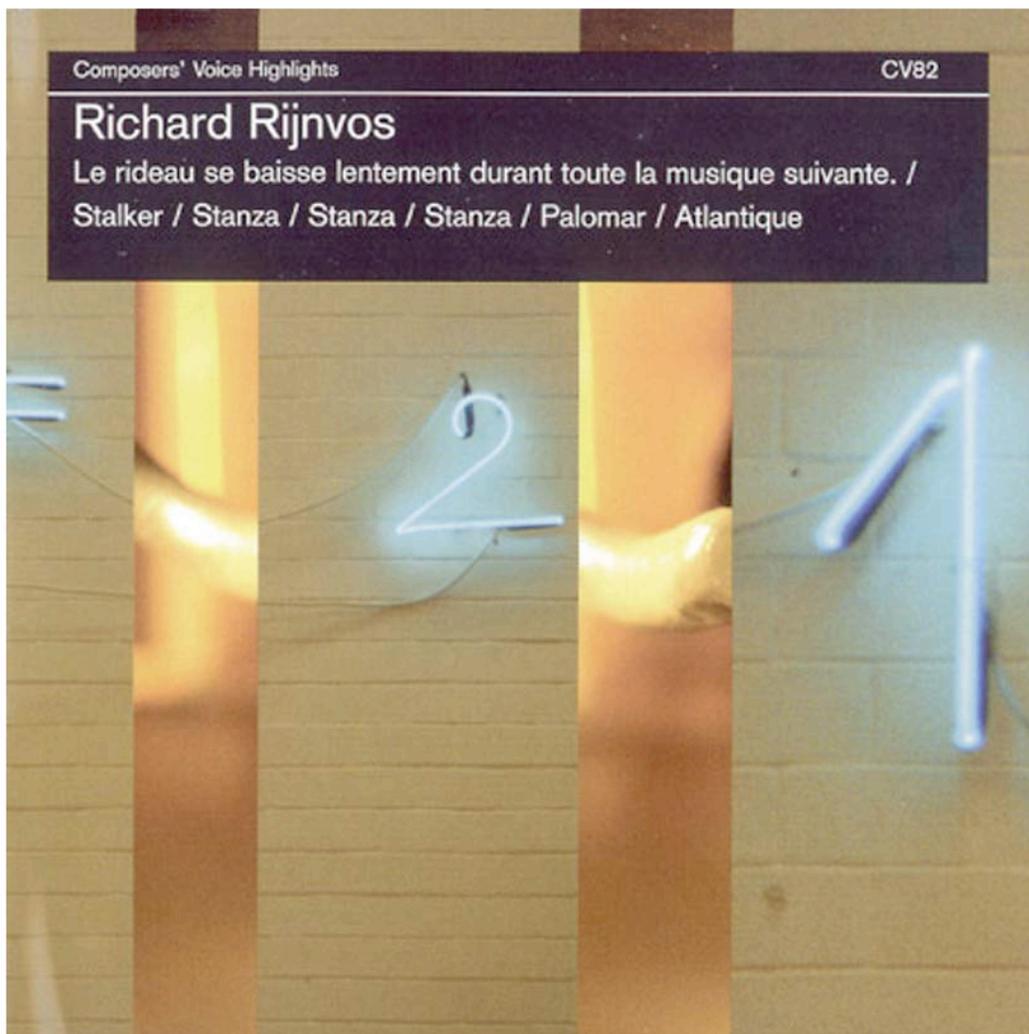


Terra Incognita

A conversation with composer Richard Rijnvos



Erik Voermans

Musicologist Erik Voermans in conversation with composer Richard Rijnvos
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(quotes in italics are taken from the chapter 'The model of models' from "Mr. Palomar" by Italo Calvino, translated by William Weaver)

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In Mr. Palomar's life there was a period when his rule was this: first, to construct in his mind a model, the most perfect, logical, geometrical model possible; second, to see if the model is adapted to the practical situations observed in experience; third, to make the corrections necessary for model and reality to coincide.

"There was a period in my life when I thought that as a composer you had to take the music going through your head and transfer it to paper as accurately as possible. I suspect that a lot of people have this image of composers. And indeed, my first compositions are structured sublimations of the sound images that manifested themselves in my head at the time. I'm referring here to the Study in five parts for piano, which I consider to be my 'opus 1', and my next work, a piece for bass recorder and four percussionists called *Zahgurim, whose number is twenty-three and who kills in an unnatural fashion....*

Only once *Zahgurim,...* was performed did I realize that it is an extremely coercive composition, the sort of piece with which the public is collectively forced into the same emotional corner. You could see that, in itself, as an impressive show of strength, but I felt that the wrong kind of manipulation was at work. At the end of the day, *Zahgurim,...* had too programmatic a character for me. In the period that followed I decided to return to one of my earlier models: Erik Satie. My love of Satie goes back to my school years. But under the influence of my teachers at the Royal Conservatory in The Hague - I studied composition with Jan van Vlijmen and Brian Ferneyhough, 20th-century analysis with Diderik Wagenaar and music history with Konrad Boehmer - I was more or less unwittingly led up a different path, the path of serialism. Ferneyhough in particular fascinated me no end. Student pressure resulted in his being brought to The Hague in 1986, but unfortunately he left after only a year. That was an enormous blow to me. Under these less-than-ideal circumstances I managed to finish my studies there, but the void he left behind was never adequately filled. Thereafter I went to Freiburg on a DAAD scholarship, since rumour had it Ferneyhough would return there to teach composition. I waited for a year. Waiting for Godot. He did come, but then, just as suddenly, he was gone again. I studied with Emmanuel Nunes, but he had nothing much to tell me. Still, my time in Germany was less fruitless than one might think, because while in Freiburg I made what would be the major artistic decision of my life: I cast doubt upon the legacy of Schoenberg and of Darmstadt. I had had my fill of developmental thought.

Back to Satie meant back to simplicity. And to other penchants, like repeating without repeating, apparently unchanging structures, music without anecdotal background, without dramatic progression, without effete climaxes. The first result of this new-found simplicity was *Le rideau se baisse lentement durant toute la musique suivante*. The title comes from Igor Stravinsky's *Les Noces*. It is the final stage direction above the monumental closing bars, in which the music consists of two nearly-regular periodic motions. In *Le rideau...* five layers are stacked upon one another, whereby each instrument represents its own periodicity. The soloist is actually the double bassoon, with its long quarter-tone melodies. The central idea is that of 'repeating without repeating': nothing ever returns literally - rhythmically, harmonically nor melodically. The material is in a constant state of minimal change, so you can no longer say that B is derived from A or that C is derived from B. Everything is derived from everything else, but at the same time everything is completely unique. You can no longer assign the term 'principal material' to anything. The musical material is in fact not defined; its origin is, as it were, denied."

To construct a model - as Palomar was aware - you have to start with something; that is, you have to have principles, from which, by deduction, you achieve your own line of reasoning. These principles, also known as axioms or postulates, are not something you select; you have them already, because if you did not have them, you could not even begin thinking.

"The change in my compositional thinking came to a head in November 1988, when the American composer John Cage was a guest for a short period at the conservatory in The Hague. Musicologist Frans van Rossum gave four introductory lectures, in which he swept, in one fell swoop, everything I had achieved in the preceding years off the table. All my sacred cows were unceremoniously slaughtered. Cage turned four centuries of Western European musical thought upside-down. He shook up music in the way Marcel Duchamp had earlier done in the visual arts.

Many people look for Cage's importance in his role as a philosopher and as a conceptualist. But in doing so they do his music, his poetry and his graphic work a gross disservice. A work like *Dance/4 Orchestras* (1982) haunts me musically as much as Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*. Cage's influence encouraged me to continue down the path I had begun to tread with *Le rideau...*. This was not without consequences. It took me years to rid myself of the chaos he had caused in my mind. While in Germany I even started to harbour doubts about whether to continue composing at all.

QUAD dates from that period. It was written for the Australian ensemble Elision and the Nieuw Ensemble (Amsterdam). *QUAD* paid the price for my internal wrestling, and as a result it feels a bit like a stepchild. *QUAD* has a kink in it: halfway through, the old idiom is replaced by the new one. I also had big problems with the pitch organization. In a temporary fit of cowardice I wriggled out of the problem by turning to pitchless percussion instruments. That resulted in *Stalker*, a solo piece for Arnold Marinissen. Percussion is by nature associated with driving, horizontal rhythms. *Stalker*, however, contradicts this association by

concentrating on 'sound colour alchemy': the exploration of new vertical sound combinations.

Stalker is thrifty with its sentiments. I was still very much at odds with the question of whether you can go flaunting your emotions like I did in *Zahgurim....* While in the early years sound images still rambled freely through my mind, it now felt as though I wanted, via [Cageian] Zen Buddhist back alleys, to clear my mind of thoughts altogether. And while I used to be on the lookout for a way to transpose my subjectivity to a musical object, I now started to wonder if the answer didn't actually lie at the opposite pole: whether I could translate a given objectivity into a musical subject.

My favourite example of this kind of objectivity comes from cartography: the contours of a continent. Whether or not you find the coastline of Australia or Africa attractive, the contours are as they are. Beauty or ugliness is beside the point. You can only give in to them, experience them and, if possible, enjoy them. But how to transform these contours into sound? Or are there other given objectivities that lend themselves more readily to musical translation? Is there a method that can generate all aspects of sound (duration, pitch, colour, dynamics, direction)?"

The construction of a model, therefore, was for him a miracle of equilibrium between principles (left in shadow) and experience (elusive), but the result should be more substantial than either. In a well-made model, in fact, every detail must be conditioned by the others, so that everything holds together in absolute coherence, as in a mechanism where if one gear jams, everything jams.

"I consider the music from *Radio I* (for Samuel Beckett's radio play of the same name) as a key work in my oeuvre, in that it utilizes a compositional principle that I have applied ever since. All elements of a composition are generated from a magic square, a numerical matrix whose sum is the same in all directions. It dictates its own laws, and in doing so justifies its own existence. Without getting bogged down in technical details, it is interesting to note that my first magic square had the appearance of a chess board: black and white squares with pitches and numerical proportions. Still under the spell of my new-found mechanism, I was bowled over by my encounter in Ferrara, Italy with the following illustration:

Only much later did I discover that this was the riddle canon *Ave Maris Stella* by the 16th-century Dutch composer Ghiselin Danckerts. I was fascinated by the thought that whether I myself generate notes in the form of a chess board, or if someone else does, in principle I should be able to extract a piece from it. That is how *Stanza* originated. *Stanza* exists in three versions, all of which are musically miles apart. The first, diatonic, version is for music box ('white keys' only). The second version, chromatic, is for solo positive organ and eight instruments. The work is dedicated to the memory of John Cage: my meeting with him in Ferrara in June 1991 was my last. The music becomes very gradually lower, and as a result it has the unmistakable character of a lament. In the microtonal version of *Stanza* (for solo bass flute and eight string players) the strings have the freedom to

repeat notes. There are eight ways in which to play them. Consequently the piece sounds different every time it is performed.

That indeterminacy also appears in *Palomar*. The music comes from the multidisciplinary performance piece *Palomar op het Strand* (Palomar on the Beach). Spoken text (the first chapter of the novel 'Palomar' by the Italian writer Italo Calvino), slide projections of abstracted beaches (by photographer Frank Zweers), projected blue light and music for nine violins form the basis for a polyphonic audio-visual performance. After the premiere the composer Richard Ayres convinced me that the music could also hold its own as a separate entity. The resulting concert version is entitled *Palomar*.

Like *Palomar*, *Atlantique* is not notated in score form. *Atlantique* was originally made up of two equal components: moving images (film) and moving sounds (music). After our collaboration on *for Samuel Beckett* and *Palomar op het Strand*, Frank Zweers and I decided to produce a work in which images and sound would go hand in hand. In the music film *Atlantique*, when there is music there are visual images; layers of images are stacked upon each other as the music becomes multi-layered; and when there is silence the image is black. Some time after the work's 1994 Holland Festival premiere, I decided that the music from *Atlantique* could also stand on its own. For a concert performance, four identical ensembles are arranged quadraphonically. There are no melodies; rather, each part consists simply of a series of isolated notes. The piccolo part of ensemble I is identical to that of ensembles II, III and IV. This principle is maintained for each instrument. Since the musicians have a certain amount of freedom (within predetermined boundaries) in the placement of their musical material in time and in the particular note to be sounded, each individual part will be different from the others, and every performance of *Atlantique* will be completely unique. The realization of the piece on this CD was made by superimposing four recordings made by the Ives Ensemble on top of one another, so that it almost seems that one is hearing the Radio Philharmonic Orchestra." *A delicate job of adjustment was then required, making gradual corrections in the model, so it would approach a possible reality, and in reality to make it approach the model. In fact, the degree of pliability in human nature is not unlimited, as he first believed; and, at the same time, even the most rigid model can show some unexpected elasticity. In other words, if the model does not succeed in transforming reality, reality must succeed in transforming the model.*

"People occasionally ask how they should listen to my music. They require a method that, alas, does not exist. Everyone has to find it out for himself. I'm not going to tell anyone how they should listen to my music. Often the question follows, "Don't you want me to be moved?" But 'being moved' is only one kind of emotion, alongside joy, sadness, wrath, passion, fear, ecstasy, disillusionment, boredom, vexation - to name but a few. To say that a sunset is 'moving' is a classic mistake. The experience of looking at the sunset is what causes one to be 'moved', but the sunset itself is but an objective occurrence. As far as music goes, you have composers that want the message they put into their music to come over precisely so, and you have composers who want to leave the listener

free to make their own discoveries. I belong to this last category. I'm not interested in providing people with ready-made emotions."