

# Man of the Heart

Jeremy Polmear talks to Han de Vries about his new box set of CDs - and about the English and the Dutch, about interpretation, about Richard Strauss, and Heinz Holliger.

**Jeremy Polmear:** *You are a Dutch oboist, and your recordings are on an English CD label, so let's start by talking about our two countries, and about the three English concertos in this box - Malcolm Arnold, Peter Maxwell Davies, and Richard Rodney Bennett. How do you approach playing English music?*

**Han de Vries:** When I play your music, I see your countryside; I feel the connection between your music and the natural world, gentle and curving.

**JP:** *In composers such as Vaughan Williams, but not in these pieces, surely?*

**H de V:** Perhaps not so much in the Maxwell Davies, which is more black and white, but the Richard Rodney Bennett is very liquid music. And Malcolm Arnold is easy, friendly and warm music, with a great sense of humour. There is humour also in the other English piece in the box, *Music for Mel and Nora* for oboe and piano by Simon Bainbridge. It's like a little robot, and you are a cog in the machine. You have to concentrate all the way through - the moment you have a feeling, you are lost!



*Han de Vries & Jeremy Polmear  
London 2011, photo Diana Ambache*

**JP:** *Dutch music has humour too, doesn't it?*

**H de V:** It can do. Our country is flat, and we can be an unromantic people - direct in expression, even rude. Some of our contemporary music reflects that - aggressive and intellectual as in, for example, Peter Schat's *Thema*. But we have a sense of humour too - we can be humble and clownish, with an anti-intellectual strand in our music. Louis Andriessen, who has two pieces in this box, was able to take both sides, to be ultra-modern one minute and mocking the next. There is something similar in Willem Breuker's *Concerto no 2*, which I perform in the box on a DVD from the Concertgebouw Hall in Amsterdam. It starts as an orchestral concerto, but is interrupted first by jazz and then by a bagpipe band. Breuker comes from a jazz tradition, and from the Berlin of Kurt Weill, and talks about his music on the DVD. There are subtitles if by any chance you don't speak Dutch!

There are also two pieces in the box by another very good Dutch composer, Hans Kox. His style is traditional and he got squeezed between the two opposing forces, which made his career difficult.

**JP:** *Alexander Voormolen is another more traditional composer here, isn't he?*

**H de V:** Yes, there are two concertos by him, an oboe concerto and one for two oboes. He was influenced by French composers, and you could say the style is old-fashioned, but it's very Dutch - you can see our mills and our clogs. There was a TV costume drama a few years back that used the slow movement of the oboe concerto as its music, it is very well-known to any Dutch person over 50.

**JP:** You mentioned Peter Schat's Thema - I really like that piece. It's loud all the way through, and reminds me of the heavy jazz-rock music I used to listen to in the early 1970s.

**H de V:** It is a homage to James Brown, the 'Godfather of Soul', and I can hear that. The oboe has a microphone fixed to the top joint to make as nasal a sound as possible, and it is amplified so that it is not drowned by the orchestra. Talking about musical styles, composers can change their style during their lifetimes. Peter Schat's last opera, about the life of Tchaikovsky, is quite Romantic in style.

**JP:** You had a special relationship with the composer Bruno Maderna, didn't you?



*Han de Vries and Bruno Maderna  
photo Maria Austria/MAI*

**H de V:** Yes, we got to know each other at the Holland festival, and he was a guest conductor with the Concertgebouw Orchestra when I was there. I can say that I understand his music - his Italian lyrical way, and his sudden explosions, like a child crashing all the toys that it has. It was a pleasure to work with him; I remember one passage he had marked 'presto possibile'. I worked on it day and night to make it faster than a fighter jet, and when I met him he said, with a smile, "Han, don't make such a problem with it!" He helped me approach his music without fear.

In the box there are two different performances of his third oboe concerto which he wrote for me, and one is on DVD with him conducting. For people who find his music difficult, I recommend watching his face - the way he asks you to start a phrase, the expressions he uses - it's like a translation of the music. You can see how deep, and how human, it is.

**JP:** When you look at this box - even ignoring all your other recordings and performances - there are 51 pieces here, recorded over a 34-year period. Do you feel happy, with a working life well spent?

**H de V:** It is as it is, and I'm happy to paint now. I have always played with my eyes as well as my ears, and I think that has helped my musical fantasy, my imagination. But I have a lazy side too - I like talking, making jokes, drinking wine - and I always felt I did not do enough. My teacher Haakon Stotijn used to say "only hard workers achieve things".

**JP:** There were some pieces in this box that really surprised me. I wasn't expecting to enjoy Stockhausen's flute, oboe and piano piece Tierkreis, but I did!

**H de V:** It was a surprise to me too, I enjoyed it more when I heard it later. Partly it's like a music toy for little children, and sometimes it is very deep - it's a complete piece. At one point Abbie de Quant the flute player has to sing, and she also has to hum while playing, which she does brilliantly, very clear and in tune.



**JP:** *There's a lot of Bach in the box - mainly JS of course - but a surprise here for me was what a lovely piece CPE Bach's B flat concerto is.*

**H de V:** Yes, I'd like that slow movement played at my funeral, it's one of the most touching oboe pieces I know! Bach adapted it from a keyboard concerto, it feels rather fragmented and can make you feel rather uneasy playing it. But it's worth the effort, and it helps one to understand Charles Burney's famous observation of CPE Bach's own performance on the clavichord: "... he grew so animated and *possessed*, that he not only played, but looked like one inspired. His eyes were fixed, his under lip fell, and drops of effervescence distilled from his countenance. He said, if he were to be set to work frequently, in this manner, he should grow young again."

**JP:** *There is also a lot of Mozart, and here the surprise to me was how effective the arrangement was of the little Divertimento no 1 K439b.*

**H de V:** When I listened to that version with viola and cello, I thought "it wasn't a mistake, it's not an arrangement an oboist should have avoided." But you need very good string players - any problems of intonation and the piece is easily killed.

**JP:** *You were born into a Holland occupied by the Nazis, and there is one CD of music of this period.*

**H de V:** Yes, including a sonata by Pavel Haas, who was murdered in Auschwitz. People would sometimes say to me that they didn't understand it, and I can sometimes hear that other oboists don't either, but I understand it all. It has tremendous sadness, but not expressed in a cliché way. And there is also the *Ballad of Mauthausen* by Theodorakis - a mixture of poetry and music about another concentration camp.

**JP:** *This leads me to your performance of the Richard Strauss Concerto, which I found very affecting.*

**H de V:** I have more hate than love of this piece. Behind it is a mentality that I do not understand. It's very sweet, it's expressive, but it's a glassy emotion. I do not hear real blood and flesh, it's like the smile of a Geisha girl. It was written just after the war, in the disaster of Germany - how can he write such a piece with no sign of destruction?

**JP:** *Is it because he was at least tolerant of the Nazi regime that you say this?*

**H de V:** That does not influence me. Working with some composers can be unpleasant, though as I have said Maderna was a joy. It doesn't matter, the music is the thing. With this piece I concentrate on the technical challenges - getting the fingers very clear in those first two pages, getting the breathing right, but never making it sound virtuosic, it's not that kind of piece.

**JP:** *I'm still puzzled. I have heard performances by other oboists that have left me impressed but unmoved.*

**H de V:** Because this is such a well-known concerto, it is common for players to put too much of their own taste into the music, which can block the interpretation. And there must be no hint of the *Concours* mentality. Perhaps you like my performance because I keep my opinions out of the way.

**JP:** *For sheer excitement, the Penderecki concerto has to take the prize in this box.*

**H de V:** Yes, it was commissioned by Heinz Holliger, and I heard him play it. Of all the special techniques used in the piece, the one that amazed me most were the upward

glissandi. How were these possible, I asked myself? I talked to recorder players, I talked to clarinetists who had played that opening solo in *Rhapsody in Blue* - and I taught myself to do it. It's very hard on a covered system, and the hardest thing is to go over the break, and I wondered if Holliger's recording was more than one take. Mine certainly was only one, because it was a live performance.

**JP:** Do I detect a rivalry with Holliger?

**H de V:** No, I am a great admirer of Holliger. He's the Mount Everest of oboe playing. He is a genius. And he has a much better technique than I ever did. In this box I perform his *Mobile* for oboe and harp as part of my homage. What I admire about his playing is that it's so boring that it is never boring! Let me explain: when I listen to myself, sometimes I hear only me. Holliger never irritates the listener by imposing his personality. He's like Boulez, he's not a coquette. Holliger touches my brain; I am a man of the heart. I'm like a cat that jumps on a person who doesn't like cats!

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<b>Louis Andriessen:</b> Anachronie II Romance in F	CD 3 CD 6
<b>Malcolm Arnold:</b> Oboe Concerto	CD 2
<b>Simon Bainbridge:</b> Music for Mel and Nora	CD 8
<b>C.Ph.E. Bach:</b> Oboe Concerto Wq 164	CD 1
<b>Johann Sebastian Bach:</b> Cantata BWV 84, Oboe Concerto BWV 1053 & Concerto for oboe and violin BWV 1060	CD 1 CD 7
<b>Ludwig van Beethoven:</b> Trio	CD 5
<b>Richard Rodney Bennett:</b> Oboe Concerto	DVD
<b>Willem Breuker:</b> Oboe Concertos nos 1 & 2	CD 6
<b>Elliott Carter:</b> Pastoral	CD 3
<b>Domenico Cimarosa:</b> Oboe Concerto	CD 6
<b>César Cui:</b> Nocturne	CD 4
<b>Peter Maxwell Davies:</b> Strathclyde Concerto no. 1	CD 5
<b>Rudolf Escher:</b> Trio d'anches	CD 2
<b>Bert Esser:</b> Concerto for two oboes	CD 4
<b>Morton Feldman:</b> Oboe & Orchestra	CD 2
<b>Jean Françaix:</b> L'Horloge de Flore	CD 9
<b>Pavel Haas:</b> Suite	CD 3
<b>Joseph Haydn:</b> Oboe Concerto	CD 8
<b>Heinz Holliger:</b> Mobile	CD 2
<b>Jacques Ibert:</b> Symphonie Concertante	CD 8
<b>Guus Janssen:</b> Nevenzon	CD 6
<b>Hans Kox:</b> Lied ohne Worte & The silent cry	CD 4
<b>Bruno Maderna:</b> Oboe Concerto no. 3 Oboe Concerto no. 3	Bonus DVD CD 8
<b>Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart:</b> Adagio and Rondo K. 617, Divertimento K. 439b no. 1, Quartet K. 370 & Quintet K. 406	CD 7 CD 6
<b>Carl Nielsen:</b> Fantasiestücke	CD 6
<b>Georges Pfeiffer:</b> Musette	CD 3
<b>Krzysztof Penderecki:</b> Capriccio	CD 6
<b>Julius Röntgen:</b> Sonata no. 1	CD 5
<b>Peter Schat:</b> Thema	CD 8
<b>Karlheinz Stockhausen:</b> Tierkreis	CD 4
<b>Richard Strauss:</b> Oboe Concerto	CD 6
<b>Georg Philipp Telemann:</b> Overture-Suite no. 2	CD 9
<b>Mikis Theodorakis:</b> The Ballad of Mauthausen	CD 6
<b>Antonio Vivaldi:</b> Sonata RV 53	CD 3
<b>Alexander Voormolen:</b> Concerto for two oboes Oboe Concerto	CD 5 CD 9
<b>Stefan Wolpe:</b> Sonata	CD 8
<b>Iannis Xenakis:</b> Dmaathen	CD 8

## Han de Vries

### The Radio Recordings

**Artists include:**  
**Elly Ameling** *soprano* • **Jan Goudswaard** *guitar*  
**Willy Goudswaard** *percussion* • **Henk Guittart** *viola*  
**Polo de Haas** *piano* • **Philip Hirschhorn** *violin*  
**Rudolf Jansen** *piano* • **Albert de Klerk** *organ*  
**Liesbeth List** *vocals* • **Alberto Lysy** *violin*  
**Wouter Möller** *cello* • **Theo Olof** *violin*  
**George Pieterse** *clarinet* • **Abbie de Quant** *flute*  
**Bart Schneemann** *oboe* • **Joep Terwey** *bassoon*  
**Koos Verheul** *flute* • **Boris Zarankin** *piano*

**Ensembles:** American String Quartet • Willem Breuker  
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Netherlands Ballet Orchestra • Netherlands Chamber  
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Chamber Orchestra • Radio Philharmonic Orchestra  
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Schat • Pierre Stoll • Peter Maxwell Davies • Jan Willem de  
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**Total recording time (9 CDs, a DVD and a bonus DVD)**  
**10 hours 55 minutes**

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