
Henriëtte Bosmans

Dutch composer and pianist

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Book cover of Metzelaar, Helen. *Zonder muziek is het leven onnodig: Henriëtte Bosmans [1895-1952], een biografie*. Zutphen, NL: Walburg Pers, 2002. ISBN: 9057302217.

Henriëtte Bosmans was born in Amsterdam on December 6, 1895. Her father, Henri Bosmans, had been the principal cellist of the Concertgebouw Orchestra, but he died when Bosmans was a few months old. Her mother, Sara Benedicts, taught piano at the Amsterdam Conservatory for 40 years and was a thriving concert pianist. Bosmans studied piano solely with her mother, and at the age of 17 gained a piano teaching certificate cum laude from the Maatschappij tot Bevordering der Toonkunst. By the 1920's she had a solid career as a piano soloist and performed with leading European conductors such as Monteux, Mengelberg and Ansermet. She performed 22 times as a soloist with the Concertgebouw Orchestra between 1929 and 1949 and was also an active member of chamber music ensembles.

Bosmans began composing in her teens and studied harmony and counterpoint with Jan Willem Kersbergen and, later, instrumentation with Cornelis Dopper. She wrote her earliest known compositions, the two sets of *Drie Klavierstukken* (Three piano pieces), in 1914. Her friendships with cellists Marix Loewensohn and Frieda Belinfante inspired her several works for cello, including two concertos and *Poeme* for cello and orchestra. Up until 1927, her music had Romantic influences and was characterized by broad, lyrical lines.

From 1923-1927 she maintained a thriving career as a concert pianist, and this led to long breaks of compositional productivity simply because performing took up all her time. In addition, she felt like she had come to a dead-end as a composer and was unable to free herself from the language of the romantic training of her youth. To develop herself as a composer, she turned towards Willem Pipjer who urged her to concentrate on contemporary problems. Subsequently, her music became more concise and logical, and she started experimenting with polymeters and polytonality in her work. Overall, her work became less romantic and more suggestive of the techniques and atmosphere of Debussy and Ravel.

During these years, Bosmans gained more independence from her mother who was very domineering and businesslike. Bosmans typically spent her earnings with little thought for the future. She never owned a piano, preferring to rent, and her financial state was in disarray. She spent much of her life living with roommates who managed the housekeeping, financial and administrative affairs. She first lived with Frieda Belinfante until Belinfante married the flautist Johan Felkamp. Later in life Magda Swat served as Bosmans' factotum. Out of pure admiration for the composer, Swat arranged thousands of things that Bosmans did not care to be bothered with because she was so busy playing piano and composing.

An important work of this time was the *Concertino voor piano en orkest* (Concertino for piano and orchestra) written in 1928. According to the critic Paul Sanders, the *Concertino* became one of her most successful compositions. This is in part due to the fact that Bosmans, as a formidable pianist, promoted it herself through many successful performances. Another work of note was the *Concertstuk voor fluite en kamerorkest* (Concert piece for flute and chamber orchestra) from 1929 which was dedicated to the flutist that Frieda Belinfante married. In 1932 this piece won the second prize of the major Concertgebouw Prize Competition.

During the years 1933-34, Bosmans often accompanied the violinist Koene, to whom she became engaged in 1934. Koene was a violin prodigy from Batavia, the then capitol of Indonesia, and he had come to Europe in 1910 and played as the concertmaster of orchestras in Utrecht and Dresden. Unfortunately, Koene suffered from a brain tumor and died in January of 1935 shortly after their engagement. He was never able to perform the work which Bosmans wrote for and dedicated to him, the *Concertstuk voor viool en orkest* (Concert piece for violin and orchestra). The work was premiered by Louis Zimmerman in 1935 instead. It received many performances at home and abroad, including the USA.

Koene's death and the impending war were probably the main reasons that Bosmans stopped composing for a long while until after the war. During the war Bosmans refused to become a member of the Kultuurkamer, which was required of all Dutch musicians. Because she was half-jewish, performance of her music was banned in August 1942. However, she continued to earn an income playing in private concerts. Her financial situation was not strong though: she refused to join any music faculty partly because of her Jewish origins and partly because of her strong desire to remain independent.

After the war, Bosmans regained momentum as a composer and concert pianist. She concentrated almost solely on composing vocal songs, the first two on texts of Fedde Schurer which were sung by the Dutch singer Jo Vincent. Other works included the passionate Doodenmars ('March of the Dead') to a text by Clara Eggink, and a more hopeful orchestral song, *Lead, kindly light* (1945), to a poem by Cardinal John Henry Newman.

In the last years of her life Bosmans found inspiration for vocal compositions in the voice of the French singer Noémie Perugia. Because Perugia refused to sing in Dutch, Bosmans arranged most of her work on French texts. The artistic collaboration between the two inspired Bosmans to dedicate eleven of the twenty-five vocal works that she composed between 1948 and 1951. After her mother's death in 1949, Bosmans wrote four songs on texts of Paul Fort. Each of these dealt with the tension between life and death and they were among the songs dedicated to Perugia. Her songs vary quite remarkably in character and are quite expressive. Many are narrative and ballad-like, the music artfully underlining the text. She was quite skilled in setting both French and German poetry, such as *Heine's Das macht den Menschen glücklich*. Though the Bosmans-Perugia duo was quite successful in concerts, the relationship was not without challenges. In addition to living in different cities, they had several personality conflicts.

In 1947 Bosmans joined the Donemus Review Committee for New Music whose purpose was to promote contemporary Dutch music. Through this work, she met associates who stimulated her to write articles for Dutch newspapers and journals. Another motivation for Bosmans' articles was her negative view of music critics. She was appalled that they could review professional musicians without training and proposed a competency exam for reviewers.

Near the end of 1950s Bosmans suffered from intestinal difficulties. Her doctors misdiagnosed her stomach cancer as an ulcer and operated on her. Her health wavered in the following years allowing her only occasional time to compose and perform. On April 30, 1952 Bosmans accompanied Perugia in their final performance together, and then collapsed at the end of the recital. Bosmans died on July 2, 1952 at 56 years of age. She received a posthumous knighthood.

Some characteristics of Bosmans composition remain constant throughout her life and her varying compositional styles. In instrumental works with several movements, she often weaves thematic material from the first movement into the last movement. She was fond of using alternating meters to create a sense of rhythmical excitement. She was interested in tone color and thus utilized the very upper and lower registers of the piano. Her vocal works often evoke the mood of the text. For the most part her music is very tonal and melodic, flowing from a source deep inside her.

The Dutch continue to honor Henriëtte Bosmans through the Henriëtte Bosmans Prize. The prize is an encouragement prize for young Dutch composers consisting of money and a performance, and has been awarded since 1994 by the Society of Dutch Composers each year.

Bibliography

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