

The basics of Buk & Bach

by Marguerite van de Poll

Many friends of the Bukowski-Society know about the project by Willem van Ekeren from the Netherlands, who combined Bach's classical music with Bukowski's poems and many of them adore his approach. So we asked him for an interview to go deeper into the making-of and all that. Though he's a little shy and not the guy who likes giving interviews, we got him, partly because our author for this was Marguerite van de Poll, who had been working with Willem for many years.

? Hi Willem, we know that you didn't 'invent' Bach-Bukowski, but that in a way it came to you. You were in bed with Bukowski's *The last night of the earth poems* reading the poem *You know and I know and thee know* for the third time, and all of a sudden you heard at the same time the *f flat prelude* from Bach's *Well-tempered Clavier* (WtC) playing back of your mind. The next day you started experimenting with it on the piano and a couple of other Bach-Bukowski combinations came up quite fast and the rest is history. Today, we are going to talk about the musical ins and outs of Bach-Bukowski, in spite of your specific opinion about analysing music and talking about it, is that okay?

! It's okay if people want to analyse, but for me, analysing music myself, is totally unnecessary and to read about it, is also a bit of a bore, that's not where the inspiration comes from. But that's a personal thing I guess, I'm not the analysing kind. And if you're in a creative process, analysing kills it. There are masters in analysing, they see through everything, they make links and yeah, then it could be interesting. I would of course be flattered if it would be on the literature list of a conservatory to analyse a Bach-Bukowski song, but I rather like them to cover it, you know, let them sing it, let them play it. Then you're getting closer to the truth. Then you feel what I've done and what it's like.

? You combined the Bukowski poems with parts of Bach's WtC. I know that this is a series of preludes and fugues, but can you explain what preludes and fugues are?

! The fugue is more like a canon; it has to do with the imitation of the voicing. But this also works for preludes. Bach can give a prelude the

appearance of a fugue. In a fugue you have the theme, which is then repeated in another voice at a different height and then again, and sometimes again. And after that, you get an intermezzo before the theme starts all over again but in another tonality. (fig.1)

The image shows a musical score for a fugue in B minor, divided into five voices (I-V). Each voice is represented by a vertical line with notes and accidentals. The notes are connected by horizontal lines, indicating intervals and melodic movement. The score is organized into systems with measure numbers. The tonalities for each system are listed below the notes. The voices are: I (measures 1-25), II (measures 30-43), III (measures 44-52), IV (measures 53-59), and V (measures 60-76). The tonalities are: h-fs, fs-h, h-fs, fs-h, e, e-h, h-fs, (A), D-A, A-D, fs, fs-clk, E-h, h, h-fs, e-h, h, and B.

fig.1: Fugue in B minor (In the bottom), from A. Dürr "Johann Sebastian Bach Das Wehltemperierte Klavier" Bärenreiter, 1998 – The 4 different voices, starting with the fugue theme, and the intermezzos

? What comes first: the choice of a poem, or that of a Bach-piece, and if you choose a poem first, is that based on the text alone, or do you also consider the possibility of combining it with Bach? If so, what are your criteria?

! There is no particular sequence; I select favourite pieces of Bach and of Bukowski. No criteria, it is all pure intuition. There is of course a history of Bach playing involved and a history of reading the poems and a history of songwriting. I do have a feeling about choosing the right poem. In my opinion not all poems are suited for Bach. Some are too much like little dialogues out of a movie, or real life dialogue, with different voices and that I don't want. That's too difficult. For the Bach-Bukowski-project I feel more attracted to the little stories or little paintings, you know, that kind of stuff.

A specific state of mind or point of view, or some philosophical or psychological kind of thing. And Buk mixes all this. And of course in the music, most of the time, I do prefer the *minor* stuff of the works. Not all the time, sometimes it's really very good to have a combination of a very sad and very tragic poem like *Balloons* and the

kind of sunny-side-up music of the *D major fugue*, that makes it very harsh.

I guess, I like the *minor* stuff of Bach better than the *major* because to me it has another, more, impact, it reaches you on another level, it gets deeper. And because I like them more, I can play those works better, and so they can be available being there with the poems. And also the poems of Bukowski are not very *major* in experiencing them. They of course have a warm heart and a good feeling running through them, but there is also some nasty telling there.

I don't mean *minor*. Nobody knows what *minor* and *major* is, it's a very artificial classification, it doesn't really exist, but it's a way to get the show on the road, to get started. And this of course is very decisive for further development and character of the piece.

? How do you make the match, once you have chosen a poem?

! When I have no hint from inside that a certain poem has to be with a certain Bach-piece, I try it. Most of the time my choice just happens to be the lucky one because I do know the atmosphere of the prelude or the fugue and I can also imagine what kind of atmosphere the poem has, so that is what I try to combine. And for instance, like I said, I like the combination of the *D major* and *D flat Major fugues* with the kind of humorous or ironic or even harsh texts.

? When do you choose a prelude and when a fugue for a poem and which one of them? Has length got to do with it?

! It can be a prelude or it can be a fugue. Of course length has to do with it because most of the preludes are shorter works. When you want to do a real long poem you have to look for a long piece and then you automatically get into a fugue. (There are also short fugues). Very simple choice, I'm kind of a guy who doesn't want to go through hardships for the sake of art, I like the easy way.

In the bottom is one of my favourite poems and the *fugue in b minor* is the last piece of the first part of the *WtC* and I said, "well that's a bottom-piece and it really fitted like...., yeah it was very good. It had a chromatic theme with very strange up and down jumps and also a very beautiful triad in between, so it really represented kind of the idea of the poem with all its impressions, all its strange, dreamlike sequences. And vice versa those fitted well with the chromatic material of the 24th fugue of the first part.

It's all just about the musical impact and the way they balance on each other. It's not that a fugue has more. Of course there's another structure, but that has nothing to do with the use for the poem.

? The *Well-tempered Clavier* has 48 prelude/fugue combinations. You relatively often chose both the prelude and the fugue from the same key [4 times: *f minor*: *You know* and *Blasted*. *D major*: *Aliens* and *Balloons*. *b minor*: *Spark* and *In the bottom*. *D flat Major*: *Peace* and *Be kind*.] In your concerts and on the CD though, you treat them as separate things. Is your choice based on the fact that you know those pieces better than the rest, or do certain keys match better with the poems and/or your way of singing?

! It could be both, I know them better, I like them better. I can work with them.

? And then, when the choices are made, how do you continue? In your CD booklet you write that at the very first time you sang *You know* and *I know* and *thee know* on the *f minor* prelude, it fell into place with the structure of the *f minor* harmonies. What do you mean by that and how do you make that happen? What musical problems come up and how do you solve them?

! Well, there is no such thing as problems, when I start playing. I just like to enjoy myself when I play. I want to mix the two of them together. And when it gives me a good feeling and when I enjoy what I do, like the way, the rhythmic, the melody or, you know, the way the first line of the poem dances on the music of Bach, then it's okay with me and then I can go on.

I just want to make something beautiful, something that is strong and reaches out, you know. If I don't have a good feeling about the start, I stop. That hasn't happened too often, maybe 3 or 4 works of all the Bach-Bukowski combinations didn't make it to the end, they had to change or I even had to leave both out.

And then I start like a painter. This is a kind of sketch you make, first with the first line. Then you obviously have a kind of characteristic of the subject and the rest you fill in very sketchy, very vague. Then you go on with highlighting something you want to have in. (fig. 2 - at the following page)

? Are there any other gifts in such a way?

! Well of course when you have a very long poem like *In the bottom* there you have the intermezzos. This is the instrumental part, where there are no words. (fig. 1 again)

? But you choose to do it like that?

! Yeah, I do, but it exactly fits the total length of the piece. You have the intermingling instrumental intermezzo's and there are no words and then, when the fugue theme starts again, you start with the text, and this also makes a beautiful whole when it's all finished. Then all the words are finished and you have the end of the music too.

? So you didn't have to measure to fit this in, to make them end at the same time?

! No, because you can hear my singing most of the time has the same tempo, there is no acceleration, just sometimes there is. Once or twice I made a mistake and I had to do a rap, had to press it a bit harder to make it fit better.

? Gounod's *Ave Maria* is another example of existing text put on an existing part of music. Are there more examples in history, or are you and Gounod the only ones that did this?

! For all I know: yes. I mean, in the Middle Ages you have some musical traditions to fit in texts on Gregorian melodies and make new melodies on the *cantus firmi* but...

? Musically seen, what is the main difference between Gounod's *Ave Maria* and a Bach-Bukowski song and why do you sometimes compare *Peace with this Ave Maria*?

! Gounod composed a straightforward, very classically romantic melody for the prayer on the chords, the harmonies of the *C major prelude*. It's a kind of classical baroque. It's a very well-balanced melody. And it's of course with very slow, long notes, very nice to sing on. You can really do a lot of *bel canto* on it. And then you hear

these meditative moving chords flowing under the melody and that's of course a very nice balance, so it works musically.

? But *Peace* works as well?

! Yeah, but the words and the melody are much shorter and much more intertwined with the movement of the chords, with the flowing and the waving. But it's still kind of peaceful, although the melody of course is of a totally different structure.

So you can compare the *C major* and the *D flat prelude*, because of their obvious simplicity of the movements. The chords are just changing but the moving is the same. And the themes of the two songs make them kind of similar too. I mean, there is no aggressiveness or agitation in the *Ave Maria* and in *Peace*. But it's all about the interaction between the instrumental music and the singing melody.

? There is a difference between a 'normal' song and a Bach-Bukowski song. Does that have to do with the fact that the piano is not being used as accompaniment and that Bach-Bukowski songs have a different structure?

! Well that's part of it, but when you're strictly speaking of a song, you have a very simple form, you know, you have a verse and a chorus and maybe a bridge; in a pop song, they always speak about a bridge. Mostly two important themes A and B (or a chorus/verse) and sometimes you have some contrast like a C or a D theme.

This is like a chain, you know, it starts all over again and again, so maybe 3 or 4 times you hear the same circle. And even in the verse, very often the same lines are repeated, with little variations. Yeah, listen to every song, there is a lot of repetition. Words change but the melody stays the same.

My melodies are not song-like melodies in that perspective; it's just more a *parlando*, *parlando-bluesy* kind of thing. That's what Bukowski's words need, just a bit of magnifying of the talkative qualities and not very much more than that. In a melodic way of course. And rhythmically a bit more expression. But it's really close to the Buk-talk.

? Could you compare it with any other musician?

! Of course Tom Waits has done this before in a lot of his stuff. Very long lyrics and he does this the same. But he makes all his stuff himself of course.

And then these days, in all kinds of music you have the rap-idiom. That's very alive. And it's also not very repetitious in that sense and an enormous amount of words. It's just plain rhythmic speaking. It does not have to do with singing. Well, it can be very great of course, because it has such rhythmic potential.

? Now we come to the structure of the BB songs. Most of the poems are ongoing, but *The bluebird* seems to have a kind of repeating verses and *In the bottom of the hour lurks* and *You know and I know and thee know* are lines that keep coming back in those two poems. Does the music you play and sing there, also have a same kind of repetition, different from the other BB-songs; are they more like general songs?

! Well, I wouldn't say songs, but aspects of a song. It's repetition of the first line of a verse. This is of course what happens in songs, but here there is no verse, just the lines keep coming back. I try to sing them the same way on Bach's music, and because I always sing them on the theme of the fugue, I can do that more or less.

The piano part has the same theme in it, but with some other voicing of Bach. You know, the counterpoint is different. But still, it gives you the feeling of something coming back and going away and that gives some simplicity, which people appreciate very much, it gives them kind of a grip. So generally speaking you can predict where I will start again with the line, but I don't do that all the time that would be boring; I have a few tricks up my sleeve.

In *The bluebird* prelude the text of Bukowski really decides for me to use the words in the same way, or rhythmically the same, with a slight variation, because it's another level. So there you have the music of the prelude that also is very repetitious. And this gets even more and better on the way because I can emphasize with the same words of Bukowski that there are the melodic themes of the prelude. So you get more unity of course if you have the same text over and over again. (fig. 3a + b)

I think the Bach harmonies and the Bach melody is kind of compulsory. He is very tolerant in what can be there with it, but you can never go against it, in a musical sense, that would be musically

spoken, unacceptable. You cannot destroy it; you can put in some tension, some discords, which are not baroque, but you can never get out of the harmonic world he created. Bach's music is so strong that, if you listen to the music well enough, you automatically put the words where they have to be.



fig.3a: example of a B-B song, with a repeating theme. 'The bluebird prelude in g sharp' bar 1 + 2



fig.3b: example of a B-B song with a repeating theme. 'The bluebird prelude in g sharp' bar 14 + 15

? So that's what makes it easy as well. In fact you said that the poems ask for this way of treatment and also Bach's music forces you to do the right thing. And then they suddenly fit together, and so naturally! That means that they really do belong together. This is

even more magic than if you would have made them fit. IT JUST FITS!!! You found yourself a rough diamond.

! Yeah, it could be, it could be that you're right ... a goldmine, haha ... Maybe that's why it is so appealing to people, because it's kind of natural, the way I sing this ... Round. But of course it's kind of hard to play and sing this together and everybody sings in his own way. It would be nice if people start doing this, to see what happens. With my next 9 songs there is a difference. One song is a bit more melodic. It's not bluesy, but more pop-like somehow, like a bit of Bono. The poem *This*.

? There will also be some more up-tempo songs. Will that reflect in the choice of keys?

! No, no, I'm sorry. It mostly will be minor keys.

? The *Be kind* and *The idiot* fugue are the only fugues you directly start singing. Why, in all the others, don't you sing at the beginning of the fugues?

! I think it's appropriate - even for a very long theme, because of the way fugues are built -, to be respectful to the contents of the music by starting with the real skeleton of the thing; to let this stand alone for a while. So then people can have the feeling this is a really different kind of music.

But the *Be kind* fugue and the *D major fugues* have very, very short themes. It is not necessary to let them stand alone because they are not that interesting. These themes are used in a very appropriate way, in the sense that this is a very short, little theme, but it's used 100 times in all kind of ways. And when you have a very long linear theme about 4 to 5 bars, Bach maybe uses it only 20 times.

? How do you manage to sing your songs bluesy while playing Bach?

! Well I cannot do this any other way, because when I feel and hear these words of Bukowski, for me, this is the way it has to be sung. This is kind of bluesy, this is the best way. Because if you really try to do elaborate melodic things, then the whole thing sounds ridiculous.

The words of Buk have to do with the way he talks. This is what all the black Afro-American people, the blues guys did. They really just talked their music, their singing. This is not about Western approach to singing from la, la, la, la, la, or the musical melodies, the very melodic thing. It's closer to the wounds, more crying ... I don't know ...

? But then the Bach part, do you keep it baroque, or do you cheat a bit?

! Well, I don't cheat on purpose; maybe sometimes I get carried away. Of course it was used for harpsichord; I add dynamics and I do like to steal a bit of time or give some time. Sometimes I'm a bit on a brake and then I do some acceleration, but that all depends on the way I sing the lines, on the way I breath in and out the words. It's a rather baroque way, yeah, you can say that. I don't think everybody will agree but ...

? What is the most difficult part in the whole of Bach-Bukowski?

! The hardest thing is of course to get it into gear for concerts so that you feel sure about having all the stuff together in your heart or in your mind or where ever that is. Then you can give a relaxing concert and let it all happen like it's a fresh thing, and not worry about forgetting words or musical bars, whatever. So the hard part is to have everything at your disposal. It takes an awful lot of time and even then. When you're under pressure or have some disturbances, you can get stressed and then the memory fails you. Or when you're playing on very bad instruments, not well tuned or mechanically in bad shape, then your finger memory is also leaving you. And that is very, very ...

? Frustrating?

! Yeah, humiliating is a better word. Frustrating is okay, but it is humiliating; you've already done so many hours and then you still cannot deliver the right thing.

? Would it be easier if it would be a series of *Ave Maria* like songs?

! Yes, I guess ...

? Because that's more logic to the mind and fingers and everything?

! Yeah, but nobody wants that! I know what you mean of course, when it's easier, it's easier.

? So the way you put the words, the timing against Bach makes it more difficult, because it's not always logical?

! Yeah.

? Why do you think it works?

! It has been said before, but the poems are very rhythmical and they are very physical and phonetically appealing to the mouth itself, even without the content. And of course the music of Bach is very rhythmic and well, they can benefit from each other.

? I would like to read to you, two things Bukowski wrote (thanks Falko!). From the letters *Reach for the Sun* (Nov. 30, 1991):

"I always write while listening to classical music and now maybe the music that goes into the poem is coming out again. Strange. Especially since I prefer to keep my writing close to the bone - like Bach."

And from the poems *The Flash of lightning behind the mountain*:

"writing is all I know how to do and
I much prefer the music of great classical
Composers so
I always listen to them while I'm typing
(and when I finally write a good poem
I'm sure they have much to do with it)."

Is it a coincidence that you combined Buk with Bach, or did you recognise Bach in Hank's rhythm? Somebody once said: "Buk's rhythms are simple and direct, and so are Bach's."

! No, I haven't recognised Bach's rhythm in Hank's rhythm. It is my story; it has nothing to do with Bukowski and Bach or Bach and Bukowski.

I cannot say: "hey, this poem really reminds me of Bach". No it never happened. Again: among other things there is of course a very strong

rhythmic sensation when you read the poem. This is more for musicologists to try to find out if there is a baroque rhythm in the poems of Bukowski.

The music might come back in the poem; maybe it's even the fact that he was such a dumb fuck to type with all his might through this beautiful music, so I don't know. Do the new typewriters still make such a noise: 'bang, bang, bang'? But I don't think you can listen to the music very well, even when you're doing 'tic, tic, tic'. He is in a kind of trance, a spiritual soup.

? I have heard a lot of your Bach-Bukowski concerts and I don't get bored, quite the contrary, I enjoy every one of them! They always seem to be different. What's the secret?

! I don't know, there is no secret. It's different every time because it is a totally new situation again. Every concert is totally different and for a BB concert even more than like in big musicals, where you're doing your 400th night, you know, in the same theatre. Because I only play once and then I jump to another one.

? It's not improvised, but there is flexibility in structure and timing?

! Of course, when you're doing stuff for the so many time, you try to amuse your self a bit; it's necessary not to get bored with it. So you have to feel your way into every new concert and a very good way is to have slight alteration.

? So you give your self some freedom?

! Yeah, you can be a little bit late with the words or sometimes be much earlier, so you get a very huge syncopation or you can also of course put in some high notes and some low and then things happen. But most of the time it is still whirled around some kind of harmonic gravity points, you know, where you have to be at a certain time. You cannot be too late. So you have some black holes, harmonically; you have to be sucked in there all the time, they are standing out these holes. That's how the poem hangs onto the music of Bach; it hangs onto the black holes.

? It's interesting to have an example of that!

! Oh yeah ... well ... nobody gets that of course. Listen well, and maybe you'll get sucked in too.

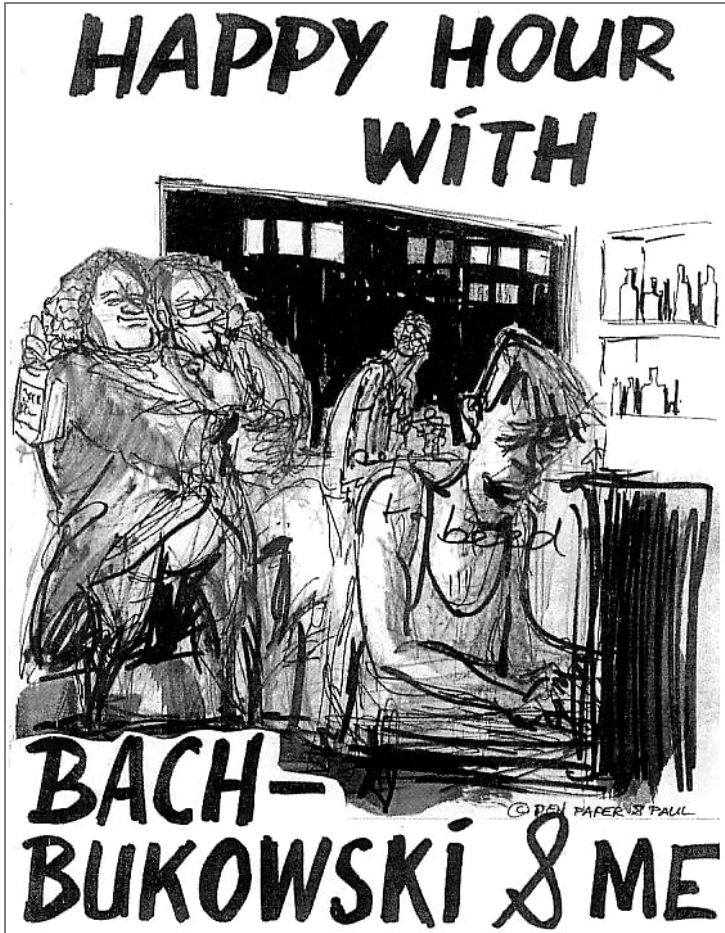


fig.4: the artist as seen by a friend. In the background, there are Bach and Bukowski dancing to the tunes.

? You told me that you have a couple of wishes: First a BB festival with music based on the same principal as Bach-Bukowski.

! The festival of course would really thrill me in the sense that I'm very curious what will happen when people have these kind of assignments given to them. It could be fun of course if somebody comes up with a poem and does something with Mozart or whatever, or other Bach-Bukowski's for that matter.

But I don't think people will be very interested in this way of making music, because I think most personalities are not fit for this. Most people like to do their own stuff. You have of course the people who can really be somebody else, like actors, but most songwriters really have to do their own stuff.

Covering music is of course another possibility; it's an accepted thing. In the classical music it's only covering but on another level of course. But this way of getting into these minds and these hearts of those big guys, with Bach, with Bukowski, and then being in tune with your self ... I don't know, it's not human. Sometimes it's maybe too much for one being to make something out of this, because it's not clear what you've created in the end.

I don't know, I think it will die when I die, guess it's not something that will stay on the scene.

? Not even the concept?

! No, they'll say this guy was a nutcase; he was a good nutcase for that matter. People are thankful for me, people who like BB, but I don't know; it still seems a crazy thing to do.

? Do you see it as a duty?

! Well of course, sometimes yes, but no, for me it still has revelatory parts also in it. It's also me to get on higher grounds. But I'm still hungry after all these BB years of putting things together, to do little simple things, you know, and be my self again and not be Buk or Bach, because this is inherent to the process; you have to get close to these guys to make it work, make it worthwhile also.

? Then the other wish: your BB-songs, sung by you, but the preludes and fugues played by different instruments.

! This is also something that I think is possible, with all kind of ensembles, all kind of combinations of instruments. Maybe I would like to do something with the *Amsterdam Blaasensemble*, *Calefax* would be nice too. Or even with a choir. A project with *The Gents* would be nice. If they vocalise the Bach fugue. Then you have all vocal, like an a capella work of a BB-song. Would be nice I guess, with me as the soloist and all the guys singing their asses off. That'll be great, a bit like in the spirituals!

What I also like to do with for instance *The idiot*, is a Dixieland old New Orleans kind of thing. That would also give some more imaginary elements and make the text more juicy, likeable. But not changing the music, that's not so good.

With *Spark* it's very easy to hear a jazz trio, like a double bass, a bit of drum, and maybe a piano, or a guitar, I don't know.

A symphonic orchestra maybe for a big fugue like the *c sharp minor fugue* with its long opening slow movement, you know, the *Jam*-song.

I think it would be very nice to hear this on strings of course and low strings. Think the *Wiener Philharmoniker* would be nice, if they would like to do it. We're still talking, no contracts yet, but with the New Years concert, they might change the waltz-programme and do some Bach-Bukowski songs.

? What year?

! Like 2080

? You'll be doing this then?

! Yeah, me and my grandfather.

Harpsichord or organ is also very possible. There was a guy in the 80ies, Richard Clyderman, and he was a famous, very popular pianist. He was not a very great pianist, but he had flair with the piano and he had hit-songs on the piano. He had his own piano show and he was racing on the stage from one keyboard instrument to another and doing another thingy on the piano and then raced to the cembalo etc. About 20 keyboards he did in one hour.

So Bach-Bukowski why not? If you can make fun with it ... you can do this on the little organs they use for the passions. They sound great, very serious, very severe.

But I don't think anything will happen. I think the best is still me on the piano. Because, well, I've played in music groups, and it takes a

lot of hard work and rehearsal time to get in the same mood and the same tempo with the other musicians.

I can have freedom with the tempos now. When you do this with other guys, this is impossible, this can never happen. So then you have to be more in beat, to be in synchronisation with each other. I watched TV and the conductor Jaap van Zweden was directing the *Concertgebouw Orchestra*. He was just trying to do a little accelerando with 3 quaver notes in one bar. It took 10-15 minutes before the whole orchestra could do this.

? But the jazz people?

! Yeah, jazz people do this, because the music is very improvised. Those great jazz musicians know exactly where they are in the song, the progressions of the chords, and they are always playing 'in time'. If you do it with other people, I think it will not be possible to have the same sensational freedom, but you can add something else. You can replace it with more grandioso. So it changes. You can then emphasize other aspects of the Bach-Bukowski world.

? So the festival and the other instruments might never happen but your next 9 BB songs will. We're all looking forward to them. Are you too, or is the hard work involved scaring you?

! Well no, I'm not scared more than I was with the first 13, it's the same.

? Are you looking forward to it?

! Yeah. In a way of course it's very interesting new material. I very much like to perform this. I think it will be good. It will really add up to the material we have now. With the 9 more songs you can do a really long evening with Bach-Bukowski. Then it can stand out for 1,5 hour or so, you know, this is more for the big theatres. A few of them are more up-tempo and there are some other rhythms. There are a few in a 12/8, so, rounder. That gives a different feeling.

? When can we hear them on stage or CD?

! I'm still working on it, but maybe I can do a few starting September/October 2006.

? Do you still practice a lot?

! Yeah, I practice a lot, yes.

? Also the first set?

! No, not so much. And that's a totally other way of practising, because here I have to freshen them up, get them out of the closet again and polish them. There are always methods to get more into the music,

especially when I'm just rehearsing the piano part. Just to give certain voice lines more expression than others, you know ... So there is always enough to be done when I get them from the shelves again for a new concert.



fig.5: Willem van Ekeren in front of Bukowski's birthplace.

? Are there any other things you would like to tell us?

! Well, I still have maybe one last thing to tell you. The interesting revelatory part of performing Bach-Bukowski is when you really get the feeling of freedom, when everything is just there, already there, that's the feeling, that you have the music and the words and I only have to pluck them out of the air, not playing on an instrument. It's just like a juggler and nothing can be wrong, or nothing can go wrong. I don't know but ... Well this is not a very good way of saying things. No. STOP this shitty interview please.

? Thanks a lot!

! Thank *You* Marguerite, it was great!

For more information about Willem van Ekeren, Bach-Bukowski, the concerts and the CD, see www.bach-bukowski.nl

