

ENSEMBLE HOUTHANDEL
INTO THE WOODS

SARAH VERMEYEN FLUTE
EVY VAN DONGEN CLARINET
JONAS COOMANS BASSOON
ROGIER STEEL HORN
MAARTEN WIJNEN OBOE

LEONARD BERNSTEIN (1918-1990)
Overture to 'Candide' (1956)

SAMUEL BARBER (1910-1981)
Op. 31 | Summer Music (1956)

ROBERT MUCZYNSKI (1929-2010)
Op. 45 | Quintet for Winds (1985)

MALCOLM ARNOLD (1921-2006)
Three Shanties (1943)

GEORGE GERSHWIN (1898-1937)
Selections from Porgy and Bess (1935)



Ensemble Houthandel formed as a wind quintet at the Royal Conservatoire Antwerp in 2005. At that time it was called 'Ensemble Houthandel Antwerpen' and was initially active for exam performances, also becoming an emblem for the conservatoire and for itself in a variety of self-organised concerts. The group studied and rehearsed the standard wind quintet repertoire intensively in those early years.

In 2007 Houthandel was selected as finalist at the renowned Belgian chamber music competition 'Gouden Vleugels', and this generated a great deal of interest and a well-filled concert schedule. Their first production, 'De Grote Houthandel Antwerpen Show', was performed twenty times at a variety of important venues. Together with Jeugd & Muziek Vlaanderen, Ensemble Houthandel also organised a successful series of educational (school) concerts.

In February 2009 Houthandel was declared winner of the 4th edition of Gouden Vleugels and awarded the Jeugd & Muziek Chamber Music prize organised by Jeugd & Muziek Vlaanderen, Radio Klara, newspaper De Standaard and the KBC Bank. This award really put the wind in the ensemble's sails, and in the 2009-2010 season there were no fewer than 35 performances of 'De Grote Houthandel Antwerpen Show' and a number of highly acclaimed concerts in the Netherlands. Part of the Gouden Vleugels prize gave Houthandel the opportunity to record their debut CD 'Kicking Sawdust' in Studio Toots, a well-known location for Flemish Radio and Television. This was followed in April 2010 by a concert tour to the Spanish Balearic Islands.

In the 2010-2011 season the oboe and horn chairs were vacated and Houthandel welcomed two new musicians. As a result the ensemble became even closer-knit, and the dynamics for rehearsal and creativity grew in intensity. That season saw Houthandel perform 16 school concerts of the Grote Houthandel Antwerpen Show, 8 performances of 'Kicking Sawdust' and

10 performances of 'Peter and the Wolf', a dance production of 'In the Wings' directed by Anne Geenen. In addition Houthandel set up the 'Blazersatelier' or 'Wind-Players' Studio': a creative and innovative workshop for students of wind instruments.

The concert list for 2011-2012 also had a promising start, with 14 performances of 'Kicking Sawdust' and a major revival of 'Peter and the Wolf' with no fewer than 21 performances in the Netherlands. This list was supplemented by various school and other performances, and a concert tour to the International Music Festival Vitoria-Gasteiz in Spain.

In the 2012-2013 Ensemble Houthandel realised its ambitious project 'Do You Remember?' For this the ensemble commissioned the British composer Philip Feeney, who is internationally known as a composer for ballet, as well as working with the Dutch theatre and opera director Sybrand Van Der Werf. The result has been the most theatrical and multi-layered production by Houthandel to date, from which followed an extensive tour spread over two seasons and innumerable school concerts. A highly successful spin-off from this production has been the interactive family show 'Weet Je Nog?'

In 2014 Houthandel created their production 'Soirée Deluxe' with highlights from the wind quintet repertoire and sensational in every sense of the word. At the same time the ensemble has been preparing for their recording project 'Into the Woods' in which they have drawn on Anglo-Saxon repertoire to create an accessible programme with a variety of stylistic influences. This production has its première in 2015 followed by a series of performances in Belgium and the Netherlands.

Ensemble Houthandel is given financial support by the Vlaamse Gemeenschap en Kunstcirkel vzw (the Flemish Community and Art Circle).

ENSEMBLE HOUTHANDEL IN CONVERSATION WITH DOMINY CLEMENTS

The name of your ensemble 'Houthandel' translates in English to something like 'timber trade'. This is certainly a distinctive identity for woodwind instruments, but your attitude to performing is also a refreshingly modern alternative to the usual concert-hall conventions, including choreographed movement and performances in unusual locations. Perhaps you can tell us more about this, and perhaps also how your energetic concept transfers itself into the recording studio?

Houthandel is an organisation which is based on three pillars: music, musicians and audience. Whatever the programme, the ensemble looks for the best possible form and content to create an optimal production. Houthandel uses various forms of expression to play for and with its public, and the result should therefore always be a powerful meeting between music and audience.

Scenography, choreography and costume are an integral part of the performance, and the musicians also frequently play from memory, which brings a great deal of freedom. This provides flexibility for visualising the music in a space; gaining contact and interaction with audiences unencumbered by the physical and mental barriers which can often be thrown up by sheet music on a stand.

The challenge is indeed to create an intimate atmosphere through a studio recording, and to minimise the distance between listeners and musicians. We feel that a varied programme supports us in this aim.

The repertoire that we chose for *Into the Woods* will amuse, surprise and fascinate the listener from start to finish.

This programme is an attractive musical mixture with plenty of appealing jauntiness; framed by operatic arrangements starting with Bernstein's rip-roaring *Overture to ... 'Candide'* and ending with Gershwin's wondrously inspired and jazz-inflected *Porgy and Bess*. Does this reflect your ideal concert programme, or were you seeking a particular journey on which you wished to take the listener?

We resolved to choose accessible repertoire for *Into the Woods* while at the same time including wide variety and many stylistic layers in the programme. The selecting of core works in the wind-quintet repertoire is intended to perpetuate the growth of our ensemble, and we found inspiration for this in an Anglo-Saxon line using mainly American composers. America is a relatively young culture, but their music for wind quintet is full of diversity and has a wide range of influences and styles. In addition to pure 'art music' there are important elements drawn from Jewish, African-American and jazz music. Moreover, there are several very high quality arrangements of well-known orchestral repertoire which we like to include in our set-list. This variety becomes an anthology, and the juxtaposition of the different works becomes a narrative in which the hearing of one piece has its effect on the way one perceives the next, shining new light on well-known music and old favourites.

The lyrical, open-air feel of Samuel Barber's *Summer Music* is a real showcase for the quintet, with lovely solos for each instrument as well as having passages which demand the utmost rhythmic unity. How do you approach achieving artistic consensus while creating space for individual expression? Is this something which applies to Ensemble Houthandel beyond musical interpretation, for instance in the ways you organise your intriguing variety of projects?

Ensemble Houthandel is most definitely a democratic collective in which artistic choices are made and given shape as a group. Two of our number have taken on the duties of business and artistic leadership, but otherwise

everything is discussed and decided by the whole quintet, from the selection of the programme and the ultimate content of the performance to the design of the promotional materials. The essence of our business is however the search for an ever-evolving group sound, preserving a respect for everyone's individual expressiveness and timbre within the musicianship and craft of interpreting each piece as an ensemble.

Robert Muczynski had Polish origins but was born in Chicago and is generally considered an American composer. He described his *Quintet for Winds* as 'lyrical, rhythmic and expressionistic,' and, as with Samuel Barber's work, it was written to be as rewarding to play for musicians as it should be for people to hear. Do you find your own enthusiasm for a particular piece of music transfers itself to your audiences – even with 'difficult' composers and new music, or do you chose your repertoire with this kind of communication in mind?

The repertoire for wind quintet is fairly limited and mostly contemporary (the majority of works are from the 20th century), and as a result the ensemble has never elected to play accessible works per sé. From the existing repertoire we have always looked for good compositions and forgotten pearls, and have also commissioned new works (Vloemans, Henderickx, Feeney) in order to expand the repertoire for our instrumentation. To make this music more accessible to audiences we have placed and emphasis on our original and visual form of performance, using costumes, choreography, stage direction... This appears to have come together for the first time with *Into the Woods*. In the Anglo-Saxon line we have found a wide mixture of extremely high quality repertoire, each and every composition with its own captivating delights. We also want to extend the family of works for wind quintet by raising the profile of some fantastic arrangements of orchestral repertoire.

Originally a trumpet player and a highly successful composer for both the concert hall and films, Malcolm Arnold was very much a musician's musician. His *Three Shanties* take the songs *What shall we do with the drunken sailor?*, *Boney was a Warrior* and *Johnny come down to Hilo*, transforming them into what has become some of the most popular music in the quintet repertoire. Filled with roguish wit and sophisticated fun, these pieces raise the question as to whether music can literally be 'funny'. Can Ensemble Houthandel raise a laugh during concerts?

The *Three Shanties* is indeed a very rewarding work: nice both to perform and to hear. Simple and recognisable tunes have been integrated into its three movements in a virtuoso and at the same time comic fashion. Houthandel has always aimed to give pleasurable and even funny concerts. This can be found in many elements of the concert experience: the relaxed way in which the musicians communicate with the public, the interaction between the musicians, unexpected and unconventional use of performance spaces and of course the music that is being performed. Repertoire for winds is generally rather upbeat and airy rather than ponderous and weighty. The *Three Shanties* will certainly contribute to the comical side to the CD and our concerts.

Your online mission statement includes an emphasis on innovation and a 'total experience' for audiences, and on quality and depth rather than quantity in terms of your productions. There is of course plenty to say about your previous successes, but where does this recording see you in the ongoing line of your development, and in which direction(s) do you see yourselves going in the future?

Houthandel does indeed limit the number of new productions it does per season, due to the intense preparation required for the visual development and memorising of each project. *Into the Woods* is a new venture which we are looking forward to greatly. We are very enthusiastic about the repertoire and this will be our second CD, five years after our debut *Kicking Sawdust*. We hope to provide a wider enjoyment of wind music by reaching new audiences with this CD. This particular programme is also especially inspirational for the making of a fine live show in which the effect of the music is intensified through appropriate staging and choreography.





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Recording Producer and Editing

Daan van Aalst

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Booklet text

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LEONARD BERNSTEIN (1918-1990)

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| 1 | <i>Overture to 'Candide' (1956)</i> | 4.36 |
| | transcribed for Wind Quintet by Don Stewart (2011) | |

SAMUEL BARBER (1910-1981)

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|---|-------------------------------------|-------|
| 2 | <i>Op. 31 Summer Music (1956)</i> | 12.15 |
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ROBERT MUCZYNSKI (1929-2010)

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|---|--|------|
| | <i>Op. 45 Quintet for Winds (1985)</i> | |
| 3 | <i>Allegro risoluto</i> | 2.37 |
| 4 | <i>Andante</i> | 3.03 |
| 5 | <i>Moderato – Allegro con spirito</i> | 6.05 |

MALCOLM ARNOLD (1921-2006)

- | | | |
|---|------------------------------|------|
| | <i>Three Shanties (1943)</i> | |
| 6 | <i>Allegro con brio</i> | 2.29 |
| 7 | <i>Allegretto semplice</i> | 1.57 |
| 8 | <i>Allegro vivace</i> | 2.54 |

GEORGE GERSHWIN (1898-1937)

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|---|---|-------|
| 9 | <i>Selections from Porgy and Bess (1935)</i> | 18.14 |
| | Transcribed for Wind Quintet by Bill Holcombe | |

Total time 54.15

