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Karel Goeyvaerts

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Score example
Karel Goeyvaerts

was born on the 8th of June, 1923 in Antwerp and died on the 3rd of February, 1993.

Education
From 1943 to 1947, Karel Goeyvaerts studied at the Royal Flemish Conservatory of Music in Antwerp, and went on to study at the National Conservatory in Paris, where he pursued studies in composition under the tutelage of Darius Milhaud and musical analysis with Olivier Messiaen.

Career
In 1970, he was appointed producer at the Institute for Psycho-Acoustics and Electronic Music (IPEM), a research and production studio founded by the Belgian Radio and Television (BRT) and the University of Ghent. Later, he worked as head producer for New Music at Belgian Radio 3 (the classical channel).

In 1992, he was named as the first holder of the KBC Chair for New Music in the department of Musicology at the University of Leuven, a position requiring him to teach and to compose again. However, the composition ‘Alba per Alban’ remained unfinished at the time of the composer’s sudden death.

Compositions
Studying with Olivier Messiaen, Goeyvaerts quickly assimilated recent musical innovations, in particular Messiaen’s approach towards rhythm and Webern’s structuralist application of serialism. Goeyvaerts would be the first to successfully apply the serial principle not only to pitch but also to rhythm, sound intensity and articulation.

Written in 1950-51, the ‘Sonata for 2 Piano’ marks the beginning of Goeyvaerts’ career as a composer. This piece had a major influence on the young generation of avant-gardists and particularly Karlheinz Stockhausen.

His ‘Sonata’ and ‘The Second Violin Concerto’ (1951) are transitional works in which the composer aims for structural purity, without however quite achieving his goal. For example, the traditional style of movements 1 and 4 of the ‘Sonata’ contrasts sharply with the serial middle movement.

‘Number 2 for 13 instruments’ (1952) can be considered the first totally serial composition.

Goeyvaerts was one of the first to compose electronic music, which allowed him to bring even more discipline to both the composition and the performance. Milestone compositions include ‘Nr. 4 met dode tonen’ (‘with dead tones’) and ‘Nr. 5 met zuivere tonen’ (‘with pure tones’). In 1953, Goeyvaerts and Stockhausen, together with several other composers, realized the first music produced by means of electronic generators (at the WDR in Cologne).

From the 1960s onwards, Goeyvaerts no longer initiated major artistic innovations, but rapidly integrated new ideas and techniques into his own idiom. The experimental, aleatory, repetitive and neo-tonal works written after 1960 can thus be understood as explorations of international tendencies in terms of their usefulness for personal compositional intentions.

Repetitive music also fell under Goeyvaerts’ gaze, an interest culminating in the five ‘Litanieën’ written between 1979 and 1982. After 1980, Goeyvaerts reclaimed the expressive intention and tonal techniques associated with the Neo-Romantic style. His opus ultimum, the large-scale opera ‘Aquarius’ (1983-93), forms both a synthesis and a culmination point of his work as a composer.

Despite great stylistic and technical diversity, Goeyvaerts oeuvre remains remarkably homogeneous.

Achievements
In 1985, Goeyvaerts was chosen as the Chairperson of the International Composers’ Rostrum, an association under the auspices of the UNESCO International Music Council.

Karel Goeyvaerts was a member of the Royal Academy for Science, Letters and Fine Arts of Belgium.