



Kasper Jansen

A Cosmopolitan between Earth and Heaven

Pierre Audi at the Netherlands Opera and the Holland Festival

Boekmanstudies

1 - A Cosmopolitan in Amsterdam

The unlikely appointment of Pierre Audi

Looking like an exotic wild creature with his large, dark eyes darting apprehensively around, Pierre Audi arrived to take up his appointment as artistic director of the Netherlands Opera on 17 June 1988. As he entered a small room in the basement of Amsterdam's Muziektheater, the windowless space suddenly seemed to become a cage, imprisoning him.

Audi had travelled from London that day. He had seen nothing of Amsterdam, apart from the Muziektheater. One of the world's greatest music stages, it frightened him. He had never directed a real opera, only contemporary music theatre. He thought: "How on earth am I ever going to direct in this huge black hole?"

Audi's small stature in an oversized black suit made him look even younger than his 31 years. He made the round of introductions to all the strangers present in the room, shaking hands with each. He answered some questions, promised to deliver an ambitious artistic package within budget, and said that he wanted to direct operas himself when the occasion allowed. He then posed for a few photos, and after 15 minutes Pierre Audi was gone again, on his way back to London. He had escaped Amsterdam already. With his free, independent spirit, he seemed not the type to form any bonds. "A real cosmopolitan," sighed Bernard Sarphati, the chairman of the Netherlands Opera. And then, as a validation of Audi's appointment, he added: "But then, Amsterdam is a cosmopolitan city."

The appointment of Pierre Audi as the successor to previous director Jan van Vlijmen was a total surprise. Van Vlijmen was an idiosyncratic conceptual composer, not looking for commercial success. After barely a year in the new and (it turned out) too expensive Muziektheater, Van Vlijmen was forcibly removed by Minister of Culture Elco Brinkman, on account of his budgetary excesses and an open quarrel with staff.

Van Vlijmen had regarded the barebones staging of Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, directed by Jürgen Gosch, as his best production. "All opera should be like this *Tristan*," he announced. The fact that the public rebelled en masse against it, as if to send Jürgen Gosch scurrying back to Germany pursued by a barrage of boos, didn't seem to bother him in the slightest.

Van Vlijmen seemed boring, but actually he was anything but. He was also responsible for

the future Nobel laureate Dario Fo's brilliant staging of Rossini's *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*. The production was performed globally, becoming the biggest public success in the history of the Netherlands Opera. The final performance of the production was only in 2006 - some 15 years later.

Van Vlijmen's painful departure led to serious fears for the artistic future of the Netherlands Opera, just when Amsterdam had finally built a new, contemporary opera and ballet theatre after six decades of discussion. The appointment of Pierre Audi was a *coup de théâtre* by the board. It would avert parochialism, and also prevent the Muziektheater from becoming doomed to failure as a mere satellite of La Scala - for the Milanese artistic director, Cesare Mazzonis, had also applied for the job.

Audi was an international mystery man who, in some untraceable way, had ended up at the Amstel. Only later was it revealed that Peter Diamand, the former director of the Holland Festival and the Edinburgh Festival, had brought Audi to the opera company's attention. Pierre Audi had been born in Lebanon, the son of a banker, into a French oriented family. After a stay in Paris he'd gone to Oxford to study and then started his own music festival in London's 300-seat Almeida Theatre. Meanwhile, he'd acquired a British passport.

There wasn't much more to tell about Pierre Audi. Only that he had taken the Schönberg Ensemble, the technological avant-garde musician Michel Waisvisz, and the Maarten Altena Octet from the Netherlands to London, where he'd also given the music of Louis Andriessen a hearing. Shortly after his appointment, Audi said in an interview that no one could tell him why Amsterdam had needed to build a new opera house. "So I'm going to show them why!" he said. For this, however, he would need time: the next season was already decided, and the season after that was mostly finalised too. In 1990, he practised in Leeds with his first staging of a real opera, *Jérusalem* by Giuseppe Verdi.

Pierre Audi largely kept the promise he made in 1988, as we can now attest. The most adventurous appointment ever in opera history, he even talks of a magical connection with the Netherlands. Audi came to the 1990-91 season with his own ambitious artistic policy. He was in Amsterdam, personally directing opera: the first one was *Il Ritorno d'Ulisse in Patria* by Claudio Monteverdi. He made an unforgettable impression, demonstrating a natural talent. Audi always keeps within budget, thanks partly to the staunch support of a solid financial director, Truze Lodder, who became the other cornerstone of the success of the Netherlands Opera.

Thirteen years after his appointment, in 2001, Pierre Audi was awarded the Prince Bernhard Culture Fund Theatre Prize. In a television programme covering the award, Ivo van Hove, the artistic director of Toneelgroep Amsterdam, called Pierre Audi's productions, "self-portraits of the director, a cosmopolitan person without roots. Audi's characters often find themselves alone in an empty space."

On this occasion, Audi himself confirmed that his vague, international past means that he belongs nowhere. He can therefore remain a stranger, unaffected by established Dutch theatrical traditions. He still represents a different order, "lost in time and space", as an outsider in the village that is Amsterdam, untouchable and uncontroversial above all else.

And however unlikely it might have seemed at first, the cosmopolitan Pierre Audi, who had arrived in the Netherlands almost by accident, was already engaged in a remarkable form of symbiosis with Dutch artistic life. The Netherlands Opera, the nation's most expensive artistic institution, flourished as never before. In 2004, Audi was also appointed artistic director of the Holland Festival.

During his 21-year Dutch career, Audi has never really adapted. He goes his own way, making maximum use of the artistic freedom and generosity typical of the Dutch creative climate. He has probed and shifted its borders.

Pierre Audi seems at home and belongs here, exactly because of his cosmopolitan character.

That's the opinion of both the Dutch art world and the Dutch public. According to Audi, the Dutch public is "the best audience in the world," because of its chronic lack of bias. Moreover, in contrast with the British public, it does not demand that everything is presented in a naturalistic way. The Dutch public is often willing to think, exercise its own imagination, and draw its own conclusions. Pierre Audi is so at home in the Netherlands that the only alternative, as far as he's concerned, is the Salzburg Festival. Earlier this year, he was one of the three candidates seeking to follow in the footsteps of artistic director Jürgen Flimm. But when I met him at a première, on the steps of the Amsterdam Muziektheater, Audi said, "I'm not leaving."

He could not imagine that he would actually be appointed: "In Salzburg, there are so many different interests at work - political, economic and touristic - that artistic considerations do not prevail."

Yet Audi knew what he would do, if by some chance he were to be appointed: "Then I'd go to Salzburg, of course. It is the only job that's still possible after Amsterdam." The next day, the job went to the Austrian Alexander Pereira.

Pierre Audi had anticipated how it would be, because he knows Salzburg. In 1996, he had been there with Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron*, the Netherlands Opera's most prestigious show of all time. The stage design was by Karl Ernst Herrmann, the director was Peter Stein, and Pierre Boulez conducted the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra. There too, in 2006, the 250th anniversary of Mozart's birth, he presented his Amsterdam production of *Die Zauberflöte* in sets by Karel Appel, accompanied by the Vienna Philharmonic conducted by Riccardo Muti.

With extensive credits as a director of opera productions and an artistic director of musical theatre pieces behind him, Audi has achieved enormous international recognition for his excellent record in the Netherlands Opera and, in more recent years, the Holland Festival.

Thanks to him, the Amsterdam Muziektheater is a worthy counterpart of the Amsterdam Concertgebouw, which among other things is home of the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, named "the best orchestra in the world" in 2008. The Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra and its chief conductors also regularly contribute to the performances and successes of the Netherlands Opera. Internationally, the Netherlands Opera is generally regarded as one of the most interesting opera companies in Europe.

Audi has also directed drama in the Netherlands, with Toneelgroep Amsterdam and Het Zuidelijk Toneel. He has also directed a number of operas outside the Netherlands, and has functioned as a major exporter of Amsterdam productions. Pierre Audi has received several awards in the Netherlands. In 2009, he was the first to be awarded the Johannes Vermeer Prize, a new state award for the arts, established by the Minister of Culture, Ronald Plasterk.

2 - The Inexperienced Opera Director **Spontaneous naivety can't be reproduced**

When, on 10 November 1990, he made his Amsterdam début in Monteverdi's *Il Ritorno d'Ulisse in Patria* (1641), Pierre Audi had previously directed only one 'real' opera – that is, "an opera by a dead composer." The Monteverdi work tells the mythical story of the homecoming of Odysseus after the Trojan War and ten years of wandering dictated by the constant interventions of the gods. With that one production, repeated many times at home and abroad, Audi established his fame as an opera director and acquired great authority as artistic director.

Audi created his own 'Amsterdam' opera style of theatrical purism. It is characterised by the distinctiveness of the characters, the absence of trivial externals, an intense sense of drama and mythical timelessness, and the presence of the primary elements of water, earth, fire and air – the latter in the form of sound vibrations from the singing. In Wagner's *Die Walküre* there was a ring of fire, in Monteverdi's *Orfeo* water was literally burning.

The *Ritorno* was a show in the tradition of Peter Brook and his idea of 'the empty space'. A good

performance does not require traditional, naturalistic sets. Empty space is enough, marked by an increasingly recycled steel wall by Jannis Kounellis, or giant puppets by Georg Baselitz in Birtwistle's *Punch and Judy*. At the Almeida Theatre in London, Audi hadn't even had the money for any stage sets.

In Amsterdam's Muziektheater, there was a preponderance of empty space: the stage was a black hole. The opera story itself was told by a single rock, the characters and the music, and the poignant depiction of the human drama did the job.

And silence: the silence was broken only by the opera, because then emotions were no longer under control. Such a silence gives the audience the opportunity to interact with the drama itself and to empathise with the characters. Audi brought us the theatre of austerity, intensity, and concentration on essentials: the moving but unsentimental portrayal of underlying relationships.

When Pierre Audi was 16, he had asked Peter Brook to help him, by teaching him the trade. Brook refused: he needed an experienced assistant and had no time to train anyone. But he did find the time, twice, to spend an hour talking with Audi. Brooks' rejection only increased Audi's intention to be a director. Since then, he has been self-taught, as he said in his speech, 'The State of the Theatre' in September 2009.

"The principles that Peter Brook formulated 40 years ago in his manifesto, 'The Empty Space' are still highly relevant and more than ever applicable to opera," Audi said. "His personal advice to me, 34 years ago, has helped me to understand that to direct and lead a company that has the ambition to produce important work is only possible if the deeper meaning of these activities is clearly defined, and if consistent and determined progress is made towards a vision."

Audi was to develop such a vision later, and very convincingly, in Amsterdam. But when he was 16 and contacting Brook, he had already long ceased to be an inexperienced theatre and opera lover. He had even made films. In Lebanon, at the age of 12 or 13, he had seen an opera at the Casino: *Il Matrimonio Segreto* by Domenico Cimarosa, produced by Milan's Piccolo Scala. In 2002, he would direct the same opera in Paris. In 1969, the 12-year-old banker's son heard the music of Stockhausen in the caves of Jeita, and he and his parents made a 'grand opera tour' through Salzburg, Munich and Rome.

On 20 July, 1969, the day that Neil Armstrong landed on the moon, Pierre Audi saw *Tristan und Isolde*. He also saw Herbert von Karajan's *Don Giovanni*. He saw *Aida* at the Baths of Caracalla. Then he outlined his own ideas for *Aida*. At 15, he made his first movie, based on a story by Thomas Mann. A man goes to a cemetery and is overtaken by someone riding a bicycle: Death. Audi filmed the 'real' segments with an 8mm camera, and the hallucinations with a video camera. Then he projected the two over each other.

Audi's style is always 'back to basics,' but extremely detailed in the external representation of the characters and their relationships. Everything concerning this is endlessly rehearsed: the postures, the movements, the direction of the gazes of the singers, the angle at which a sword is held. Once these are perfected, they may not be changed even by a millimetre. Audi also works this way with the chorus, a major 'character' in its own right, but also a plastic, moving part of the stage set. 'Back to basics' also governs his major performances with their many visual elements that may yet never simply be identified as 'the set.'

This return to essentials also characterised his staging of Puccini's *La Bohème*: a cold-water production where sharp, icy mist replaces woolly snow, ending with a closing image of hard-as-nails bleakness. Poor sick Mimi dies a lonely death, surrounded by bohemian 'friends' who lack any command of the art of life, being concerned principally with themselves.

Audi's *Der Ring des Nibelungen* production in Amsterdam even boasted the largest 'stage set' performance ever in the history of Wagner's four-part cycle. All sorts of things were suspended above the stage where the orchestra and conductor Hartmut Haenchen played their leading roles. Part of the audience sat on a row of chairs that was suspended high above the stage. It has been one of Audi's

life goals to push the boundaries of opera, an art form that unites all the other arts, as far as possible to find out just how far one can go.

That happened in the *Ring*. The four different installations by Georg Tsyypin spanned the entire universe, and never before had so much emptiness been depicted in a theatre. In *Die Walküre*, you looked over the 26-metre-wide, 40-metre-deep stage of the Muziektheater, 15 billion light years away. Anyone in the house could have believed that, with every performance, the Moses and Aaron Church behind the Muziektheater was temporarily removed.

The closing scene of the *Ring* showed a spherical universe of rings. Thanks to the reflections in the glass stage floor with its fiery red meridians, the Muziektheater's semicircular space was transformed into the universe. The burning of Valhalla was a purification, an aesthetic as well as an ethical event. But the *Ring* is round, everything returns, and the past becomes the future. At the end of *Götterdämmerung*, Wotan threw his spear into the world again. Audi's message cannot be mistaken: evil is ineradicable.

In the mythical season of 1998-99, when the *Ring* was performed in its entirety and *Il Ritorno d'Ulisse in Patria* was revived, Audi's respective visions of the worlds of Homer and Wagner could be compared: "As with the gods in the Greek drama, in the *Ring* it's all about doubt. Wagner's music, like Monteverdi's, comes directly from the soul. Both speak of the transient life. What interests me in opera is the human element, also in Wagner's gods."

What is striking is that the role of the Greek gods in Homer is much more decisive than that of the Germanic gods in Wagner. Their rivalries and their fights using humans as pawns go shamelessly far. The Germanic gods have fallen into petty greed and other low forms of human behaviour. The Greek gods, however human they seem, are always superior. At the end of the *Ring*, Valhalla is in flames; at the end of *Ritorno*, we get "long live Olympus".

Audi has never really surpassed the power of *Il Ritorno d'Ulisse in Patria*, which he equalled only in Wagner's *Die Walküre*. He admits it himself: "The *Ritorno* was a perfect production. I've tried for years to understand the secret of this performance, so I can use the same recipe again. But it can't be done. The spontaneous naivety of that time obviously can't be reproduced. I have to accept that."

The 'best', the 'finest' and for me the 'most appealing' performances of Pierre Audi almost always have a lucid, transcendental nature. They occupy the border between life and death. The temporal and the eternal can come together with Pierre Audi and even overlap, as demonstrated in Rameau's *Castor et Pollux*, in Monteverdi's *Orfeo*, in *Tea* by Tan Dun, in *Les Troyens* by Berlioz, and in Messiaen's *Saint François d'Assise*.

In many ways, this was also the case in *Rêves d'un Marco Polo*, a collage presentation of seven pieces by Canadian composer Claude Vivier. Audi created a new work from the oeuvre of the deceased Vivier (1948-1983), a composer who in life foretold his own violent death. Almost everything came together here: references to the seven-part opera *Licht* by Stockhausen, music by Maderna, Berio, Ligeti and Nono, and the Mahler's Second Symphony: "*Der liebe Gott wird mir ein Lichtchen geben, wirdt leuchten mir bis in das ewig selig Leben.*"

3 - A Liberal Artistic Director

Variation in style and repertoire at the Netherlands Opera

For Pierre Audi, the core of his work at the Netherlands Opera is not directing, but artistic policy: deciding the programme and casting directors, conductors and singers. This had never been a decisive role for the chief conductor. Hartmut Haenchen, in his 13 years at the company, only once joined the rest of the staff in formulating a new artistic policy. Edo de Waart was too low profile and left the job early. Ingo Metzmacher seemed to be in a stronger position, but left after just three years. Audi engaged the world-famous for Pierre Boulez for *Moses und Aron* and Simon Rattle for *Parsifal* by Michael Gruber. The result was musical perfection.

Typical of Audi's artistic policy is his liberal attitude towards works in the repertoire that he hasn't staged himself, and towards directors with a different style from his own.

Audi is not, personally, a big fan of comic pieces or of the early romantic Italian repertoire. Yet after his successful *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*, Dario Fo simply had to stage Rossini's *L'Italiana in Algeri* too. The world-famous Bryn Terfel sang in Amsterdam as a new Elvis Presley in Donizetti's comedy *L'Elisir d'amore*.

In 2005, ten years too late, Bellini's *Norma* was finally given a chance. The soprano Nelly Miricioiu, the immensely popular 'Queen of the Matinee' of the Amsterdam Concertgebouw, collapsed during the première, never to return during the production's run. The heart-rending opera tragedy in the Muziektheater was front-page news, and Audi lost the opportunity of building a big reputation in programming Verdi's repertoire. That wasn't really ever to come together properly until Willy Decker arrived with *Don Carlo*, conducted by Riccardo Chailly, and *La Traviata*.

Audi has his personal reservations about the staging style of Harry Kupfer, a director with a great output and a major significance for the opera in the Netherlands. In 1977, with the company still under the innovative sway of Hans de Roo, Kupfer's terrifying and bloodcurdling *Elektra* – featuring the house of Agamemnon as a slaughterhouse – introduced the modern directing style to the Netherlands. The production was revived twice up until 1984, and in 1986 Kupfer produced *Boris Godunov* for Jan van Vlijmen.

Audi considers Kupfer extremely professional and admits that his conceptual works are thought out in great detail. But what Audi misses in Kupfer is the relaxed attitude that Michael Grüber has: "Directing is about what you don't do." Audi's admiration for Grüber, who directed a phenomenal *Parsifal* in Amsterdam, is immense: "To me, Grüber is God."

Nevertheless, Audi revived Kupfer's productions of *Salome* (1988 to 2002) and *La Damnation de Faust* (1989, 1992, and commissioned him to create new productions of *Die Frau ohne Schatten* (1992, 1996), and *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* (1995, 2000). Wieland Wagner came to Amsterdam from Bayreuth to look at this superior, light and entertaining *Meistersinger*. This production was intended by Kupfer, 50 years after the war, as a reconciliation gesture. He downplayed Wagner's praise of 'superior' German art, and during the finale Hans Sachs offered the Dutch audience his laurel wreath.

Meanwhile, Willy Decker took the place of Kupfer, becoming the most important director after Audi, with a continuous series of top productions, beginning in 1994 with the relentless yet tender 'yellow' *Wozzeck*, a world-class production. Then followed *Werther*, *Elektra*, *Kát'a Kabanová*, *Boris Godunov*, *Lear*, *Die Soldaten*, *Der Rosenkavalier*, *Don Carlo*, *Die Tote Stadt* and *La Traviata*.

Audi doesn't personally favour productions that make opera topical. Yet Peter Sellars staged Stravinsky's neo-classical, Faustian opera comedy, *The Rake's Progress*, as an indictment of the American prison system. So convincingly did the inimitable Sellars add his own signature to the opera, that even informed members of the audience couldn't tell which content belonged to the original of Stravinsky and his librettist WH Auden.

The high point of such topical treatments came with Peter Sellars' two productions of Debussy's mystical *Pelléas et Mélisande* (1902). In 1993, he set the opera in California, against the backdrop of a Pacific Ocean of fluorescent tubes. Part of the story was about Rodney King, the black motorist who was brutally clubbed by Los Angeles police, as was seen on video recordings. The other version, in 1996, was about the black football player OJ Simpson and the globally sensationalised murder of his wife.

In 2008, Pierre Audi produced *Pelléas et Mélisande* himself in Brussels. Abstract it certainly was, but not everything about it was completely timeless. On stage the revolving sculptural installation, by the renowned Anglo-Indian artist Anish Kapoor, recalled the lasciviously curved furniture of the 1960s and 1970s. But nothing contributed to interpretation of the dark and inexplicable story: the mysterious origins of Mélisande, her strange death, and all its other irrational aspects. The mystery was even increased by all the singing about the hair of Mélisande – who was bald.

The famous director duo Jossi Wieler and Sergio Morabito taunted and defied the Amsterdam public in 2004 in with their staging of Mozart's *Lucio Silla*. The opera, about a Roman dictator who comes to power at the cost of immense suffering, was moved to the GDR on the eve of 'Die Wende'. The set, by Anna Viebrock, showed a typically desolate DDR interior littered with pieces of junk, which also recalled Anselm Kiefer's macabre painting of Hitler's Chancellery, *Innenraum*. The performance suggested endless East German misery so powerfully that the audience could physically experience, in scarcely four hours, the hopeless eternity of 40 years of GDR dictatorship. But 15 years after 'Die Wende,' this idea was of no interest to an Amsterdam audience. In my own life, which began in 1946, I've never heard anything other than that the GDR was bad. Why was this drilled into me again for a whole evening, long after the demise of the GDR? It was a pointless retro piece.

During the Mozart Year of 2006, Wieler and Morabito were charged by Pierre Audi with producing the three Mozart operas to librettos by Lorenzo da Ponte. It was a prestigious commission, following the celebrated earlier Da Ponte production by Jürgen Flimm and Alfred Kirchner, accompanied by the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra and Nikolaus Harnoncourt.

Wieler and Morabito set *Così Fan Tutte* in a youth hostel, *Le Nozze di Figaro* in a car showroom, and *Don Giovanni* in a hall full of beds and mattresses. This *Don Giovanni* was one of the strangest ever. At the end of the first act, Don Giovanni raped Zerlina during the party scene not invisibly offstage, but unabashedly centre stage. This left Zerlina's wedding dress stained with blood. Meanwhile, the groom Masetto is busy strangling Don Giovanni's servant Leporello. And after a gun is slowly passed around among the crowd, the otherwise indecisive Don Ottavio finally shoots Don Giovanni down.

The title hero is untouchable: in the second act he returns unharmed. At the end the dead Commendatore does not drag Don Giovanni off to hell, but himself disappears into an abyss. Don Giovanni then quietly leaves the auditorium, returning moments later to rise triumphantly to the stage. "To hell with norms and values," seems to be the credo.

After the performance ended, there were deafening volleys of boos for the directors. But how justified were they? The Netherlands Opera had come up with the most intriguing *Don Giovanni* ever. It was a production that forced even the most seasoned Mozart devotees in the audience to think more deeply about the opera so frequently seen, a 'dramma giocosa', a cheerful drama in which the caricature characters have become so familiar that their instability and even perversity are no longer noticed.

Wieler and Morabito acutely accentuated the insanity in a tough, aggressive production. There was room too for the almost always omitted scene, *Per queste tue Manine* (KV 540b), in which Zerlina, like a furious mistress, avenges herself on Leporello with a lash: "This is the way to deal with men!" You could also see this *Don Giovanni* as a performance played out by the insane in the asylum of Charenton, where the libertarian and atheist Marquis De Sade was locked away for years. It was not a pleasant sight and not a good performance. Worst of all: the monomaniacally evil Don Giovanni himself was completely uninteresting. One nice touch was that Leporello became a horny and jealous rival in love; another was that Elvira entered the monastery with a bag of Dutch liquorice.

4 - Old-Fashioned Craftsmanship Pierre Audi in Drottningholm

The opera house in Drottningholm, Sweden, where Pierre Audi staged a spectacularly unique production of Handel's *Tamerlano* in 2000, is the most exceptional theatre on earth. It is also on Unesco's World Heritage List. The tiny theatre was built in 1766, in the park of the white summer palace in Drottningholm, west of Stockholm. The 'Swedish Versailles' is set in a northern Arcadia, a timeless green paradise with classical buildings and ancient Greek sculptures. Of the contemporary world, there is no sign.

The artist-king, Gustav III himself, was the manager of the opera at Drottningholm. In 1792, the theatre was closed after the assassination of the king, who died at a masked ball following a plot by rebel aristocrats. They took revenge after Gustav III had completed a coup on behalf of the people of the country. The murder in the opera house of Stockholm inspired two operas: Auber's *Gustav III* and Verdi's *Un Ballo in Maschera*.

The Drottningholm opera house was rediscovered only in 1921. The historian Agne Beijer opened the doors after 209 years and entered the 18th century. Here was a theatre from Mozart's time, completely intact: since being built, it hadn't been so much as repainted! And it had a full set of ingenious stage machinery: a wavy sea on the horizon, and a chest of rolling stones to mimic a storm. There were dozens of painted scenery panels that could be pushed out from the wings. In a few seconds, a ballroom could be transformed into a forest, a classical cityscape into a fiery hell. Since its rediscovery, Drottningholm has been the baroque pride of Sweden.

The time of Gustav III is meticulously maintained. Even the theatre personnel are dressed as the bewigged pages of the king. Here Ingmar Bergman made his endearing film about *Die Zauberflöte*. Every opera lover in the world wants to attend one of the authentically historical productions of Drottningholm's summer festival at least once.

During the rehearsals for *Tamerlano*, Pierre Audi showed me dozens of lights in the wings. They are hidden in copper rods, which – thanks to computer controls – can oscillate slightly. The dim light is reflected by a mirror measuring two-by-two centimetres. This is taped, to soften the reflection. The aim is imitate the flickering candlelight of the 18th century, without causing a fire hazard.

It was touching to see how much care and ingenuity the Swedes had spent on the lamps. But Audi scoffed: "We'll get rid of that flicker, that's disco. I want it purer. The obsession with authenticity here is very shallow, because it has nothing to do with what ultimately really matters: good theatre."

Audi, who had already seen operas in Drottningholm, was annoyed with the sloppiness with which they were sometimes produced. "The story sung in Italian in *Tamerlano* is very complex, and because there are no surtitles, you have to make the action visually intelligible. This requires a perfection that I have to work very hard on. What is new here - paradoxically - is old-fashioned craftsmanship."

At the beginning of the new millennium, Audi's *Tamerlano* in Drottningholm constituted a revolution. The reviews made the front pages. Audi had transformed the unassailable Drottningholm. A production lacking the obligatory respect for the past made the director at once famous and infamous in Sweden. After the première, artistic director Per-Erik Öhrn had a lot to explain to the associates and friends of the theatre in the foyer.

For the first time in 244 years, there had been a performance in Drottningholm where the orchestra was not dressed in 18th-century costume. For the first time, ordinary modern lights had illuminated the stage from the wings. For the first time, the audience had seen Drottningholm as it should never be seen: a bare and empty wooden theatre. The glorious past, miraculously preserved, was degraded. The painted illusions of reality had gone, only the mechanics behind the show were still visible. A horror show in 18th-century terms, Audi had portrayed the apocalypse with which *Tamerlano* ends.

Öhrn justified Audi's departure from one aspect of Drottningholm's history with a passionate and principled argument. "This theatre is a unique museum and of course it should be preserved unchanged for future generations," he said. "But it is not a church, embodying eternal, unassailable dogmas. Even if the past reigns, there must still be room for change and renewal."

Audi's *Tamerlano* was concerned with getting beyond the outward show of Drottningholm to reveal the inner essence of the opera. It is a very exceptional piece, probably the first opera in which a ruler comes to life – a taboo in 18th-century opera, in which death is anyway an extremely rare phenomenon. And suicide, which occurs in *Tamerlano*, was a cardinal sin in Christian eyes. The 18th-century repertoire does contain the death of the Commendatore in Mozart's *Don*

Giovanni. It's a unique event for another reason: it takes place in the very first scene. But we can argue about whether the Commendatore is really dead or not. At the end, he returns to throw Don Giovanni into hell. He had apparently been given permission to leave purgatory or heaven for this. In Handel's *Tamerlano*, the Turkish sultan Bajazet, captured by the Tartar king Tamerlano, takes his destiny into his own hands. He drinks poison and defies Tamerlano, who cannot forbid the sultan's death: death releases him from the Tartar's power. In his half-undressed state, the singing Bajazet already seems a corpse. And when he finally dies, on his throne and with his head bent, he inevitably seems to somehow live on.

It is an extremely lucid Pierre Audi scene, on the border between life and death. The confused *coro* that closes the opera recalls the final chorus of Bach's St. Matthew Passion, in which those left behind try to come to terms with the unimaginable death of Christ. After three days he will rise again, but that's hindsight, the bystanders at Golgotha did not know that. Handel's music yearns, sounds dissonant, and provokes strong emotions. The impressive performance ends not only by gripping and moving us, but especially by making us unusually uncomfortable.

From this sharp, ruthless analysis of the functioning of the Drottningholm theatre Audi drew uncompromising conclusions. All are signs of the intelligence and intellectual power that characterise him as artistic director and an artist.

For Audi, his first opera production in Drottningholm also meant a breakthrough in his art and a new peak in his oeuvre. Subsequently, he would also direct *Alcina* by Handel and *Zoroastre* by Rameau in Drottningholm. In 2005, *Tamerlano* and *Alcina* were also performed in Amsterdam's Stadsschouwburg theatre, and *Zoroastre* followed in 2006. The stage set in every case was a replica of the little Swedish theatre.

What Audi learned in *Tamerlano* was that it is possible to break with the custom of performing Handel operas exactly as they are written. Few things are more difficult than to produce a Handel opera. They are complicated, with hard-to-decipher stories with many complications and little outward action. Everything is contained in a long series of arias with only an occasional duet or ensemble. If the director follows the libretto and score literally, there is usually only one singer on stage, meanwhile the others are waiting their turn patiently in the dressing room.

With Audi, most characters are on stage constantly, even if they are not singing, and they can sometimes be seen walking into the wings, where things also seem to be happening. They become like pieces in a game of chess being played out during the arias, which are no longer separate issues.

Audi wove into both operas an ever closer web of relationships and he deepened the action, adding many layers of drama and creating additional subplots, violent clashes, withering looks, sudden temptations and shameless voyeurism. There is wit and boldness too. In *Alcina*, an intense love conflict, the infatuated Morgana makes a powerful grab for Ricciardo's crotch, unaware that she's tackling a woman in drag.

Audi excelled with a perfectionist approach and subtle detailing, which ensured that neither four-hour opera bored for a second. All the movement was pure choreography, to music played yearningly and with great character by the French baroque orchestra Les Talens Lyriques, led by Christophe Rousset. It was finally more authentic than 'authentic'.

5 - The State of Theatre

Pierre Audi looks around

In the theatre world outside Pierre Audi's Netherlands Opera and Holland Festival, completely different ideas dominate than in the Muziektheater and the Muziekgebouw on the IJ, where the Holland Festival has its office and partly takes place.

First, there was the notorious 1969 Action Tomato, which put an end to the conventional stage life of that time - by pelting the established thespians of the time with tomatoes, ushering in more

opportunities for younger talents. After Action Tomato, the great actors and actresses not only gloried in the classics, but also in new pieces such as *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*. There was a large audience for such work. Every Thursday, there was a play on the television, a modern piece such as *Happy Days* by Samuel Beckett.

Then Dutch cultural policy, thanks to a succession of policy documents on culture changing every four years with the cabinet and subsidy criteria, took on a breathless atmosphere with the emphasis on innovation. That ended in a continuous renewal of the previous renewals.

During the Theatre Festival of September 2009, in Amsterdam's Stadsschouwburg theatre, Pierre Audi gave a lecture entitled 'The State of the Theatre.' He presented himself there as a Tiresias, the blind Greek seer with a divine perspective on the world and the times. In Amsterdam, Pierre Audi saw a stunning, unprecedented abundance of cultural expression.

Audi praised this richly assorted supply, but also predicted the end of an art that wants to know nothing of the past and refuses to build on it. With his long accumulated and unquestioned authority as artistic director and as a director of operas and plays, Audi made a plea that was as passionate as it was bold for a totally new artistic direction and a different artistic consciousness in the Dutch theatre and theatre world.

Abroad, contemporary Dutch theatre has found success and is seen as vital and thriving. Yet the continued existence of Dutch theatre, according to Audi, is threatened by its refusal to accept that theatre exists in a tradition.

Theatre companies would rather perform adaptations of novels or films than works from the modern or classical Dutch repertoires, although in a healthy theatrical environment, these should be dominant. "The patient is currently healthy, but will ultimately be very sick," as Audi later summarised his argument.

Audi praised the thriving music scene in this 'melomane' country and held it up to the theatre as an example: "Theatre can learn from the discipline and intelligent attitude towards tradition that music abundantly demonstrates."

It was one of the few times in many decades that someone not directly involved with the concert music world spoke with so much appreciation about the practice of the large, sometimes loathed, world of traditional classical music. This applies as much for the symphonic music producers in the large concert halls as for those staging chamber music in small venues. But to confine the discussion to Beethoven: all of the nine symphonies, 32 piano sonatas and 16 string quartets deserve to be performed for a wide audience with considerable frequency.

The opera is the traditional home of the cast-iron repertoire, essential for the maintenance of the art form and as a basis for new work. In 1950, that repertoire started only with Gluck's *Orfeo* (1762) and went, roughly speaking, through Mozart, Rossini, Bellini, Donizetti, Verdi, Tchaikovsky, Mussorgsky, and Wagner to Puccini and Richard Strauss. Since then, the 17th and early 18th-century artists Monteverdi, Rameau and Handel have been added, taking back the origins of opera as an art form by more half a century.

The last century's developments, adding Stravinsky, Janáček, Bartók, Berg, Britten, Prokofiev and Shostakovich to the contemporary repertoire, were incredibly significant. *Le Grand Macabre* (1978) by György Ligeti is already a confirmed part of the contemporary repertoire. The same goes for pieces by Philip Glass and John Adams. During the 21-year artistic reign of Pierre Audi, 20 world premières have taken place at the Netherlands Opera, some co-productions with the Holland Festival and foreign opera houses. Many of these were also revived by Audi, the only way for such occasional performances to grow into parts of the repertoire.

While he has been exemplary in broadly extending the repertoire of opera and musical theatre by commissioning composers and librettists, Audi sees in the Dutch theatre world no culture of interest for writers to incorporate in their work. According to him, the antique, classic and more recent theatre is too infrequently performed, or at least, it is not performed in a consistent manner that educates the public and thus builds on tradition. It seems to echo the message of the avant-garde Wagner in his *Meistersinger von Nürnberg*: the true master is the one who masters the ancient arts, but who also knows how to renew them.

According to Audi, we need music and theatre: “Music evokes and provokes the dreaming psyche, and the exchange of words takes us back to the absurdity of our human relationships. We need them both, and both are part of an artistic heritage which generation after generation should feel obliged to deal with and respond to.

“As the theatre man that I have become by both inclination and education, I have found in my confrontation with this powerful and rich heritage the key to the role that I have played for the past 21 years in this country. And I owe that powerful realisation to the 16 years before that, when I was immersed in the rich musical life of the United Kingdom, where music also frequently acts as the binding factor between the various creative disciplines, which emphasises developments in the arts and gives them an identity.”

Pierre Audi believes that through the aversion to classical or living playwrights, the role of director as craftsman is undermined in favour of the director as the real, and sometimes only, author of the performance. The director’s profession, in its purest sense, is an endangered species.

“Unfortunately, the transfer of knowledge and experience to the next generation is problematic in our field,” he said. “I myself am self-taught; many important directors avoid giving younger professionals the opportunity to work with them and learn from them.” Audi apologised for also failing to do this sufficiently well: “We cannot do everything for everyone, and yet that is exactly what is expected of us; and for me that is a worthy, utopian endeavour.”

Pierre Audi operates quite differently from his colleagues in the theatre. In the international world of opera music, he has a unique status as a conduit for new pieces and a discoverer of future repertoire works. He is the Amsterdam reincarnation of the legendary Serge Diaghilev, his choreography always striving for a new Gesamtkunstwerk, through connections with art and unusual production forms.

A good example was 1992’s *Life with an Idiot*, the “first and last Soviet opera” by Alfred Schnittke and writer Viktor Jerofejev. The ‘idiot’ in this requiem for 70 bloodstained years of Soviet life was Lenin, at play in a madhouse. Queen Beatrix, Prince Claus and the world’s opera press came to Amsterdam for it. The set consisted of an installation by Ilya Kabakov, the director was Boris Prokovski and Mstislav Rostropovich conducted the Rotterdam Philharmonic Orchestra. Rostropovich also performed as a pianist and cellist in a café orchestra.

Audi has also played a decisive role in Dutch opera and music history. After *De Materie* (1989), directed by Robert Wilson, Louis Andriessen could build on his work at the Netherlands Opera with three major and groundbreaking pieces of music: *Rosa, a Horse Drama* (1994), *Writing to Vermeer* (1999) and *Commedia* (2008). Film director Peter Greenaway was responsible for stunning productions of *Rosa* and *Writing to Vermeer*. In *Rosa*, he arrived at a technically superb virtuoso performance, in which he created an image on the stage from theatre and film which was exactly like watching a movie.

It is worth pointing out that commissioned works by composers other than Andriessen were not merely incidental, as in the case of Theo Loevendie (*Gassir, Johnny and Jones*), Guus Janssen (*Noach, Hier^o*), and Rob Zuidam (*Rage d’Amours, Adam in Ballingschap*). *Noach*, in an apocalyptic production directed by Audi with sets by Karel Appel, was also revived and shown on television. It was a macabre feast, a *Threepenny Opera* of the second half of the 20th century and a morality tale about the impending demise of mankind and animal life.

Alice in Wonderland (2001), by Alexander Knaifel after Lewis Carroll, was pure poetry. It was a miracle of Audi’s imagination and measured art direction in an atmosphere of endless eternity, without any dramatic structure. It was the wonder of a journey to another, better world, a performance for the child inside the adult, with theatre, singing, dance, circus and much silence in a fragile, fairytale atmosphere of enchantment and magic.

6 - The un-Dutch Holland Festival Pierre Audi at the international level

The new policy of Pierre Audi at the Holland Festival led, in 2008, to unprecedented differences between official advisory boards in Amsterdam and The Hague on the nature of the Holland Festival and its level of subsidy. Twenty years after he had been hailed as a glorious cosmopolitan, Audi was accused of being - a cosmopolitan. That finally came out in Amsterdam, during a still ongoing debate about the relationship between politics and advisory boards.

For the first time there was a nationalist, Rita Verdonk, in Dutch cultural politics. The Amsterdam Kunstraad (arts council) changed the term 'un-Dutch' from a compliment to a disqualification in its advisory report to the city council about the Holland Festival. Pierre Audi, just reappointed to the Holland Festival until 2012 and for the first time in the Netherlands officially under attack, said that the negative judgement of the Kunstraad was 'bizarre'.

Since 2004, when he succeeded dramatist Ivo van Hove as artistic director of the Holland Festival, Audi had been working to change the profile of the Holland Festival. Under Van Hove, the Holland Festival was more or less under-developed as an international theatre festival and greatly diminished in size.

Audi wanted to return to exceptional performances of an international standard, in a multi-disciplinary setting with lots of space for music, opera, music theatre, visual arts, dance, film, literature, architecture and non-Western art. He wanted a kaleidoscopic window on the world, with a mix of big names and bold experiments.

That breadth marked the festival in the years of the legendary Peter Diamand, who was festival leader from 1948 to 1965. From 2004, the festival was once again working with the best and most important Dutch art institutions - a guarantee of an international standard.

Audi put forward his ideas for the Holland Festival in *The State of the Theatre*: "Within the context of an arts festival, the various disciplines can meet and touch each other, and from such synergy new developments can occur. This mysterious phenomenon continues to fascinate me and inspire my passion for commissioning new work, as well as breathing new life into the classics."

Early in 2008, Audi requested a significant increase in Amsterdam's paltry subsidy of 750,000 euros for the Holland Festival. On accepting the appointment, he had already said: "The current budget is too small to meet the high expectations. You can't work miracles out of thin air."

The Amsterdam Kunstraad was extremely negative about a subsidy increase, and would rather maintain the Holland Festival's existing grant only if it implemented a cheaper and less ambitious artistic policy, adapted to Amsterdam's resources.

According to the Kunstraad, Pierre Audi's policy was "not unique, artistic or interesting enough, un-Dutch, too focused on the established and thus not independent in its own policy." The council accused Audi of 'Viennese' ambitions: "But Vienna is on the Danube, and on the IJ different realities apply."

Had the advice of the Kunstraad been followed in the past, the Viennese State Opera would not have performed in Amsterdam in 1949, with, among others, soprano Elisabeth Schwarzkopf and conductor Karl Böhm. And Maria Callas, Leonard Bernstein, Igor Stravinsky, Karlheinz Stockhausen, Pina Bausch, Luciano Berio, Pierre Boulez, Margot Fonteyn and plenty of other world-class orchestras, theatre companies and artists would not have been welcome either.

"Bizarre and shocking," was Audi's reaction to the pronouncements of the Amsterdam Kunstraad. "I'm definitely not going to adjust anything, shrink the festival, or make it more 'Amsterdammish'. The budget is sound, there are sponsors, and having artistic ambitions at the international level fits in with the festival tradition. The Alderman for Culture Carolien Gehrels wants an international cultural level in Amsterdam."

The national Raad voor Cultuur (culture council) advised the state to give the Holland Festival half a million euros more to promote excellence and internationalism. Minister Plasterk would commit to approximately 375,000 euros. Amsterdam's Alderman Gehrels proposed, against the advice of

the Kunstraad, to give the Holland Festival a further 200,000. The Amsterdam City Council voted against it, and Gehrels suffered a defeat, also on some other points.

A heated debate has been raging in Amsterdam ever since, about who has primacy in the arts policy: the expert advisory council, or politicians who set the social conditions and goals for the arts. Gehrels wants an end to the current advisory system which has been in place for decades, and which means that politicians may have no substantive influence on the arts. She wants, as she said during the third Boekman Lecture on 5 June, 2009, not a politicisation of art, but a culturalisation of politics.

In Pierre Audi's Holland Festival, the personal hand of the festival leader is clear to see, in the programming, the contributions of the Netherlands Opera and the execution. Just as he did earlier in his London Almeida Theatre days, Audi as a director adds a changing visual and theatrical dimension to music, using mostly modest means. He calls these previously rarely seen techniques 'mise en espace' - a term that is a variation on the 'empty space' of Peter Brook.

The themes of the Holland Festival - 'Heaven and Hell' (2005), 'Hysteria and Melancholia' (2006), 'Oppression and Compassion' (2007), 'Cielo e Terra' (2008) and 'Serenity and Anxiety' (2009) were very nearly comprehensive. They overlapped and were therefore hardly compelling.

But what there was to see and hear was often very special, unique even, and would not have been seen in the Netherlands without the Holland Festival. A case in point was the 2006 production of the play, *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* directed by Jürgen Gosch. In Germany it was still scandalous, with its nudity and excrement eating, but in the Netherlands the festival audience seemed shockproof.

In 2007, the festival was very varied and socially engaged, with *Dr. Atomic* from Peter Sellars, *From the House of the Dead* headed by conductor Pierre Boulez, performances from The Wooster Group, the Wiener Burgtheater, the coloratura soprano Edita Gruberova, and the Sahel opera *Bintou Were* - created by an initiative of the Prince Claus Fund.

Later, there was *Commedia* by Louis Andriessen, and *Eine Kirche der Angst*, a shocking performance by Christoph Schlingensiefel about his cancer. There was the exceptional *Hiob* of Johan Simons, the revelation of the music of Pascal Dusapin, the dance opera *Medea* by Sasha Waltz, and a performance of the complete works of Edgard Varèse.

Audi presents real festivals, with new discoveries, interesting links and direct connections to a glorious past. So, in 2008, there was a tribute to the deceased Karlheinz Stockhausen - for decades a regular guest at the Holland Festival - who had intended to celebrate his 80th birthday with the Asko Ensemble at the Festival with his new piece, *Glanz*.

The superb *Glanz*, performed around a luminous pyramid, was the culmination of an *In Memoriam* of visual and theatrical music from various periods in his 374-work oeuvre.

Stockhausen believed that his music creates a direct transcendental connection with the cosmos, which vibrated to its furthest reaches during a performance of his work.

To me, it seemed as if, during the lyrical and melodious music of *Glanz*, Italian composers Luciano Berio and Bruno Maderna - once stars of the Holland Festival as well - were heard again at the festival, emanating from another world through the medium of Stockhausen.

A twittering bird, from Olivier Messiaen, sounded through an oboe in the circle. Messiaen was the mentor of Karlheinz Stockhausen. Messiaen's 100th birthday was celebrated in 2008 at the Holland Festival, with Audi's impressive staging of the opera *Saint François d'Assise* (1983), the only production in the world that year. The Dutch produced première was a remarkable moment in the opera history of the Netherlands.

In *Saint François d'Assise*, Messiaen unites heaven and earth with music - the perfect interpretation of the festival theme 'Cielo e Terra'. Audi staged the opera with more than four hours of music in a church on the stage of the Muziektheater, whose dome had a view of the sky. Heaven and earth overlap: in Messiaen, the earthly life is a foreshadowing of in the eternal heavenly life.

In the second act, aesthetic delight enables a breakthrough to the other side. The angel sings:

“Listen to this music from which life hangs in the scales of the sky, listen to the music of the invisible.” This elevated notion gets a disarmingly earthy complement from Audi in St. Francis’s sermon to the birds, played by colourfully clothed children.

The half acted concert version of Audi’s production, widely regarded as a historic moment, was an emotionally gripping success that summer at the Proms in the Royal Albert Hall. After 20 years, the cosmopolitan Pierre Audi was back in London with a unique Amsterdam opera.

7 - The Mystery of Religion and Death

The convictions of Pierre Audi

La Juive by Fromental Halévy, as of September 2009 Pierre Audi’s latest production at the Netherlands Opera, was a highlight of the remarkably broad performance of the artistic leader and director. *La Juive* (1835) deals with the centuries-old conflict between Jews and Christians, which has so often led to discrimination and persecution. The show, performed in 2007 at the Paris Opera, was a great public success in Amsterdam and was praised by the press.

After four hours and 15 minutes of an amazingly violent première on Friday, 4 September, the following Sunday in the Muziektheater there was a nine-hour conference organised by the Nexus Institute in connection with the performance. The title was ‘Reflections on Man after the End of History. Part 1: Faith, Death, and Freedom.’

The 20 or so speakers included the London Rabbi Jonathan Sacks, the Minister of Justice Ernst Hirsch Ballin (Jewish father, Catholic mother), the just-dismissed Rotterdam advisor Professor Tariq Ramadan, the musicologist Charles Rosen, Nina Krushcheva, the granddaughter of former Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev, and Pierre Audi. There were 1200 attendees.

The Nexus Institute of the University of Tilburg studies European cultural affairs in their artistic, philosophical and ideological contexts in order to provide insights into contemporary questions and to give a challenging shape and direction to the cultural and philosophical debate. Pierre Audi is also a member of the advisory board of the institute.

La Juive, which takes place at the beginning of the Council of Constance (1414-1418), provides an ideal occasion for reflections about faith, death and freedom. The underlying confrontations in *La Juive* get to the essence. The constant threat of the death sentence for violating religious laws affects almost everyone. The complicated libretto by Eugène Scribe looks like a 20th-century piece. Many characters are not what they seem at first sight.

The Jewess Rachel is not Jewish, but the daughter of the Cardinal Brogni, whom he fathered at a time when he was not spiritual. She was saved from death in Rome by the Jew Eléazar, who nurtured her as his Jewish daughter. Eléazar seeks revenge on Brogni, who has condemned his two sons to death as heretics.

Rachel thinks her beloved Samuel is a Jew. But he is really Leopold, a Christian, the husband of Princess Eudoxie, who employs Rachel. Finally, Eléazar and Rachel are to be burned at the stake. At that moment, the Cardinal hears from Eléazar that Rachel is his daughter, but it is too late.

One of the conclusions of *La Juive* may be that religious people apply labels to each other that are arbitrary and therefore meaningless. People have a narrow view, also of themselves. They are not always aware of history and its meaning for their personality and their relationships with others and the rest of the world.

At the Nexus conference, we were reminded of what the Amsterdam-based Jewish philosopher Spinoza said in the 17th century: cast off belief in the supernatural. But religion cannot be abolished. God was declared dead by Nietzsche, and that was reinforced during the last century. Yet God is still alive. What’s more, God, called Allah by Muslims, is back on the world stage.

Religion can lead to fatal fanaticism, as Pierre Audi can tell us from his own experience. He fled his homeland because of religious wars that led to anarchy. In 1975, the Knights of Ali had taken 50 Christian men and boys captive, and killed them in a cemetery. Their genitals were cut off and

stuffed in their mouths. The young Pierre Audi had to stay inside, even a car might be held up by one of the gangs that roamed everywhere. He left for good, never to return to Lebanon.

The staging of *La Juive* seems a complement to Audi's first 'real' opera, Verdi's *Jerusalem* (1990). It is the French version of *I Lombardi alla Prima Crociata* (1843), 'The Lombards on the first crusade'. The European Christians went to the Holy Land to save it from the Moslems. The parallel with the Lebanese civil war between Muslims and Christians is undeniable. It wasn't Audi's own idea to produce *Jerusalem* and *La Juive*. He was asked by Nicholas Payne of Opera North in Leeds and Gérard Mortier of the Paris Opera.

In both productions, Audi made no comparison with the present. "My concern is the human story of the characters," he said. "You must present art as art. People do not need to be taken by the hand – they can draw their own conclusions. As a director, you must clarify the many layers of meaning. Eléazar is a very complex character."

He continued: "Making things topical is exactly what I never do. I have witnessed such terrible things first-hand in the Middle East, so I know what is involved. I want to talk about it in a very different manner that just Wilders versus Arafat. You must find a way to the human dimension of the piece, to make it stronger than politics. As in Handel's *Tamerlano*, a confrontation with a Muslim, I opted for a family drama, but with a religious aspect."

In Lebanon, Pierre Audi was raised as a Roman Catholic, his mother's family coming from the Christian ghetto of Damascus. Audi is no longer a practicing Catholic. "I was an acolyte in Beirut. But for me it was just something theatrical, it wasn't an expression of spirituality. These days, I do feel spiritual. I'm not someone who says I don't believe. I respect it. I was fascinated by the ritual of religion, and I orchestrate that very readily on the stage."

In Berlioz's six-hour, double production *Les Troyens* (2003), Audi perfected his mythological oeuvre, all his thoughts about life, death and life after death. After the *Ring*, it was a new mutation in his art as a producer. The stage set, by Georg Tsy-pin, is immense, the theatrical technique astounding, and the massive choral and ballet scenes have an impressive visual role.

In his *Les Troyens*, Audi refers to the past and the present, without tying the action to real events. Symbolism and realism coincide completely. A red horse's head sets Troy on fire, and there are transparent skyscrapers as replicas of the Twin Towers destroyed two years earlier. Audi saw the avant-garde Berlioz as the centre of 19th century music. The procession of the Trojans with the treasure of Priam anticipated the Triumphal March in Verdi's *Aida*.

That triumphal march glides into the silent suffering of the widow Andromache, scattering the ashes of Hector over herself, and the loud lamentation for the death of the priest Laocoön. The gold recalls Wagner's *Das Rheingold*, one of many references to Wagner. The love duet of Dido and Aeneas refers to *Tristan und Isolde*, the ghost of Hector who ascends from the underworld seems like the wandering Wotan. Dido on her funeral pyre is the ancestor of *Brünnhilde*.

Three glass towers are the Triple Towers of ancient Africa, the proud sign of power. At the end, the Trojans and the Carthaginians gather to swear eternal hatred to the descendants of Aeneas in a desolate grey scene. Later, Rome will destroy its rival Carthage.

Almost all opera is about life and death. That's what makes the music, Audi believes: "The music talks about death. The mystery of death dominates many moments in Egyptian culture, in classical Greek culture, and the contemporary culture of war and death. Death is not something nihilistic; it's not a black hole. You need something else to believe in, something after death. That doesn't necessarily have to be a second life in the Christian heaven. It can also be a mythical sense that there's something else, that our reality is not always absolute and concrete."

Such ambiguity plays a huge role in music, according to Audi. Composers are always preoccupied with it, and great conductors such as Haitink are working with that too, as in a Mahler symphony. In Mahler, all music moves from earth to heaven, to a different kind of life that is indescribable and unknowable.

Rachel in *La Juive* was raised to die. Death can come at any moment. At the end of his production of *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Pelléas goes to a higher place. Audi's staging of *Venus und Adonis* by Hans

Werner Henze is about life and the cosmos: the dead Adonis rises to the planet Venus. In *Rêves d'un Marco Polo* by Claude Vivier, an immortal soul, without fear of the uncertain life after death, journeys to explore the universe.

About the Author

Kasper Jansen (Middelburg, 1946) was art and music editor of the national newspaper, *NRC Handelsblad*, from 1979 to 2009. He saw almost all of Pierre Audi's productions at home and abroad, reviewed them, and interviewed Audi on a regular basis. In 2005, he published *Tussen Aarde en Hemel* ('Between Earth and Heaven', Prometheus) - reports and interviews about faith and unbelief in religious music. He is now working on a book about music and early forms of opera in Amsterdam during the Golden Age.

The Johannes Vermeer Prize is a state award for the arts, established by the Minister of Education, Culture and Science (OCW). The realisation is in the hands of the Boekman Foundation.

Jury Johannes Vermeer Prize 2009: Victor Halberstadt (Chair), Maarten Asscher, Judith Belinfante, Jos de Pont, Paul Schnabel.

Secretary Johannes Vermeer Prize: Suzanna de Sitter, Boekman Foundation.

In 2009, the Johannes Vermeer Prize was awarded to Pierre Audi and presented to him on 30 October, 2009, in the Prinsenhof in Delft.

This publication is a production of the Boekman*studies* Foundation for projects and publications on art, culture and policies. Boekman*studies* is part of the Boekman Foundation, the intersectoral study centre for art, culture and policies.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or published in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior written permission of the publisher.