

PROFILE: MAYA VERLAAK

Maya Verlaak is a Belgian composer (b. Ghent, 1990). She describes her compositional process as a scrutinising compositional position in which the creative process is guided by the context. She develops novel approaches for each situation, never taking anything for granted. This way of working opens up her compositional practice towards new methods, creative solutions and playfulness. Sharing her creative process is important to her, so she develops new notation systems to give performers and/or the interacting audience insight into the compositional process.



Maya Verlaak photo, photo credit Ana Smaragda Lemnaru

Maya's works has been commissioned and performed worldwide. Her music appears on NMC Recordings (*Next Wave*, 2014), Birmingham Record Company (*Trace*, 2024; *Tape Piece*, 2020), Another Timbre (*All English Music is Greensleeves*, 2020) and Ensemble Klang Records (*Vanishing Point*, 2024). She is a founding member of the Post-Paradise concert series and Acid Police Noise Ensemble, and is currently a member of iii (instrument inventors initiative).

Maya studied composition, with a minor in sonology, at the Royal Conservatoire of The Hague. In 2019 she was awarded a Ph.D. from Royal Birmingham Conservatoire (Birmingham City University) funded by the AHRC Midlands3Cities Doctoral Training Partnership. She has been a principal subject composition teacher at the Conservatoire of Amsterdam since 2018. Her website is <https://mayaverlaak.com/>.

One of the characteristics of your music that I have found especially exciting, ever since I first encountered your work, is your ability to create performance situations that produce extraordinary sounds and yet also make an immediate visual and dramatic impact. Is this a conscious creative aim for you? Are you able to say how and when you started to make work like this?

I don't think I ever started composing something with the idea that it will look visually interesting; however, I always start working on ideas with the given context as a starting point, and that context can certainly have something visually or dramatically interesting. I always carefully analyse and critically reflect upon the context until it triggers inspiration for the newly commissioned composition. This way of working started for me around 2008, when I was studying composition at the Royal Conservatoire in The Hague. At that time I was mainly trying to come up with other ways to listen to electroacoustic music, music only for loudspeakers. It was bothering me that I would not have anything to look at during these concerts, so I began inventing all kinds of ways to present electroacoustic music in visually interesting ways. For instance, I used salty water as a conductor for electricity to power loudspeakers: during a performance of one of my electroacoustic pieces I watered the loudspeakers at precise times so that they would turn on to make sound.

By the end of my bachelor's degree and during my master's degree I became more involved with writing for classical musicians. I was primarily concerned with the limits of classical instruments and developed a keen

interest in working closely with the musicians. On moving to England in 2013 I became more aware of the social aspects of music-making. Every time I analysed the context of a new commission I found inspiration in all kinds of classical concert hall etiquette and the classical ensemble culture; examples of this include my work *All English music is Greensleeves* (2014) and *Hexenhaus* (2016). During my Ph.D. at Royal Birmingham Conservatoire I investigated ways in which I could share all the steps of my own critical analysis. My methodology involved turning things upside down, doing the exact opposite of what one would normally do to draw attention to the subject. There's more about this in my Ph.D. thesis, *Hexenhaus – a scrutinizing compositional position* (2019).

My (now more finessed) methodology often causes accidental theatricality or very intense listening experiences. Quite often the audience sees musicians struggling while trying very hard to perform my pieces (recent examples are *Roulette* (2021) and *Vanishing point* (2022)). This situation often intrigues or even unsettles the audience, which I hope triggers a sense of analytical thinking. I want the audience to think about the reasons why and how I composed the piece, and I invite them to think about the compositional process in relation to what they have just experienced. Someone once told me that people go to concert halls to have fun, that they have no interest in questioning the concert hall etiquette or contemporary musical practice. This person had not taken the time to delve deeper into a second layer in my compositional process. While I am often very critical and conceptual with my musical material, I always create space for fun, trust and care for the musicians and audience. My compositional material is always very carefully crafted, even when my scores give a lot of freedom to the musicians through the use of things like musical games or interactive self-built computer programs. I always carefully calculate every single sound that can happen. During the compositional process I often make another (secret) computer program to calculate the social interaction and resulting sounds. It is also important to mention that for every single piece I compose I completely reinvent my notation so that it communicates in the specific ways in which I want to communicate. I believe that every concept needs new notation and that as composers and musicians we should not be afraid to learn new techniques and methods for every new piece we create.

Your article with Thomas Moore on post-instrumental practice and sustainability raises important questions about the way that some new works require performers to develop playing techniques that they may not be able to use again. How do you resolve this question in your own work?

Sometimes I will receive an email from a musician or an ensemble asking if they can perform one of my pieces and if I can send the score and instructions. These are always nice emails to receive but I'm usually quite careful not simply to send a score to a place which is too distant for me to travel to. It is important to me to always take time to get to know the performing musician and to work on the piece with them in order to build trust. Some pieces are no longer conceptually correct if they are performed in a new place by a different musician.

This means that if someone really wants to perform these kinds of pieces I need to travel to them and adapt the score in relation to the new context. I have only done that a couple times because this is not a very sustainable practice. Instead I have decided to find ways to build trust over email or video conversations and make the musicians re-evaluate the context themselves. They have to analyse my compositional process and the score and then make adaptations. If the musicians take this process seriously I find that I enjoy the process of creative

adaptation and it confirms that my compositional process creates active thinkers. When this kind of interaction happens I usually get inspired to write a completely new piece for them, or sometimes they may ask upfront whether they can commission a new piece from me. I conclude that my compositions take some time to learn at first but this often piques the interest of the musicians I work with and can trigger them to ask for more pieces! This is not about musicians learning some kind of new technique on their instruments but it is rather a sustainable practice which involves people learning to be more active thinkers and to take risks in performances.

For centuries there's been a sort of musical golden triangle between the British Isles and the countries that are now the Netherlands and Belgium. I'm thinking of all the exchanges and influences, from Dunstaple and Bull to the recent generations of British and Irish students in The Hague. Do you feel part of this? Is it just geographical convenience or is there some aesthetic commonality?

At 18 I left my home country of Belgium to study in The Netherlands because I felt very connected to the teaching practice in The Hague. This decision has led some people to categorise me as a Hague School composer, connecting my music, or my way of thinking about music, to Louis Andriessen, Gilius Van Bergeijk, Dick Raaijmakers and Jan van Vlijmen. I was always told that the Hague School is not about the sound of the music but the attitude, and this particular attitude is difficult to find in Belgium. When I relocated to England I was surprised to notice a similar attitude when seeing and hearing the work of my fellow Ph.D. candidates in Birmingham, Huddersfield and Bath Spa. Howard Skempton was one of my teachers and he enjoyed dissecting my conceptual thinking patterns while never questioning the resulting sound. I think sound is important, as it is also important for all the Hague School composers, but it is not the main parameter that connects them. But when I heard Howard talking about the Scratch Orchestra I got the opposite impression: that sound was not the primary concern. I often had arguments with my Hague School teacher Peter Adriaansz about how I was not paying enough attention to the way in which my work will sound, while my teacher Gilius would make sure I stayed true to my concept. I'm not sure where my practice fits now that I'm living back in Belgium, teaching composition at the Conservatoire of Amsterdam and keeping regular contact with colleagues in the UK, but I think it is important to be some kind of outsider everywhere to keep up a critical mind.