solo piano to chamber music ensembles and symphony orchestra. He often writes for unusual instrumentations, such as twelve piccolos, ten bass trombones or thirteen clarinets.

Wim Mertens also works for theatre and the movies, notably the score for the 1984 performance of Jan Fabre's *The Power of Theatrical Madness* at the Venice Biennale and the soundtrack for Peter Greenaway's widely acclaimed 1987 film, *The Belly of an Architect*.

Since his recording debut in 1980, titled *For amusement only*, an electronic composition for pinball machines, Wim Mertens has released more than 60 albums. Early landmark albums are *Vergessen* (1982), introducing his first writings for ensemble, and *Struggle for pleasure*, including *Close cover*, still one of his classics.

The 1985 album *Maximizing the audience*, marks the introduction of the vocal element in Mertens' music. Over the years, the composer has used vocals 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) - all of which feature highly lyrical and distinctive combinations of piano and voice. Nonetheless, in 1989 he returned to ensemble writing with *Motives for writing*, followed by the 1991 *Alle dinghe*, a three-part cycle covering 7 CDs, written for different instrumentations and celebrating the first ten years of his career.

In 1990, Mertens wrote the soundtrack for the film 'Rust', directed by Lars Ymir Oskarsson, based in Iceland. The double project *Shot and echo - A sense of place* (1992) can be considered as typical of his musical temperament and approach; the two CDs tackle the same material in totally different ways, the composer continuously shifting moods and changing his position.

In 1992, Mertens wrote original music for the 'Raoul Servais- documentary film', directed by Benoît Peeters. He also composed the soundtrack for the Belgian film 'Je pense à vous', directed by the brothers Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne. The following year, he composed and performed 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 1994, he composed the original soundtrack for the French director Pierre Boutron for his film *Fiesta*.

1994 marked a turning point in Mertens' career. The solo album *Epic that never was* - Mertens' first live recording and a confirmation of his increasing stature and ambition as a performer - was recorded in Lisbon at the San Luiz Theatre. It was followed by the sequel to *Alle dinghe*, the even grander *Gave van niets*. This four-part cycle, four years in the making and covering two double and two triple CDs, revealed the growing importance of intuition and organic flow, as opposed to conceptualization, as the main source for Mertens' music.

The album *A man of no fortune, and with a name to come* was chosen by Marion Hänsel to be the soundtrack of her film *Li - Between The Devil And The Deep Blue Sea*. Mertens also wrote the music for Jan Keymeulen's film *Lisa*. In 1995, *Jérémiades*, his fifth album for piano and voice, addressed the theme of the Lamentations of the prophet Jeremiah crying on the destruction of Jerusalem, but without the original text. Mertens presented it in his own language.

1996 saw a return to ensemble writing with *Jardin clos*, composed for an extended ensemble and yet which has, somehow, orchestral accents.

1997 saw the release of the unexpected guitar album *Sin embargo*. Not many people know that Mertens' first contact with an instrument was at the age of 8, when he started playing the guitar. Still in 1997, Mertens' music was used by German filmmaker Tom Tykwer for his film 'Winter Sleepers'.

In 1998, on the album *Integer valor* we can hear extended orchestrations (strings, brass instruments, guitar, bass, percussion and piano). Some compositions start in a very explicit composed way but later evolve towards sections in which the composer also integrates elements of notated improvisation. With *Integer valor*, Mertens crossed a new step in his musical story. This chapter offered a powerful set of orchestrated compositions. That year he was also nominated as the Cultural Ambassador of Flanders and was also commissioned to write the original music for the Belgian Pavilion at Expo 98 in Lisbon.

In 1999, Mertens worked for the cinema again, composing the original soundtrack for Paul Cox's film *Father Damien*. He also composed for the documentary 'Entre Flore et Thalie', directed by Françoise Levie and started collaborating with the Brazilian filmmaker Marcelo Masagao for his documentary on the 20th century 'Nos que aqui estamos por vos esperamos'. The soundtrack went on to win the *Lente de Cristal* award at Miami's fourth Brazilian Film Festival. That spring, he released the 3-CD box set *Integer valor - Intégrale* featuring material composed over the previous three years, partly released on the homonymous album and as limited-edition singles. This work represents a point of telling equipoise in orchestral sound, which Mertens achieved through a long recording process.

At the end of 1999, Wim Mertens released *Kere weerom*, a trilogy composed and recorded between 1995 and 1999. *Kere weerom* is the compositional sequel to the trilogy *Alle dinghe* (1986-1990) and the tetralogy *Gave van niets* (1990-1994) and is composed of: *Poème* (2 CDs, piano), *Kere weerom* (3 CDs, strings / guitar / harp / percussion and piano) and *Decorum* (2 CDs, clarinet / flute and guitar). In February 2000, Mertens released *If I can*, recorded with the Belgian National Radio Choir four years previously. Five years after *Jérémiades*, Mertens, who was celebrating his 20th year in music, released *Der heisse brei*, the sixth album for piano and voice.

Also in 2000, Mertens composed music for a documentary on Belgian painter Roger Raveel. In 2001, twenty years after the first release of *At home - Not at home*, he released the full CD of these legendary recordings, featuring the American composer-musician Peter Gordon. Four new tracks were added: *That strange attractor - Dense points - Coloured by turning* and *That M*. A live version of *Not at home* recorded at Opera Baltycka, Gdansk, Poland was included.

Aren lezen was released in December. This tetralogy was composed and recorded between 1995 and 2001. *Aren lezen* is the compositional sequel to the trilogy *Kere weerom* (1995-1999), the tetralogy *Gave van niets* (1990 -1994) and the trilogy *Alle dinghe* (1986 -1990). The cycle was complete. The whole cycle, *Qua*, was later released as a 37-CD box set in 2009. Also in 2001, Mertens delivered the score for the film 'Qui vive', by the Dutch filmmaker Frans Weisz.

In March 2002, Mertens started releasing a live series entitled *Years without history* featuring recordings dating back to the 80s. The first volume is called *Moins de mètre, assez de rythme*. Mertens often presents his work in different instrumentations: solo or ensemble concerts; piano and violin; clarinet and flute and more ambitious settings for horns, alternating with female voices. *Moins de mètre, assez de rythme* was recorded as a duo on 1st October 1992 in Paris, with the clarinet player Dirk Descheemaeker who worked on a lot of Mertens' pieces such as *Circles* (1984) and *Instrumental songs* (1985). The duo titles in *Moins de mètre, assez de rythme* refer to Mertens' solo work (*Lir*), the ensemble pieces (*Wandering eyes*) and the cycle *Alle dinghe* (*La mesure*). *In the absence of hindrance*, the second volume of the live series was released in June 2002. This solo concert was recorded in Poland, in Gdansk on 22nd November 1998 at the *Opera Baltycka*. *Cave musicam*, the third volume released in November 2002 was recorded in Brugge on 29th October 1998 at the Stadsschouwburg. It features his brass quartet in a selection from the albums *Integer valor* (1998), *Vergessen* (1982), *Maximizing the audience* (1985) and *Struggle for pleasure* (1983).

2003's *Moment* was a box set with 13 albums covering the period 1980-1989. Remastered and repackaged in original covers, it featured 80 compositions, including 6 unreleased tracks. The fourth volume of the live series, *Years Without History: Not Yet, No Longer*, was released in June 2003. This brass quartet concert was recorded in Gdansk, Poland on the 9th November 2002 featuring compositions from *Aren lezen Part III: Kaosmos - Human Guesswork*.

Since July 2003, several scores by Wim Mertens have been published. *Close cover*, *Struggle for pleasure* for solo piano, *4 Mains*, *Sin embargo* for solo guitar; *Inergys*, *Salernes* and *Gentlemen of leisure* for piano and solo instrument, *Geslagen* for solo drums and *Multiple 12* for solo piano, including the titles: *Circular breathing*, *Tourtour* and *Multiple 12*.

In the same year, Mertens composed the soundtrack for the Brazilian film '1.99: a Supermarket That Sells Words', directed by Marcelo Masagao. In December, the album *Skopos* was released. *Skopos*, in Greek, means, 'reach' or 'range'. The idea is that music can help bring things that are barely perceptible 'within the scope.'

In May 2004 Wim Mertens releases, the fifth volume of the live series *Years Without History: 'With no Need for Seeds'*, including *The Fosse*, *Whisper me*, *Close Cover* and two previously unreleased compositions. The concert was recorded in December 1986 with the Wim Mertens Ensemble including six soprano voices, violin, flute, clarinet, piano and voice.

2005 saw the release of the solo album *Un respiro*. At the dawn of his 25 years of career (1980-2005), Mertens invited us for a 'voyage' into orchestral perception. *Un respiro*, consists of ten new very rhythmical tracks composed for two pianos and two voices all performed by the composer himself. The album shows Mertens' passion for the voice, not using it as an instrument but presenting the voice as a guide for the piano. *Un respiro* is Mertens' sixth studio album as a solo performer pianist/singer. It shows how composing today can also be strongly related to the performance itself. How the performance and the singing/playing can interweave and create one single event.

In the same year, he also composed the soundtrack for 'Der Lebensversicherer', a film directed by the German filmmaker Bülent Ackinci.

2006, marking a career of 25 years. Mertens received the Cultural Prize 2006 from the Province of Limburg, Belgium, and celebrated with an exclusive concert with his ensemble in the Provincial Museum 'Begijnhofkerk' in Sint-Truiden. He released the album *Partes extra partes* recorded with the Brussels Philharmonic (VRO), conducted by the Argentinean Dante Anzolini, including some of his most famous compositions - *Struggle for Pleasure*, *Close Cover*, *The Belly* - along with previously unreleased tracks. He then released his first DVD live recording, 'What you

see is what you hear', including sixteen compositions selected from 25 years' career. The concert featured an ensemble of twelve musicians with six female singers, a string ensemble and Wim Mertens, piano and voice.

Mertens also wrote the soundtrack for a documentary about the Belgian writer Willem Elsschot: *Erfgenaam van Elsschot*, directed by the Dutch film-maker Suzanne Raes. The composer collaborated again with the Brazilian filmmaker Marcelo Masagao for his new film 'Otavio e as letras' ('Octavio and the words').

In June 2007, Wim Mertens premiered a full evening concert with the *Orquesta de la comunidad de Madrid* – Orcam - in Madrid. The symphony orchestra of more than 70 musicians was conducted by Dirk Brossé with Mertens playing the piano and singing. The artist presented his new String Ensemble at a concert in the Festival Noches de San Benito in Valladolid, Spain, in July 15. It was followed by a two-hour solo performance for piano and voice at the Arena Antiqua in Ostia, Rome.

In the summer of 2007, the composer signed a contract with EMI Music Belgium for his entire catalogue. The first release on EMI Classics was a new album *Receptacle*, recorded in February-March 2007 with a group of seventeen musicians, all women. This was followed in 2008 by the re-release of a large selection of his back catalogue and the release of the box set *Years without history vol. 1-6*, including the five first volumes of the series, as well as the sixth previously unreleased volume *The promise kept in advance*. Still in 2008, Mertens released *Nosotros*, the seventh volume of *Years without history* and his new studio ensemble album *L'heure du loup*.

Later that year, Mertens was commissioned by Christian Dior Homme to compose original music for the new men collection and performed with his string ensemble (eleven musicians) during the fashion show in Paris and gave more than 30 concerts in different formats (duo, solo, string quintet and symphony orchestra).

2009's releases included 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* (which had received the Sabam's Joseph Plateau award in 2000). In June 2009, the cycle *Qua* was brought together for the first time into a 37-CD boxset. At the same time, the studio album, *The world tout court*, was released.

Zee versus Zed was released in 2010. The album consisted of ten pieces for an ensemble composed of 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 *fil conducteur* for the album.

2011 was a creative year:

- With the double album *Series of ands - Immediate givens*, the composer reached a broader musical scale. In total, more than 30 musicians took part in this ambitious production. A complete scale of strings, horns, guitars, harp and even an authentic harpsichord (a first for Mertens) created an accentuated orchestral sound and marked a striking development in the composer's palette.
- For the Festival van Vlaanderen in Ghent, Belgium, Mertens composed *A Starry Wisdom* and performed a solo piano concert in St Baafs Cathedral as well as a second concert with his Ensemble in the Capitol.
- The double CD - DVD *Open continuum* of live recordings with the Tenerife Symphony Orchestra (OST) in Spain in June 2008 was released. On vocals and piano, Mertens presented 19 compositions from his extensive repertoire for symphony orchestra. The event created a new relation between the various elements, 'an interaction between the three players: soloist-orchestra-conductor'.

- For the opening of the new Education and Research laboratory of the KU Leuven in December, he presented with a large ensemble *Telles Quelles* a work that Mertens - himself a former student of the university – that had been commissioned especially for the occasion. He was inspired by, among other things, scientific literature by the researchers Bart Destrooper, Peter Carmeliet and Catherine Verfaillie. The Spanish video artist Cristóbal Vila created a 3D video for the track.

In 2012, Mertens was commissioned to write and present a composition by the city of Guimarães, Portugal, Capital of Culture. In March he performed *When tool met wood* with the Fundação Orquestra Estúdio directed by Rui Massena. The album was released in 2013.

Also in March 2012, precisely 30 years after the release of *Struggle for pleasure*, Mertens released the double album '*Struggle for pleasure - Double Entendre*'. It included ten previously-unreleased compositions from the Mertens archive, all composed in the same period 1980-1982. He also re-recorded two titles *Salernes* and *Gentleman of Leisure*. These pieces were all performed on 15 and 16 March by the Wim Mertens Ensemble during the Rewind Series at the Ancienne Belgique in Brussels.

The album *A starry wisdom* album was released the same year.

October 2014 in Sint-Maartens Cathedral in Ypres saw the world premiere of *Voice of the Living* by the extensive Wim Mertens Ensemble. *Voice of the Living* was commissioned by the Chancellery of the Belgian Prime Minister in the context of the commemoration of the 100th anniversary of the First World War. 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.