My Surreal Sabbatical

(and how one email to Chiel Meijering has transformed the bassoon world)

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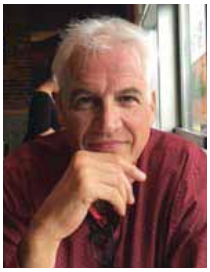
Composer Chiel Meijering

Sitting in my office this evening, I contemplate the series of improbable events that occurred during my sabbatical from the Jacobs School of Music at Indiana University which began in the fall of 2016. What has occurred and continues to occur is almost unbelievable and even hints at what might appear to be a fairy tale or an urban legend in the bassoon world.

Let Me Explain:



Chiel Meijering

It all started in late June of 2016 when I was organizing my sabbatical recording project. Most of the repertoire had been fleshed out but I needed just one more piece for the CD. Without even knowing why, something propelled me to contact a composer from Holland, named Chiel Meijering, of whom I had little knowledge except for a duo that he had written called *Nocturnal Residents*. That piece, I had performed at the IDRS conference in Oklahoma in 2010 with my IU colleague, **Bill Ludwig**. *Nocturnal Residents* was quirky and reminded me of insects or some other crawling and unnerving creatures that one has nightmares about. It was an effective work and was received well at the concert. Meijering's name disappeared from my radar after that performance but for some reason in June of 2016, the name came back to me and it prompted me to send him an email.

Meijering was vacationing in France at the time I sent my message inquiring about a concerto from many years ago called *Neo Geo* that he had written for a Dutch bassoonist, **Sylvia Stoetzer**, who was a girlfriend at that time. He said the piece was not very good and needed revision but that he would get back to me about other repertoire. The very next day, he emailed back with the wonderful idea to rework some concertos he had written for the virtuoso Swedish recorder player Dan Laurin to play on a newly created Dutch instrument called the "Eagle recorder".

Meijering took only a couple of days to adapt one of these concertos for the bassoon and soon discovered how remarkably well they suited its sonority. He then continued to experiment with his other recorder works throughout the summer and into fall, adapting all of the recorder concertos for bassoon.

It was an incredible outpouring of repertoire for the instrument. He worked at lightning speed and would rework these new masterpieces in a matter of a week or less. It was like musical fuel for me. Within days of receiving one work, I'd open my email and another concerto would be there waiting!

I searched YouTube one night and discovered that beyond what I already knew of this Mr. Meijering fellow, he really was the "real deal" in Holland, having composed over a thousand pieces (including several operas) with numerous premieres by leading international ensembles. This was no ordinary composer. I knew that he was brilliant and was in the process of making history with these concertos. This repertoire will change the way the world views the bassoon as no longer just an orchestral instrument, but a truly virtuosic solo instrument.

As you can imagine, I was elated—almost overwhelmed at times There were so many choices. All of these pieces were incredibly beautiful and complex, with undertones of melancholy, bawdy humor, folk, funk, and opera—all of which suited the bassoon's voice so well. I was smitten by every single piece. I would advise and help with the bassoon part and felt a very strong connection to his music as we continued our work. It was too good to be true… until… he had completed the task of reworking the entire collection of recorder concertos. I had become addicted to these pieces and his writing.

Thankfully, he was so inspired that he *continued* to write brand new original concertos for the bassoon (he is currently writing another one as I write this article)! The number of concertos is ever changing but I can tell you that there will be several and Antonio Vivaldi would appear to be a stingy writer for bassoon by comparison to the volume of material that Chiel Meijering has created for the instrument thus far!

In a nod to my own enthusiasm for the concerto project, Chiel will often refer to my Scottish roots, such as in the title for one concerto: *Message from the Clan of the Battle Axe* (2017), which comes from historical references of the McLean clan. He often adds Celtic folk melodies and driving rock motives as well. At times, Meijering will ask me to write riffs or record specific effects on the bassoon that he can incorporate into his next piece, almost personalizing each work. In another example, Meijering was looking for a new idea and I suggested taking a few bars from a Vivaldi concerto and working it into a new piece. This can be heard in his *Red Priest Reversed Mastery* concerto (2016).

No matter the work, Meijering seamlessly stitches together a variety of styles and genres into a coherent whole, always remaining fluid but with sudden and surprising harmonic and tempo changes that keep the audience at the edge of their seats. It is an incredible honor for any musician to have this composer-performer relationship and what is created by that mutual mission is like nothing I have ever experienced in my musical life. Through all of this, I have become convinced that bassoonists will soon hold the name Chiel Meijering in the highest regard as one of the great masters of bassoon music in our century.

So, as I conclude my evening in my home office, I listen to one of his later concertos that I recently performed on June 24th at the IDRS conference at Lawrence University titled *Perpetuate Transmigration* for bassoon and string orchestra. This piece is just

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one of one hundred bassoon concertos written so far by Meijering, including two recent double concertos for two bassoons, another for bassoon and contrabassoon with string orchestra and tubular bells, and four triple concertos for bassoon, clarinet and accordion with string chamber orchestra. Fifty-five are currently published and soon the later works will also be made available through Donemus publishing. With support from Indiana University and its talented string students with Ian Passmore conducting, we will soon have two recordings of his music available through the Naxos label. To be released in late 2017, these albums will include movements from the early works as well as two of his later concertos. Further recording projects and commission plans are sure to arise over the next two years and beyond.

I have to pinch myself daily and ask, "Is this some kind of strange dream or practical joke?" But the truth is that it is very much a euphoric reality and it is with great reverence that I am given the opportunity to pioneer and premiere some of these new works that will shake up the bassoon world. Chiel Meijering, whom I have nicknamed "The Brainiac," is a master wizard in this epic bassoon fairytale. I do hope that he is in no hurry to break the bassoon concerto spell anytime soon!

Chiel Meijering, Kathleen McLean, and conductor Matthew Michelic

Chiel Meijering will be in residence in Bloomington, Indiana in October and November 2017, composing a new commission work for 12 bassoons and string orchestra. It will be premiered in Bloomington on March 31 at the IU Bassoon Day with Bram van Sambeek as guest artist and will hopefully receive another premiere at the IDRS convention in Spain with an international all-star group of bassoonists.

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Interview with Chiel Meijering (December 2016)

Kathleen McLean (KM): *When did you realize that you were destined to compose and what were some of your musical influences in your early years.*
Chiel Meijering (CM): In secondary school, when I was sixteen, I had a music teacher who was very progressive (this is a salient detail). He played the bassoon and more than once brought his funny instrument to the classroom and improvised with us. One of his projects for us was to re-compose a new modern opera, starting from a libretto he provided. We had to fill in the music ourselves. This stimulated our fantasy a lot.

He also invited present-day composers to give a lecture. I still remember this very vividly, because it brought the possibility of becoming a composer within hand's reach, so to speak.

Very soon I started to write short compositions for bassoon and piano that I performed with my teacher. To be able to play the piano part I had to study meticulously at home. Although I started with percussion when I was about eleven, there always was a piano in the house because my older brother played it. He went to study piano and sing (baritone) at the conservatory later. We were very competitive, but I never liked the classical music he had to study: Beethoven, Chopin, Liszt, Fauré—and Carl Czerny was the worst of them. I remember my brother also composed short piano pieces, but he was not so serious about it as I was.

My biggest inspiration in that period was pop music. I remember fantasizing about becoming the singer of a rock group—one of my big examples was Reg Presley [the lead singer of The Troggs]. Imagining myself standing near the edge of the stage, screaming out my songs while hysteric fans would try to drag me from stage (or drag my pants down) excited me a lot. Later I settled for being a drummer in a rock band, the big inspiration for this being Keith Moon, the drummer for The Who.

As my brother did, I also started studying at the Amsterdam Sweelinck Conservatory as a percussionist. That horizon was somewhat limited for my musical imagination there, although my teacher conjured all sorts of large scores from modern composers that we would hang like a big world map in front of us.

Actually, I hated all that music. My escape was a composition teacher named Ton de Leeuw, who I knew as teacher of our modern music class. Admiring him and more or less adopting him as a father figure, I started to compose in his direction. He had also written a book about modern music [*Music of the Twentieth Century*] and that helped a lot in increasing my technical abilities. From then on, I started reading technical music books about Stravinsky, Cage, Morton Feldmann, Charles Ives, Ligeti, Stockhousen, Boulez and many more. After four years of percussion, I continued my composition studies with Ton de Leeuw. All and all I studied seven years at the conservatory (one year overlapping percussion/composition).

Shortly after I finished my study, a friend asked me to write for their newly established guitar trio, "The Amsterdam Guitar Trio". The first piece I wrote for them was *Are You Afraid of the Dark?* (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zydO7LNBBOg) This eventually resulted in a CD called *2 Men and a Lady*, released in 1989. From then

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on, my name slowly became established and more and more commissions floated in, which made it possible to make a living.

Most of my early influences are pop, and on the side, piano music from my brother and the opera and church music my parents liked. The Doors, Frank Zappa and many more had a bigger influence on me than Beethoven or Bach. Only much later did I start to appreciate classical music. Although Vivaldi wrote a lot of bassoon concertos, I always hated his simple formula music.

KM: *You have an extraordinary number of compositions to date and compose at lightning speed. What is your secret?*
CM: Already by secondary school I noticed I was different than the rest. I remember staying overnight with two friends and it was all too much: I could never be satisfied with just sitting all evening in front of a TV, chewing on chips or listening to cheap music.

To somehow overcome this, I started meditating. That helped me a lot. I also started reading books that no one in my family would ever read: Carl Jung, Erich Fromm, Wilhelm Reich, Carlos Castaneda (*The Teachings of Don Juan*). In 1968, worldwide everybody was looking for new ways, the Woodstock festival was a big event. I learned to become as honest with myself as possible, being in touch with my deeper inner life as much as possible, this helped a lot in my composing. I have always tried to shed the fake personality everyone wants to project on you as an artist. I've walked away from success when it would restrict my freedom—even said the wrong things deliberately to make a fool of myself.

Being in touch with yourself makes it possible to make fast analyses and quick decisions, it is how I can write so fast.

KM: *The titles of your compositions are notably eclectic and often tinged with comedic double meaning. Do you complete the work before assigning a title or vice versa?*
CM: There is no rule here, but the title has to tally with the content of the piece, how far off as it may seem. *Dancing with the Demons* was chosen with you in mind after you told me about some disturbing things that happened in your own life. Demons (or whatever things) of the past can haunt us from the earliest years. The idea of the piece is to dance with your demons but also not let them grab you again, etc. *The Ultimate Girl Power Hero* was also with you in mind. I wanted to escape from a world of bourgeois narrowmindedness; creating strange titles helped a lot.

KM: *You have written an enormous collection of concertos. In the last year, you have composed thirty-nine-plus new bassoon concertos in addition to the newly revised fifty-five recorder concertos for bassoon. What has possessed you to focus on this instrument at this time?*
CM: Apart from the fact that the bassoon is a very melancholic expressive instrument that can create a wide range of sounds, even imitating the sound of a roaring dinosaur (the contrabassoon), the instrument has been nailed in my subconscience with erotic feelings, since one of my girlfriends who I was very fond of played the

bassoon. Also, early on I was requested to write bassoon pieces by another young player, Marieke Stordiau. These pieces were used in a Ballet by a famous Dutch Choreographer called Rudi van Dantzig.

KM: *Beginning with Concerto 65 (*Quixotic Frenzy*, the 10th real bassoon concerto) you started composing larger one-movement works as opposed to concertos of three or four shorter movements. Why did you decide to approach these concertos differently?*
CM: I got bored of the short-winded three-movement/three-minute pieces and needed another challenge after fifty-five concertos. You always refer to these [smaller pieces] as "encores" and you are right. I used to write longer orchestral pieces in my early career, such as *The End of a Specimen* (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ucmv9uwXCeg) so it was not difficult to do so.

KM: *Is there one composition that you feel is your best work to date?*
CM: Well, always your last work is the best, I think. Personally, I like *The End of a Specimen* a lot because it caused a breakthrough in my career and it was used in a ballet, but many of my last bassoon concertos I regard as masterworks. Since everything I have achieved in forty-five years of composing seems to be bundled together like an old tree, it is in its last years that it produces huge amount of flowers or seeds or offspring.

KM: *What other art forms, artists, visionaries inspire you? And is there a strong Dutch influence or sense of nationalism in your musical voice?*
CM: Other influences are mostly from visual arts. I like the American artist, Mike Kelley, a peer. Also, Jackson Pollock, Picasso, Damien Hirst, Jeff Koons, Keith Haring, Karel Appel, Francis Bacon, Alexander Calder, Edward Keinholtz, Andy Warhol, Georges Pierre Seurat, and many more. When I read, it is mostly technical stuff, about music or philosophy: Jean Baudrillard, Slavoj Žižek, McLuhan.

There is little nationalism in the Netherlands. Being a small country that is dependent on the markets and innovation, it is quite progressive. In the Netherlands, composers were oriented toward either France or Germany. And because of the changes after WWII, including the Marshall Plan, American art influences also became stronger, especially in the fields of recording and cinema. I was asked to write the music for the fifty-year anniversary of the Marshall Plan in 1997 with President Bill Clinton and Queen Beatrix in the audience (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fvUu1JfR-84).

KM: *Your bassoon concerto scores are richly complex with challenging passages for all sections of the orchestra, including a lot of dialogue solos between strings and bassoon. Could one consider these pieces to be more like chamber concertos?*
CM: Sure, they are all chamber concertos. A solo instrument works best with a string orchestra in my personal taste. Maybe add a little percussion or a harpsichord/piano now and then. I like writing for string instruments, it comes naturally with me: my family all plays string instruments and I played of lot guitar when I was young, so

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I can see the notes on the fingerboard, I don't have to think if things are possible, with every note I write I know the degree of difficulty.

KM: *Your rhythmic notations and performance markings are extremely specific. Is this to ensure that the performers don't run off on a tangent with the score?*
CM: The idea is when the performer plays exactly what he has to play, the music will work at its best, so yes don't run off on a tangent. But I am open to any suggestion a musician may have. Recently, I was asked to conduct *Perpetuate Transmigration* in Canada and enjoyed working closely with the musicians.

KM: *If you were only allowed to write one last composition, what would it be scored for?*
CM: For bassoon and strings of course, or maybe Eagle recorder, bassoon and strings.