

Composing, arranging, performing, and teaching in the practice of carillonneurship at Erasmus University Rotterdam as a source of inspiration and breeding ground for projects and thematic concerts

Mathieu Daniël Polak, May 2022

Introduction

In this article I, Mathieu Daniël Polak, carillonneur and composer, describe, based on my work at Erasmus University Rotterdam, how the themes of composing, arranging, teaching, and performing are connected, blend into each other and how this inspires me to come up with thematic programs and new projects.

Carillon Erasmus University Rotterdam

Every Wednesday from 12.30 to 13.00 I play the carillon of the Erasmus University Rotterdam (EUR) - campus Woudestein. Twice a year, a carillon course for beginners is organized. Enthusiastic students are offered the opportunity to continue taking carillon lessons after completing the course. All workshops and courses are freely (free of charge) accessible to students and employees of the university. A condition for following follow-up lessons after the course is that the student, if sufficiently advanced, also gives a number of recitals per year.

Throughout the year, workshops take place. The carillon falls under Studium Generale, an organization that is part of Erasmus University and offers scientific, social and cultural events throughout the year. Their program consists of lectures, debates, a monthly talk show, movie nights and events such as carillon courses, workshops and weekly carillon concerts. On special days in the year such as the Opening Academic Year (September) and the birthday of the University (November), festive concerts are given. In any case, student songs such as *Io Vivat* and *Gaudeamus Igitur* are performed on the carillon. In 2009 I received a composition assignment from the Institute of Social Studies The Hague, since 2009 part of the University of Rotterdam. It became a composition based on the melody *Gaudeamus Igitur* called '*Bells change the World.*'

The work is played during the opening of each academic year.

The carillon stands on top of an airbridge. On the airbridge, just below the carillon, is a grand piano which is donated by emeritus professor Jean Paelinck. Students play this piano every day. Because the instrument is on my walking route, I often ask students if they would like to go to the carillon recital. In this way, students from all parts of the world are introduced to the carillon. The multicultural demographics of the university are reflected in the recitals. There was a period when many Greeks studied at Erasmus. In that context, I have compiled a book of Greek music for carillon, called *Koudounia*. In the book you can find my composition *Petit Siritaki*. The piece is reminiscent of *Zorba the Greek* by Mikis Theodorakis. Chinese students are always found on campus. For them I arranged several melodies for carillon. The Chinese pieces were included in my book *The Big Apple* in 2021. In *The Big Apple*, the city of New York is imaginatively brought to sound. The Chinese pieces fall under the chapter *Chinatown*. Under the walkway is the practice keyboard on which lessons and study take place. The carillon students can collect the key to the room, in which the practice keyboard is set up, at the security room. My predecessor, the first carillonneur of EUR, was Mar

Bruinzeel. Under his leadership, several students moved on to the professional carillon training in Amersfoort. Recently (2021) people participated in the courses and workshops from China, Poland, South Africa, Romania, Turkey. They are studying temporarily at EUR. The language of instruction is usually English. It is less obvious for them to follow the professional training.

The students learn to play the carillon from the carillon method '*Voorslag*.' (*Before the Hour Strike*)

I made this book as a graduation project for the Master Carillon Diploma in the year 2000 and it works well for students who can already read notes. The book is published by Beiaard Centrum Nederland. For students who can't read notes, I work with simple melodies with chord symbols. The chord symbols then usually act as accompanying notes in the pedal. For one-time workshops I have several own compositions for carillon quatre-mains ready in which the student plays an ostinato figure, and the teacher plays a melody over it. After *Voorslag*, students can continue with *The Playbook*, which contains own compositions and arrangements of existing carillon pieces for manual solo, quatre-mains, pedal solo. In addition, I have written some etudes for pedal solo and frequently arrange music when there is a demand for it by the students. It goes without saying that all music is also available to the carillon students of Carillon Center Netherlands.

Carillon Erasmus University

The tower – actually more of an open bell chair was erected in 1968. The tower has a height of about 23 meters. The carillon has 47 bells with the heaviest bell being a C2 of about 265 kilos. The bells were cast in 1968 by the bell foundry Petit and Fritsen. In the United States of America, many universities own a carillon on campus, this was probably the inspiration for the then School of Economics to also own a carillon on the campus grounds.

(Students studied at the Netherlands School of Economics until 1973. In 1973, the Medical Faculty of Rotterdam and the Netherlands School of Economics merged as Erasmus University Rotterdam).

The municipality donated a sum of money for the purchase of a carillon in 1963. The maintenance of the carillon is in the hands of the company Eijsbouts. On the airbridge, just below the carillon, a band-play is set up. This automatic drum was never put into use. The hammers on the clocks point to the original idea of installing an automatic play as well. The practice keyboard in the space under the airbridge was made by Mar Bruinzeel and members of the Technical Service. The practice keyboard is in urgent need of renovation. Plans are currently being made for the renovation of the practice keyboard.

The airlift on which the carillon stands connects two of the three main buildings of the campus. Between the main buildings is the central square, where the carillon sounds relatively strong. The carillon in the park sounds ideal about fifty meters away.

Details Carillon compositions and projects Erasmus University

For the 106th anniversary of Erasmus University, I composed '*The Tinbergen Variations*' on behalf of the University in 2019. The composition is dedicated to the economist and Nobel Prize winner Jan Tinbergen. The composition is based on the opening chords of the Goldberg Variations by Johann Sebastian Bach. Erasmus Magazine invited me for an interview in which I was allowed to talk about the composition: <https://youtu.be/3Jyf6XndNzI>

The time signature is 5/8. In my compositions I prefer irregular time signatures that give a dexterity that appeals to me. The origin of this preference can be found in the music from

the Balkans. Also, within the 4/4 size I regularly come to an unequal distribution of the bar, for example 3+3+2 eighths.

During the strict lockdown due to the Corona , almost no one was allowed to enter the campus in March/April 2021. Only a handful of security guards and the carillonneur had access to the grounds of Erasmus University Rotterdam.

Exceptionally, a few students were allowed to spend a morning on campus making a film. On YouTube they published 'This must be the Place:' April 1, 2021,

<https://youtu.be/OWOKIjcwDCY>

In this project led by Erik Vermunt, student of cultural studies/cultural economics, special places of the campus are shown, the carillon sounds and people dance on an extinct campus. The thrust of the film is 'we miss the places where we can come together.' The melody in the video is by the group Talking Heads.

Source of inspiration and breeding ground

A carillonneur has several workplaces and these influence each other. Books such as *Koudounia*, Greek music for carillon and the arrangements of Chinese music are primarily intended for practice at Erasmus University (EUR) but also end up on the lectern of my students at Carillon Center Netherlands (BCN) in Amersfoort. Books such as *Voorslag*, method voor de amateur carillonneur and *Het Speelboek* are made for students of BCN but I also use for my students at EUR.

I founded the amateur class of BCN in the year 2000 together with the then director of the Dutch Carillon School, Jacques Maassen. Since then, after a series of courses with me, many students have moved on to the professional training at the Carillon School Amersfoort. The students of BCN not only come from the Netherlands, but also students from Germany, England and even Argentina. In addition to the carillon of the Belgenmonument in Amersfoort, advanced students also get the opportunity to play on the carillon of Spakenburg.

For one-time workshops I compose quatre-mains pieces for both institutes with ostinato figures for the participant and an extensive party for the carillonneur. Composing and arranging carillon music for educational purposes is a significant part of my practice. In composing methodical music, the concept of 'setting a framework' comes to the fore. A piece is for pedal solo or does not contain large jumps or puts the accent or double stops or on learning a specific scale. I also use this framework as a starting point for my compositions for market recitals and concerts. With major works such as *Mazzeltov* and *Chag Sameach*, I invariably received feedback from carillonneurs such as Boudewijn Zwart and Frank Steijns that the music is easy to study, is well heard but also has traditional and innovative qualities to be performed at concerts. In March 2022, for the 150th birthday of painter Piet Mondriaan, I composed a piece about one of his canvases. The work, called *Composition in Colour*, will premiere on the carillons of Amersfoort and Winterswijk. I am currently putting the finishing touches on a composition based on a Luxembourg melody. This composition called *Hämmelsmärchen* will be performed by Frank Steijns on the carillon of the City Hall in Maastricht on the occasion of 100 years of Luxembourg's Consulate in the Netherlands. At the Royal Carillon School of Mechelen I am following the specialization degree in composing for carillon with teacher Wannes Vanderhoeven and hope to complete this course in the autumn of 2022.

Biography Mathieu Daniël Polak

Mathieu Daniël Polak (1972) was educated at the Dutch Carillon School in Amersfoort. He obtained his Master's degree in 2000, specialising in amateur education.

Since graduating, he has been a teacher at Carillon Center Netherlands in Amersfoort.

Mathieu won prizes for carillon playing at international carillon competitions in Hamburg and Enkhuizen. As a carillonneur he has performed in Japan, Denmark, Germany, France, Belgium, Portugal, Lithuania and the United States.

Since 2008 he is the permanent carillonneur of the Erasmus University in Rotterdam and since 2003 carillonneur of Bunschoten Spakenburg. Mathieu obtained two Master Degrees for composition at the Lemmens Institute Leuven (2013) and at the Utrecht School of the Arts (2010). He is currently studying carillon composition at the Royal Carillon School Mechelen (Belgium). In 2017, his carillon composition *Dandelion Field* was awarded second prize at the Johan Franco composition competition in America. His carillon work *A Butterfly's Dance* was awarded first prize at the Johan Franco competition in 2019. In 2019, Mathieu received a stipend from the Fund for the Performing Arts to compose and arrange Jewish music for carillon. The suite *Chag Sameach* (Hebrew: Happy Holiday) was premiered by carillonneur Boudewijn Zwart on 7 May 2019 on the carillon of the Westertoren in Amsterdam. Mathieu was awarded the prestigious Visser-Neerlandia Prize for this work on 1 February 2020.

In 2021, Polak was awarded a composition grant by the Performing Arts Fund and the Amarte Foundation to compose the suite *Mazzeltov*. Due to the large size of the work, it was decided to organize a double premiere. Frank Steijns, permanent carillonneur of Maastricht, performed the solo works on the carillons of the City Hall and the Saint Servatius Basilica. Carillonneurs Dick van Dijk, Georg Wagner, Ariane Toffel, Moshé Lewkowitz, Boudewijn Zwart and Mathieu Polak also participated in the concert. They performed the quatre-mains pieces. The first copy of the *Mazzeltov* book was handed over to Mr. Benoit Wesley, consul of Israel. In addition to carillonneur and composer, Mathieu Daniël Polak is a piano teacher at the Music School Amersfoort, has a private piano teaching practice in the Utrechtse Heuvelrug and is a pianist at the Liberal Jewish Community (LJG) Amsterdam.

Epilogue

The sheet music (pdf) of the books *The Big Apple*, *Koudounia*, *Mazzeltov* and *Chag Sameach* and also of the compositions *Bells change the World*, *Petit Sirtaki*, *The Tinbergen Variations*, *Hämmelmärchen* and *Composition in Colour* can be received free of charge by sending an e-mail to Mathieu Daniël Polak: mathieudpolak@hotmail.com or info@mathieudanielpolak.com

These works and more compositions for carillon can also be downloaded from the website: www.mathieudanielpolak.com The books *Voorslag* and *Het Speelboek* are for sale via the webshop of Beiaard Centrum Nederland.