

Itamar

REVISTA DE INVESTIGACIÓN MUSICAL: TERRITORIOS PARA EL ARTE



AÑO 2020

6

 Facultat de Filosofia i Ciències de l'Educació



VNIVERSITAT
DE VALÈNCIA

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Territorios para la Conversación

Discover your 'Inner Cello' An Interview with Stijn Kuppens

Hein Vanhee¹



Portrait of Stijn Kuppens² - credits Joris Pollers

Stijn Kuppens composes revolutionary, contemporary instrumental music with a central place for the cello. He intends to reach a broad, international public, which calls for a modern approach to his roles as producer, cellist and composer. After a brief introduction to describe the position of Stijn in the musical landscape, this interview provides a general discussion of his musical realisations, followed by his views on the benefits and dangers of music notation, his inspiration, his composition style, his use of new cello techniques, and his new composition technique of modular composing. After this, Stijn shares his views on live performance today and the importance of the concert setting for performer and public. By way of a conclusion, Stijn shares his guidelines for discovering your own 'Inner Cello.'

¹ Hein Vanhee is a Belgium based art historian and museum professional, with a particular interest in independent underground music.

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² Stijn Kuppens is a Belgium based independent composer, cellist and producer, and a passionate cello teacher.

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H.V. Thank you for having accepted this interview. Could you start by briefly introducing yourself to our readers?

S.K. My full artist name is Stijn Kuppens AKA Roger Lee K. The extension 'AKA Roger Lee K', my alter ego, is a symbol for total creative liberty. I am a Belgium based independent composer-cellist-producer, bringing my contemporary, self-composed music, in which the cello has a prominent role, to the public through recordings and performances. My goal is to reach, inspire and bring musical joy to the public, with passion and authenticity. My project is small-scale, but explicitly international, set in the 21st century, and beyond genre. It cannot be defined geographically. Despite the fact that my music is composed and not improvised, I feel that I belong to the non-classical family of musicians.

With my music, I want to reach a broad audience. My music is accessible, but refined and original at the same time: I integrate recognisable elements from popular music styles, as well as complex artistic elements from classical music. I show new instrumental and musical possibilities of the cello, sometimes virtuosic, but without losing the accessibility of my music. This richness of techniques brings a continuous variety. My music is accessible from the first listening experience, but is meant to be listened to multiple times. The multi-layer aspect, both compositional as content-wise, is not necessarily explicitly shared with the public, but it creates depth, also while performing.

H.V. Since early 2019 you have released on international streaming platforms a number of carefully recorded pieces of music. Can you tell us about how you work?

S.K. Since I consider recordings, audio or video, as important as live performances, I am spending a considerably amount of time producing them. They are final products, not a recorded version of a live performance, nor just a tool to promote myself as a performing artist. Some recordings are possible to reproduce during a live performance, others not. The final result of every recording goes through a severe production process, during which I make no compromise. Recordings are only released when they have arrived at the final stage in which I feel that my music can communicate completely. Once released in the world, they will live a life of their own.

As a producer, I am constantly working on new releases. My ideal rhythm nowadays is to release new material every 6 weeks, audio or video, short or long. The first release was a piece for cello and piano in February 2019. I don't think any more in terms of albums, CDs, or concert formats. The online music business has changed the world, and the music world needs to adapt. This, of course, does not mean that one has to abandon the past completely. Having a CD or a vinyl still has great value.

Digital audio releases since February 2019

- Peace for Twins (12 min, cello & piano, digital release February 2019)
- Inner Cello (45 min, cello solo, digital release June 2019)

- Pas de deux (8 min, cello solo, digital release August 2019)
- Lines (4 min, cello solo, digital release September 2019)
- Montagnes (5 min, cello solo, digital release November 2019)
- Wild Things come and go (8 min, cello solo, digital release December 2019)
- The Heidelberg Variations (6 min, cello solo, digital release January 2020)
- The Angel of 1985 (Dialogue with violin) (6 min, violin & cello, digital release March 2020)

Until today I have been working completely independently, managing everything myself, and teaming up with top specialists in different fields: a sound engineer, musical partners for recordings, a graphic designer, a marketing advisor, a social media specialist, a copywriter. The 21st century allows independent artists to create their own path through the musical field, reaching a public through recordings and performances.

H.V. Can you tell us a bit about that remarkably long piece titled ‘Inner Cello’?

S.K. In June 2019, I released ‘Inner Cello’, a composition of 45 minutes, composed of nine interconnected parts, which were composed separately, but which fit together perfectly as a puzzle to form a whole. With this first solo project I wanted to make a personal and unique contribution to contemporary music. The name ‘Inner Cello’ refers to the exteriorisation of my inner music, of the music that comes from inside myself, from an authentic source of inspiration. It also refers to a rediscovery of the cello, for which I develop new playing techniques, and which I use to make compositions that grow organically towards well balanced music. The silences in ‘Inner Cello’ are fundamentally part of the music. The listening experience is identical to the length of the piece. Despite the wide variety of styles, atmospheres and techniques, ‘Inner Cello’ is coherent and melted down to one artistic work. The single version of ‘Inner Cello’ has been chosen by Spotify to feature in the Editorial Playlist ‘Classical New Releases’ in June 2019, despite its unusual length of 45 minutes.

What is remarkable is that the different components of ‘Inner Cello’ can exist as independent compositions. They have a different meaning when they stand alone than when they are an integral part of ‘Inner Cello’, where they are influenced by the music that precedes or follows. I like to compare this to a painting that consists of different panels. Those panels can stand alone, but by bringing them together in a certain configuration they become a new entity, which has an extra dimension and gets a new meaning. Since the listening experience of ‘Inner Cello’ as a whole is different from listening to the parts individually, I decided to release them also separately. This is not a common practise, since the parts inside ‘Inner Cello’ are almost identical to their single releases.



Release tile of 'Inner Cello' - credits Joris Pollers

H.V. Is that a composition format you are applying also in new upcoming work?

S.K. There is a second cello solo project under construction, called 'Cello Souls', again consisting of a series of interconnected compositions for cello solo which will be presented to the public separately and as a whole. I am again using new self-developed playing techniques, there is the multi-layer aspect, and I make use of a big variety of style elements from different musical genres. 'Cello Souls' is, like 'Inner Cello', recorded entirely acoustic, without the use of overdubs, loops or effect pedals. In 2020 different parts of 'Cello Souls' will be released, beginning with 'The Heidelberg Variations' (released in January 2020).

In 'Dialogues', my third project, I make my music dialogue with other instruments, mostly using my self-developed composition technique which I call 'modular composing'. The first single of this project, called 'The Angel of 1985 (Dialogue with violin)', was released in March 2020. This release has been highly appreciated, featuring in Spotify's playlist 'Classical New Releases' in March 2020. There are at least three new releases planned in 2020, of which one more with violin, and two with oboe.

H.V. Let's talk about the composition process. How do you develop the musical ideas? Do you make provisional recordings, or do you use pen and paper?

S.K. My most important tool to remember a musical idea, make it possible to overlook, and to build a composition and finalize it, is music notation, whether it is on paper or on the computer. I rarely use audio or video during the composition process. From the moment that I have a new musical or instrumental idea, I try to write it down as detailed as possible in order to not lose the ‘finesse’ of it.

Each composition goes through many stages, sometimes more than 50, before I present it to the public. I keep on refining, changing, adding until nothing more asks for change. From that point on, the composition will live its own life through recordings and performances. Once a piece is finished, I learn it by heart as soon as possible, and internalise it in my memory and in my body. The score will have a practical use during recordings and will then be archived. I don't use scores any more during live performances. In my feeling scores are forming a wall between the musician and the public, not only because of their physical presence, but also because of the visual concentration of the artist on them. I have always used detailed music notation, including in my own compositions, but when I play my music I leave the scores behind. Working in this manner, I have come to the understanding that the soul, the deeper meaning of the music, does not lay in the scores. I can only communicate this essence through recordings and performances. Music notation is for me a practical and essential part of the composing process, but not of the performance.

Since I am myself developing new playing techniques and looking for new sounds and sound effects, I need to invent sporadically new ways of notation, sometimes inspired on the notations used in contemporary classical music.

H.V. By using music notation, it seems that you both align yourself with classical ways of composing while simultaneously taking distance from that as a performer of your own compositions?

S.K. Despite the importance of music notation in my composition process, I see possible dangers as a consequence of the use of scores. Our music notation system is per definition an extreme simplification of generally a much more subtle musical idea. Try to write down exactly a musical phrase played by any professional musician, and you will notice the limits of the notation system, as for parameters of tone colour, accurate musical timing, breathing, accentuation, phrasing, rhythmical interpretation, and so on. We are so used to this that we don't even see the huge discrepancy between what is on the paper and how it is translated into sound.

Within the sector of classical music, where music notation has a very important place – in contrast with most other musical styles – we are confronted with a vast majority of performers who never write down musical ideas, and thus are not confronted with the limits of the notation system. There is also a vast majority of composers who are not performers. Music notation, more and more applied through music notation software and its integrated playback function,

influences the expectations of composers and performers when transforming a score into music.

In new compositions we must avoid unnatural standardization, rhythmical quantizing and perfection, and keep finesse, nature, subtle nuance, irregularity, instability, imperfection and friction.



Excerpt of composition for cello solo 'Industrial Groove' by Stijn Kuppens - illustration of music notation

H.V. What is the starting point for a new composition?

S.K. Total artistic freedom, starting from nothing but yourself. The first motivation for a new composition can come from an unstoppable urge caused by an event, inspired by a person or a situation or because of an instrumental discovery.

There is often a worldly, concrete layer, linked with a wider social, philosophical or spiritual idea. Sometimes the title becomes clear in an early stage, and stays prominently present as a centre thought during the composing process.

Early in the process there are the basic musical motives of the composition, or a groove, a riff, a melody, a chord sequence, a musical effect or an inspiring rhythm. During the process I insert also earlier instrumental findings, mostly appearing through improvisation, natural movement or caused by an instrumental inspiration while playing on a certain cello.

When I write for other instruments I use the piano to compose. Musical imagination has then an important role. The sound of an instrument, as well as a specific musician for who I am writing, are also important sources of inspiration.

H.V. To what extent do you feel that you have developed your own style?

S.K. The most important characteristics of my compositions are in my opinion the fact that they are authentically artistic, that they were conceived from the heart and soul, and that they are accessible to a broad public. My music style integrates many musical worlds, and finds connection with modern,

contemporary styles, and cannot be easily defined geographically. Despite the fact that my music is not classical music, one can recognize elements of it in the musical structure or composition techniques. The musical form can be very easy to extremely complex. My style is influenced by travels through Europe, Asia, Northern and Southern America, and by the past, the present and the future.

Despite my immense respect for classical music, as well as for composers and performers, I feel that I belong to another world, for creation and performance. I describe my style as non-classical influenced by many genres and with a background of classical music.

Concerning my repertoire for cello solo, I like to integrate new playing techniques. There is definitely common ground with contemporary classical music, but my music does not belong to this genre.

H.V. While you play the piano as well, the cello seems to take centre stage in your developing career as a composer and performing artist. What's the magic of the cello?

S.K. In my composing activities I approach the cello as a universal instrument, with which I can express any possible musical aspect in terms of sound, rhythm, tone height, chords and counterpoint. Often I keep searching until I manage to express with the cello characteristics of totally different instruments, like percussion, wind instruments or chord instruments. I also simulate electronic effects acoustically.

By deepening my knowledge of the cello I am reaching and sometimes extending the boundaries of technical and musical possibilities, in bow technique as well as left hand technique. I combine uncommon left hand and right hand techniques and I discover new and special sounds or techniques, which I integrate artistically and musically in my compositions.

I approach the cello also from the point of view of natural, intuitive choreographies of playing movements, which can cause musical gestures or motives.

Finally, I also challenge myself to musically translate the impossible on the cello. This can be by imitating a playing technique of a totally different musical instrument, like a wind instrument, or in the expression of an abstract thought. The fascinating journey to find a way to translate this on the cello can have surprising results.

H.V. How does it work when other instruments step in to play with the cello?

S.K. In my project 'Dialogues' I have my music dialoguing with other instruments. I call this composition process 'modular composing', in which I build a new composition on top of an existing composition. I use the existing cello solo tracks, sometimes with minimal adaptations, and I compose for a second instrument on top. The meaning of the original cello voice changes

because of this dialogue, with as a result a new composition. Especially the realisation that both versions, solo and dialogue, can coexist, without competition, is very special, and a new experience for me. I applied the modular composing process on four pieces until now, of which two with violin and two with oboe. The musical experience and result were in all four cases equally strong for me, for the featuring artist and for the recording engineer.

I had the unconventional idea of not recording the dialogues with both instruments at the same time, but to use the existing cello solo recording, and recording the dialogue voice(s) in overdub. This was a huge challenge because of the high level of chamber music skills required to make this work. The result had to be perfect chamber music, with totally natural playing and phrasing of the two dialoguing instruments. But the starting point was the cello solo recording which was not recorded with the purpose of using it to overdub. I contracted a sound engineer who made manually a click track for the cello solo recordings, which was momentarily used by the featuring artist to help during the overdub. The music notation of the dialogue voices was musically very simplified in comparison to the reality, so I prepared everything until the slightest detail with the featuring artists until we reached the point that every note made sense. The overdub recording method gave a top result in every point of view.



Release tile of 'The Angel of 1985 (Dialogue with violin)' - credits Joris Pollers)

H.V. Can those intricate recordings be reproduced during live performances?

S.K. Most of the recordings actually can. All releases with cello solo have been performed live several times. The 'Dialogues' with cello and violin have been played live exactly as they were recorded. The versions with oboe, which have not yet been released, have not been played live so far. One can be played live just like recorded, the other one cannot.

Despite the fact that the cello is still very much associated with the classical scene, and given the fact that my music requires good acoustics and a silent public, I don't feel attracted to perform my music in the typical classical concert hall. The public that I am trying to reach does not require a classical background or interest, and is therefore not used to the atmosphere of a classical concert. A live performance of 'Inner Cello' requires a condition where I as well as my public feels comfortable and inspired.

The listening experience of a live performance of 'Inner Cello' is like a walk through the nature: you're walking, you look around, have a stop, but the walk is never finishing, you cannot be outside the walk. Your thoughts wander off, your attention is suddenly drawn by what you see, what you hear; you discover visually and auditory new details. From the first note, the performer goes into dialogue with the public as a whole, but also with every individual listener. The notion of time goes away, the listener accesses the parallel world of 'Inner Cello' and his or her thoughts go freely their own way, in dialogue with the music.

H.V. What are your favourite locations to play in front of an audience?

S.K. I find unusual concert locations particularly inspiring. The right atmosphere is for me as a performer essential to be able to give myself 100% to the music. The positioning of myself and the public and an adapted lighting are crucial to achieve this. I consciously try to avoid the classical concert feeling and to aim for a more modern setting. If the natural acoustics cannot guarantee a good listening experience, I sometimes use a trustworthy sound amplification system.

In ideal circumstances everybody should feel at home and at ease, to be able to relax mentally and physically, to let the music come to you. Then I can feel as a performer one with the public, even part of the public.

For the listener, attending a live performance is much more than going to a place to listen to your favourite music. It's also a visual experience, sometimes related to your appreciation for the concert place. And it's a social event, a meeting place with listeners with a common interest, or with acquaintances or friends. The atmosphere is therefore very important to influence the listening experience positively. Listening comfort is influenced by the seats, by nice, adapted or inspiring lighting, an attractive location, tasteful decoration.

Nowadays the public has access to high quality recordings and high-end speakers or headphones. The musical and sound expectations are therefore very high. Close up concerts are highly appreciated since you can experience the music even in a better and closer way than through the best recording. High quality amplification can be necessary in bigger halls, to have the music reach the listener.

H.V. How can readers discover their own 'Inner Cello'?

S.K. The starting point of your path lies inside yourself. Sharing my path with you can be at the most an inspiration. I would like to invite readers to listen to my music and to connect indeed with their own 'Inner Cello'. The guidelines I would hand out are these:

1. make your own guidelines!
2. work hard to become... yourself!
3. very simple ideas are ok, very complex ideas also
4. don't look for what's new in the world, it's ok if it's new for you
5. the starting point of your path lies inside yourself
6. look for inspiration in the world around you

H.V. Thank you very much, Stijn, for this conversation.

S.K. You are very welcome!