Jan Brokken

The Music of the Netherlands Antilles: Why Eleven Antilleans Knelt before Chopin's Heart. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2015. 210 pp. (Cloth US\$60.00)

In *Caribbean Discourse*, Édouard Glissant analyzes the Caribbean not as a fixed collection of traditions and experiences, but as part of a process of becoming—a region constantly transforming into a new set of possibilities. In *Music of the Netherlands Antilles* (translated from Dutch by Scott Rollins), Jan Brokken extends Glissant's analysis, pointing to Curaçao's widespread appreciation for Western classical music, as well as the island's own creole renditions of Western dances, as instances of transformation and becoming. He introduces the mazurka, for example, as being “born in the snows of Poland,” but, “thaw[ing] out completely under the Antillean sun” (p. 162), emerging in Curaçao as something new and different, “a delicious concoction” that “no matter how Antillean [it] may have sounded, bore a European stamp” (pp. 58, 114–15). The waltz, too, was “rendered with more fiery rhythm” on the island, “and not always in 3/4 but often in 6/8 time” (p. 21). “Curaçao is multifaceted in a unique way,” Brokken affirms, “it unifies differences without removing them” (p. 6). His book pulls readers immediately into Curaçao's complex negotiation of “here” and “there,” past and present. Reconciliation, however, emerges possible through the mazurkas and waltzes, which, on Curaçao, effectively straddle the Old World and the New.

Brokken first learned about Curaçao's appreciation for Western classical music, specifically the compositions of Chopin, when he moved to the island in 1993, taking refuge in a bungalow complete with piano. “No sooner had I moved into [the] bungalow than I slid behind the keys,” playing “a couple of mazurkas by Chopin” (p. 8). It was a hot evening, he remembers, so “the doors and shutters were all wide open, and the sounds of the piano must have been clearly audible at some distance” (p. 8). The next day a Curaçaoan neighbor thanked Brokken for playing “our music,” mazurkas “to dance to Caribbean music” (pp. 8–9). The neighbor's words raised questions regarding Chopin and Antillean traditions, which became the story Brokken explored, living in Curaçao, over the next nine years. It provided the foundation for this book. Brokken suggests that Chopin's popularity on Curaçao came from the fact that Chopin himself belonged to multiple worlds: Poland and France. “A similar situation existed for composers from Curaçao. Most of them were of European descent ... but they no longer spoke the language of their forebears ... A part of them was European due to their exposure to European civilization, while another part was a product of living at the threshold of South America. In Chopin they encountered the same sort of split personality” (p. 24).

Brokken traces the development of Chopin's influence through a variety of Antillean composers, crediting Jules Blasini, who first brought Chopin sheet music to Curaçao in the nineteenth century, for "herald[ing] the beginning of Dutch Antillean classical music" by composers such as Joseph Sickman Corsen, Jan Gerard Palm, Edgar Palm, Jacobo Palm, and Wim Statius Muller (p. 29). Yet he also scouts for Chopin's influence in more modern locales, including the popular Tumba Festival and the cruise ship *Freewinds*, where Chick Corea gave a piano concert that featured improvisations on local dance music he'd heard earlier that day while walking Curaçao's downtown streets. Chopin is crucial to the history and development of Antillean music, past and present, Brokken argues, pointing as further proof to the eleven Antilleans who, at the 150th anniversary of Chopin's death in 1999, paid homage before the heart of Chopin, entombed at the Church of the Holy Cross in Warsaw.

Music of the Netherlands Antilles offers readers a glimpse into the unique relationship Curaçao had, and continues to have, with Western classical traditions. Brokken brings to life the unique beauty and music of Curaçao, helping me to fall in love with the island all over again. Reading the book, I was delightfully pulled back to 1995, when I first heard Edgar Palm play and discuss his mazurka and waltz compositions ... and to 2001, when I attended Karnaval, where Izaline Calister's hugely popular tumba "Sa sa na awasa" played a central role.

This is where the book is most successful: providing a memoir that builds a convincing narrative about Chopin in terms of a Curaçaoan phenomenon. Unfortunately, despite its wealth of information, based on close research from primary and secondary sources, the book includes no citations. However, it is highly readable, and presents vivid accounts of the island and the musicians. Brokken is a well-known journalist who has published novels, travelogues, and literary nonfiction, and this book displays his skills as author and narrator. It reads like a collection of extracts from a travelogue, or a diary without the dates, offering private glimpses into the lives and music of numerous Antillean composers and musicians.

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