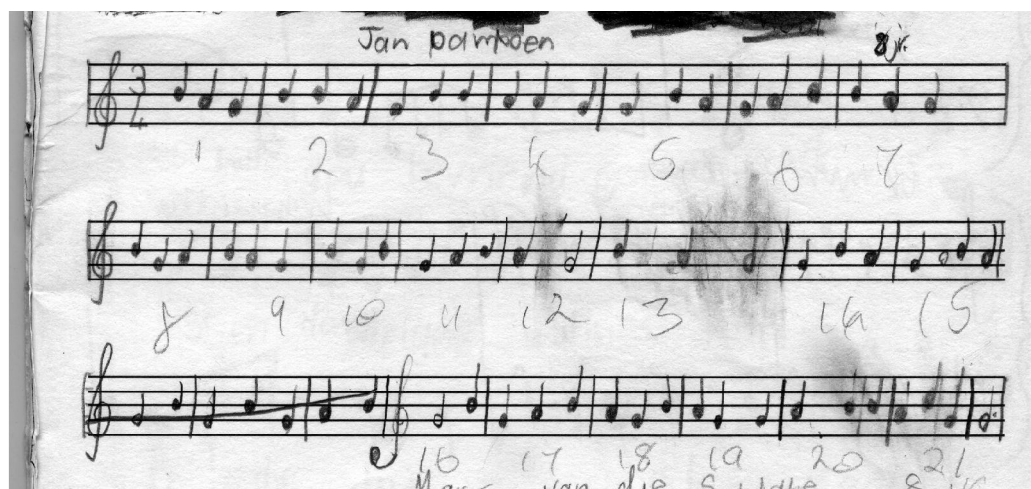


Variation 2 – Potchefstroom

“Thank you! It was quite something to look through your first booklet of compositions together with you, seeing them in your own handwriting. I want us to page again to the one called ‘John Pumpkin’, the one with three pitches. It’s not the



first one that you notated, but I suspect this is the piece that Jaco Meyer¹ refers to when he writes that you started your career as composer when you notated your musical ideas after your third recorder lesson. I remember that you told me last week that your recorder teacher worked on only one note per lesson, and that this turned out to be quite stimulating. You said that by the third week of progressing at a snail’s pace, a question appeared in your mind: what patterns can one make with these three notes? So, you consider this as your first composition, in spite of there being earlier works notated in the book, right?”

[...]

“Ah! So, you think of it as a composition, because it started from this more general idea, rather than from a specific sound pattern, and then it was created through notation, and in ways similar to how one solves a puzzle, and *without* shaping and reshaping it through repeated try-outs with an instrument or through singing. And so it makes me think that some of the earlier works can each be thought of as a repeated improvisation that was written down, right?”

[...]

“Let’s go for a walk by the river, and use our steps to trace a path from your experiences with improvisation.”

[...]

Ha! Yes, indeed – paths are made by walking regularly! *Even when one doesn’t quite know where one is supposed to go*, you would have added if I didn’t. Hey! I’ve just now had a spark of insight: that creating paths is a sensorimotor activity involving the whole self.

¹ Meyer, J. 2021/2022. *Interview: Re/creating (in) a World of Uncertainty: Memories, Music, and Movement*. In: SAMUS 41/42 (page 11). recorded version at www.jacomeyer.com/resources/composer-interview-series/4-hannestaljaard

[...]

“So, let’s start at the very beginning... I know that reading music notation, as well as singing, playing by ear on the piano and the recorder had been part of your life for a year or two by the time you started recorder lessons. But improvising started even earlier, right? I have listened a few times to the part of your interview² with Jaco Meyer where you talk about how improvising and playing music were stimulated from your earliest years in the conducive social constellation of the family. Uhm... I believe I’m realistic when I imagine that your learning improvisation was not a formal process, and that it was not shaped from the outside. ”

[...]

Ah, so it stayed that way until you relocated to Vienna. That I did not know! And this would be in stark contrast to your learning musical instruments, music theory and composition. But, wait... I know that learning to compose was also to a large extent self-directed... I’ve heard you refer to yourself as mostly an autodidact when it comes to your skills as composer. So, we’ll have to talk tomorrow about different learning processes. But for now, the different outcomes are easy to guess... developed skills as composer, also in terms of analytic out-of-time listening skills... clear, strong attitudes regarding the importance of your role as composer... the development of the different systems that you laboriously designed and then used for composing works as diverse as *Four Essays for String Quartet* and *Let the Games begin* and *Riturnelli*... But certainly these systems featured in your activities as improviser? I know that you did not stop improvising.”

[...]

“O.K. So improvisation happened during teaching, when you were working as organist in churches, or – I remember this now! – as a ‘party trick’ when you improvised as a way to give your impression about people whom you did not know. These are clearly social contexts, right?”

[...]

“Thanks for returning my thoughts to the developing of systems. I get it... you were improvising in the familiar common practice tonality. But I think my point of these being clearly social contexts stands firm. I’m just wondering why these social contexts did not exert a stronger influence on you to keep learning improvisation. Somebody once told me that he overheard you and Conrad’s sister, if I remember correctly, improvising together on the grand piano in the hall when you were in high school, and that he was impressed. Why didn’t your identity as improviser and the related skills play a bigger part in your activities as musician?”

[...]

² Meyer 2021/2022, (page 23-24)

“Indeed, time constraints and the uncertainty that comes when one doesn’t know if you can be successful the next time you improvise. And yes, school was a nightmare for many of us...As an improviser myself, I certainly know that uncertainty, and I know the amount of hours it takes to learn to improvise at a high level. Easy to see that the sensorimotor learning necessary for improvisation will not happen if one does not put in the hours! But fine... I understand that it was not needed and thus not important in your development or in your career, and that the learning that did take place, happened ‘on the side-lines’ so to speak. Being able to do something reasonably well, often stands in the way of doing it really well, or? Uhm... But your studies there in Vienna did start with a success in *Haus der Geschichte* with the beautiful quartet improvisation. I know, I was there! It was piano, flute, recorder and cello, right? In German we will say “stimmig”, and I have a few more good words with which I can describe it. And I know from looking at your notes and reflections that the attempts to develop tone systems for improvising was something that has been keeping you going on your improvising path until now. To be honest, to me it all seems rather complicated now! Have you managed to make any sense at all of this?

[...]

“That’s a nice, happy smile! So, I would like us to talk tomorrow about how you understand at this stage the listening skills that one needs to develop for composition and those for improvisation. Are they really that different as you suggested yesterday? Can one really develop some skills and not others? Would they not just all develop simultaneously and naturally? Should one even focus on listening skills during improvisation lessons? I have many questions about this!

[...]

“Yea, of course, the majority of skills overlap, as you say. And yes, it’s naïve to think that all listening skills will always just develop naturally. Silly. What would that even be, naturally developing? But you once said that you struggle to improvise, because you often slip into composer’s listening. What’s that? Yea, yea... that’s what we will talk about tomorrow when we have time for a longer conversation.”