HARRY SPARNAAY
1944-2017

Paying tribute to the master bass clarinettist
Harry Sparnaay, godfather of the bass clarinet, passed away on 12 December 2017. His playing and teaching are firmly established in the history books, and his pioneering development of the contemporary bass clarinet has created an international family of fellow bass clarinettists. He is already greatly missed by this community of artists, who pay tribute to him here.

For many of us he was father-like and always helpful, with so many ideas and so much enthusiasm.
I think he said yes to everything, and
assumed he’d figure out a way to do it,
or a convincing way to fake it

Oğuz Büyükerber
(Netherlands/Turkey)

I moved to a new country in the midst
of my career at the age of 30 to study
with Harry after hearing him play a solo
recital in Ostend. The things I learned
from him go way beyond just the bass
clarinet. He keeps being a true inspiration
and a reminder for me when I feel lost or
dishheartened.

At our first meeting, I asked Harry what
he thought about my visual impairment in
relation to the conservatory curriculum.
He replied without skipping a beat:
‘That’s my problem to solve. I need to
learn something with this as well, no?’
Curiosity coupled with pure clarity – as in
this incident – best summarises the many
amazing qualities he had.

Among countless things, he taught me:

- Never to have only one repertoire
  prepared for a concert. What if the
  pianist doesn’t show up, or the sound
  system doesn’t work?

- To think deeply and very analytically
  about every aspect of performing:
  producing a sound, standing, being
  spontaneous and creative towards
  unexpected problems... And he also
  said: ‘When a musician starts to think
  when performing, that’s wrong.’

- To do what I believe is the right thing
to do, and be patient. He said, ‘Even if
what you believe you need to be doing
doesn’t seem to exist yet, you have to
make it. Then it will exist.’

I don’t think I can really describe the
deep sadness I feel at this great loss.

He said, ‘Even if
what you believe
you need to be
doing doesn’t
seem to exist yet,
you have to make
it. Then it will exist’
Lori Freedman (Canada)

Harry was by far the most significant figure in my formative musical training because of who he was as a musician. I believe that the reason I came to have this 'singular' performance voice in both written and improvised music, so consistently mentioned by journalists and peers alike, is in part because of time shared with Harry.

Seemingly unintentionally and certainly unbeknownst to me at the time, Harry showed me ways to give myself permission. Aside from diligence — work and play became the same thing to me — and responsibility to the composer, without ever using these words he challenged me to explore all interpretive possibilities imaginable. Like this we worked together on new repertoire that had been written for him around that time — Xenakis, Berio, Donatoni, Ferneyhough, Yun, Ambrosini — all works that he himself was in the process of learning and rethinking. In terms of inspiration and courage to learn and to reinvent at every possible moment — a rather humbling existence — an artist such as Harry continues to give it 'in spades' for me!

Paul Roe (Ireland)

The passing of Harry has left a void in the bass clarinet world and beyond. His was a life lived with passion, curiosity, exploration, love and joy. Harry had a huge and generous heart and was such a people person. Meeting him was always fun and uplifting, and he literally embodied 'joie de vivre'.

I had the good fortune to play with Harry on many occasions both in duos and also as part of Concorde ensemble. He was a kind and loyal friend who was so generous with his time. On many occasions he responded to arcane queries I made, queries that he alone could answer, relating to contemporary music and the bass clarinet. I continue to be inspired by him, feel his presence and indeed hear his voice and laughter as he shares yet another one of his favourite anecdotes which I never tired of hearing.

Quoting Harry himself from his book gives an idea of his wonderful spirit: 'I am thrilled to have such wonderful friends and I would like to hug them, kiss them on both cheeks and say: thanks ever so much, you mean so much to me.'

Thanks, Harry — you illuminated the world and it was a joy to know you.

Michael Lowenstein (USA)

Harry was the most open, transparent, honest mentor I have ever had. This cut both ways of course — I never needed to worry where I stood in his esteem, good, bad or indifferent. He never pandered. He never gave false praise. If he thought I could figure something out, he wouldn't give me the answer — he'd just look out the window while I struggled. If he thought I needed a boost, he'd cut my lesson short and we'd go for a coffee and talk. So, while I carry his spirit of entrepreneurship inside me — of creating something that doesn't exist, and challenging the world to see and hear it — I believe that it's his honesty and realness that changed my life. Harry, thank you.

Fie Schouten (Netherlands)

Harry was such an important coach for me. For many of us he was father-like and always helpful, with so many ideas and so much enthusiasm. And I felt a lot of freedom learning with him, as long as I took his lessons seriously by preparing (otherwise it was 'coffee').

I knew a lot of colleagues (non-bass clarinettists) who got infected with the fascination for new and contemporary music after working with Harry. So many people enjoyed the projects at the Amsterdam Conservatory Ensemble Hedendaagse Muziek (ensemble for contemporary music). We even went to Cagliari, Italy with him and 15 students, and Harry was insistent that we did not check our sheet music into the hold. It was before the time that everybody had PDFs, and he absolutely did not want to arrive without the music.

And one of the lessons: 'If your trio-mate is playing funny notes, it could be that his page 6 stayed in the dressing room. Keep smiling and playing until everything gets back to normal.'

I studied for six years with him. For two years I did bass clarinet as a secondary subject and for four years as a main subject and with two great final concerts. What Harry was good at: he listened to his students and let everybody develop their own voice and choice in which direction they wanted to go. Of course, there was some basic stuff: I had to practise the two Uhl clarinet etude books on bass clarinet, and when I finally reached the last page, he said: now once more and then two etudes a week. He said it with a laugh, but it wasn't a joke!

From 2012 and on I played a few times with Harry as a colleague and with a lot of other former students. What a joy, and how proud he was of all of us! He had many fun stories and we laughed to the point of tears. His daughters Manon and Myrthe told me that they also experienced this with their father, making jokes and laughing into tears. The last time I saw Harry and his wife Silvia was in the summer of 2016, my children swimming with Harry and Silvia's three dogs.

Thank you Harry for your enthusiasm, knowledge and bringing together such a great crowd of people. In your class I found my husband and many great friends.
One thing we can promise him is that the bass clarinet is established, and we all are continuing to research and develop it.

**Petra Stump (Austria)**

After I finished my studies with Harry in 1999, we kept in touch. He gave me good advice, consolation when I lost hope to succeed as a musician, constructive criticism about my projects and recordings, and he was one of the people who encouraged me to go on composing. His good spirits always made me look towards the future with a smile and a kind of cheerfulness.

The last time we worked and played together was in 2013 when he visited Austria for a masterclass. He was already a little tired because of health problems but when he started teaching or playing his energy set a fire on everybody. Within a few minutes all the students fell in love with Harry, and soon the running gag ‘We don’t need Spohr’ was established! Because of him we will keep working for the presence of the bass clarinet as a solo instrument with its own repertoire.

It hurts to lose you Harry, but it was an enrichment to have known you!

**Stephan Vermeersch (Belgium)**

The word ‘impossible’ did not exist for Harry; he always found solutions or ways to fake it as well as possible. His perseverance and stubbornness to reach the goal are legendary, and always with a smile. Many of the world’s bass clarinet players today have had the same nice contacts with Harry: inspiring, a musical father and a magnificent friend. What you saw and heard was what you got: no nonsense or frills, and that is so refreshing in the music world of today.

For sure I was musically shaped and inspired in many ways by Harry. I remember very well when we met for the first time: I played some contemporary pieces including some of my own pieces at an international festival in Spain, and Harry was sitting at the front row. But he not make me nervous at all – on the contrary, I relaxed. After my concert he stood up and gave me a big hug, and we became soulmates. For me it was one of highlights of my life.

**Sarah Watts (UK)**

I didn’t study with Harry, but he was always an inspiration. I really got to know him during my PhD research into multiphonics. Harry was always there to offer advice and support. His acceptance and positive comments for my book meant the world to me. The social times when Harry was at festivals with bass clarinet colleagues were joy and laughter. Harry was passionate about the bass clarinet, but also passionate about life. He was full of fun, jokes and always spoke his mind.

I’ve heard many colleagues who have established careers call him a mentor. It’s true – we never stopped seeking his advice and he never stopped helping us. His passing has left a huge hole, and his fear was that the work he had done would not continue. But one thing we can promise him is that the bass clarinet is established, and we all are continuing to research and develop it. Many young students are still specialising in bass clarinet. Thank you Harry – we wouldn’t be doing this without you.