Reinbert de Leeuw: ‘Music is my world’

Johan Bakker

For decades Reinbert de Leeuw (1938) has been playing a key part in modern classical music. A recent TV documentary showed how De Leeuw approached Bach’s St. Matthew Passion. A conversation about baroque, avant-garde and faith with a man who lives for music.

*What makes conducting Kurtág so difficult?*

“The nature of his compositions. You can write down many things in a score, but Kurtág’s music is about the elements that can’t be captured."

*How do you approach such music?*

“The first time I performed one of Kurtág’s works - twenty years ago - the composer was present. We played 'What is the word' in those days. It’s hard to find one regular note in that piece! As a conductor you have to invent everything. The score contains commas, dashes and arcs and I had to think about their meaning. The piece is based on a text by Samuel Becket that describes how an actor loses his ability to speak and how he starts to search for ‘the word’. The whole piece is like a collective stammering. There are no rules for such music, so I had to find my own way.”

*What is it like to be examined by a composer during a performance or a rehearsal?*

"I usually love to hear from the composer what his or her ideas are behind a piece. But Kurtág can be very demanding. Each time he cried: ‘Nein, nein!’ You need a huge amount of resilience in these situations, but eventually it is rewarding. Unlike many other conductors, I think that a composer should have total freedom to express his wishes."

*What do the musicians think of this?*

"They realize how impressive Kurtágs music is and they take his critical comments for granted. At the end of the day Kurtág was very pleased with our recordings. We have made an album that will be valuable even after a hundred years."

*It must be a relief for you to have finished this mega job.*

“The heaviest part is the large choir piece 'Songs of Despair and Sorrow '. I had never performed it before and I could not fall back on my experiences. Kurtág could not be present this time; He is 91 and he is working on a new opera. We talked a lot on the phone. I sang for him what I had in mind and then he responded by singing how he wanted it. During the recordings we really went to the limits of possibilities for two days. At the end I was exhausted."

*Has this been the hardest music you have ever recorded?*

"This has been the hardest project in my life by far. The music is so detailed and the way it is executed is so extreme: every note is like a matter of life or death. Some musicians don’t have anything to do during a long part; they have to wait for twelve minutes before they can play their first note and that one must be perfect."

*What makes you such a good interpreter of compositions?*

"Since my sixth year I have been absorbed by music. And when I was ten years old I started to compose. That gave me a euphoric feeling. I've always admired composers. I have often wondered how things work and why some notes are that good. In Kurtág’s case it is a very rich world. My curiosity drives me to try to understand it as good as possible. If I feel affection for a composer, something happens with me. Then I want to know everything and I simply have to do it because something starts to burn in me."

*In your interpretation of St. Matthew Passion you also made some distinctive choices.*

"The people of Holland Baroque said: ‘We are looking for a way to leave our conventions.’ I replied to the choir and the orchestra members: ‘You have more experience with Bach than I have. If you think that something can’t be done, please tell me so.’ But they stated: ‘No, we will do it the way you want it.’ It was a great gift that people who have been working in the early music their entire lives followed me wherever I took them. "

*What was it like to work with Bach again after so many years of making modern music?*

“Bach is such a giant; It's unbelievable that this man has been able to make all this music. Next year I will conduct St. John’s Passion and whenever it's possible I study it all day. At this moment I am completely obsessed with St. John’s Passion. I'm not religious, but I do believe in Bach. Because of St. John’s Passion I study Bach's library and I know that his Passions are the result of Bach’s deep and profound faith. But the story has universal strength as well. Bach's music is so overwhelming and his work contains so much wealth and emotion that I'm very grateful that it has crossed my path."

*How different are the worlds of early music and the avant-garde?*

"In the 1960s I was part of a movement that tried to attend people to ‘new music’, sometimes in a noisy, unconventional way. But those were also the years in which Harnoncourt, Leonhardt and Brüggen developed a new vision about old music. I've always felt very related to that movement. They did everything to understand what Bach exactly meant. They tried to find the essence of the compositions. Frans Brüggen and I did not use music to flatter our egos, but we were the composers’ servants.'

*What makes a piece of music strong?*

"Amazingly enough the music that touches me the deepest is often religiously inspired music. Messiaen's work for example is wonderful to do. A lot of music can be impressive and intellectual in itself, like the works by Boulez and Stockhausen, but I have much more affinity with composers who are interested in what goes beyond the ratio. The power of really good music is that it tells you something that can’t be described in words. That's why music is my world.”