

Baudouin Oosterlynck: *Eye for ear, ear for eye*

by Dr Robert Casteels

Art collector, composer and musician, artist, thinker and poet, visual artist and sculptor, sportsman and physiotherapist? Any attempt at pigeon-holing the artistic personality and journey of Baudouin Oosterlynck falls short. Under his trademark hat resides a rich and warm personality that encompasses all of the above and more. The hat may well be another manifestation of his subtle sense of humour¹.

Oosterlynck the art collector has assembled the most extensive collection of works by artist Ben Vautier², and owns a fine collection of spectacles ranging 500 years back. Born in Kortrijk, Flanders in 1946, Oosterlynck started his artistic journey as a composer in the traditional sense of the word and a pianist-improviser. The drawings accompanying each creation remind me of "Naïve Art"³. His works' titles display a witty playfulness with the French language, and the concise accompanying texts reveal a systematic and inquisitive mind. Besides being involved in the arts, Oosterlynck used to be an athlete, competing at Belgium's national level, and he also worked as a physiotherapist. Finally, his sound sculptures and installations are so visual that Belgian government agencies classify him as a visual artist.

This present essay is based on his web site⁴, books⁵ and an art movie⁶, as well as peripatetic conversations with Oosterlynck. Here, I contend that Baudouin Oosterlynck's artistic oeuvre can be summarised as an obsessive search for his real identity and a focused search for new sensorial perceptions.

From performing artist to performance artist

In the 1970s, Oosterlynck started performing his own compositions mainly for prepared piano. Yet, the stifled ritual of concert and one-way communication from active performer to passive listener could not satisfy his creative urge anymore. In 1978, he created the first of his musical installations linking eye and ear. In doing so, he willy-nilly became one of the pioneers of performance art. Performance art, as opposed to performing arts, defies definition by its very nature. The closest definition is that performance art refers to art brought alive by artists themselves, requiring the active participation of the listener. Oosterlynck reversed the traditional listening approach. Instead of going to dedicated spaces such as concert halls to listen to music performed on stage, visitors came to exhibitions to listen close-up, or with a stethoscope, to music emanating from walls, glass panels, and the like. Passive behaviour of the listener is completely transformed into an active search, giving access to a whole range of acoustic phenomena not normally perceived. For instance, in opus 9, "Histoire sans parole" [1975], the listener is expected to walk from one loudspeaker to another at an even pace whilst these loudspeakers emit single sounds at certain specific times. Hence, the listener will perceive the impression of going towards or walking away from a pitch. It is little wonder that at that time, music presenters shunned Oosterlynck's mode of music production. However, prestigious museums⁷ presented over 177 of his installations or instruments, all to be listened to in an environment of silence or in places where ironically, there is nothing to see. Against the common stream of our society where visual dimension predominates, Oosterlynck resolutely privileges the auditory.

Oosterlynck's reputation was growing and in the 1980s, he was offered to work on sites. He created works of auditory illusion by using the peculiar acoustic properties of existing buildings. I single out the "Flagey" Radio House⁸ in Brussels (Belgium) and the Baptistery of Pisa (Italy) for special mention. He timed and precisely choreographed sounds travelling up and down existing ramps of the huge stairwell of the iconic but at that time dilapidated "Flagey" Radio House. A detailed study of the architecture of the Baptistery of Pisa⁹ reveals a sophisticated knowledge and extraordinary use of acoustics at the time of its construction that started in 1153. This knowledge was apparently lost thereafter. Every floor section of the baptistery corresponds to a different reverberation time according to a systematic grid. Oosterlynck playfully deceives the visitor's aural perception by multiplying infinitely a single sound travelling under the dome of the baptistery. Cupolas and domes fascinate his ears. Opus 64 was prefigured by opus 43 "Musique pour les coupoles italiennes" [1982] and opus 47 "Miniatures in situ" [1979-1983], and developed again in opus 71 "Gloria in Excelsis" [1990], "5 Oratorios du silence" respectively in opuses 83, 84, 85, 100 and 101 [1990-1991] as well as opus 131 "Pour Vassivière" [1999].

Silence, specie on the brink of extinction

In the 1990s, thanks to my brother Raphaël Casteels, I discovered Oosterlynck's work through exhibitions I attended in the Belgian cities of Tienen, Namur and Brussels. Many of his artistic preoccupations intrigued me deeply, particularly the relation between sound and non-sound. Silences in music are as vital as the discovery of figure zero in mathematics. Oosterlynck developed the notion that surrounding silences affect sound production and listening. Just as colour depends on the paper that carries it, sound depends on the silence that carries it. Just as we hear through transparency, we hear through silence. Quote¹⁰: "I became curious about this blank sheet for the inscription of sound". Silences vary with their envelope, that is the surrounding relief, altitude and temperature. Oosterlynck then researched places where qualitative silences are still to be found. True to him without compromise, he traveled 15 000 km on foot, by bike and by train all over Europe to research places that still contained different qualities of beautiful and natural silences. In between each discovery, he rested his ears for 5 to 6 days, so that his ears could again become truly receptive. Instead of music reaching the ear, the ear had to find music through the silence. The ear pressed to the ground reveals the sound-source buried below. At the very moment a silence stripped bare by his ears envelops him, reality becomes stronger than imagination. The ear takes shape. Oosterlynck's selection of 32 places became the "Variations du silence" opus 73 to 104 [1990 – 1991], or 32 variations divided into 23 preludes, 3 overtures, 5 oratorios¹¹ and 1 sonata. This title may contain another hint of gravitas, knowing the artist's sense of humour and the profound effect Beethoven's music made on him¹². To some, Oosterlynck behaves like an elitist aesthete or an illuminated mystic, criticisms which he refutes. To others, he is a true sculptor of silence.

Homo auditus

The series called "Pax Musica" opus 111 to 117 [1993] particularly touches me, because these 8 strange musical instruments have fallen in oblivion and met their most pitiful fate: aphonia. As far back as in opus 105¹³ dating from 1991, Oosterlynck observed that the shape of the human skull collects approaching sound waves and separates them respectively towards the left and right ears. His inventive curiosity questions further¹⁴: "How would we aurally perceive the

world if our ears were placed differently? How would we interact socially with eyes positioned in the front but with ears positioned behind our skull?" For the last ten years, with the "Prothèses acoustiques"¹⁵, and the "Aquaphones", Oosterlynck unveils the direct relation between what is seen and what is heard. The exhibition organised in the frame of "Sound Journey - from architecture to music" presented some drawings with their corresponding listening devices of "Etant Donnés"¹⁶ [2002 – 2004]. Oosterlynck invites people to operate his listening devices. This haptic approach enables visitors to perceive unexpected features of sound and silences. Listening visitors and visiting listeners actively experience the other side of their ear-drums.

Sound Journey

Sound Journey is the title of the pavilion devised by NUS Year 2 Architecture students. This listening pavilion captures and differentiates sounds from NUS Kent Ridge campus on one side and from Clementi Road as far as the Pasir Panjang Distripark on the other side. This concept recurred in several works by Oosterlynck, such as opus 77 "Sonate pour deux instruments du silence" [1990], and the following works dating from 1994 – 1995: opuses 121, 122 and 128 "Prothèse" and opus 130 "Double écoute". For my latest music composition, similarly entitled *Sound Journey*, I drew my reference from his works – opus 72 "À pro-peau", and opuses 180 and 182 "Pavillon d' écoute".

Coda

With hindsight, we are fortunate that traditional ways of music making could not satisfy Oosterlynck. As he expresses it himself¹⁷: "Since nobody was creating the music I imagined, I was forced to create it myself". Concert halls used to shun the creations of Oosterlynck and his fellow performance artists. In recent years, festivals of contemporary music have discovered and incorporated them into their programmes. Yet ironically, ever since his debut in the 1970s, he does catalogue his works with opus numbers as per the norms of traditional music composers. By July 2006, Oosterlynck reached opus number 182 and remains to our benefit a successful performance artist. Besides the title "Etant Donnés", Oosterlynck seems to have a predilection for homonyms and puns. These witty titles do bear a significance in relation to their piece. To select but a few: opus 48 "Acoustico-drome", a neologism based on "acoustics" and the suffix "-drome" (meaning running); opus 72 "À pro-peau", based on homonyms "a propos" (meaning with regard to) and "peau" (meaning skin); and opus 120, a piece with water, because "cent vingt" (a hundred and twenty) sounds exactly the same as "sans vin" (without wine). My favorite pun is the title of opus 110 "la flûte enchantée" which does not necessarily refer to Mozart but to tall hunting champagne glasses.

Oosterlynck's artistic journey remains unpredictable. He stays focused in his search, lucid but impervious to the centrifugal disintegration of Belgium and decay process of Europe. To me, in the noisy over-informed and over-visual scene of contemporary art, Oosterlynck has unremittingly developed a necessary body of works that is playful yet based on solid scientific experimentation and findings, spiritual and uncompromising yet undogmatic, mind-opening yet commonsensical.

The next time I meet Oosterlynck, shall I avert my eyes and turn my ears to his hat?



- ¹ See “L’ Homme au chapeau melon” [1964] by Belgian painter René Magritte.
- ² French painter and performance artist [1935 -].
- ³ Important 20th c. style of painting. To name but a few, Marc Chagall, Douanier Rousseau and Patricia Barton are naïve painters.
- ⁴ See web site <www.baudouinoosterlynck.be>
- ⁵ Amongst others, “25 ans entre l’oeil et l’oreille” Edition Maison de la Culture Province de Namur [2000].
- ⁶ “Singulier Voyage entre l’oeil et l’oreille” André Darteville RTBF-ARTE [2001].
- ⁷ See list in web site <www.baudouinoosterlynck.be>
- ⁸ “Jeux et résonances” opus 37 [1981].
- ⁹ “Pour le Baptistère de Pise” opus 64 [1985].
- ¹⁰ “Paroles scellées” imprimé chez Vlaeminck Louvain [1998].
- ¹¹ Another play on words between the musical form “oratorio” and the religious building “oratory”.
- ¹² Beethoven’s 4th piano concerto, according to “Singulier Voyage entre l’oeil et l’oreille” André Darteville RTBF-ARTE [2001]; Beethoven composed 32 sonatas for piano.
- ¹³ “Leurs têtes, nos oreilles – convexe – concave”.
- ¹⁴ “25 ans entre l’oeil et l’oreille” Edition Maison de la Culture Province de Namur [2000], page 66. Incidentally, Oosterlynck researched the ear trumpets made for Beethoven.
- ¹⁵ Acoustical prostheses opus 128 [1994 – 1995].
- ¹⁶ The title “Etant Donnés” is an untranslatable play on words in French language between the meaning of “given that” in legal documents and an ontological reference to “being” and “given” in plural.
- ¹⁷ “Singulier Voyage entre l’oeil et l’oreille” André Darteville RTBF-ARTE [2001].