

# "The ideal tone is the way Vermeer paints gold"

Bart Visman and Marc Pantus

Marc Pantus will never forget the first time that he heard Renée Fleming sing. He was at the Ravinia festival, near Chicago. "I had never heard anyone sing so beautifully," he recalls. "The quality of tone was perfect. And if the ideal tone could have a visual counterpart, it would be the way that Vermeer paints gold."

Pantus was studying painting before he became a singer, and he vividly remembers the physical feeling of producing his first full-bodied tone. "It felt like a column of sound travelling from his feet to the ceiling. There are a few Vermeer paintings where in the background you see the frame of a mirror or a painting. It's gilded. And it's painted without contours. Everything is rounded off, but you can see the edges. What you want is for a tone to be like a golden egg, from the bottom to the top."

This is the inspiration behind *Vermeer's Gold*, a song composed by Bart Visman to a text by Marc Pantus for this year's and next year's IVC. The IVC commissions a new Prize Song every two years that must be sung by every candidate that makes it to the semi-finals. The two men had already collaborated, including on a large work for the Radio Philharmonic Orchestra and the Netherlands Radio Choir and on the lied cycle *Seven torch songs and an attack* for IVC laureate Peter Gijbbersen. To Visman, Pantus seemed the ideal poet for the IVC's commission - a singer himself, he could speak directly to the experience of the competitors. Both immediately agreed that the song would be in Dutch.

"Since I am Dutch, I have a responsibility here," says Visman. "You can sing in Dutch as beautifully as you can in any other language." Pantus concurs. "Language is important, and I think it should be taken seriously. It's not just a coat hanger. You have to be willing to speak as much as you sing. "When people ask me, 'Why do you write all your songs in Dutch?' I say, well: Janacek! I mean, how many people speak Czech? And yet his works are performed in the Czech original all around the world. He listened to the sound of the language and wrote it down. You just do it."

At the behest of the IVC the pair ensured that there was a good English translation of the song in order not to create a disadvantage for non-Dutch speakers. Participants will be able to choose which language they sing. Both are curious to see who chooses what. There are six versions of the song - in three different registers for male and for female voice - or twelve, if you count the English translations. The idea of freedom of choice is central to both the work's creation and its content; composer and poet took care to create a work that did not favour lighter, more agile voices or heavier, fuller ones, but which gave as much scope as possible for lyricism, beauty, and story-telling. In the end, it is what each singer brings to the performance that is most important. *Vermeer's Gold* tells the story, from a singer's perspective, of what it feels like to perform in a competition.

"Actually," says Visman, "it is a dramatic scene in the sense that the poet describes the fear of the singer, or maybe rather the questions that someone who is about to go on stage

might have. What am I doing here? I'm going on stage. What am I going to do? What is the reason for doing that? Who am I to think that I can do that? The answer is: I am going on stage, I am going to sing this song, for the simple reason that you, the audience, you, the jury, are not. The reason is that only they can do what they do. There is an element of fun in it, in that it is a competition. And I hope that the singers will realise that this is a song for them, for each and every one of them." Pantus elaborates. "The song elongates the moment before a singer goes on stage, in the way that a dream can make a minute seem like hours. I wanted it to be very much linked to the situation of the singer at the point before going onstage. The odd thing about singing is that no-one really knows how it's done. Of course, you study and you rehearse everything in depth, but that doesn't mean that it's going to happen."

And yet the stage is a very safe space for Pantus. "You are sure that you have a reason to be there. Your name is on the poster. And the stage is also a sacred place where you can be truthful in your work. "But as soon as you go to the backstage area, you have to start telling a tainted story - maybe not lies, but you have to be nice and friendly even to people you might not like. Singing is a place where truth can be told without repercussions. But it's very, very clever not to always tell the truth when you're trying to have a career."

Pantus uses three distinct voices to tell his story - a little like Schubert's *Erlkönig*, though he says the comparison did not occur to him when he was writing. Visman says



Bart Visman



Marc Pantus

that though he is a huge admirer of Schubert and Schumann Lieder, he also didn't consciously think of them when he was composing *Vermeer's Gold*. "One could do worse than to embrace those composers. They really created something that hadn't existed before. They are very complete - a dramatic world of their own. Each song has a complete universe in it. I didn't really take them as an example, but you can't escape it either. I certainly hope that by the end of the song, the performers and the audience feel lifted up to a slightly higher plane; suddenly, there is no problem to be solved any more. This is what it is."

Both men hope very much that the song will give those who perform it something that will accompany them beyond the frame of the competition - that the thoughts and emotions it contains will be a gift that they can take with them when they leave. "Through telling the truth, you can find beauty," Pantus says. "I wish for everyone to feel really at home on the stage. I've tried to be friendly to the singers. I hope that they can relate to it. And if not, then they can just sing it nicely!"

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