

PIET KEE - A Dutch Master Of Note

An obituary by Kenneth Shenton



One of that select but notable band of Dutch organ recitalists who rose to international prominence, Piet Kee (b. 1927), who has died in May, aged 90, was a dynamic and diverse musician whose influence permeated all aspects of the subject. Soloist, composer, improviser par excellence, teacher, editor, writer, conductor, design consultant and undoubted enthusiast, throughout the course of more than half a century, the remarkable breadth of his industry brought not only greater recognition for the instrument itself, but also proved pivotal in inspiring countless new generations of performers.

Born into a distinguished Dutch musical dynasty in August 1927, Pieter Willem Kee spent his formative years among the windmills of Zaandam, to the west of Amsterdam. Almost from birth he was playing the two manual and pedal harmonium in the family home. Initially taught the organ by his father Cornelius, himself a recitalist of international renown, following the country's occupation

during the Second World War, Kee studied at the Amsterdam Conservatorium. There his teachers included Anthon van der Horst for organ, Willem Andriessen for theory and Willem Smalt for piano.

Having completed his National Service, in 1951, Kee returned to the Conservatorium, coming to national prominence by winning the *Prix d'excellence* and the Jubilee Prize. In addition, as the winner of the Haarlem International Improvisation Competition in 1953, 1954 and 1955, he was able to retain the highly coveted *Silver Tulip* Prize. Appointed Organist of the Church of St Laurens, Alkmaar in 1952, he remained in post until 1987. As City Organist of the St Bavokerk in Haarlem for 33 years, from 1956 until 1989, Kee successfully helped maintain its fine cultural traditions.

As a performer, keen to restore the organ to the mainstream of contemporary music making, Kee revelled in the unique opportunities afforded by the instrument. Fiery and impassioned, his sense of rhythm more than matched by a love of colour, underpinning everything was a splendidly natural technique. Effortlessly building an enviable reputation for musical insight and selfless integrity, he successfully maintained a non-stop global career as top-flight concert artist. Attaining a uniform distinction in all aspects of repertoire, his tempi never lacked sparkle, the performances panache.

A regular and welcome visitor to this country throughout his long career, Kee made the first of many appearances at the Royal Festival Hall in 1957. As he would do so often he ended the recital with an improvisation, the theme supplied on this occasion by the composer Peter Racine Fricker. Forty years later, in August 1997, when the Incorporated Association of Organists held their Annual Congress in the Netherlands, Kee's two recitals, one at the Concertgebouw in Amsterdam and the other at St Bavokerk, Haarlem, merely served to confirm his status as the leading exponent of his art.

Happily, many of his solo performances endure courtesy of an extensive and somewhat eclectic discography. In 1954, one of the first LPs to be produced in the Netherlands, featured Kee performing a varied programme of Sweelinck, Couperin, Buxtehude, Reger and Distler. Alongside a lifelong devotion to the organ music of J.S. Bach, one of his numerous discs successfully showcased the work of friend and fellow Dutch composer Hendrik Andriessen. No less impressive was the fine all César Franck programme, recorded on the organ of the Basilica de Santa Maria del Caro in Spain.

As a much sought after teacher, Kee's influence has been immense. Joining the staff of the Muzieklyceum in Amsterdam in 1952, he stayed on when, in 1976, it merged with the Amsterdam Conservatorium to become the Sweelinck Academy. From 1970 onwards, as a member of the team at the Haarlem Summer Academy for Organists, he taught both Bach interpretation and improvisation. Increasingly in demand at seminars, master classes and competitions worldwide, for more than three decades he became a popular fixture at the St Albans International Organ Festival.

Much of what he taught he practiced in his own highly individual compositions. A fastidious though never prolific composer, his sacred music includes, *The World*, a particularly vivid 1999 mini oratorio of words by Henry Vaughan for mixed choir, soloists and instruments. Two years later came a highly challenging a capella choral exploration of George Herbert's text, *Heaven*, specifically created for the BBC Singers. Sadly, neglected is a much earlier work, dating from 1988, *Integratie*, intriguingly scored for organ, mixed choir, flageolet, serinette, mechanical birds and three mechanical organs.

Conceived on a larger and perhaps more personally distinctive canvas are his many works for solo organ. Dating from 2000, *The Organ*, an expansive exploration of Golden Section form draws on the influences of Dutch painting and Chinese music. Of the *Three Organ Pieces, Seventy Chords and More* is a tribute to countryman, Ewald Kooiman, while *Cervos*, with its Messiaen-like allusions, is built around a well-known Genevan Psalter melody. The *Voluntary on HSAE* is an extended development of the musical notes of its dedicatee, the distinguished English organist, Philip Sawyer.

It was yet another English organist, Thomas Trotter, who remains at the heart of *Festival Spirit*, a Kee creation for five organs that was written and first performed for the 2001 St Albans International Organ Festival. Dedicated to Peter Hurford, it is scored for four box organs and the Harrison organ in the Abbey. Trotter, Marie-Claire Alain, Ben van Oosten, David Higgs and Andrew Parnell were the performers. Four years later, Trotter was again the featured soloist, this time in the premiere of Kee's *Haarlem Concerto*, featuring solo organ, harmonium and symphonic wind orchestra.

Erudite and persuasive, Kee also proved to be a fine writer, contributing a remarkable series of studies on the long forgotten background to the passacaglias of Bach and Buxtehude. The recipient of countless honours over the years, these range from the Bach Medal in 1960, presented by the Harriet Cohen Foundation, to his election as a Knight of the Order of Orange-Nassau twelve years later. In 1988, in the company of Olivier Messiaen, at a glittering ceremony in London, Sir David Lumsden, President of the Royal College of Organists, presented both with Honorary Fellowships.