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## A Fringe Violin Festival in Utrecht: Reporting from the 27th Netherlands Violin Competition

FEBRUARY 19, 2020

By Laurence Vittes

During the last week of the 27th Netherlands Violin Competition last month, four young Dutch virtuosos curated four concerts in and around Utrecht that were a virtual fringe festival for the violin.

The concerts came while the finalists for the competition's two senior age divisions—Davina van Wely for 14-17 year olds, and Oskar Back for 18-26 year olds—were preparing for their concerto performances Saturday at the TivoliVredenburg in the heart of the city's vibrant downtown center.

There are tremendous virtues to being a national competition. For the large enthusiastic audiences, it was about their love of music bonding with their love for Dutch musicians. Every young hopeful on the stage was a hometown hero. It was inspiring and it was real. The curated concerts showed what happens when hometown heroes open up the Dutch stage to include the world.

The music at the curated concerts came from classical and non-classical genres. The performers were renegades, superstars, and cool session pros. The three concerts featuring non-competition content took place in conventional settings, with a stage and seats. The one program with conventional repertoire took place in a performance space like a 1950s beatnik pad with everyone sitting on the floor.

*It raised new fantasies about future competitions. It was a fringe festival for the violin.*

These empowering concerts unleashed the violin and showed the world just how wide the musical dimensions within the Netherlands are, and how profoundly global as well. On a purely musical level for classical music listeners accustomed to knowing the score in advance, it was a lot about having the chance to listen without knowing. It raised new fantasies about future competitions. It was a fringe festival for the violin.

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The first night it was Diamanda La Berge Dramm playing music from Purcell to Cindy Walker; she played solo and variously in increasingly fluid configurations with four participants in the Competition's Davina van Wely section and ten young non-career path violinists from a local school program. Dressed in minimalist black and barefoot, Dramm moved around the equity theatre-like stage like a wizard, she summoned players to join here in entire sections or just parts. The musical results were enchanting, like Britten's putting a children's orchestra in his Noye's Fludde. It was the way outreach programs in the schools ought to be, interactive and spontaneous. It was the way the best classical music concerts are: total musical theater.



Diamanda Dramm and friends. Photo by Foppe Schut.

Dramm herself had been inspired growing up, like many young Dutch musicians, by both new and early music, and it was reflected in the music she and her band infectiously mingled and cut apart and played in bits and snatches: Biber's famous Prelude, Dido's Lament, four of Bartók's 44 Duos, Berio's Duetti, Walker's Dusty Skies, Garth Knox's Violin Spaces, and Dramm's own Beastings. It was like a Partridge family of violinists.

On Wednesday night it was the turn of Emmy Storms, Oskar Back prize winner in 2009 and 2011, who presented an intoxicating mix of Indian and Western music. There was Enescu and Falla, a dazzling capriccio for solo violin by Simeon ten Holt, a love song by Heiko Dijker, a classical Indian raga, and two magnificent set pieces for violin, Indian violin, piano, and tabla drums by Jacob ter Veldhuis (AKA JacobTV).

The concert was being created in some stream of consciousness process that could never be entirely complete, but led your mind on as it led your ear. JacobTV told me afterwards that he and the musicians had "such great vibes rehearsing" that they are planning to collaborate more in the near future. "Perhaps already this summer," he said, "a new violin-piano-tabla piece may see the light."

On Thursday night, in an unlikely performance space on an overcast night, Niek Baar and Ben Kim played sonatas by Schumann (No. 2) and Beethoven (Op. 24) for a young, musically curious crowd of roughly 50 most of whom sat on the floor in a scene out of Greenwich Village in the 60s, with a sprinkling of Dutch Holly Golightlys.

Baar's passionate take on Schumann's painfully conflicted D minor universe sounded particularly raw in the dry acoustics of the pop-up performance space called the Shed. Playing on a Strad he had borrowed just that day in Amsterdam, and partnered by a powerful, eloquent Kim on a far less brilliant piano, Baar took us with him into the music's soul and then brought us out again. Baar raised his game whenever Schumann raised the temperature, his pizzicatos were vulnerable, he swept the frailty of the violin aside in his intense outpouring of song. Together they brought a dead space alive. It was harrowing the way only chamber music can be.

Undeterred by the winter outside, Baar and Kim followed with Beethoven's Spring Sonata, Baar especially sensitive to the gentler, feline moments, and Kim rolling out torrents of gorgeous sound. For an encore they played a bit of the slow movement from Mozart's Piano Concerto K.488, launching Kim's new CD.



Yannick Hiwat Quintet with Shauntell Baumgard. Photo by Foppe Schut.

On Friday night, back in the suburbs one last time, it was multi-genre violinist/composer Yannick Hiwat and his Quintet that lit up the night, featuring a young violinist named Shauntell Baumgard with a rare communicative voice who is working with the Competition on a unique collaborative project called Urban Arts Talent. It was an ideal way to clean out ears for the Mozart, Ravel, and Saint-Saëns on the menu for Saturday night.



## Violinist Viktoria Mullova on Her New Arvo Pärt Album & Pascal Dusapin's New 'Violincello' Concerto

By Laurence Vittes Like her playing, Viktoria Mullova is eternally young, curious, and ready to explore. Her new Onyx recording of Arvo Pärt's music for violin and orchestra, conducted by Paavo Järvi, represents yet another milestone in her remarkable career. This season, Mullova will be presenting the US (Seattle Symphony) and UK (London Philharmonic) premieres ... Continue reading

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## Major Competitions Are Faced with the Quandary of Teachers on Juries

By Brian Wise Questions about fairness and transparency in music competitions have been in the air since the days when a young Van Cliburn was prowling concert stages, fresh off his Tchaikovsky Competition win. In 1961, New York Times music critic Harold C. Schonberg, just back from a contest in Bucharest, wrote about the phenomenon ... Continue reading

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