

## The comets we do not see

What are we missing out on this month? Or this year? I received a compilation box with ten CDs of live radio recordings by the Concertgebouw Orchestra as a present. ‘You like historical recordings, don’t you?’ said the giver. For sure. All the same, I expected no great surprises and unsuspectingly put on the first CD. I shot bolt upright.

A recording from the 10th of August 1958 at the Festspielhaus in Salzburg. Our Concertgebouw Orchestra conducted by the Greek-American Dimitri Mitropoulos. The 62-year-old conductor was in the twilight of his career. He was frail, tired, ill, due to a daily overdose of cigarettes. He would pass away two years later. Nevertheless, Mitropoulos was a passionate conductor to his last gasp, the great inspiration for the man who would succeed him at the New York Philharmonic: Leonard Bernstein.

In Salzburg he conducted the Concertgebouw Orchestra playing the Piano Concerto in D Minor, BWV 1052, by Johann Sebastian Bach. The soloist was Glenn Gould. The Canadian pianist was still performing at that time. Six years later he would stop definitively. From 1964 Gould made recordings in his studio in Toronto exclusively. Towards the end of the 1960s he developed into a cult figure. In 1981 he recorded the Goldberg Variations for the second time. Completely different to his first recording from June 1955. Slower. Drier. More incisive.

I remember how I listened to the two recordings with Yuri Egorov on dozens of occasions in 1982. What were the differences? The brilliant discoveries? The Gould rarities? Yuri, whose own Bach album had just appeared, was sometimes hugely irritated by Gould. Just as often he had to gulp in wonder. Everything about Gould’s approach to Bach was new.

Well, new...

On Sunday the 10th of August 1958, my super-musical mother could have turned up the radio at eight o’clock in the evening. My brothers, both of them fanatical pianists, could have called out: ‘This is just utterly crazy! This is revolutionary!!’ The eldest was well into his nineteenth year, the second almost seventeen, years when you embrace new ideas like blushing girls. The high priest of music reviewers – wasn’t it Marius Flothuis at that time? – could

have proclaimed Gould, Mitropoulos and the Concertgebouw Orchestra to be true revolutionaries.

But he did nothing of the kind.

Gould at his most Gouldian erupts from the recording. He plays the concerto extremely fast. Four minutes faster than a year earlier, when he performed BWV 1052 in Leningrad. Mitropoulos must have supported him wholeheartedly when deciding the tempi. At no point do you hear the pianist rushing the conductor, or vice versa. They make a flying start, not a hint of hesitation. 'Wham!' from the word go. Breathtaking to hear it. The orchestra sounds as if the average age of the musicians is somewhere below thirty. Gould had not taken to singing along yet, something that would drive Youri Egorov crazy later on – 'What a poser!' He does stamp very audibly on the stage, perhaps to prevent his foot accidentally catching the pedal.

No pedal. Secco notes. Staccato. Twenty years later it would be the only way to perform Bach for well-nigh every pianist. Gould died from a brain haemorrhage soon after releasing the Goldberg Variations. From that moment forward he was a saint.

How often does the new pass us by?

My mind turns with pity to the sophisticated art connoisseurs from 1888. They must have beaten their brows at least a hundred times for not having crossed the threshold of the Parisian art dealer Boussod & Valadon. To ask the clerk, a certain Theo van Gogh, for a couple of cornfields, and on leaving magnanimously saying: 'Oh, why don't you include that little bridge in Arles as well.' After all, it cost less than a meal in a restaurant on the banks of the Seine.

I received another box of CDs. Compiled by the producers of Klara, the Belgian cultural broadcaster. Eight CDs, subdivided into the categories Joie, Zen, Blues, Passion. Among the blues I hear 'Swans Migrating' from the Cantus Arcticus, Concerto for Birds and Orchestra. It opens with a tape recording of a passing flight of swans. Oboes take up the sound of the thousands of birds. Then the strings join in, giving texture and volume to the swan song. It is a music and nature experience combined, a work by the Finnish composer Einojuhani Rautavaara from 2005. That's already six years ago! Rautavaara was born in 1928, wrote eight symphonies, the last of which received its premiere in 1999. I missed all of them. Music that measures up to Sibelius.

We discover what is truly ground-breaking only later on. The brightest comets pass us by. During all those evenings we spend sitting in theatres or concert halls we miss the essence. While all of us think that, if we had been alive then, we would have been at the première of Stravinsky's *Sacre du Printemps*. And that then, just like Ravel in 1913, we would have given a booper a box around the ears.

Jan Brokken

(Translation from Dutch original: Andrew May)

*JAN BROKKEN is a well-known journalist who made his debut as a writer in 1984 with the largely autobiographical novel De provincie (The Province), the story of a youth spent in the countryside, which was made into a successful film. He has published gripping travel books about, among others, Africa, Indonesia and Curaçao, and is the author of the acclaimed and bestselling novels De blinde passagiers (The Blind Passengers, 1996), De droevige kampioen (The Sad Champion, 1998) and Jungle Rudy (2006). His work, which has been translated into several languages, has been compared in the international press to that of Graham Greene and Bruce Chatwin. Baltic Souls was on the longlist for the European Book Prize 2011.*