

Jan Van Landeghem: *Sanpaku* (1992)

In his threefold activity as organist, conductor and composer, Jan Van Landeghem (°1954) is able to turn his hand to anything. Whereas his organ concerts lead him into the world of ancient and Baroque music, and his conducting skills made him familiarize with the great Classic-Romantic repertoire, as a composer he stands in the present-day, aspiring to a new and contemporary music. However, Van Landeghem seems to be strongly influenced by his performing activities, assuming a somewhat polystylistic manner of writing. As by consequence, his oeuvre encompasses a wide range of the most diverse genres. This abundance of different stylistic aspects does, however, no harm to the originality of his music, which often combines a very traditional grammar with more progressive and daring tactics.

Jan Van Landeghem has always been fascinated by non-Western cultures, which repeatedly incited him to the composition of a new piece. As such, he has written works inspired by the serene Buddhism as well as by the effervescent African cult of magic. *Sanpaku* is another such a composition, written in 1992, this time inspired by Japanese culture. It might come as a surprise that it is written for recorder quartet, a medium we generally associate with Western, especially ancient music. Nevertheless, the four recorders of *Sanpaku*, ranging from the regular tenor to the Japanese shakuhashi flute, evoke a surprisingly Eastern sound world.

The mysterious title of the work comes from a Japanese term, literally meaning “three halves empty”. This cryptical definition generally refers to a small iris that only fills one quarter of the eye. The particular eye condition indicates a physical or mental imbalance, or at least it does so in Japanese culture. In our Western world, we generally interpret this symbol as standing for an extreme form of chronic tiredness. ‘Sanpaku’ depicts a state of ‘being dead alive’. It is exactly this struggle that is presented during the four pieces that build up Van Landeghem’s same titled composition.

Each of the four pieces takes one aspect of Japanese culture as its point of departure, indicated as such by its title: *Zen*, *Samoerai*, *Kabuki* and *Karate canon*. Nevertheless, it is the first piece, *Zen*, that sounds the most ‘Japanese’ of all four. Its use of four shakuhashi flutes contributes to this particular sound atmosphere. The shakuhashi is a flute made out of bamboo that originates from China but very soon enjoyed great popularity in Japan. Over the centuries, the shakuhashi established a strong relationship with Zen Buddhism, since it was often played by monks while meditating or wandering around. With its five finger holes the shakuhashi naturally produces a pentatonic scale. However, by changing the mouth attitude the pitch can alter at about half a tone, and the same goes for not wholly covered finger holes. The shakuhashi evokes a very broad range of sounds, from a whispering *piano* to a widely resonating *forte*. By consequence, this instrument proved to be very attractive to modern Western-style composers, both in Japan and abroad. As such, it also reached Van Landeghem, who had always been sensitive for this kind of unique and exotic sonorities.

The term Zen refers to a particular form of Buddhism, in which the body is brought into a complete, resting balance. As such, the so-titled opening piece can be interpreted as a first attempt to re-establish this balance as broken by ‘sanpaku’. The long solo of the first shakuhashi flute at the beginning is the first to promise such a therapeutic effect. Rather than describing an on-going melodic line, it dwells on particular moments, circling around in numerous thrillers and large-scale vibratos. [example] This meditative character is emphasised by an only approximately notated rhythm, which escapes every clear pulsation. A small gong concludes the individual phrases of the flute, seemingly willing to penetrate the inner body of the listener with its reverberating sound. Joined by a second

sakuhashi, the imploring tone of the flutes becomes all the more powerful. Only two dramatic moments involve the full quartet – with two basses joining the two tenor shakuhashis –, each time realizing a vivid breakout of the meditative discourse.

Samoerai, the second piece, displays a sudden contrast with this Zen atmosphere. The traditional Japanese fighters are depicted in their march towards the battlefield: strong and unstopping. The perpetual rhythmical movement in the three bass voices lays out the foundation for a more frivolous line in the tenor. Two times, the on-going march is put a stop to by sudden interludes that display a diatonic descending line, *legato e lyrico*, in which all four parts are involved. However, each time the battle is taken up again, at every turn more agitated and convinced.

Kabuki is one of the official forms of traditional Japanese theatre. In *Sanpaku*, however, it is the third piece in row. Its theatre-based origins seem to come to the forefront in some solo and duo passages, that expose a rather speech like rhythm and melody. What is more, Van Landeghem in these particular passages explores a special recorder technique, already used in the foregoing pieces but not to this extent. Next to their playing the recorder, the musicians now also have to sing while playing, which brings about an impure sound close to the didgeridoo. The performance of these ‘recorder-actors’ is framed and intervened by interludes of undulating lines – once in parallel motion, then in contrary motion –, which seem to take along the listener into another realm of time: a process common to theatre and in particular opera praxis.

The *Karate canon* finally involves a very traditionally Western technique. However, the contrapuntal technique of the canon is not strictly treated, but its emblematic motion is preserved. Again there is the heat and movement of a battle, intensified by the canon technique that fastens the discourse. Its *perpetuum mobile* reminds of Baroque music, a reminiscence that becomes all the stronger by a chromatic descending figure, dramatically empowered by numerous delays. The superposition of these typical Western techniques with a Japanese thematic and sounding atmosphere makes this piece, and to a broader extent the whole *Sanpaku* cycle, to a true synthesis and promoter of the art of Jan Van Landeghem.

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