

Musical Moments

Musical Moments

A composer's biography

Piet Jozef Swerts

to *Krystyna*, my muse

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Title *Musical Moments* — A composer's biography

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ISBN 9789465203966

First print, 2025

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www.bravenewbooks.nl

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Foreword

Composing music seems to many to be a riddle, a mystery. During my forty-year career, the same question kept coming back to me: *But how do you do that, composing?* An intriguing question that you can't just answer.

This book is a composer's biography that mainly looks at the many facets of the creation process of the most diverse compositions and assignments. It tries to expose the complexity of the thinking and writing process of composing and also to show that there is no unanimous answer about the how and why because the context of creating a musical work is always different.

I have conceived this book chronologically, and from there, I have divided it into chapters so that the reader can more easily oversee the musical course. It has proved impossible to scrutinize every composition and explain it in detail. Therefore, the most important works for me are described in more detail because they also show my evolution as a composer more clearly.

What is special about this publication is that I have entered QR codes of all the works discussed, with which you can access audio and video recordings of my works via the internet. In this way, you can dwell on the resounding result of what I am trying to describe at your own pace.

In 1988, *Eline Plipse* made a moving documentary about the Russian pianist *Youri Egorov*, who was born in 1954 but died of *aids* in 1988 at the age of 34. I was moved by it at the time, and his interpretation of *Schubert's Moment Musical* in A flat Major in that documentary has stayed with me ever since. It ran like a thread through this exceptional portrait.

That piece also has something mysterious in it. Although it is a miniature piece of music, it still carries the whole universe within it. It radiates an enormous melancholy, an acceptance of the brutality of life, an elegy from the depths of *Schubert's* spiritual life.

Compositions are always *Musical Moments* in an artist's life. It is a reflection of who you are at that moment, how you experience the world, and what you want to express at that moment. That is why I found this poetic title of *Schubert's* beautiful piano collection suitable as a metaphor for the title of this book.

Somehow, I hope that this contribution lifts a corner of the mysterious veil of the secrets of composing and that the music lover can enjoy the most beautiful art form, *Music*, more intensely with these insights.

1 A brief family history

Lambert René Raymond Swerts

On the first floor of the parental (rental) house in *Tongeren* hung for years in the sixties (we have lived there since 1969) a large black and white portrait photo of my great-uncle *Lambert René Raymond Swerts*, born in *Tongeren* on August 7, 1884, brother of my grandfather, *Joseph*, which unfortunately I never knew. At the time, it hardly attracted any attention. The photo with a rather heavy, baroque, golden frame made by a certain *Edmond Jaminé* shows the classic pose of a man with a beard that is reminiscent of *D'Artagnan* of the Musketeers. That photo was and still is considerably damaged. Around the chest and neck area, some pieces are gone, precisely splintered. These turn out to be *bullet impacts* of drunken *Germans* who were forced to be posted to my great-grandparents during the *First World War* and had indulged themselves in this portrait with their revolver. More than a hundred years later, those traces have remained unchanged.

At the time, I had no idea who exactly this person was. Is it possible that I see a tie pin with a *treble clef* there? *Impressive*. So some musical roots on the father's side after all? The portrait is currently at my younger brother *Wim*'s. Unfortunately, after some research, I haven't become much wiser. The trail is getting lost.

The *artistic* talent comes precisely from my father's side since different generations of painters and draughtsmen have succeeded each other, at least according to the family tree that my father once compiled.¹

My great-grandfather, *Jean Joseph Hubert*, was born on November 30, 1855, in *Tongeren* and was a house painter. He had a drugstore and a paint shop, but painted on canvases himself, including a beautiful portrait of an old man and a woman sitting at the table. With the bottle in hand, she seems to have a lot of fun pouring her husband (?) or boyfriend a drink.

Jean Joseph died in 1913, while his wife *Marie-Thérèse Vangertruyden*, my great-grandmother, died thirteen years later on 7 February.

They left behind three children: *Joseph*, my grandfather; *Lambert*, my father's godfather; *Raymond*, who had the presumed musical talent; and *Albert*, who also became a house painter, according to the family 'tradition'.

Drawing talent

My aunt *Marie-Thérèse*, who lived to be 96 years old, also had a talent for drawing. She studied at the *Académie* in *Liège* and then became a drawing teacher at the *Athenaeum* in *Maaseik* and *Eisden*. She was not the only one. *Marcel*, the second

¹ A family tree that goes back to 1738. The first three generations are said to have been sawyers: *Swerts Arnold* (1738-1812) *Swerts Jan* (without profession, 1788- ?), and *Swerts Arnoldus* (1818- ?), sawyer. Then came the house painters.

son of my great-uncle *Albert*, brother of my grandfather, also started as a drawing teacher at the *Provincial Higher Institute for Art Education* in *Hasselt*, the same institution where my younger brother *Wim* also followed his higher art education in the eighties.



my great-grandfather, Jean Joseph Hubert Swerts (1855-1913)



the shop of great-grandfather Jean Joseph Hubert Swerts

*Wim*² is a professional artist and has his studio, *Lighthouse Productions*. He is the illustrator of a large number of albums. He can paint beautifully and makes precise pencil drawings; I especially find his portraits impressive. At home, I have a painting by him from 1987, *Wim* was 21 at the time, a beautiful *head of Christ*. The daughters of my musical sister, *Annemie*, also have artistic talent; they can not only draw but are also active in the media world. Her youngest daughter, *Astrid*, sings movingly beautifully and once reached the semi-finals in a television show while composing her songs. My second brother, *Jan*, whose life can be called unusual, to say the least, wrote fairy tales that were illustrated by my sister's daughter, *Heleen*. Little or nothing is known about my musical great-uncle. I checked with my mother, who is at the blessed age of 94. I expected to hear more about that, but that chance is almost *nil*. *Lambert*, also known as '*Raymond*' *Swerts*, was the grandfather of two sons: *Albert* and *Marcel*. The eldest, *Albert*, has since died; the late *Marcel*, his brother, had a daughter, *Greet*, and until there, the trail is lost.

Grandparents

I never met *Elisabeth Nelissen*, my father's mother. She died on April 9, 1949, at noon of a *thrombosis*, while my grandfather died four years earlier on February 24, 1945, at 11:00 a.m. after a long lung disease. By the way, when I look at the photo of my grandparents, I think my grandfather looks a lot like *Rachmaninov*. My great-aunt *Anna* married a *Frisian*, *Jannes Vandenbosch*. They went to live together in *Roordahuizum*.³ Near *Leeuwarden* in *Friesland*, and moved to *Australia* after the *Second World War* for fear of a world war with the Russians.

Box-Rochus

Information on my mother's side is even scarcer: I got to know my grandmother *Maria Rochus* quite well, an optimistic, simple, smiley, but still poor woman. She became a widow before she was thirty because her husband *Joseph Box*, as far as I know, had died of pneumonia during that period. As a result, her three children, including my mother, the eldest of the three, were raised by her parents. My mother sometimes told me that she often heard my great-grandfather, a blacksmith, cursing loudly to the end of the street while he was busy shoeing the horses. Being raised by grandparents certainly influenced the values that she received in her upbringing and that did leave traces in our upbringing during the sixties and seventies. A bit of a conservative, old-fashioned upbringing. This brief history of my family is, therefore, quite unusual: my father was orphaned at the age of 24

² https://nl.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wim_Swerts

³ *Reduzum* (formerly *Rorthahusum*, *Rauwerdahuizum*, *Roordahuizum*) originated as a mound village on the banks of the former *Middelzee*. The village of cattle farmers and peasant feints was very well known for the *Grand Hotel 'De Trije Romers'* along the road from *Leeuwarden* to *Sneek*. [www.historischcentrumleeuwarden.nl/onderzoek/leeuwarder-dorpen/reduzum, accessed 4 February 2025]

and lost both his parents in a short time; my mother, raised without a father, was raised by her mother and grandparents. But there are no real artistic roots there.



my grandmother *Elisabeth Nelissen* on father's side



my grandparents, *Joseph Swerts* and *Elisabeth Nelissen*

My family

I come from a family of five children. I have three brothers and a sister: *Jef*, *Jan*, *Annemie*, and *Wim*. I'm number three, so to speak. Father thought that our names should be short, typically *Flemish* names.

My sister from our offspring is by far the most musically inclined. She plays the piano very well. She led a youth choir with Verve in the college where she teaches. She is also an avid concertgoer and is present at my concerts as much as possible. I attach great importance to her judgment; she has the right musical intuition.

My oldest brother, *Jef*, is a more technically inclined dentist. My second brother *Jan* had his rock band, '*Lush Blood Rope*'(!), with which I once performed as a fourteen-year-old.

Plays

My father, *Raymond* (1925-2003), used to be one of the youngest justices of the peace in *Belgium* after the war. In his spare time, he played theatre director. He wrote theatre plays, including '*Nocturnal Intermezzo*', a dialogue between a bed, a chair and a sofa who shared their adventures. In the drama society, he met my mother, *Henriette Box*. We are talking about the post-war fifties.

Father wrote stories and even poetry. His *fables* invariably started with: '*In a small country by the sea, there was a man with an ugly shortage: 'he had too much money', 'he couldn't say anything' or 'he could only speak the truth'*', and so on, with the moral of the story at the end.

As a judge, *Raymond* has written judgments by hand all his life. He had beautiful, elegant handwriting. Maybe I inherited that from him. He certainly had a great love for classical music. He owned a recorder on which he occasionally played folk songs, and he bought classical LPs of operas by *Puccini* and symphonies by *Beethoven*.



my father, *Raymond Swerts* (1925-2002), and my mother, *Henriette Box* (1931-) in the fifties



father in his office as a justice of the peace

Our particularly bulky record player from that period was an extremely large and robust piece of furniture that stood in the far corner of the living room. It would now have been a very stylish *vintage* piece of furniture with a built-in solid radio where you had to turn the round, thick beige hand knobs to try to find the right FM channels with crackling noise. In my adolescent years, I often lay there for hours on the floor, listening to everything I could get my hands on from the ether.

Henriette Box

My mother went to work as a secretary in the *Ambiorix* shoe factory in *Tongeren*. When we, children in the sixties, came there (1958, 1959, 1960, 1962, and 1966), she stayed at home to take care of the family. Years later, she began to get more and more involved in the local women's association. She soon became a tour guide and made group trips with '*her women*'. In my forties, I happened to become a musical tour guide myself as well. My mother is a woman who doesn't mince her words. She has a temperament; she is a brave woman who loves her children and is proud of them.



my mother at the age of 93

Writer

My musicality doesn't seem so obvious. It suddenly appeared around the age of ten. I was a *dreamy* child. Photos from the sixties always give me the impression that I always liked to sit somewhere alone, completely to myself.

At the age of eight, I already wanted to be a writer. I love to write. *Still*. I never really stopped. In my childhood, I wrote stories and from the age of eleven, I spontaneously switched to writing music, from the moment I started attending music school.

Yet writing notes, texts and diaries has almost always remained a constant. They mainly serve to reread fragments of compositional processes and to reflect on them further.



Somewhere in the sixties

Maastrichtersteenweg 15

Until 1969, we lived in a grey terraced house at *Maastrichtersteenweg 15* in *Tongeren*. It is still there; the façade is still identical. Our bedroom, in which the four of us slept, was located at the front on the first floor. The windows opened onto the back of the station, while the railway line on the other side of the bridge was, in fact, at the same level as our bedroom.

At night, the street lamps shone straight through the thick blue curtains of our room. I can still remember well the lispingsound the screaming steam trains made. Railway staff often walked past those huge, clumsy trains. When the light of the street lamps seeped through the curtains into our bedroom, it created a grim-like shadow play.

Around the age of seven, I had asked and received permission from my parents to go to mass every day. They were already convinced that I would become a '*pastor*', while at the time, I was only attracted by the large, quiet, and solemn space

of the local church in the *Saint Lutgardis* parish and the smell of incense that hung around it. At the age of eight, I already had a fondness for paper formats and books in primary school. Moreover, I was a fan of the *Flemish Filmkens*.⁴ I wrote my first stories myself, including *The Fall of Ben Hur*. Eight years young.



*Our home in the sixties
at Maastrichtersteenweg 15*

Jos Verboven

I was always enthusiastic and already took part in small essay competitions that appeared in the magazine *Zonnekind* or *Zonnestraal*. I had then sent my story to

⁴ The original *Vlaamsche Filmkens* was launched on 2 November 1930 by the *Goede Pers, Uitgeverij Averbode*, as part of the printing activities of the *Abbey of Averbode*. A *Vlaamsch Filmke* cost 50 centimes. In five years, the circulation rose to 40,000 copies, and the popularity continued to increase until a circulation of about 60,000 copies per week was achieved. [Wikipedia]

Averbode Publishers. It must even have been thoroughly reviewed because the editor, *Jos Verboven*, sent me a letter back full of willing explanations with *feedback*. I found it all very exciting. *Receiving and sending letters*. After all, the *internet* and *e-mail* did not exist. Writing fascinated me; I still have a fondness for different types of paper and formats, and the aesthetic in them still attracts me.

Melodica

During our holiday in Spain in 1970, I got my hands on a *melodica*, a light-green metal elongated device with white and black plastic keys like a keyboard. The mouthpiece was white and, over time, had become completely weathered due to the excess of saliva and the appearance of teeth. But if you blew well, a whiny, quack-like sound came out. Quickly, I was able to play more than thirty melodies perfectly by ear. The step to the music school was quickly made; it was suggested by my parents themselves.

Waltz in C

In 1971, during my second year at the music school, I composed my first 'piece', a little *Waltz* in C for piano. It was clumsily scribbled with a pencil on a written A4 sheet of piano music, with the beginning of the middle section being a plagiarism of a piece of *Kublan* that I just learned to play as a beginner. Since then, I have continued to write music. The *Waltz* was my homemade gift for 'Father's Day'. *Raymond* even recorded my 'performance' on a large tape recorder.

Epiphany

How much I would give now to return to that time with my current musical insights to reengage in the experience of the *very first hearing*, the *musical enchantment* of the naïve, innocent hearing that absorbs everything and eagerly absorbs it, fascinated by a new world that opens up, it seems ages ago another life. My very first piano teacher, *Françine Souvereyns*, gave me that very first unforgettable *Bach* experience. I can still remember how she played that beautiful fugue theme in *F* from the second book of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* on the light brown upright piano. It was *an overwhelming experience* for me as a ten-year-old.

How that second and third voice came in and became polyphonically intertwined, was like an explosion in my head, an unprecedented virus that settled in me and never let go of me.

Three-part invention

One of my experiments a few years later, I must admit, it was a classmate who challenged me to do so, which led to the 'composition' of 'my' *three-part invention* for piano. Composed in 1977, but the theme was remarkably similar to Bach's mesmerising theme in *f minor*. In retrospect, the counterpoint itself was correct.

Bach, *Fugue Theme in F* from the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, Book II, BWV 881.
Underneath that is 'my' so-called theme of my '*Three-part Invention*'



Three-part invention (1977)

Then, during my third year in the O.L.V. High School, I was in the *Latin-Greek* direction, and I suddenly expressed a determined desire at home that I '*want to study music*'.

Barely a year later, my great adventure in *Leuven* began thanks to the decisive intervention of my late father at the time. A very progressive decision for that time, in retrospect. Not easy. Fortunately, the right one for me.