

## **Luister (Listen) Magazine (Spring 2008)**

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His paintbrush dances across the screen. For the artist Norman Perryman (1933), his brush is his instrument. Nearly fifty years ago he began to astonish international orchestras, conductors and musicians with his creations, produced live and synchronized with the music.

### **Norman Perryman paints the music Paintbrush as instrument**

*The Gadfly* by Shostakovich resounds through the darkened studio. With the crescendo of Janine Jansen's violin, via an overhead projector on an enormous screen you suddenly see stencilled arms, curved like a bowl, as if they are embracing the changing colours. Synchronous with the strings, the colours begin to move – they dissolve, pulsate and transform. Artist Norman Perryman is totally concentrated as he passionately follows the music with his paintbrush. His brush emphasizes every musical phrase, every silence - he has memorized the notes. Sometimes he's just a fraction ahead of the score. Music and images discover each other's rhythm. The image has an almost hypnotic effect, resulting in a more intense experience of *The Gadfly*. As the last note dies away, Perryman smiles with satisfaction: it was a good "rehearsal". After washing his brushes he places them with an enormous variety of others – one is thick with rough hair, another as thin as a blade of grass. Each brush can match a specific sound and mood. Grouped around five overhead projectors are dozens of jam-pots, each with its own colour and brushes. To the layman this might look a bit chaotic, but for Perryman it's part of a carefully organized and memorized system.

On the walls hangs a different kind of work: impressionistic portraits of celebrated musicians in action such as Luciano Pavarotti, Jessye Norman, Riccardo Chailly and Rostropovich decorate his studio in the form of posters. This is not just any old painter.

### **Kinetic visuals**

In 2008 Perryman is celebrating fifty years as a professional artist, with a party for close acquaintances. He is also completing his memoirs: *A Life Painting Music*. In his own country (England), connoisseurs are familiar with the documentary made about this artist by BBC television in 1993, on the occasion of his collaboration with the famous Simon Rattle and the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra in the Birmingham Symphony Hall. On the programme was Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*, for which the music was complemented by Perryman's abstract kinetic images, projected live on an

enormous screen. Since then this Englishman works all over the world. He was recently invited to perform in several concerts in South Korea. He also has special ties with New York and in particular with the big Chinese-American talent, composer Huang Ruo. On March 19<sup>th</sup> this duo presented the premiere of a new project in New York, in which Perryman created images for Huang Ruo's composition for pipa and soprano, an early Chinese plucked instrument. In addition, they are working on a new work for Paintbrush and Orchestra, for a possible performance in the Netherlands. Despite the fact that the artist has performed with numerous Dutch orchestras and ensembles, he is not a prominent figure in the country where he has lived for nearly fifty years. High time to re-introduce this artist, because he is unique, one of a kind.

## **Automatic writing**

The painter originates in Birmingham, where he studied painting at the College of Arts and Crafts. As young twenty year-old art teacher he found himself in The Hague, teaching at an international school. A few years later in 1963 his love for classical music found expression during a stay in France where he went to paint landscapes. In his hotel he heard a pianist improvising and decided to improvise sketches to the music. "I reacted to the music with a sort of automatic writing. When we later talked and he saw my work, he reacted enthusiastically: he recognized his music. Then I thought, I have to develop this concept." Indeed, that's what he did, starting with some simple performances at a school in Switzerland where he was then teaching and where he discovered the potential of an overhead-projector. More public experiments with music and brushes followed.

## **Eight projectors**

Perryman's working method is exceptional. He rehearses like a musician, but with one big difference - he memorizes the music. He "conducts" with his paintbrush – his instrument. A specific composition often takes months of study and preparation, and each project requires many bottles of transparent coloured ink, window cleaner and water. One of Perryman's sons assists in performances, as vision-mixer with between five and eight overhead-projectors. He can't be everywhere at the same time. "The projectors are effective and easily transportable. Rather than working with new technology, I prefer to use my bare hands. I don't need a digital programme to express beauty. After a performance people often come up to me and ask whether they can buy a specific image. I have to disappoint them: I have nothing left for them but a bucket of dirty water – that's all. Only afterwards do people tend to realize that they have been watching a sort of "living" art form. My paintings dissolve continuously into new colours and figures and the paint flows away, just as the last note of the music dies away and the sun sets. Like music, this is a temporal phenomenon.

## **C Major is yellow**

Perryman's use of colour plays a most important role in his performances, sensational experiences of synesthesia. "I've always had the feeling that music evokes specific colours, a certain atmosphere or feeling, a theory that Scriabin illustrates in his colour-

circle. For example I associate an E with blue-green, but C major is yellow. It's purely instinctive." Synaesthesia has not been taken very seriously by scientists, although recently it has enjoyed a revival of interest. We know that something at the back of the brain can cause a crossover of sensory experiences so that, for example, you see colours when you listen to music or hear music in images."

Perryman also sees his work as a type of *Gesamtkunst*, like opera or dance. "Simon Rattle once said to me that he thought that this could be the future of opera, in that expense could be saved by using my projected work as decors." That this idea is not inconceivable was demonstrated by the successful music-theatre performance of *The Soldier's Tale* by Stravinsky, a collaboration with the Netherlands Chamber Orchestra in the Concertgebouw in 2004. In this case the 'decors' were Perryman's continuously changing projections, painted live. Speaking of Stravinsky, one of his dreams is to perform images to *The Rite of Spring* with, for example, the Netherlands Radio Philharmonic Orchestra under Jaap van Zweden. "Stravinsky thought in visual terms. His music is really painterly, so that's an interesting challenge for me. Jaap van Zweden is familiar with my work, so who knows?"

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