

From Vacuum Cleaner to “The Soft Music Piano Bridge”

by Hens Vlam-Verwaaijen (Dutch composer)

(Translation Corrie Ooms-Beck)

I

Earliest Musical Memories

When I was reading an autobiography of Arthur Rubinstein some years ago, I was greatly surprised to find that as a toddler he had the same “musical” memory of the vacuum cleaner as I do. The monotonous hum of that appliance inspired me too as a very young child to sing along with the whining sound, improvising while alternating between unison and harmony

When my elder sister turned seven, my parents decided it was time to start our music education. And so one day an upright piano made its entrance into our house – a large, shining black instrument, on whose open keyboard cover my mother’s piano music soon found a place, mostly sheet music with black staves and black notes. And that was the way it should be, I thought, because our neighbors had a similar black piano with very much the same sheet music on the open cover.

At my grandmother’s house, on the other hand, things were entirely different: she owned a grand piano, which differed from our upright not only in shape but also in color: brown instead of black.

Especially intriguing, I thought, was the music book, which stood not on a ribbed ledge inside the keyboard cover but on top of the instrument.

Moreover, the staves and notes in this book were printed not in black but in blue! As a five-year-old, watching Granny play,

I was fascinated to see that, when she pressed the keys down, a bit of the wood under the ivory would appear – something I found most mysterious. Granny’s small hands were soft and plump, and her way of pressing down the keys, thus producing that heavenly music, made me long for the day that I would be able to do the same. Later I found out that the book with the blue notes was a collection of songs sung by generations of Dutch schoolchildren, so that Granny’s “heavenly music” may well have been a song like “Under Mother’s Umbrella” or “How Gently Glides Our Little Boat”.

During World War II (we lived in Hillegersberg, a suburb of Rotterdam) my parents, who were active members of a social club, participated in many cabaret-like programs, frequently with an emphasis on the French chanson. Once they staged a complete opera to the music of Bizet’s “Carmen”, spoofing the story of a 15th-century Dutch commander who threw himself to the enemy from a besieged church tower in order to safeguard the lives of his men; accordingly, the opera was titled “Jan van Schaffelaar” after this hero.

To the music of one of Bizet’s most famous arias ‘Toreador’ from the opera Carmen they had composed the text “Jan, come to dinner, the soup is getting cold.” My elder sister and I would sit for hours at the top of the stairs, shivering with cold, to listen to these rehearsals. Before we were in our teens we knew many of these French chansons, and I have never been able to hear Bizet’s “Carmen” without associating it with the prosaic texts of that parody.

I should mention here that my parents had not only an extensive knowledge of the opera, they also knew practically every operetta.

Because of my father's job with an American company, my parents had lived in Leipzig, Hamburg, and Berlin during the period of 1928-1931. A young couple without children, they had a fantastic time during that interwar period, attending an unbelievable number of performances of concerts, operas, operettas, and plays, together with their American and German friends.

When my seventh birthday came along, I, too, was allowed to start piano lessons. I had great expectations: there was so much to learn before I could even dream of catching up with my elder sister, who was already able to play "Ave Maria" by Burgmüller! Never, I thought, would I reach that level of proficiency.

The first years I went to my lessons by streetcar, but in the last year of the war public transportation no longer functioned, so I had to walk – three quarters of an hour each way. This put a damper on my enthusiasm, which had started to flag anyway because my teacher seemed to be bent on discouraging me: for example, she did not wish to hear my self-composed little pieces.

Besides, I was never in those five years permitted to lay even a finger on the grand piano that stood in the same room. I could not understand that: my grandmother certainly allowed me to play *her* grand piano! – All in all, it was unfortunate that these lessons were not more inspiring.

II Copenhagen

In May 1945 the war was over. A few months later, in late August, my parents were given the opportunity to send their three daughters to Denmark with a Red Cross transport. This organization made it possible for hundreds of Dutch children to recover from the deprivations of the “winter of starvation” (1944-45) during a three-month stay with guest families.

We were transported in closed trucks furnished with straw mattresses. The column of trucks drove straight across Germany (of which I don't remember seeing anything) to the Danish border, where the children were collected by their respective foster families. The three of us were picked up by an acquaintance of my parents, Mrs. Jørgensen, with whom my younger sister and I were to stay the next months. My elder sister was placed with a pleasant butcher family one block away; there we tasted salami and wieners for the very first time.

The last stage of the journey was by train, which was thrilling because I had never been in one. It took us a whole day to reach our final destination, Copenhagen. The entire journey had taken a full week, including a two-day quarantine in a reception camp at the Danish border where we were finally able to run about, where we were thoroughly scrubbed from top to toe, and where we ate delicious white bread, shaped into a braid, flavored with cumin and thickly spread with butter.

Our host, Mr. Jacob Jørgensen, owned several music stores, including one in Amsterdam. When during the war that store was in danger of being confiscated (I don't know if the fact that his wife was German had anything to do with that), my father offered him our attic to store the musical instruments, many of them accordions.



(By the way, that attic held not only those accordions but also a vast supply of apples – no wonder that the three young Verwaaijen sisters found themselves quite popular for a time!) Along with these accordions came a gramophone record with numerous pieces composed by Mr. Jørgensen himself. One of these I had played so often on the phonograph that I was able to repeat it faultlessly on the piano. When I heard that Mr. Jørgensen was

not only a businessman but also a good pianist, I doubled my efforts, knowing I wanted to play it for him once I was in Copenhagen.

That first night in our new accommodations we slept fitfully, and I woke up early. It was very quiet; everyone was probably still asleep. I was mustering up my courage to get out of bed and sit down at that impressive white (!) grand piano to play “his” piece. Would I dare? Or not?

After counting it off on my buttons I got the answer: I would. Very quietly I left the bedroom, stole to the drawing room, gingerly lifted the cover of the grand piano, and started playing. I was not even halfway through the piece when a white figure darted into the room.

I had never seen anything like it: a man in a kind of dress, hairy calves showing underneath, and a small white cap on his head.

(My father I knew only in striped pajamas.) Speechless, I stared at him, but he nodded kindly at me as if it was the most usual thing in the world – which to him it was, of course – and motioned me to play on. When I had finished he applauded and in one way or another made it clear that he would play for me after breakfast.

Happy and relieved that Mr. Jørgensen had taken it so well I appeared with my sister at our first Danish breakfast in a sunny kitchen, with “frøken” Annika, a motherly figure, behind the stove.

She reminded me somewhat of our Dutch Queen Wilhelmina, but she was even shorter and had kind eyes, and in her clean blue-and-white uniform she fried as many eggs (with bacon, too!) as we wanted.

What a treat! Recently having survived the last starving winter we barely remembered what an egg looked like, and now to be able to eat six eggs at a time... it was fabulous.

As he had promised, Mr. Jørgensen played the piano after breakfast, and how! Beethoven’s entire Moonlight Sonata was conjured forth from that splendid grand piano. Especially the final movement made a great impression on me; it would remain my special request during our stay.

The Jørgensens had no children, and after some time, when we were able to communicate better (she spoke German and he mainly Danish), they made me the proposal to stay with them for good: he would take care of my music education so that I was bound to become a famous pianist. I was ten years old; although I was seldom homesick and quarreled with my sister practically every day, I naturally found

it much too difficult to make such an important decision on my own, without being able to consult with my parents. And so soon after the war, telecommunication was unavailable to common civilians – a telephone call to Holland was impossible.

So, after those wonderful, unforgettable months in Copenhagen all three of us eventually returned to Rotterdam, well-fed and well-dressed, with new clothes and shoes. Copenhagen became a lovely memory of wonderful people, of a bright, tastefully furnished room with a white grand piano, and of Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata.

As life gradually took its familiar course again, I resumed my piano lessons, although, although now with different expectations. I wanted to make it clear to my teacher that there was a pianist in Denmark who actually thought that I had some musical talent, so I asked her at the very first lesson if she would permit me to practice the first movement of the Moonlight Sonata.

The reaction was, "Why no, of course not, the idea!" You might ask why I did not try to practice on my own.

The answer is that it was easier said than done at that time: neither we nor anyone else we knew owned that particular sheet music, and so soon after the war you could not simply go to the store and buy it.

There was a great shortage of all kinds of goods; the most elementary things like food, clothes, and shoes (to name but a few) were still rationed. And copying machines had not been invented yet!

III High School, 1947-1954

In 1947 I left elementary school and went to the Gymnasium Erasmianum in Rotterdam. That meant, among other things, a half-hour bicycle trip twice a day and lots of homework. This seemed an opportune moment to ask my parents if I could finally stop my piano lessons now. I had asked before but they would never hear of it. Reluctantly they yielded to my arguments and gave their consent. But this did not mean that I quit playing, of course.

At the flea market in Rotterdam I was delighted to find a loose copy of the Moonlight Sonata; full of enthusiasm I started to practice the first movement. With the help of a recording of Wilhelm Kempff I managed to let it sound somewhat like the interpretation of my great hero, Jacob Jørgensen.

My mother played as an amateur violinist in two small orchestras, the Hillegersberg Vaudeville Orchestra and a baroque ensemble directed by her violin teacher, Mr. Wijts. She persuaded me to accompany her a few times, but because I found it difficult to practice only accompaniment parts, without a melody, I didn't enjoy it very much, to tell the truth.

My passive music education continued imperceptibly. As concert life started to flourish again our parents took us more or less regularly to concerts by the Rotterdam Philharmonic Orchestra, conducted by the renowned Eduard Flipse. One of the high points was a gala benefit performance, in the fall of 1947, I believe.

That word “gala” was a source of concern to my mother: she herself still had an evening dress of sorts, but where could she get dresses for her two daughters?

As I mentioned before, there was a shortage of everything and many things were available on coupons only.

Still, she managed to get hold of some white organza, from which she sewed two gorgeous fairy-tale dresses, each with a festive bow of wine-red velvet on the back.

Excitedly we awaited the evening of the concert. No less than three piano concertos were to be played by the famous pianist Julius Katchen: one by Mozart, Beethoven’s Third, and Tchaikovsky’s First, if I remember correctly.

During that evening a small incident took place. Before the intermission we had scarcely been able to keep from giggling, to our parents’ great annoyance.

We found Katchen’s gestures so exaggerated and theatrical that we had a hard time keeping a straight face, so everyone was relieved when intermission came. But then, to our surprise, my sister announced she was going to ask Julius for his signature.

Awestruck, I saw the billowing white cloud of organza disappear. My sister stayed away a long time and came running back just before the beginning of the second part, but she managed to tell us her story. Proudly she showed Julius’s signature on the program that was now covered with coffee stains and giggled that she had been so nervous that she had knocked his coffee cup over: all the coffee over his trousers! Fortunately not much damage had been done; after some scrubbing and dabbing he was able to continue the performance in the same suit.

Our Sunday breakfasts were quite special, as I realize now. My father would play records of the best-known piano and violin concertos up through the Romantic period.

As a matter of fact, we listened to music the entire Sunday. After breakfast my father and I listened to the program “La Tribune du Discophile” on the Belgian radio, in which different performances of various solo concerts were compared. Then there were the Sunday afternoon concerts on the Dutch radio, preceded by an opera hour called “Bel Canto” (in which, however, I was less interested).

All in all, it was incredible how much classical music we listened to. And because we had no program guide and therefore didn't know what was going to be played, it became a game among us who would be the first to guess the composer of the piece. In the long run we knew practically all Beethoven symphonies by heart; we needed to hear only a few measures and we knew exactly which movement of which symphony it was. Now I wouldn't be able to do that anymore.

My active musical education had been at a standstill for some time. Instead of piano lessons I wanted very much to have ballet lessons. I had been dreaming of that for years, but my parents objected. After a lot of pleading on my part, however, they finally said yes.

Some Friday afternoon in February 1948 I was going to have my very first lesson at the ballet school of a well-known Dutch dancer, Netty van der Valk, in Rotterdam.

I was very much looking forward to it, and had been thinking of nothing else that whole week. Finally there were only two more school hours to get through before I was to be introduced into a new world.

And during those very last hours of the school day, at gym class, I broke my left elbow. There went my dream. Instead of the ballet school, I found myself at the hospital (or what was left of it after the bombing of 1940), where my gym teacher and I had to wait for hours until my arm could be set.

After four weeks the arm was bent in a fine 90-degree angle, and would remain that way for quite a while. Physical therapy was practically unknown in those days; a little massage was all. Although the arm never became quite straight again, it has never prevented me from playing the piano – but it did put an end to my ballet dreams.

My elder sister and I had also become interested in jazz, and at age fifteen I wrote my first boogie-woogie, which would not appear in print until 35 years later, under the name of “July”, in the seventh album of the series “The Soft Music Piano Bridge over the Classics”.

We started to buy our first records, e.g. Artie Shaw’s Big Band, Ella Fitzgerald, Louis Armstrong, and also Doris Day. True, the last one did not really belong to the jazz category but she did have perfect timing, according to my younger sister, who among the three of us had the most “feel” for jazz. She, too, had now started piano lessons, and although she never played a piece as it was meant to be played she always gave it swing and rhythm.

The singer and movie actress Doris Day was enormously popular in the fifties, and I think there were not many teenagers in the Western world who had not covered the walls of their rooms with portraits of Doris. We bought every new record of hers



and knew all texts by heart, as well as every nuance of her voice. We tried to imitate her as best we could, which wasn't too difficult when your voice was husky from a cold. had a cold and your voice was a little hoarse. And I got lucky. In the summer of 1952, when I was seventeen, my sisters and girlfriends had



encouraged me to enter a contest for the best Doris Day imitation. This contest took place in the city theater of Gouda, which was not far from our little summer house on the lake where we used to spend our sailing vacations. Although we had

never had any response to my entry, we took our bikes and went to the theater that evening.

It was a variety show with many of the famous names of that period: the singers Eddy Christiani and Olga Lowina, the entertainer Kees de Lange, the pianist Cas Oosthoek, and many others. At the end of the first half of the program Cees de Lange announced that immediately after the intermission there would be a Doris Day contest; during intermission, those interested should check in with the pianist backstage.

My sisters and girlfriends gently but inexorably pushed me through the door that led to the area behind the scenes. There I was received by the pianist, Cas Oosthoek, who immediately put me to work: "Which numbers have you prepared?"

I mentioned "Shanghai" and "Tea for Two". After some searching he found the pitch that suited my voice – he did that by ear, which I thought was very clever.

Full of enthusiasm he guided me through the two numbers and gave me expert advice that was very helpful. After some fifteen minutes of intensive training behind the closed curtains of the stage he thought I would do.

There was only one other candidate, a singer from the town Leiden who had her own band with her; she was kind enough to lend me her lipstick, for teen-age girls didn't use makeup in those days. My outfit was not quite up to snuff either: my jeans and sneakers looked pathetic compared to the long, black velvet gown of the Leiden lady.

After the intermission I was the first to make my (quite inexperienced) entry onto the stage. I shot out from behind the curtains and in the blinding spotlights blinked my eyes at where I thought my support group was sitting. In the meantime, the pianist had begun the introduction to "Tea for Two" but I missed my cue – not once, but three times. Nervously I called out to the audience, "It won't work!" – as if that was not obvious.

But after a hint by the pianist that I should sing into the microphone, the song finally took off. During the second song I regained my confidence to such a degree that I even dared to walk along the stage as I sang, managing to jump over the cords just in time.

My rival, on the other hand, remained stationary as she sang two slow numbers with a husky voice and eyes closed. Her Doris Day imitation apparently appealed somewhat less to the audience than mine, for they gave me a slightly longer applause – which meant that I had won the contest!

One of our young sailing friends, a red-haired boy from Gouda whose name I have forgotten, asked me soon after this performance if I would be willing to sing with his school band;

he attended what was then called the Intermediate Technical School in Rotterdam, not far from my school.

Very properly he came to our house, where I introduced him to my mother. She asked him the usual questions, like “Where do you live? Do you have brothers and sisters? Eleven – you don’t say. I take it your family is Catholic?” To this he nodded affirmatively.

My mother, who was rather anti-papist, went on, “I have never understood the way the Catholic Church interprets the bible where it says: ‘go and multiply’” – alluding, of course, to the large families among the Roman Catholics at that time. Shaking her forefinger at him accusingly, she said, “But to *me* two times two is four, and not twenty-four!” The poor young man turned almost as red as his hair and couldn’t leave the premises fast enough. This was the end of my singing career – but I think I wouldn’t have dared anyway.

I am taking a few steps back.

At sixteen I wanted to resume my piano lessons, but the big question was: with whom? My parents didn’t know and neither did I. We consulted my mother’s violin teacher, who proposed to teach me himself; after all, he assured us, in his music studies he had minored in piano. So began another period of piano lessons, which lasted only a year and a half. But in that relatively brief period my teacher awakened in me a great love for Schubert’s music and also urged me always to pay attention to “musicianship”. However, for matters like technique or knowledge of the instruction repertory he probably was not quite the right person.

But for other matters, like technique or knowledge of the instruction repertory, he probably was not quite the right

person. He claimed, for example, that you actually needed to practice only the scale of C – then you could automatically play all the other scales too! Besides, my hand position (I played with very flat fingers) was incorrect, as I learned later at the Conservatory.

After a year and a half I had more or less mastered only one piece, the first movement of Haydn's Piano Concerto in D; I played that at various occasions, for example at the "Music and Declamation Evenings" of our school, where I even won a prize with it.

As a result the honor was conferred on me to musically represent our school in Antwerp at a cultural and sportive school exchange. This, however, proved to be less successful: the evening before the concert I had also participated in a number of volleyball games, which had caused my fingers to swell. Playing Haydn with swollen fingers and a tired body was not a good idea.

I cannot remember anything else playable in my repertory except some Heller études. Nevertheless I have good musical memories of this brief period: maybe the teaching left something to be desired, but we talked a lot about the essence of music, whatever that might be. Chopin was never played at those lessons, and neither was Bach.

Of Bach I only knew the St. Matthew's Passion because every year I went to hear that with my parents in the "Queen's Church" in Rotterdam. However, I had no idea that Bach had also written a great number of inventions, suites, partitas, preludes, fugues, etc., for piano and harpsichord. At a girlfriend's house I heard for the first time Bach being played on the piano. I remember exactly what it was: a small prelude in D. She played it in a wonderfully transparent way, and I fell in love with it at once.

(A few years later both of us would be admitted at the Conservatory in Amsterdam at the same time.)

The very next market day I bicycled to the market to scrutinize the stands selling used sheet music; I was delighted to find not only Bach's Inventions in two and three parts but also the two volumes of Beethoven's Sonatas; true, the bindings of the latter had come undone, but at any rate they were complete.

I had also been able to pick up a collection of Haydn sonatas, all the Mozart sonatas, and Mendelssohn's Songs without Words, all of them bound. After some bargaining I bicycled home with my treasure, which had cost me the equivalent of two dollars.

In the meantime I had stopped my piano lessons because I thought I did not make enough progress. I muddled on by myself until one day in February 1954 I met Bram Boelee, a young, talented, and promising Rotterdam pianist, who had recently rounded off his studies with Margu rite Long in Paris and Alfred Cortot in Lausanne. He lived up to everyone's expectations: his career was brilliant – until he was struck by a serious illness that prevented him once and for all from performing. He was 43 at the time.

But I had never heard of him until that day in 1954, when he entered our house on the arm of Lucie Meyer, his future wife and a good friend of my elder sister's. He saw the piano, pounced on it, and played Schumann's Carnival op. 9 in an unequalled way. When he had finished playing, he looked around and invited us to play something in our turn. Of course nobody dared after such a brilliant performance, least of all myself, but my sister pushed me down on the piano stool and commanded,

“Haydn!” Nervously and much too fast I rushed through the piece (which I had been playing for two years). I thought it was a disaster, but Bram asked me if I had never thought of applying to the Conservatory of Music; I did have talent, he assured me. I was flabbergasted: our whole family played, one a little better than the other, and making music was something natural, an integral part of our daily routine. This had also been the case in the families of both of my parents, so what else was new?

Bram’s remark, however, started me thinking. As of yet, I had no clear-cut plans for the future although I was in my last year at school. I was not doing very well academically, was madly in love with a university student five years older than myself, and now suddenly looked upon school as a childish pastime. I often cut classes and didn’t do my homework.

Understandably enough, my father was pretty upset about this. As a consequence I avoided him as much as possible. Fortunately (for me) he was often away on business, but as soon as he was home again his displeasure hung like a dark cloud over the house. He considered me a lazy good-for-nothing and detested my boyfriend.

I tried to convince him that once at the Conservatory I would prove myself; however, that meant that the next three months I would have to concentrate full-time on the preparation for the entrance exam. Eventually, after a discussion with the Rector of my school, my father yielded.

The deal was that I had to complete the last school year but did not need to take the final exam; instead, I would receive a certificate that I had completed six years at the Gymnasium. As far as the Conservatory was concerned, that was sufficient.

Happily I sent for application forms of the various conservatories; I decided on Amsterdam. The admission requirements were the following: a few of Bach's Inventions; a sonata by Beethoven or Mozart or something comparable (here I could use my old standby, Haydn); an étude by Czerny op. 299, part 4; and an easy étude by Chopin. As to theory, you had to be thoroughly acquainted with intervals, scales, triads, etc. But who would be able to help me with that?

Bram Boelee was no longer part of my world, so I turned once more to our trusted piano- and violin teacher. He turned out to be an enormous support in theoretical matters: he knew everything about the reversal of triads, of intervals, of auditory training (like two-part dictations)... in short, during those three months he managed to teach me enough to pass at least the theoretical part of the exam.

The practical part of the exam was another story; here I was handicapped by my limited technical skills. I got a reasonable grip on Bach's Inventions, and did not really worry about the Haydn piece either. I don't recall which Czerny étude I played; the Chopin piece, on the other hand (Étude op. 25, nr. 12 in C minor), comes vividly to mind. I thought it was such a brilliant piece, and wanted to play it at the entrance exam no matter what. I was aiming much too high, of course; that piece is more appropriate for a final exam. But I insisted.



I took the exam in 1954, on a sunny day at the end of spring. I wore a black-and white checked dress and new red Italian sandals; it was the first time in my life that I realized how important the right clothes can be for one's self-confidence.

I went to Amsterdam by train, alone. A boyfriend in Utrecht, one sister in England, the other sister in school, father away on business, and mother at home – that was the usual pattern in those days.

The Conservatory was still on Bach Street then. If I remember correctly, the exam took place in Room One, the office of the director, George Stam. He was sitting at the green jury table with Paul Frenkel at his side; Mr. Frenkel was the person to whom, on the advice of my piano teacher, I had applied as a student. The other examiners were Jan Odé, Nelly Wagenaar, and (I think) Jean Antonietti.

With an encouraging nod they invited me to start with Bach; that didn't go too badly. Then Haydn, which was less of a success, for again I played it much too fast and much too carelessly; once in a while I heard a chuckle from behind the green table.

Then came the Chopin étude – and I still don't understand why the jury didn't fall from their chairs with laughter.

I had invented the following trick to cover up my lack of technique: the broken triads at full speed I could more or less manage when playing them “rising” (for non-players: this means from left to right on the keyboard), but when descending my left hand could not keep up at all. So I depressed the pedal and kept it down until I had descended completely, which produced an undifferentiated noise. Naively, I hoped the jury would not notice this. I still don’t understand why they passed me, rather than sending me first to preparatory training.....

IV

Amsterdam Conservatory of Music, 1954-1960

An exciting time began. In the first place, I had to find a place to live, which was difficult even then. Besides, music students were not very welcome as boarders. My first (attic) room I found on the Stadhouderskade on the fourth floor, but I was not allowed to have a piano. I took the room anyway in order to have a base from which I could look for something more suitable.

I still had to practice, but I had found a solution to that. In the same street was a piano store, where I was allowed to play for the time being; as soon as I had found a better room, I would get a rental piano from that same store. Deal! There was a slight problem, however: sometimes I had to study in the display window – interesting to passers-by, maybe, but not conducive to my concentration.

When customers entered the store, I had to stop playing; so, all in all, I didn’t practice much that first month. My girlfriend who played Bach so well and had passed the same entrance examination was looking for a room, too. Because following the usual course didn’t work, we decided on a new approach.



We studied the map of Amsterdam, selected the most desirable locations, went there on our bikes, studied the houses that pleased us most; and then we rang the doorbell and told the people that we had heard they had rooms for rent.

We covered a lot of distance that way, but it worked: eventually both of us found suitable accommodations, my friend in the respectable “Old South” neighborhood, and I in the old center. It was a small seventeenth-century house on a street called Hartenstraat, on the corner of one of the main canals, the



Keizersgracht.

Downstairs my landlady had an antique shop. She and her husband made an unusual couple: she was fifty-six, short and fat, with a stiff grey permanent, and always wearing a faded flowery apron; he was dark with a moustache, and thirteen years younger.

He had a mysterious business: in the attic right above my room he had some kind of button factory, where he worked with smelly chemicals and dyes. Occasionally something went wrong with a dye bath: it boiled over or something like that – in any case, the dye trickled in colorful stripes down my walls, which was many times worse than a leakage caused by clear rainwater!

Fortunately, no one here objected to my playing. In the beginning, however, the question was whether I could have a piano there at all: it was impossible to get one to the fourth floor along the narrow, rickety, winding staircases. The only solution

was to use the century-old hoisting hook, which was attached to a beam protruding from the front wall, just under the roof. The owner of the piano store was not very keen on this but finally yielded to my pleas. At the arranged delivery time I sneaked out; I didn't want to be present when the piano fell out of the hoisting ropes...

But everything went well; when I returned around the corner of the Keizersgracht the beam with the pulley was still attached to the house, and I could see no casualties or pieces of a crashed piano lying about.

In that house I lived happily throughout my time at the Conservatory; I enjoyed that narrow, age-old city street. I still have some nice antiques that keep the memories of that precious time alive.

During the first years my teacher was Paul Frenkel. He was a Russian Jew, who after the revolution of 1917 had fled his birthplace, Odessa, and settled in Berlin. There he met the renowned violinist Hubermann, with whom he constituted a famous duo for years.

In the early 1930s he fled to Holland, where he was soon appointed instructor for students majoring in piano at the Amsterdam Conservatory.

An erudite man, he contributed to my education not only musically but also in other areas. He encouraged his students to read good books, preferably world literature, and if possible in the original language. The four walls of his study at home were covered from floor to ceiling with books, books, and more books. That is how I first started reading Russian literature, but in a Dutch translation of course.

My piano lessons, however, were less of a success. I lacked dedication and true enthusiasm, and Mr. Frenkel was much too gentle and sweet-natured to take me to task. But a person like me, who lacked a truly adequate preliminary training, might have been better off with a firmer approach.

Except for music history (taught by Willem Noske, certainly no inconsequential figure) I liked most theoretical subjects, especially theory of harmony by Henny Schouten, analysis of musical form by Ernest Mulder, and solfège by Paul Loewer.

That last subject (I can still see that in my old notebooks) inspired me with a special love for the seventh chord that I have retained until today: some people see this as one of the characteristics of my compositions. I seem to remember that for three years, three times a week, we students had to sing all seventh chords with their reversals in all possible positions. I was fond of the harmony classes too; developing a melody or bass in four voices was a joy.

Because Mr. Frenkel retired before I had completed my studies, I was taught during my last year by Jan Odé, a born teacher. When I announced that I wanted to take the final exam at the end of that year he looked doubtful; not overly impressed by my abilities, he thought I could do with an extra year. But my father had had enough: my studies at the Conservatory had already taken me a year longer than usual because I had taken on all kinds of jobs and thus let my piano studies slide a bit.

During the first three months Mr. Odé subjected me to the extremely severe regimen of practicing in an agonizingly slow tempo; the results, however, were astounding. He paid an incredible amount of attention to the touch and to the importance of listening objectively to one's own playing, and

taught me to be independent and critical when practicing a new piece. In my own career as a piano instructor I have always found this teaching method quite useful.

Thanks to Mr. Odé's support and my future husband's encouragement (and last but not least because of my own hard work) I managed to pass the final exam: in 1960 I obtained my Amsterdam Conservatory certificate. After a supplementary course "General Music Theory" I started my career as a music teacher, initially mostly as a class teacher at various music schools, with some private pupils here and there.

V

First Years as a Piano Teacher, 1960-1963

Soon I had the opportunity to take over the practice of a colleague who was pregnant; this was in Den Helder, a naval base north of Amsterdam. In those days you bought the "goodwill" of a practice, comparable to buying a medical practice. The only difference was the price! I remember I paid Fl. 400, which would amount to about \$200 today.

I gave my lessons at the home of an internist, the Loopuyt family. We had the following agreement: I had a room with a piano at my disposal (downstairs there was also a wonderful Steinway grand) where I received my students, and during the two or three days I stayed there, depending on the number of students, I was treated like a member of the family. In return, I gave the two daughters piano lessons. So, for the next three years, I traveled between Amsterdam and Den Helder a few days every week. I enjoyed my teaching and learned a lot myself.

Actually, that wonderful certificate did not guarantee any teaching skills; pedagogy was not yet an important subject at the Conservatory. When you started teaching you were really on your own. Of course, there were various teaching methods, but not one of them told you how to deal with a shy and awkward ten-year-old who had been very fond of his former piano teacher, whose parents were recently divorced, who badly wanted to play the piano but lacked the technical skill, and who was leery of me...

It was mere luck that I hit upon something that appealed to him and broke the ice. After some dead-end lessons that filled me (and him probably too) with despair I got the idea of improvising together. We agreed on the beat, and he was allowed to play on the descant as loudly as he wanted– he could even hit the keys with his fists.

The only conditions were: to keep time and to strike only the black keys. The result was astonishing: after a hesitant beginning and some encouragement from my side, he threw himself with fists and elbows (that was allowed too!) upon the keys and let himself go completely. All his bottled-up energy found an outlet. I applauded him and said that now we had given a real “modern” concert together. That really encouraged him, so we did it again. His radiant little face was something never to forget.

In Den Helder I first started to write pieces for specific students. Some of these compositions were later published in one of my albums; others remained unpublished but can be heard on my CD nr. 5 (see the Appendix). – All this took place in the Loopuyt home, and I am still grateful for the way this family treated “their” piano teacher. Mrs. Loopuyt instilled in me a love for gardening and taught me how to cook; her husband, a physician,

was a wise man from whom I learned much about the ways of the world. To top it off, their daughters were both charming and musical. I couldn't have wished for a better beginning of my teaching career.

During these years I married Joop Vlam (I should explain that the boyfriend so disliked by my father had been out of the picture for quite a while). When I was pregnant, I in my turn sold my teaching practice to my successor and tried to find students I could teach at home.

Joop and I now lived in Amstelveen, a rapidly growing community south of Amsterdam. I placed ads in the newspapers, but those interested had a hard time reaching me because we had no telephone yet.

In 1963 you had to wait for a phone connection for months. The waiting list was endless, and I eventually wrote an urgent personal letter to the director of the PTT (Bureau of Communications) explaining that a telephone was essential for us: my husband had not finished his university studies yet, and I was the only breadwinner. But we managed, and within a year much was accomplished: Joop got his degree in Economics, our baby was born, and we moved. Joop's first job (with a staggeringly high salary, or so we thought) took us to Eerbeek, a village in the eastern part of the country.

VI

Eerbeek, 1963-1975

It was a bit of a culture shock: from student life in cosmopolitan Amsterdam to "civilian" life in a small village near Arnhem, with regular working hours from 8 to 6. It took us a while to get used to, but gradually we became part of this small rural community.

Bit by bit I began to build a practice; it started with the girl next door, and soon the snowball effect took place.

As our circle of friends and acquaintances grew, we sometimes gave a house concert, and at least once a year I organized a student recital. Occasionally I wrote a piece for a specific student in the style of a book they liked but, unfortunately, had just finished.

This also took less time than a trip by public transportation to the nearest music store in Arnhem that carried sheet music. On the other hand – copying machines were practically unavailable yet, so I had to write everything by hand: one copy for the student and one for myself. Not until the 1880s did I have some rare opportunities to use the copying machine of a friendly business connection. Might that have been the reason why most of those pieces were rather short?

VII

Zutphen, 1975-1986

By now we had two children, a son and a daughter. When our oldest child was ready for high school we decided to move to Zutphen, a nearby town. We had been oriented toward that small town from the very beginning of our Eerbeek period; many of our contacts came through our various clubs.

Zutphen had a flourishing cultural life in addition to a good selection of secondary schools.

During those years many cabaret performances were put on, sometimes for the hockey club, sometimes for the Alliance Française, Round Table 17 (Zutphen) Rotary, or whatever else. There always seemed to be an occasion for putting together

something fun (just as it had been for my parents when I was a child!). There was a solid core of enthusiasts, some of whom were excellent text writers. I used to tell them, “You write the text and I’ll write the music to go with it.”

I found that easier than using existing melodies, which always needed to be reworked and adjusted. In order to unravel the melody and its harmonies you had to play the same gramophone record over and over again, always trying to get the needle at the exact spot... it took forever. Remember, there were no CD-players in those days.

These cabarets resulted in a series of songs, some of which I later adapted for piano solo, for piano duets, and for flute and piano. They were the following: “Mixed Feeling” in album 3; “Mixed Feelings” and “Blue Seventeen” in Duets I; “Blue Seventeen” again in the album for flute and piano; “A Dragonfly in Paris” in album 5; and “Lazy Afternoon” in Duets II. For extensive information on the albums and the CDs, with a description of most compositions, see www.hensvlam.nl

All these activities appeared to have a stimulating effect on some of my students, the more so because they were generally closely involved in the creation of various songs, which I wrote either for a cabaret or for the students themselves. Often these students began to “compose” in their turn: they were already familiar with the triad material and knew, for example, what the steps I-IV-V-I meant.

This was because from the very beginning I incorporated the necessary theory into my piano lessons; in my opinion, theory and practice are inextricably bound up with each other (“like strawberries with cream”, as I explained to my students).

And most students found it interesting to discover, for example, that many pieces from the classical instruction repertory ended in the steps V-I. I had fun showing them how a piece was structured, how simple the basic scheme often was, and how everything would fit together like a jigsaw puzzle. Often they were amazed at the relative simplicity. They regularly surprised me with their self-made compositions, neatly written with a fountain pen, interspersed with white dots made by a correction pen (very much like my own work), and often in an attractive cover. I have cherished them throughout my life.

Every year I organized pupil-performances and of course first we held the general rehearsals plus an encouraging pep talk....





VIII

EPTA (European Piano Teachers Association)

At the end of 1983 I joined the Dutch chapter of EPTA, an association that originated in England. I participated in several study groups and workshops, and in November 1984 presented a lecture on the “average, less gifted student”. I addressed the problem of how to keep such students motivated and what alternative repertory to offer when they were no longer interested in the so-called classical repertory.

A few of my students played some of my compositions in front of an auditorium full of piano teachers. Those pieces were simple

in structure, entirely tonal, and (I hoped) in tune with the musical idiom of the type of student whose Walkman repertory did not exactly include Beethoven. The audience appreciated the pieces, but in the ensuing discussion some of the teachers worried that the standards of music education might be compromised in this way.

This concern was shared by many instructors at the various Conservatories; it appeared there was a clear-cut difference of opinion between these teachers and the much larger group of private teachers and music school teachers. This group – to which I, too, belong – naturally works with adolescent students who tend to lack interest and talent: those students form the majority in our practices. So for them I designed the concept of

“The Soft Music Piano Bridge over the Classics”.

In order to appeal to these students, this music should fulfill the following requirements.

- 1, it should have a contemporary sound idiom.
 - 2, it should be relatively easy to play, i.e. have a simple structure.
 - 3, it should still sound “difficult”.
 - 4, it should contain no atonality or unconventional measures.
- And finally, it should offer a starting-point for the practice of scales and triads.

There suddenly was quite a demand for copies of the pieces my students had played at my lecture, but since my work had never been published I could not meet the demand right away. Encouraged by many fellow-teachers I decided to try my luck at having my work published, so I contacted the publishing firm Harmonia. This firm regularly sent instruction material to registered teachers, and since in my opinion my work also

contained educative elements, this company seemed the most natural choice for my purpose.

All of a sudden things started to move along:

Sunday November 11, 1984 I gave the lecture;

Friday November 16 the publisher, Mr. Frits Ham, received a number of my piano pieces plus a copy of my lecture in explanation; and Monday November 19 I received an enthusiastic telephone call from Frits Ham, who liked the material so much that he wanted to publish it.

He wanted to start with an album of ten pieces; moreover, he was in a hurry: he needed the book to be ready by February 1985, so that he could “present” it at the famous German music fair, the Frankfurter Musik Messe... I couldn’t believe my ears!

I involved both my children and my students in the entire process from musical notation written in pencil to a real, printed music album. To begin with, all titles had to be in English: “Holland is too small a market,” said the publisher. Then, we needed a cover in color. Many suggestions were made; our son, Michiel, who has a gift for drawing, designed the head of Beethoven wearing a Walkman. I liked the allusion, but the publisher did not. Eventually he approved the design of a keyboard in the form of a bridge, which now adorns 15 of the 18 published albums.

In the second half of December 1984 I received the first galley proofs, which had to be corrected in red. To see your own musical notation in print is a wonderful experience! And when, shortly before the opening of the “Messe”, I received the first complimentary copies from the publisher, I was even more delighted. – By the way, nowadays it is easy enough to print

music via a computer connected to a digital piano and using the right software, but in the mid-eighties we didn't have that yet.

It was a most exciting time, and in my euphoria I completely forgot to ask about a fee. When the contract arrived by mail, stating a low amount containing only two zeros, I naturally thought, "That must be a mistake; there should be at least one more zero."

A telephone call to the publisher (who laughed and said he had been expecting my call) made everything disappointingly clear: I was a beginning composer and this was a beginner's fee. Once I had become a well-established composer, he said (and to my surprise I reached that level by the time my third album came out), I was to receive twice that amount for each edition of 1000 copies.

Album 1 has had about 15 reprints by now. The publisher tells me that for some unknown reason a first album always sells best, even if another volume in the series may be better. Up to now, about 53.000 copies have found their way to amateur pianists all over the globe.

Whenever I receive the accounts of Buma/Stemra, an organization that protects the copyrights of registered composers, I enjoy looking up the countries where my work is performed. (All public performances have to be reported to Buma/Stemra, which charges a certain fee, only a fraction of which finds its way back to the author.)

It is gratifying to see that my work is played in many West European countries: England in the first place, closely followed by Finland. Then Germany, Belgium, Switzerland, Austria, Denmark, and Estonia (where students at the Tallinn

Conservatory performed a full evening's program consisting of these compositions alone. See the epilogue).

Recently I got a call from my publisher, who apologized for having to ask me a personal question: it so happened that the jury of a music school in Australia wished to know the date of birth of the composer Hens Vlam, one of whose compositions was going to be played by an examination candidate.

IX

First edition album 1

Back to the Frankfurter Musik Messe. Since I was eager to know what a "presentation" implied, my husband and I decided to go to the Fair on the day it was open to the general public. From Zutphen it would take three or four hours by car – so we could do it easily within one day, we thought. Unfortunately Joop had to stay home with the flu; a girlfriend came with me instead. It was February and freezing hard.

As we were driving along and chatting about various things, the subject of potential markets came up. We got somewhat carried away in our speculations: what if we succeeded in selling a million copies of my book in Japan... By now we were following the "Messe" signs on the Autobahn, and soon, near Frankfurt, we entered a vast parking lot.

There were still quite a few empty parking spaces at the end of the lot; we were just wondering about that, when another car parked next to us. From that car we saw seven Japanese gentlemen emerge, one after the other, and all of them carrying plastic shopping bags. We burst into laughter and decided to regard this as a good omen. We, too, grabbed our purses and followed them, giggling all the way, toward the end of the

parking lot, where there was a large building on a hill, with many flags flying. But how come the place was so empty?

Behind the seven Japanese gentlemen we climbed the stairs and entered the building. And there we suddenly looked down onto a tropical swimming pool with live palm trees and a real sandy beach...

We were dumbfounded, and feeling very stupid we asked the lady behind the counter where the Frankfurter Musik Messe was. Pleasantly she told us that there were large signs all over the parking lot with information about a shuttle service between the parking area and the exhibition buildings. But because we only had eyes for the Japanese gentlemen and the large building with its many flags, we had never seen these signs.

Coming out of a tropical climate, as we did, it was a pretty cold walk back all the way to the other end of the parking lot, where we indeed saw large signs with information about the shuttle buses. In my memory we were laughing so much that our muscles ached for days afterwards. But eventually everything worked out and we reached the Messe at about 11. (At the end of the day we came to the conclusion that the vast exhibition area could hold several tropical swimming pools.)

Soon we had found the publishers' pavilion with the modest booth of the publishing company Harmonia. The director, Frits Ham, welcomed us with coffee and proudly pointed at a rack on which his latest editions were displayed, my first album among them. The sign over the rack said "NEW". So this was the "presentation"... Still, I was filled with pride, and had the idea that everybody could see that I was an actual composer.

Back in Zutphen I was interviewed by the local newspaper, which gave me the feeling of being almost a celebrity. Soon after all this commotion, however, life returned to normal and I was again an ordinary piano teacher in a provincial town. Meanwhile, encouraged by my success, I looked with new, critical eyes at my as yet unpublished work and wrote new pieces for several students. The publisher had given me a few hints, e.g., “try to develop the left hand more.”

X

More albums

When, in the fall of 1985, I had a number of pieces ready, I approached the publisher again. And so, in February 1986, album 2 was presented at the Frankfurter Musik Messe. This time the cover was dressed in a pretty, shiny jacket, as was the first reprint of album 1. There my two babies stood side by side, pink and blue, on the rack labeled “NEW”.

Next came the album Duets (for four hands), followed by album 3, so that in February 1990 four shiny albums appeared on the familiar rack. Every year a new album was added, up to and including the Messe of 1998.

For the next album, the publisher asked me to write pieces of a more simple nature and, if possible, technically on the same level. Writing simply – what a difficult assignment! Fortunately my group of students was quite heterogeneous, so I could try out the various pieces on them. Moreover, they often gave me valuable suggestions. This album 4 is the easiest and most consistent in the series.

As to album 5, my son, Michiel, suggested giving it coherence by creating a theme. That was the origin of the “insects” album, which Michiel provided with witty and original illustrations. He was a student at the University of Groningen, in the North Eastern part of the country, and could come home only once a month.

We had moved to Capelle aan den IJssel, not far from Rotterdam, which was at least three hours by train from Groningen; because in those days students still had to pay for their train- and bus tickets, Michiel could not afford to come home every weekend.

So we communicated frequently by telephone: I would play my most recent “insect” (e.g. “Bumblebee’s Lullaby”) through the phone and ask, “Do you have a picture for that?” A few days later the mailman would deliver a drawing of a bumblebee asleep in a hammock... And the little moth of “The Spider and the Little Night Moth” was dressed by Michiel in a tiny Zorro suit.

It is a pity that Michiel’s pictures, which were originally drawn on paper of A4 format, had to be reduced considerably for the album; many charming details are now hard to make out. Take the picture with “Waltzing Mosquitoes”, for example: a casual observer will hardly notice that Madame Mosquito is wearing gloves and high heels.

Album 6 (“Melodic Studies”), which is about other animals, was also illustrated “over the phone”. You could say that these drawings date from Michiel’s “Groningen period”! In album 7 (“Twelve Months”) I continued the idea of a theme by trying to give musical expression to the months of the year. Album 8 (“What’s in a Name”) was based on a series of personal names; from the usable letters of each name I created a musical theme.

The first movement, *Allegro ma non troppo*, of the “Sonata Classica” (album 12) was originally meant as a musical joke, namely a birthday present for a new baby. I had intended to write a short piece in different styles that were based on the rhythm of the baby’s name: among which eight measures in the style of Chopin, eight measures in jazz style, and eight measures in the style of Mozart.

However, the little piece got out of hand: the eight Mozart measures grew in number until the composition was several pages long! That gave me the idea to try my hand at a real sonata with this piece as its first movement. The second movement, *Andantino*, was a composition originally written for three flutes, which I rewrote for piano.

For the last movement, the *Rondo allegro assai*, I used an existing piece that I had written for the newly restored eighteenth-century “square piano” of friends of ours.

The “*Deux Petites Sonates*” of album 13 are actually regular sonatinas and eminently suitable as an alternative to the more traditional sonatinas by e.g. Clementi or Kuhlau. They are easy to play and pleasing to the ear.

For the album for four hands *Duets II*, I used one of my cabaret songs, “*Lazy Afternoon*”. Another piece, “*Blacky’s Tune*”, was written as a potential problem solver for a colleague and her non-playing husband: the leading part of this piece doesn’t require any technical ability because only the five black keys are played in a pleasantly slow tempo.

Album 14 for flute and piano is the only “outsider” in this series. At the request of the publisher, however, the Soft Music style is applied here as well. Looking back I can’t understand how I did it, since I know next to nothing about the flute. True, Joop plays a little; but it was especially his teacher, Jan Baggerman, who gave me a lot of useful advice. During a house concert at his home the entire album had its première; the recording can be heard on CD Nr.3.

XI

Music Bridge Publishing

After publishing album 9 in 2005 my publisher HARMONIA had unfortunately gone out of business, so I decided to start my own publishing house: **Music Bridge Publishing (MBP)**. My first produced edition, album 10, I did all by myself: writing, lay-out, cover, etc. After these came a few more albums: album 11 (Jaros Suite); an album with two trios for flute; and another album for flute and piano.

XII

Conclusion



I have taken you through the musical memories of my life to explain how I have arrived at “The Soft Music Piano Bridge”, the symbol, as it were, of my later professional life. Between that and the “Vacuum Cleaner” of my early youth lie many years. When I look back at that little girl who wanted so badly to play Burgmüller’s

“Ave Maria”, I am pleased to say that now, as an adult, I *am* able to play it – and much more besides!

I have learned, though, that it is of minor importance how well you play a piece or what you do with its music – what really matters is what music does to you, and how music adds to the quality of your life. The important thing is to enjoy music, either by playing yourself or by listening to others.

Some time ago I was introduced to a 16-year-old student. Astonished, he shook my hand and said, “Gee! You are still alive!” He apparently thought that composers should be dead... But I am still alive and kicking, and hope to be so for a long time to come.



Many thanks to Corrie Ooms-Beck for her dedicated translation
2003 Minneapolis, USA.
2003/2018 Capelle aan den IJssel

Published sheet music by Hens Vlam-Verwaaijen
Title of the series 1-11 is called 'the Soft Music Piano Bridge
over the Classics'

Piano solo

- Book 1
 - Book 2
 - Book 3
 - Book 4 (light)
 - Book 5 (light) about insects, illustrated
 - Book 6 (Melodic studies) more animals, illustrated
 - Book 7 (12 months)
 - Book 8 (What's in a name)
 - Book 9
 - Book 10 (More "What's in a name")
 - Book 11 Jaros Suite
-
- Sonata classica
 - Deux petites sonates
 - **Duets I** (4 hands)
 - **Duets II** (4 hands)



Book 6

for Flute

- The first Soft Music **Flute** and Piano Album
- Trios for three flutes
- The Soft Music Flute and Piano Album 2

For CD's look at website www.hensvlam.nl



The making of Bumping Beetles (book 5)



Capelle a/d IJssel 2003/2014/2018

Postscript

Here are a few things I would like to add.

At times I have been deeply touched when I understood how much a certain composition has meant to some people.

For example, the piece “Solitude” from my first album is engraved in brass on the grave of a thirteen-year-old girl... It was her favorite music, her mother told me in a letter two years after the girl’s death. This message led to an extensive correspondence by email, in which she also told me how her daughter had died: on her way to school, on her bicycle, she had been run over by a truck...

At a later time, on a beautiful day in late summer, her mother and I went to visit the girl’s grave in a lovely old cemetery in the southern part of our country.

Hand in hand, we watched the cherished piece of music on its brass plate, glowing in the afternoon sun.

On May 12, 2010, a plane crashed in Tripoli. Thirty Dutch people lost their lives, among them a young couple on their honeymoon. The young husband had also been very fond of “Solitude”, according to his father, who wrote me a year later when he ordered the CD with that piece. He wanted it to be played in church during the memorial service.

Another memorable, sad church service in the early 1980s: for a terminally ill friend I had written “A gray day in May”, also from that same first album. When we entered the church the program mentioned “opening with organ”. Expecting organ music, I suddenly heard familiar piano tones. My heart stood still. Later I learned it had been my friend’s express wish...

Here is a more upbeat story.

Quite a few years ago I had a day on which everything went wrong. In the morning I had jumped into my car for an urgent and most important errand (I have forgotten what it was) and, on coming back home, discovered I had the wrong set of keys with me.

No matter, I thought, the neighbors have our house key. Unfortunately they were not at home. I called my housekeeper, but she was out of town that day. Friends could not be reached either and my husband was traveling abroad. Taking my chances I drove to a dear old aunt, who lovingly took me in for the whole day. Fortunately the neighbors came home in the evening.

When I finally opened my front door, I stumbled over a large yellow envelope. I opened it and found a large folded poster announcing some kind of program; it was written in the Cyrillic script with, I assumed, my name written somewhere. Fortunately the poster was accompanied by a letter in English, written by the aunt of a Russian pianist named Elena.

This Elena had stayed with us in 1994 when she participated in the so-called Eduard Flipse Piano Competition. It turned out that she had an aunt who was instructor for students majoring in piano at the Academy of Music in Tallinn, Estonia. Back in Russia, Elena showed her aunt a few of my music albums; as a result Auntie organized a music performance – at the Academy – where her students played exclusively my compositions.

When I had finally taken all of this in, I was euphoric! It seemed to me that somehow it confirmed my qualities as a composer; perhaps my work was not too bad after all...

Naturally, it has always made me happy (it still does!) when people take the trouble to say something pleasant about my

work. For example, not long ago I received a sweet email letter from a lady in South Africa, who told me that she had recently taking up the piano again: as a Christmas present her husband had given her a piano plus a year of lessons. At those lessons she got acquainted with my series “The Soft Piano Bridge over the Classics”; she had found my email address on my website.

FanMail

Here are a few samples of the various letters I have received over the years. The first two have been translated from the original Dutch.

July 7, 2010

Dear Mrs. Vlam-Verwaaijen,

Just a note to let you know how happy I am with the piano music you have written. I have now most of your books, it is a very nice change from composers like Bach and Chopin, whom I like very much too. The books 1, 2, and 7 are my favorites so far. Some beautiful turns in your pieces give me goose bumps and move me to tears, or cheer me up. Sometimes it is as if heaven opens up for me, for example with “When summer is over”; Chopin sometimes gives me the same feeling.

My piano teacher is also a fan of yours (and she is very critical). Soon I will start a piece you wrote for Bram Boelee. Years ago she took lessons from him, interesting.

Thank you for your wonderful music. I hope you will continue composing for a long time, in good health!

Kind regards,

Rita van der Maas in Dronten.

March 23, 2009

Re: Your wonderful compositions!

Dear Mrs. Vlam-Verwaaijen,

I take the liberty to send you an email; I got your name from my piano teacher Loes Ledeboer, who sends you her warmest greetings.

I enjoy your beautiful compositions enormously and so do my students, it came at just the right time and is often a wonderful supplement! I hope much inspiring music will follow.

I have a small question: in your sonata nr. 1, page 2, line 5, measure 4, you connect two quarter notes and put the dots over the stems. Was that meant to indicate a portato?

Thank you for your wonderful music!

Kind regards,

Friederike Ernst in Zaltbommel.

(Yes indeed, it is a portato. Hens)

The following two letters were written directly in English.

July 12, 2008

Dear Mrs.Hens Vlam,

I found your albums by chance in a bookshop in Delft when I was in the Netherlands two weeks ago.

I bought albums 5 and 6 since I supposed that some pieces might be useful to give my students examples of how music can depict animals

(a part of my course about psychology of music is addressed to the figural aspects of music).

Once at home, I enjoyed trying to play your music (I'm a very modest piano player). It is amazing how you succeed in expressing images and emotions through rather simple technical patterns. Thus, I'd like to listen to your music performed much better than I can, both for my pleasure and for possible use in my teaching. I'm interested in your CDs 1 and 2. Please let me know the price and how I can send you the payment.

Thanks for your attention. Regards,
Alessandro Antonietti, Ph.D.
Professor of Cognitive Psychology
Head of the Department of Psychology
Catholic University of the Sacred Heart
Largo Gemelli 1 - 20123 Milano (Italy)

September 20, 2008

Dear Mrs. Vlam-Verwaaijen,

I love your music, I'm a piano teacher and my pupils love your music pieces too! Thank you so much!

You are a genius!

Kind regards,

Ingeborg Steglich, Germany

Who wouldn't be flattered to be called a genius? But my children call me back to reality. They tell me, "Mom, don't get too big for your britches!"

Capelle aan den IJssel, Februari 2018h