

Jacques van Oortmerssen 1950-2015



On November 21st Jacques van Oortmerssen, one of our time's great organists, died unexpectedly from a brain hemorrhage at the age of 65. At the time of his death Jacques was at the height of his powers as a player and teacher. He was still ensconced in his position as professor at the Amsterdam Conservatory, a post won at the young age—especially for The Netherlands—of twenty-nine. Even while fulfilling his teaching and performing duties in Amsterdam and elsewhere, he served as organist of the city's Waalse Kerk. In 1982, he had succeeded another Dutch luminary, Gustav Leonhardt, as master over the church's fabled Christian Müller organ of 1734, one of the most important historic instruments in The Netherlands.

Jacques van Oortmerssen's death comes as a shock to the many, like me, who knew and admired him. Yet the fundamental musical lessons and the legacy of his recordings and performances live on in the immediate aftermath of his premature departure and will endure long after, not just in the organ lofts of the world but far beyond them.

A tremendous and prolific recitalist renowned for his interpretation of the works of J. S. Bach but hardly limited to this central repertory, Jacques died at the same age as the Leipzig master, whose Obituary of 1754 began by lauding the deceased as the "The World-Famous Organist." The same could and should be said of Jacques, even if the words "fame" and "organist" do not now consort so readily with one another as they did in the eighteenth century when the organ still represented the apogee of technological advancement and crowned the European instrumentarium as an unsurpassed musical wonder.

The parallels between Bach and Jacques van Oortmerssen go deeper than the length of their respective lives and the coincidence that Jacques was born in the bicentenary year of Bach's death. 1950 was the first "Bach Year" after the end of World War II, near the start of which Jacques'

native Rotterdam and its organs had been laid waste by German aerial bombardment. Any future history of the great organists might well consider the effect of this rupture on Jacques van Oortmerssen's eventual musical path, one that led him not only towards a thorough-going engagement with his country's rich organ past surviving beyond the devastated city of his birth, but also that may well have nurtured the vigorous modernism, ranging from the unforgivingly brutal to the devastatingly lyrical, to be heard in his small corpus of published compositions and countless improvisations, some captured on record. His talent for spontaneous composition, grounded through arduous practice and erudition, won him prizes at improvisation competitions in The Netherlands and England.

Like Bach, Jacques enjoyed renown for his immaculate technical control over organs of widely different character and qualities: his ability to adapt to instruments thought to be difficult, even intransigent, by most and to bring them to sounding life with apparent ease and profound subtlety, was something fellow organists and his numerous students could only marvel at—and, as far as possible, learn from.

Over the many years of my friendship with Jacques, I had the privilege to accompany him to many historic organs. Among these was that of the Nieuwe Kerk in Amsterdam, an architectural and acoustic masterpiece of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries adorned with tooled and gilded pipes, a classical pediment laden with sculpture and sumptuously painted doors that could be closed on those occasions when its visual and sonic splendors offended the austere Calvinists. The organ's richly appointed console of three manuals and pedals is flanked by Corinthian columns so that seated there, even a lowly human fumbler can be spurred by inklings of heroic resolve. More than simply that is needed, however, even to depress the keys when playing on the full organ with manuals coupled since this requires the relaxed application of weight and robust determination in the mind and fingers. Few have the mental and physical endurance required to make it through a mighty Bach Prelude and Fugue on this instrument with even a modicum of musical conviction.

At this Olympian temple of the organ on that afternoon nearly a quarter century ago, Jacques appeared a musical demi-god, easily up to the Herculean labor of making music on this sublime, unforgiving machine. He demonstrated the peculiarities and potential of the organ with a relaxed energy and unbuttoned humor that was often partially submerged in his more studied concert appearances. After these improvisatory explorations, he played from memory the Bach Toccata in C, BWV 562 (heard here on his 2004 recording made on an organ of similar size and vintage in the Dutch city of Alkmaar <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5odg6ggJOkw>) with a nonchalant majesty that rings in my ears to this day.

A few days later Jacques played a Sunday evening concert in the same church for a large audience of tourists, colleagues, devotees, and students. Along with works by Sweelinck (his celebrated predecessor as "organist maker" in Amsterdam) and Bach, van Oortmerssen played Mendelssohn's C minor Sonata and his own shimmering and propulsive *Fata morgana*, which had recently been published. After the program, Gustav Leonhardt, then organist of the Nieuwe Kerk and a man whose tastes were studiously anti-Romantic, had a collegial word with the recitalist and told him, only half-jokingly, that the new composition was a much better piece than Mendelssohn's. The composer-performer laughed off the remark, but it was plain to me that he also heard the active dose of sincerity in the compliment.

Parallels between Jacques van Oortmerssen and Bach extend to their expertise in organ construction and design. Jacques advised and consulted on many such projects. To watch and listen to him recognize the beauties and diagnose the flaws of organs both old and new was another unforgettable experience. But most importantly it is his legacy as a teacher that ties him to Bach. Just as Bach trained two generations of eighteenth-century organists, so too did Jacques mold hundreds of students from around the world during his thirty-six-year tenure as the head organ professor in Amsterdam, and through a relentless schedule of master classes in Europe and North America.

Now that he's gone, Jacques van Oortmerssen's contributions as a performer can best be judged from his project to record the complete organ works of Bach on historic instruments. Begun in 1995 the undertaking was abandoned in 2007 after nine volumes, not due to lack of commitment on Jacques' part but because of the changing economic landscape of the recording industry. Those discs that were issued can be perused on his website (<http://www.oortmerssen.com/>) along with live videos of a just a few of his innumerable performances. In the unfailing perfection of these recordings can be heard those attributes that made him one of the finest organists of this or any age: supreme technical control always serving the larger goals of expression and communication; painstaking attention to the score as historical and musical document; mastery of detail that made each moment a thing of beauty, even while this level of nuance always served the grand designs of Bach's oratory. In short, Jacques was a musician who was always thinking and feeling. His Bach series, though incomplete, ranks as one of the towering monuments in the history of classical music recordings.

On the website that offers these discs for sale you will be greeted by a photograph of Jacques van Oortmerssen presenting himself as a deep thinker and profound artist: praying hands held to lips; penetrating brown eyes partly obscured by the shadows of his scholarly tortoise-shell glasses; deep lines of study and worry etched on his forehead. He took himself and his art seriously. What the digital technology of websites and even his masterful recordings cannot capture or convey is his love for those he taught and the musical lives he touched.

—David Yearsley