

Classical

Dutch courage



The Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra and (inset) conductor Mariss Jansons. Above right: The Nieuw Ensemble. Below right: The Orchestra of the 18th Century

Three top Dutch orchestras cover centuries of music this month, and it's well worth a watch, writes **Nancy Pellegrini**

The Dutch have long been quiet contributors to Beijing's cultural scene, but this month they have created a special programme to break that dreary period between the Beijing Music Festival and the holiday season, otherwise known as November. As part of the 'Close Encounters: Dutch on Stage' festival, three groups arrive with international reputations, vastly different styles, and something for everyone.

A classic orchestra

First up is the Royal Concertgebouw (Concert Hall) Orchestra, famous in the Netherlands and beyond, with 1,100 CDs as well as a Who's Who history of conductors (Stravinsky, Strauss, Debussy), soloists (Rachmaninoff, Bartok and Prokofiev) and a continuing tradition of making contemporary composers wave their own batons. Chief Conductor Mariss Jansons has 'a great sense of orchestral geography,' writer/broadcaster Norman Lebrecht tells *Time*

Out. 'During breaks, other conductors will go to their dressing rooms and call their brokers, but Jansons stays on stage, moving music stands around by inches.'

Something riskier

Perfectionists they may be, but the Concertgebouw is nothing *nieme* (new). The Nieuw Ensemble (NE)

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has spent its 28-year history creating repertoire and programming where most orchestras fear to tread. More interesting for Beijingers is the group's long association with China. Tan Dun, Guo Wenjing, the late Mo Wuping and Chen Qigang have all written pieces especially for NE, while Artistic Director Joel Bons came to China as far back as 1988 to meet with and mentor young musical scribes.

'Composers in non-Western countries such as Russia and China have different starring points and priorities than those in the West,' says Bons. 'They don't carry the burden of Western musical history on their shoulders, and can embark on new works with a freer, more open and more flexible mind than we can.' The group's bigger brother is the Atlas Ensemble, half NE members and half musicians from the Middle East and Asia. 'In the future, the projects with non-Western instruments and composers will be intensified,' says Adriaan Reinink, NE's publicity officer. 'But NE will still search for and stimulate the future of music itself.'

A journey into the past

Mainstream; modern; the next logical step is back to the future, and here again, the Dutch don't disappoint. The Orchestra of the 18th Century (OEC) has spent decades learning just how Bach, Mozart and Haydn wanted their music to be played; now they have the instruments to prove it. Period orchestras are somewhat controversial in musical circles; purists insist that since Mozart played his sonatas on smaller, lighter fortepianos, we can reproduce the instrument and hear what Mozart heard. Others point out that Beethoven, who couldn't hear much

at all, broke almost every fortepiano that he banged upon. Instruments improved in quality; given the choice, Mozart probably would have traded up, so playing authentic instruments is nothing more than a gimmick. 'Absurd,' says Sieuwert Verster, General Director and Co-founder of the OEC, who feels period orchestras are more than period instruments. 'Until 30 years ago, all orchestral music sounded the same,' he says. According to Verster, smaller orchestras began specialising in certain periods, studying the style, repertoire, rhetoric, instrumentation and all else necessary to create the best possible performance of early music. 'The result has been compared with restoring paintings,' he says. 'The dust of centuries has been cleared away, hidden details return to the surface, and everything shines as if it was painted last night,' he continues. 'Our ideal is to play Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven the way the composers themselves would be happy with.' Something old, something new, something mainstream, and nothing blue. This November looks bright. Catch the Royal Concertgebouw on Tuesday 4 and Wednesday 5; the Nieuw Ensemble Thursday 6 and Friday 7; and the Orchestra of the 18th Century Thursday 13 and Friday 14, all at the NCPA. See listings for details.