

Square Dances

An introduction to the music of Richard Rijnvos



Christopher Fox

Christopher Fox introduces the music of a leading Dutch composer of the younger generation

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One of the most profound divisions of the world is between tidy people and untidy people. There are people whose bookshelves are organised alphabetically, others who scatter books around them as they read, people who tuck pairs of socks into one another and put them in a drawer, others who regard such behaviour as disturbingly calculating. The same is true of artists. For every Duchamp, painstakingly progressing from project to project, historicising himself as he went, there is a Schwitters, making works when and wherever he could and with whatever means he had at his immediate disposal, posthumously creating employment for the art historians who are now attempting to collect and establish provenance for the works so carelessly created.

Amongst composers of the last 50 years the numbering of pieces is often a tell-tale indicator of their fundamental cast of mind. Stockhausen assigns numbers to each work he produces, Maderna didn't. Oliver Knussen's music has opus numbers, Michael Finnissy's doesn't. Within this system of division, Richard Rijnvos is a tidy composer. His catalogue lists twenty works, the first a *Study in five parts* for piano from 1986-7, the most recent *Times Square Dance* for two identical orchestras, written between 1996 and 1998 and premiered by the Concertgebouw Orchestra in Amsterdam earlier this year. Of these twenty works, each assigned a number, several are tucked into one another like rather complicated socks: there are two works with French titles ending in *... et Double*, three works with the title *Stanza* and four with the overall title *Block Beuys*. There is also an intricate web of cross-references between these various works, spun out of Rijnvos's musical preoccupations and out of the connections between his work and other artists he admires, notably Calvino, Beckett and Beuys. It is the ways in which these cross-references have evolved that I want to explore in this introduction to his work.

Richard Rijnvos was born in Tilburg in the Netherlands in 1964 but I first came across him and his music in 1990. The longstanding relationship between the Darmstadt Ferienkurse and the Gaudeamus Foundation had led that year to an invitation for the Ives Ensemble, the chamber ensemble which Rijnvos co-directs with the pianist John Snijders, to bring a concert of Dutch music to Darmstadt. In a concert otherwise made up of ensemble works the two most striking pieces were solo works by Rijnvos, the piano *Study* and the percussion solo, *Stalker* (1990). Rijnvos and Snijders stayed in Darmstadt for a few days around the concert and we talked, exchanged addresses, tapes and musical ideas. Over the years since then the exchange has continued, the members of the Ives Ensemble have become regular interpreters of my own music and I have had the special pleasure of hearing a fellow artist's work become ever richer and deeper. Until recently, however, one of the frustrations of knowing and admiring Richard Rijnvos's music was that it was hard to share that admiration with people on the

western shore of the North Sea, except by making copies of the tapes he has sent me. Rijnvos has acquired a considerable reputation in the Netherlands as one of the leading figures of his generation and his work has also had success elsewhere in continental Europe with a string of prestigious commissions from the Netherlands Wind Ensemble, Ensemble Modern, Ensemble Intercontemporain and the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra. A recent all-Rijnvos CD on Composers' Voice, the house label of approved Dutch music, is another mark of the esteem in which he is held in Netherlands, although, unlike most Dutch composers, he has chosen not to be published by Donemus. His music has been heard regularly in Australia and north America too, but Apartment House's performances of the second *Stanza* and *Gigue et Double* during the 1999 Huddersfield Contemporary Music Festival were Rijnvos's first major exposure in Britain.

What is Rijnvos's music like? To my ears it is unmistakably from the Netherlands, although it doesn't sound like Louis Andriessen. It has both the purposeful economy of means which characterises the polder landscape and that elegant incorporation of function and style which distinguishes the architecture of 17th century merchant houses in Dutch towns and cities. Mature Rijnvos is music without frills, where every sound is structurally indispensable. There are connections to other European music, too. As with any composer who is also involved in the programming policy of an ensemble, a look at the concert programmes of the Ives Ensemble (and now at its burgeoning discography on HatHut Records) provides many clues to Rijnvos's aesthetic inclinations. Gerald Barry, Aldo Clementi and Luc Ferrari are all composers with whom the Ives Ensemble have been associated and all are composers whose work, like Rijnvos's, displays a fascination with the formalisation of aspects of the compositional process. Most important of all, however, both for Rijnvos and the Ensemble, have been the composers of the New York School. The Ives Ensemble have made a series of revelatory recordings of late Feldman — *For John Cage* and *Piano, Violin, Viola, Cello* with the *String Quartet No 2* awaiting release — but for Rijnvos, I suspect, John Cage is an even more important transatlantic influence. Cage's impact on Rijnvos can be precisely dated, to a short period in November 1988 when Cage was the guest composer at the Royal Conservatory in The Hague. Rijnvos was a student at the Royal Conservatory between 1983 and 1989, studying with Jan van Vlijmen and, for the academic year 1986/7, with Brian Ferneyhough. The pre-Cage Rijnvos completed the soberly ordered *Study in five parts* and the surreally extravagant *Zahgurim, whose number is twenty-three and who kills in an unnatural fashion...* (1987-8) (perhaps the only successful work for bass recorder and percussion ensemble ever composed?) and the differences in character and effect between the two works suggest something of the aesthetic dilemma in which he found himself. A quintet followed - *Le rideau se baisse lentement durant toute la musique suivante* (1988), in effect a tiny concerto for double bassoon with accompaniment from piccolo, trombone, percussion and piano - and marked a step towards a new sort of non-developmental musical thought, but its success depends heavily on the perverse charm inherent in its unlikely instrumentation.

The visit of John Cage to the Hague in November 1988 brought matters to a head. As Rijnvos describes it, 'musicologist Frans van Rossum gave four introductory lectures, in which he swept... everything I had achieved in the preceding years off the table. All my sacred cows were unceremoniously slaughtered... It took me years to rid myself of the chaos he [Cage] had caused in my mind.'

The re-ordering of this chaos can be heard in subsequent works. *QUAD* (1988-90) is an ambitious, thirty minute long work, written both for the Australian ensemble, Elision, and for the Nieuw Ensemble of Amsterdam, but by Rijnvos's own admission it 'paid the price for my internal wrestling... it feels a bit like a stepchild... halfway through, the old idiom is replaced by the new one'. *Stalker* (1990) for solo percussionist, written at the same time, sidesteps the difficulties Rijnvos was having with pitch organisation by concentrating on the timbral possibilities of a substantial arsenal of largely unpitched instruments, variously grouped across ten movements of widely varying durations.

This then was the Rijnvos I first encountered in Darmstadt, a composer of ear-catchingly bold works in which, nonetheless, the integration of formal and tonal ideas was only partially resolved. Resolution was imminent, however, in the remarkably assured *Radio I*, a work composed specifically for broadcast. *Radio I* is a realisation of Samuel Beckett's *Rough for Radio I* (the title is not a description of a hard-living BBC disc-jockey but a typically Beckettian designation for what is little more than a sketch for a radio play), which Rijnvos made for the Dutch Broadcasting Corporation (NOS) in 1991. Beckett's play is a sort of quartet, a dialogue between a man, 'he', and a woman, 'she', interspersed by 'music' and 'voice'. 'Music' and 'voice' are, we are led to believe, going on all the time; 'he' has two buttons which allow him to listen in to them. Within the Beckett canon *Rough for Radio I* is usually thought of as a preliminary exploration of the possibilities of radio which would be explored more fully in *Cascando* and *Words and Music*. Beckett's first version of the text was written in French in 1961 and published as *Esquisse Radiophonique*; an English version followed and was first published in 1976 under the title 'Sketch for Radio Play'. Subsequent reprintings saw the title change to *Radio I* and finally, in the 1984 *Collected Shorter Plays*, it became *Rough for Radio I*. Whether either text was ever produced radiophonically is also unclear. Plans for a BBC production, with Humphrey Searle providing the music, were made soon after the publication of the original French version but came to nothing and a later BBC proposal to produce the play without music was rejected by Beckett in the late 1970s. According to the Beckett estate the French version was produced by ORTF in 1962, although Beckett himself seems later to have forgotten about this production.

The very provisionality of the text was, however, a gift to Rijnvos, who took responsibility for every aspect of the work, from casting (wonderful performances from Michael Gough and Joan Plowright) to post-production. The incompleteness of the Beckett original (it amounts to no more than four pages in the 1984 Faber edition) invited a substantial composerly intervention, not just in the composition of the musical tones called up by the 'music' button, about which Beckett is uncharacteristically imprecise, but in the fleshing out of 'voice'. Beckett provides

nothing for 'voice' beyond a reference to his gender and the fact that 'he is alone'. Rijnvos's solution was to return to the encounter with John Cage in November 1988 at the Royal Conservatory which had so thoroughly knocked him out of his compositional stride. He took the tape of the first of Cage's workshop sessions and isolated those relatively few moments where Cage's voice was 'alone', free of other voices or ambient noise. These then become the material for 'voice' and yield remarkably Beckettian results:

is there anyone else?

what?

she's not here?

she's not coming?

now we have only the one left,
and they don't seem to be speaking

Cage's appearance within *Radio I* is more than simple homage and is the first instance in Rijnvos's work of one of the most characteristic features of his best work, the layering of different sorts of temporality, a counterpoint of times. There are momentary hints of this in earlier works, most notably at the end of the *Study* where, after fifteen minutes of metrically exact, harmonically dense music on the keyboard, the final sound is a single plucked string, held *dal niente*.

The effect is like a window thrown open, a brief glimpse out of a crowded room into a quite other landscape in which time is measured differently. In *Radio I* the other worlds are drawn into the structure of the work itself. As well as the discontinuity between the 'documentary' time of Cage as 'voice' and the 'dramatic' time of Beckett's (albeit fragmentary) dialogue for 'he' and 'she', there is the musical time of 'music' itself. Rijnvos composed seven independent musical layers - five for solo instruments, one for keyboard and tubular bells, and one for string trio. Their mutual independence is emphasised by changes in recording ambience: the clarinet is close and dry, the trombone distant and surrounded by resonance. Each layer of Rijnvos's music is more or less long-breathed, registrally conjunct; together the layers exude a remote calm quite at odds with the mixture of exasperation and confusion of 'he' and 'she', but nevertheless in tune with this exchange between Beckett's characters:

she: They are not together?

he: No.

she: They cannot see each other?

he: No.

she: Hear each other?

he: No

she: It's inconceivable!

After Beckett, Italo Calvino. To date the Rijnvos catalogue only lists one Calvino-inspired concert work, *Palomar* (1994) - 27 pieces for nine violins - but Calvino's aesthetic has gone deep into Rijnvos's habits of forming and one suspects there is more to come. *Palomar* is derived from the music that Rijnvos created for a multi-

media stage work *Palomar op het strand*, made in collaboration with the filmmaker Frank Zweers, a collaboration which has also resulted in a slide/tape work, *For Samuel Beckett* (1992) and the film, *Atlantique* (1994). *Palomar op het strand* is based on the first section of Calvino's collection of short essay-like tales, 'Mr Palomar'. In it, as in other late Calvino works, a single central subject is explored from many perspectives. Calvino himself provides a postscript to *Mr Palomar* in which he draws the reader's attention to the shift in focus from chapters which (1) 'correspond to a visual experience... the text tends to belong to a descriptive category' to those which (2) 'contain anthropological elements... [and] take the form of a story' and those which (3) 'involve more speculative experience... [which] move into the area of meditation'. These three 'thematic areas', as Calvino calls them, are then arranged hierarchically across the book as a whole. Each thematic area is predominant for nine successive chapters; each of these larger sections is then sub-divided again so that each thematic area is of secondary importance in three successive chapters; in each set of three chapters the thematic areas are again successively explored at a subsidiary level. While this sort of compositional strategy has obvious links to all those other artists who in recent decades have been exploring the possibilities of self-similarity (in music Tom Johnson, Ligeti and Per Nørgård are among its more interesting exponents), there is also an obvious link to aspects of Cage's work, especially the Cage of the period around 1950, the period of the *Sixteen Dances*, the *String Quartet in Four Parts* and the *Concerto for Prepared Piano and Orchestra*. In Calvino, a subject is re-examined from a limited number of perspectives; in turn-of-the-50s Cage a restricted collection of musical objects is presented in ever-changing sequences and combinations according to a set of movements around the grid. There are obvious differences, of course: after Cage had chosen the gamut of sounds which would constitute his music their compositional succession was determined by essentially arbitrary movements around the grid on which he had ordered them, whereas Calvino never sacrificed authorial control over the local detail of his narrative; random walks are not the same sort of phenomena as self-similarity. For the listener/reader, however, the results are effectively similar, a sort of non-repeating repetition. In Richard Rijnvos's work this interest in achieving a changing continuity from the repeated use of a limited body of material is most explicitly worked out in the three pieces entitled *Stanza*. In Ferrara with the Ives Ensemble in 1991 for a festival of music by Ives and Cage he had been struck by the festival posters which showed a chess-board overlaid with 16th century musical notations.

As Rijnvos had been using magic square to organise pitch and durational proportions within his music since *Radio I*, the musical chess-board on the posters was both familiar and intriguing. Further researches revealed the chessboard to be a puzzle canon on 'Ave maris stella', the work of another Dutchman, Ghiselin Danckerts (1510-c.1565). The Ferrara festival was Rijnvos's last encounter with Cage, so when he came to consider an in memoriam after Cage's death in 1992 the Danckerts musical chessboard seemed an inescapable

donnée, especially given the 8 x 8 grid of Cage's favourite magic square in the I Ching and his fondness for chess itself.

Each *Stanza* takes Danckerts' square as its starting point to produce music that is, respectively, diatonic, chromatic and microtonal. The diatonic *Stanza* (1993) is a delightful miniature for musical box, written as part of a project devised by the Netherlands-based American composer, Ron Ford. The shop in the Mechanical Clock Museum in Utrecht sells a kit consisting of a musical box mechanism, a hole puncher and strips of card with staff notation. Holes can be punched in the card which can in turn be cranked through the mechanism to activate two octaves of pitches. Ford invited composers to write for these little machines and recorded the resulting pieces for broadcast on VPRO.

The example above shows Rijnvos's relatively straightforward transcription of the Danckerts pitch-groups, its jaunty rhythms taking full advantage of the musical box's precise playing mechanism.

In the second *Stanza* (1993) rhythmic complexity is solely the domain of the positive organ while the eight accompanying instruments play unmeasured long notes cued from the keyboard part.

Rijnvos's use of registers involves a progressive downward movement throughout the nine minutes of the music; the piece is a restrained lament for John Cage, to whom it is dedicated. The final *Stanza* (1994) completes the process of appropriation, erasing the last traces of identity of the Danckerts source. As in the chromatic *Stanza*, a single instrument is the thread on which the other instrumental parts hang, but in place of the timbrally consistent positive organ Rijnvos uses a bass flute as soloist, carefully designating each fingering so that the tonal quality of this already rather wayward instrument becomes even more uneven.

The accompanying halo of long notes is assigned to a string ensemble, who are offered eight different playing techniques from *ordinario* to *balzato* and the opportunity to repeat notes for as long as they wish. The result is a work of fragile, unpredictable beauty, an indeterminate music which, while impossible without Cage's example, is aesthetically and aurally quite distinct. It is also hard to imagine a composer conceiving the *Stanza* cycle without the availability of musicians like those of the Ives Ensemble, who bring to their work a deep understanding of the experimental tradition out of which these works grow. For the *Block Beuys*, a cycle of four ensemble works with an overall duration of about 76 minutes, Rijnvos has written with a rather more pragmatic eye to the rougher handling that his music might receive from the players of general-purpose new music ensembles like Ensemble Modern and Ensemble Intercontemporain (first performers of, respectively, the second and fourth parts of the cycle), although the first complete performances of the cycle in Amsterdam, Darmstadt and Duisburg will in fact be given by the Ives Ensemble. *Block Beuys* is Rijnvos's most substantial work to date and, as the title suggests, it owes its origin to the German artist Joseph Beuys, in particular the collection of

his work held in the Hessisches Landesmuseum, Darmstadt, known as the 'Block Beuys'. The Darmstadt collection occupies three large rooms, with a further collection of vitrines displayed in a long, corridor-like space which links the third room to the first room and contains most of the forms and materials typical of Beuys's installations - large sheets of metal, felt, accretions of fat and food, old batteries, newspapers — objects redolent of the storage of energy and ideas. The 'Block' is a powerful space, not only because it is the largest unified collection of Beuys' work but also because of the progressive change in the way that objects articulate space in each room, from the near emptiness of 'Raum 1' to the massive disposition of large forms in 'Raum 2' to the claustrophobic rows of vitrines in the later spaces.

Rijnvos's *Block Beuys* is at one level a quite straightforward translation into sound of the Darmstadt 'Block'. Each of the four works in the cycle represents a space within the gallery, the first three representing single room - *Raum 1*, *Raum 2*, *Raum 3* - and the fourth representing the row of smaller vitrine-filled spaces, *Raum 4 bis 7*. Rijnvos has literally converted the dimensions of each room into a duration and composed separate musical layers for the space and the objects within that space; in the spaces with vitrines an additional layer represents the contents of each vitrine. Consequently *Raum 1* is texturally the simplest work in the cycle, while *Raum 4 bis 7* is the most complex. Again, a temporal polyphony is in play in every part of the cycle. In *Raum 1* a tape part, full of rich - almost rusty-sounding - metallic sounds (bowed bass piano strings in fact), provides a fixed continuum above which the instrumentalists float material notated in "time-brackets" *). In *Raum 2* the background continuum is provided by a slowly changing sustained chord on a positive organ while the ensemble foreground is full of splendidly abrasive rhythmic writing. *Raum 3*, on which Rijnvos is working at present, introduces a tape of Beuys's voice, to be accompanied by ensemble, while *Raum 4 bis 7* superimposes unconduted events for individual instruments on metric ensemble writing in which there is a progressive proliferation of rhythmic lines, from one to 28. Unifying the entire cycle is the by now familiar Rijnvos grid of pitch material and durational proportions.

I have chosen in this article to concentrate on those pieces in which Rijnvos works initially from ideas which originate in the work of other artists, not only because these offer an insight into the creative alliances of which he feels himself a part, but also because they demonstrate the powerful individuality of a creativity which can confront a Beckett, Beuys, Cage or Calvino and forge new art. On 7 May 2000 Rijnvos will conduct the Ives Ensemble in a performance of the complete *Block Beuys* in the Hessisches Landesmuseum, in 'Raum 1' itself. My expectation is that the music will be discovered to be not just an acoustic souvenir of Beuys's installation but an entirely authentic art-work, compelling in its own right.

It would be a mistake, however, to imagine that Rijnvos always begins composing with found materials. The orchestral piece *Times Square Dance*, the first of what is now a projected cycle of pieces with titles in some way connected with New York, is the most recent in a succession of works which are quite self-sufficient. *Times Square Dance* is also the most recent in a series of works for quasi-

orchestral forces in which Rijnvos has become both ever more ambitious and ever more successful in putting an idiomatically personal stamp on the medium. *Sarabande et Double* (1991) 'customised' the Netherlands Wind Ensemble by adding six violas, *Antar* (1993) re-grouped the Dutch Radio Orchestra by interposing a semicircle of twelve solo violins - who play in unison throughout the work - between the wind section at the back of the orchestra and an octet of solo strings at the front, creating a spatial 'layer' akin to the temporally distinct layers in other works. Instead of these rather awkward distortions of the constituency of the ensemble, *Times Square Dance* simply divides the orchestra. Rijnvos creates a brilliant two part invention for identical orchestral groups abounding in rhythmic energy and the bitingly pungent harmonies and instrumental colours that are a characteristic of all his best work. It's a work that offers crack orchestras the chance of a real *tour de force* - a Prom performance soon please, Mr Kenyon!

Why don't British audiences already know more of Rijnvos's music? In large part the blame must be laid at the door of insularity: apart from a few very special exceptions, the major players on the British music scene are simply too self-obsessed to notice that other countries not so far away are teeming with composers just as interesting as the island talent. Perhaps a tacit quota system is also in operation, reducing every other nation's compositional population to a few emblematic representatives: Germany = Henze, Rihm and Stockhausen; France = Boulez and Murail; Netherlands = Andriessen? Or perhaps it's my fault; after all, I've known about this music for nearly ten years and for all my advocacy have convinced only one English ensemble to take it up so far. Whatever the reason, it is to be hoped that Apartment House's Huddersfield Festival performances and the exemplary accounts of his music on the new CD will introduce many new listeners to Rijnvos's music. Tidy or untidy, I know of no better composer working today.

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*) Time-rackets are a Cage invention, found throughout the works of his last decade, specifying a time window in which a musical event can start and/or finish.