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Maat Saxophone Quartet Gives Forgotten Voices Flight

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Maat Saxophone Quartet's Blackbird recital in the Kleine Zaal proved a model of what the Concertgebouw's Rising Stars concept can be at its best: virtuosic, intelligently curated and quietly radical in its rethinking of the canon. Across a concentrated seventy-five minutes, the four Portuguese Amsterdammers traced a luminous arc from medieval mysticism to contemporary soundscapes, with a strong focus on women.

The creative voices of these women once had to fight for audibility. The result was not a history lesson, but a living, breathing musical narrative, told in the uniquely malleable timbre of the saxophone family. The evening opened in near-liturgical stillness with Hildegard von Bingen's O virtus Sapientiae, in a sensitive arrangement by Diogo Ferreira. The quartet's blend was so seamless that the four instruments seemed to fuse into one collective "organum" voice, the soprano saxophone floating the chant line over soft, organ-like cushions of harmony. The choice immediately set the tone: this would be an exploration of spiritual and sonic "voices" reclaimed and reframed, not simply a parade of showpieces.

From there, the programme moved to Lili Boulanger's Deux morceaux, also in Ferreira's arrangement, where the saxophones proved ideal translators of Boulanger's fragile luminosity. The players captured both the music's languor and its underlying tension, using the palette of vibrato and dynamic shading to suggest the orchestral colours of the originals. In Henriëtte Bosmans' Strijkkwartet, admirably reimagined for saxophones by A. Tully, the ensemble's tight rhythmic unanimity and immaculate intonation were tested and found more than equal to the task. What might have been a stylistic compromise instead became a compelling argument for the saxophone quartet as a legitimate chamber medium for early twentieth-century repertoire.

The heart of the programme, though, lay in the Dutch premiere of Aleksandra Vrebalov's Four faces, four wings, commissioned by major European institutions and here given with evident commitment. Vrebalov's writing, at once rhythmically incisive and texturally imaginative, seems tailor-made for Maat's strengths. The work sets up a series of contrasting "faces": percussive, breathy effects sit alongside long, singing lines; close-voiced clusters suddenly open into radiant, organ-like sonorities. The quartet navigated these shifts with a dancer's sense of timing, making the piece feel both structurally clear and emotionally unpredictable.

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It was in this work that the ensemble's individuality emerged most strongly: each player a distinct "face", yet all contributing to a single, many-winged organism. Placed alongside such repertoire, the arrangements of Gershwin and McCartney could have felt like light encores smuggled into the body of the programme. Instead, they were integrated with unexpected thoughtfulness. Rhapsody in Blue, in J. van der Linden's arrangement, became a compact, sharply etched tone poem, the saxophones relishing the jazz inflections without ever descending into pastiche. Porgy, I is Your Woman Now—filtered through a Nina Simone sensibility in C.

ansen's version—was shaped with vocal warmth and a keen sense of line, the quartet showing an almost bel canto approach to phrasing. McCartney's Blackbird, in Jansen's delicate arrangement, gave the concert its title and emotional fulcrum. Here the notion of "voice" became literal: a song of fragile resilience, once a quiet anthem, now refracted through four breath-driven instruments. Maat managed to preserve the song's simplicity while gently illuminating its inner harmonies, the result both disarming and quietly moving.

As a final gesture, the encore—Goemans' Aan de Amsterdamse grachten, again arranged by Ferreira—was more than a local crowd-pleaser. After a programme that had traversed centuries and geographies, this affectionate nod to the city felt like a closing of the circle: a reminder that all these once-marginal voices now sound freely in Amsterdam's musical heart. If the Rising Stars series aims to show us the future of chamber music, Maat Saxophone Quartet's Blackbird suggests that it will be inclusive, intellectually alert, and gloriously, uncompromisingly musical.

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