



Janine Jansen - Johannes Vermeer Award 2018 laureate

Jury's report

The Johannes Vermeer Award is the Netherlands' national prize for the arts. Every year since 2009, it has been awarded to an artist who has attained a unique stature in his or her field. It is a prestigious prize which demonstrates the importance that the government of the Netherlands attaches to promoting artistic talent and the benefits that this talent brings to our society.

In order to select each year's laureate, the Minister of Education, Culture and Science receives a recommendation from an independent jury tasked with exploring the various fields of the arts and identifying artists who have excelled through their outstanding achievements and creativity. The jury considers representatives from all the various fields of the arts. Previous laureates have been chosen from a range of artistic disciplines: theatre, photography, fine arts, graphic design, film and architecture. This year it is music's turn. Ultimately, the phase that the artist has reached in his or her career also plays a key role in the jury's deliberations. The Johannes Vermeer Award is meant for artists who have reached full professional maturity and are at the peak of their abilities. Potential laureates have already produced a fine and balanced body of work, while they continue their artistic evolution.

This year, Janine Jansen was nominated unanimously by the jury as the Johannes Vermeer Award laureate for 2018.

Dedication

As has often been pointed out, violinist Janine Jansen grew up with music from the word go. Her father, Jan Jansen, is an organist. Her mother, Christine Jansen-Kooij, is a classical singer. It was she who encouraged the family's three children to develop their own musical talents – providing moral support, ferrying them to and from music lessons, and sometimes even making them clothes for their performances.

So was it a question of nature or nurture? In the case of Janine Jansen the answer must surely be that both were crucial. According to her mother, Janine was already singing songs before the age of one. By the time she was six, she had begun learning the violin, lovingly supported by her parents every day. When it was time for Janine to practise her scales, the hardest part of practising, her father would roll a regal red carpet out from underneath his own instrument, the organ. And there was also plenty of singing.



It is easy to see that Janine Jansen could not have grown up in a better environment for a budding musician. And indeed, it is surely no coincidence that both of her brothers also went on to become musicians. But no matter how encouraging, inspiring and steeped in music her childhood was, is it really enough to explain that mysterious difference between a good musician and a truly great musician?

Janine Jansen's interpretations border on genius and have been unanimously lauded by thrilled audiences and fellow musicians alike. Her talent, her devotion to quality, and her dedication and love for her work have made her a star the world over. She is also a role model for young musicians.

Young violinists not only want to hear Janine Jansen play as often as they can, they want to *be* Janine Jansen. Because her playing is truly sublime – that much is clear – but also because she is the girl-next-door. No matter how glamorous the photos chosen by her record label, Decca, to adorn her numerous album covers – from the white suit to a spectrum of dazzling designer dresses – Jansen has always been herself: approachable, open and committed, no matter how tough the commercial demands made of her, which are an inevitable part of any international career. In that sense, the scene in the documentary *Janine* (2010), made by Paul Cohen, where the manager of Universal Music (Decca) asked if perhaps she was taking on too much, was revealing. 'No,' she replied 'I'm happy to do all of it', an answer that says so much about Janine.

Janine's playing lacks any trace of intellectualization, distancing or any attempt to impose her own personal 'interpretation'. On the contrary, it sometimes seems as if she is improvising the music on the spot – whether it is a completely new work by Penderecki or Bach's *Chaconne*. But it would be a mistake to think that such innate spontaneity comes naturally. Such intense freedom when performing can only be the result of years of self-discipline and effort. It is characteristic of Jansen's passion and perfectionism that she knows this, yet she likes nothing better than to shut herself away for three weekends in a row in order to study a new piece with her musician friends... even if that piece will only be performed once.

Uncompromising

A world star of classical music – so how did it all happen?

It all began with violin lessons with the famous Dutch violin tutor, Coosje Wijzenbeek. The 'shy girl with a little round face', Janine Jansen had her first lesson wearing clogs, clutching the oversized violin tightly to her. In the documentary *Janine*, Coosje Wijzenbeek remembers that day with a characteristic chuckle. In the video footage you can see how the very young Janine would play: a little rough around the edges at first. But after just two or three years, there was a true violinist, remarkable for her wide range, deep tones and the emotion that she would channel into her playing.



As a child, she sometimes used to act as if she were already an adult, her mother once said – with some obvious hesitation. Because of course, no school child plays like an adult. But music is a window to the soul, no matter the age of the artist. And even at that very young age, Janine – naturally quirky and temperamental – stood out through her performances, which were indeed ‘mature’ because of their uncompromising purposefulness and depth of feeling. Violinist Theo Olof also saw this when Jansen took part in the Oskar Back Competition in 1993, at the age of fifteen. Her playing, according to Olof, transcended the notes. And the story that she told was simultaneously both universal and personal.

Another key moment was her introduction to the Latvian violinist and tutor Philippe Hirschhorn in 1992. Hirschhorn was a master violinist in exile: legendary, enigmatic, charismatic. Jansen was 14, an adolescent in the most formative years of her life, and a violinist who was already playing with a fiery intensity and urgency. The meeting of these two forces of nature came to mean so much more than the average bond between master and student. Hirschhorn passed on his uncompromising approach to Jansen, and laid the groundwork for her musical self-confidence. By the time he passed away four years later, sadly much too young, he had ensured that Janine would go on to greatness.

By 1998, Janine already had a cabinet full of competition prizes when the Utrecht Conservatory waved her out with the highest honours. Many orchestras in the Netherlands had already discovered her talents as a soloist. The reviews from that period are full of phrases that could just as well be written today. ‘She plays every note as if it were a matter of life and death’, for example.

‘Intense and intuitive’ is another phrase that you often read in descriptions of Jansen’s playing. This is more of a reference to her presence on the stage as she makes music: vigilant and alert in her interaction with the other musicians, and then a magic spell is cast and all is directed inwards, as if in meditation. It is a reference to her characteristic way of moving along with the music, a habit that she had to ‘unlearn’ when she was working with the world famous American violinist Isaac Stern, but which she fortunately has not ‘unlearned’ completely.

You can also see that same intuitive fluidity when Janine plays chamber music; the combination of intimacy and communication required in this musical genre puts Janine back in her element. Anyone who attended one of the many concerts at her festivals in Utrecht between 2003 and 2016 would have experienced the eloquence of the interaction between Jansen and her fellow musicians, which often verges on the sensual in their exchange of motifs and responses. Giving and taking. Sometimes leading, sometimes following. Not playing as individuals, but as one – continually adjusting their individual sounds to others’ suggestions, forays and emotions.



It is significant that Janine's strength as a soloist in an ensemble also comes from her interaction with others. Her senses are always open and perceptive, sensitive to every flux and reflux of the orchestra and the conductor. And this is what makes her performances so magnetically appealing to audiences. You become a partner in musical communication of fluid intensity. The tension is tangible.

At the start of this year, Janine Jansen turned forty – a milestone that calls for a degree of reflection. But predicting where the next peaks might be is not so easy – especially not when you have already achieved so much, so young, and in such diverse areas. A festival of your own, full of memorable and outstanding experiences. A *carte blanche* series at Amsterdam's Royal Concertgebouw and, recently, New York's Carnegie Hall. Multi-disciplinary experimentation, such as dancing to Bach and playing together with 125 other young violinists. A productive fifteen-year recording deal with Decca, and a whole catalogue of robust and varied albums. What more could there be? For most of us, the insight that *less is sometimes more* comes as we approach middle age, but Janine Jansen had to learn that when she was just 32, as years of pressure to achieve forced her to take a period of total rest.

So this is probably the wrong question. Janine Jansen is a keen mountain hiker. She has learned for herself that the peak is the highest place, but not always the most beautiful place, and that sometimes it is the journey to get there that you look back on with the greatest pleasure. As such, it is quite conceivable that her future may not involve striving to climb ever higher peaks, but maybe working with interesting, like-minded musical partners and being even more selective in the projects that she accepts, so that she can enjoy the maximum intensity of artistic experience. And who knows, the insights produced may eventually be passed on to a new generation of musicians.

In presenting the Johannes Vermeer Award for 2018 to Janine Jansen, the jury wishes to pay tribute to all that she has achieved as a performing musician. To the way in which she has excelled in her career while staying true to herself, and to the inspiration that she has given to countless young musicians.

The jury hopes that this award will help Janine both to chart exciting new paths *and* to explore the more familiar ones, as she continues to amaze us with her ever-changing light.