

TAKING A WALK BESIDE NADAR: NEW TIMES, NEW MEDIA, NEW SOUNDS

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Abstract: The Belgian new-music ensemble Nadar created a Zoom performance titled *FITTINGinSIDE*, which is tailored to a world in the grip of a pandemic. It balances ritual, artistic play and collective performance, all blended in a way that astonishes the ears. We followed Nadar's course through the pandemic and studied their techniques. How did Nadar manage to turn the crisis into – yet again – a new, creative starting point? How 'live' did the new 'live' feel? And is *FITTINGinSIDE* the format of the future?

Anyone who has followed the Belgian new-music group the Nadar Ensemble during these last years will know that very little of what they do is 'inside the box'. Perhaps their best-known performance is *EXIT F* (2011), by Michael Maierhof, for four hot-air balloons and an ensemble of conventional and composer-created instruments. This autumn, they kicked off the season with a composition for three cranes, large ensemble and a giant butterfly by American 'new discipline'¹ composer Natacha Diels. And, of course, there is the now infamous *Generation Kill* (2012), written by house composer and artistic co-director Stefan Prins: a piece for four musicians and four game consoles, in which real musicians merge with their virtual alter egos (see [Figure 1](#)).

And then came March 2020, a proverbial point zéro. Pieter Matthyssens, artistic co-director of Nadar together with Prins, explains how they quickly shifted gears: 'I do not know if I would really call the past year a period of loss. We actually just kept going. As soon as the ongoing productions were wiped off the table, we sat down with the group to ask ourselves: what can we continue doing? And what is possible now?'

During collective Zoom sessions, and distinct from Nadar's way of working, an intense exchange of ideas emerged. First, they developed the plan to rework *Nocturne* (2017), by Mátyás Wetzl (1987–), into a corona-proof version. Normally, the musicians are on stage playing instrumentalised switches for 16 lamps. Instead, the Nadar musicians played 16 actual working light switches from their living rooms that were then

¹ 'The New Discipline', Milker Corporation, <http://milker.org/the-new-discipline> (accessed 20 July 2021).



Figure 1:

Nadar Ensemble performing Stefan Prins, *Generation Kill* © Conrad Schmitz.

compiled into a visual mosaic² – a playful wink at the thousands of home-made videos that flooded social media during those months.

Streaming concerts, the solution to which many ensembles and concert organisers turned, especially during the second period of lockdown,³ held little interest for the team at Nadar. ‘That was never really an option for us since it is impossible to imitate the concert experience anyway,’ explains Matthyssens. ‘We would lose the essence of a concert: namely that the audience experiences it together in a defined time and space. The idea of listeners sitting passively in front of their screens without any possibility of giving something back just did not appeal to us.’ The few streamings in which the ensemble or its members played left a somewhat tedious aftertaste, ‘especially when we recorded the concerts in advance, I felt miles away from anything that resembled a live experience’.

‘Nadar is more than just a concert ensemble,’ Matthyssens further emphasised. ‘Even before the lockdown we were not making anything that could be considered a typical concert. We simply applied that way of thinking to our new situation, just as we would have should we suddenly have found ourselves stranded on a desert island.’

Nadar can indeed be described as a collective of quirky DIYers. From building their own sets to cobbling together the highly complex electronics behind many of their works, they often do it themselves. By always starting from the ground up, they have managed to repeatedly tread the lesser-beaten paths. For example, late last fall Nadar created an online series of lessons for secondary schools in Belgium. The lessons were made available, free of charge, to support teachers who had grown weary from their second semester under the COVID-19 measures. It also seemed pertinent to encourage professional musicians to share their daily artistic practice, considering the ongoing debate on artistic subjects in the secondary-school curriculum. Matthyssens himself presented lessons on the cross-section between Belgian singer-songwriter Stromae, eighteenth-century French painter Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres and the Jewish-American

² *Nocturne [lockdown version]* (Wettl/Nadar Ensemble), www.youtube.com/watch?v=vGe4LGq_BAw, accessed 17 February 2022.

³ Beginning at the end of October 2020.

photographer Man Ray. Colleagues of the ensemble offered workshops with titles like ‘Classical Music in Hip-Hop’ and ‘Smartphones as Instruments’. ‘That is perhaps where I ended up gaining the most satisfaction,’ Matthynssens told us, ‘because we were able to bring the students into contact with artists who are otherwise inaccessible to them.’

FITTINGinSIDE [lockdown version] for trombone, walk, soundtrack and conference call, by Stefan Prins, ended up being Nadar’s most extensive project of the corona period.⁴ The work is essentially the ‘lockdown recycling’ of a work that Prins composed in 2007. In the original version, listeners were sent out for a walk with an MP3 player and earbud headphones. After the walk they returned to the concert hall, still wearing their earbuds, for a 20-minute trombone solo. *FITTINGinSIDE* is all about inversion: inside and outside swap places. Outside, one hears the sounds of the street combined with trombone sounds in the headphones. Once the audience goes inside, the headphone soundtrack very gradually slips into street sounds, while the trombonist plays live in the concert hall.

‘Walking outside was about the only thing we were allowed to do during the first lockdown,’ Matthynssens continued. ‘We were not allowed to see people, but we were allowed to walk. What if we connected those walks?’ That set Nadar on the road to a Zoom performance, which at the beginning of the health crisis was still very much a new medium, one that still needed to be thoroughly explored before it could be used artistically. The platform itself raised technical questions too, like: is it possible to get rid of the compression on the sound? How does one ensure that sound and image remain synchronised? How to solve – and detect – sudden feedback? Behind the carefree façade of *FITTINGinSIDE* [lockdown version], the computer geeks at Nadar dealt with quite a few headaches.

13 June 2020. The first lockdown has just passed. I am biking home after the first ‘live’ family gathering in months. A virtual concert – now? It seems like the most mistimed performance ever.

A Zoom link for your smartphone and one for your computer. Earphones connected to the smartphone. External speakers plugged into the computer. Are all my batteries charged? *FITTINGinSIDE* does not seem to be made for technophobes like me, but it is surprisingly simple once everything is connected.

A little later I walk through the evening sun. My phone stretched out in front of me, my camera aimed at the street. In my ears: aspiratory trombone sounds, almost imperceptibly breaking loose from the silence. Sluggish breathing, intermittently demanding my attention, like someone who is there and yet not. On the screen of my phone, I see how others are taking other walks simultaneously in other worlds. Tropical plants, cluttered streets, rain and sun, American traffic lights.

Back at home, the sounds in my ears merge with the trombone player on my computer. He, like all of us, is locked in the frame of the screen. Gradually, it seems as if his groaning, wildly acerbic trombone is about to break out of the frame. As if his sweat drops are going to splash through the screen. As if he’s here when he’s patently not.

It is precisely through this mix of distance and proximity, of isolation and connection, of virtuality and physicality that a sudden but sharp sense of mourning asserts itself. It feels ‘live’ and at the same time it feels like the absolute lack of ‘live’. *FITTINGinSIDE* is without question the most intense artistic experience I have had since the corona crisis began. What seemed unattainable in all the months of endless conference calls was made possible: a shared room and an intimate artistic exchange.

⁴ Trailer, *FITTINGinSIDE* [lockdown version], <https://youtu.be/RZWkrytoCcw>, accessed 17 February 2022.

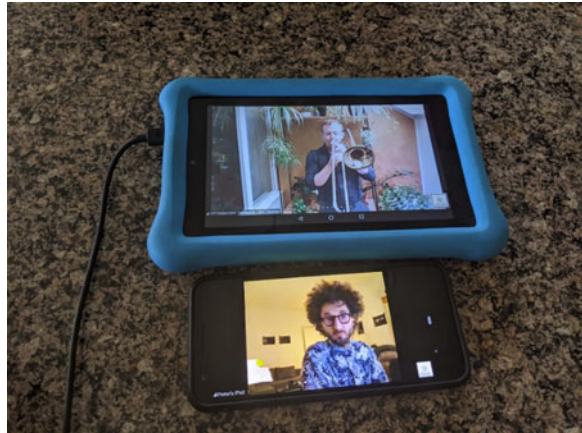


Figure 2:
Thomas Moore and Stefan Prins,
FITTINGinSIDE [lockdown version] ©
David Paul.

The faces on the screen during the performance's after-talk look fragile. Or is that my imagination? (Figure 2)

21 June 2021. One year later. Nadar repeats *FITTINGinSIDE* as part of World Humanism Day. Listeners from 31 countries sign on. The concert halls opened again a few weeks ago and the craving for 'live' is gradually being sated.

Ten o'clock in the morning. The soundtrack on my phone blends with the busy street. A bumpy counterpoint emerges between accelerating cars and dingy double tones, between the garbage cart and the rhythmically thudding mouthpiece of the trombone. Do I hear a baby crying?

Crossing the street, I swerve just in time to avoid a car, while in my head I flip faster and faster between the tangible reality and the one in my ears. Enthusiastically swiping back and forth on my screen, watching the walking feet beat their paths on five different continents simultaneously. My feet synchronised with those of a man named Bob, my toes dancing in his shoes. In the upper-right corner of my screen, someone steps into a supermarket full of brightly coloured packages.

What does it mean to be 'somewhere', I wonder, when we can be in so many other places at the same time? Our heads, after more than a year of the pandemic, seem better armed against the constant zig-zag between here and elsewhere. More so, we are enjoying it to the fullest it seems. Was that months-long whine about the lack of 'live' just a lapse?

The trombonist in his room also seems unfettered, less confined. My elated ears are only too happy to be carried away by the nimble play between computer and smartphone sound, between inside and outside, between the tangible and intangible.

The frame that has been created colours my experience and moulds the possibilities that the digital space can offer. Whereas a year ago it offered a place for ritual mourning, 12 months later it seems to have become a playground for adult children. Both times the shared digital space transforms into more than a mere 'substitute for live' – or at least the possibility for such a transformation was created.

The relationship and interplay between virtual and real have dominated Prins' artistic and compositional universe for more than a decade. In 2007 he wrote the Samuel Beckett-inspired *Not I*, for electric guitar and live electronics. Here, Prins sits at his computer and processes the live guitarist's sounds in real time, transmitting them to the amplifier that is spaced evenly between them. 'What you see is not quite what you get.' That principle applies to many of Prins' pieces. In the award-winning cycle *Piano Hero* (2011–17), analogous to the computer game *Guitar Hero*, Prins plays with this same thin boundary between real and virtual, but with an added visual aberration. The audience sees a physical pianist on stage operating a MIDI keyboard, while a virtual on-screen avatar hammers on the strings inside a deconstructed piano.

‘Our new plight fascinated me immensely, especially at the beginning of that first lockdown,’ Stefan Prins tells us from Berlin. ‘Everyone suddenly started zooming. Virtual encounters suddenly became our central way of interacting. What for so long has been a theme in so many of my pieces was suddenly de facto our reality. I was enormously inspired by it and had a lot of ideas for new pieces – so many that it was simply impossible to perform them all [laughs].’

The performances of *FITTINGinSIDE* [lockdown version] surprised him. ‘I found it intriguing to see how the corona version took the piece in a totally new direction. Especially the visual element – that you could see the other participants’ walks. I also experienced a strong sense of connection, a feeling of really being together in a digital space, that was much more than I had imagined was possible.’ What also surprised Prins was the sudden empathetic experience:

A former student of mine was participating from Bogota. She took a walk in her house because it was simply not safe for her to go out on the street. It made me realise that we had thought of this concept entirely from a position that might also have been a bit exclusive. I do not really have a well-thought-out response for that yet. However, suddenly having to experience – and empathise with – someone else’s concrete environment certainly raises new issues for me. (Example 1)

This project also demands quite a bit from Thomas Moore, the trombonist who brings *FITTINGinSIDE* to life from his tiny winter garden. He is on standby not only as a musician but as a technical wizard as well, playing online help desk and launching a live recording studio just moments before grabbing his trombone. His solo is also incredibly difficult. ‘I have to be in good physical shape for this piece,’ he says. ‘Otherwise, I will not make it.’ Furthermore, he must make do without a ‘live’ listening audience. ‘It is not easy to find the right concert feeling. I really have to get the adrenaline going by envisioning a public’s energy.’ The difference between a ‘real’ live performance and this production remains enormous

Somehow I still feel like an overexcited dog running into a glass door. During a live performance I can feel if the audience is listening, feel their attention. *FITTINGinSIDE* [lockdown version] feels like something in between a live concert and a streamed one. I was not very pleased with my performance on the

The image shows a musical score for the piece 'FITTINGinSIDE'. It consists of four systems of music. Each system has two staves: the top staff is for Trombone (T. Tr.) and the bottom staff is for Piccolo (Picchlo). The score is written in a complex, rhythmic style with many notes and rests. There are various musical markings such as dynamics (f, p), articulation (accents), and phrasing slurs. The title 'FITTINGinSIDE' is written at the top of the first system. The score is numbered 453, 459, 464, and 468 at the beginning of each system.

Example 1:

Stefan Prins, *FITTINGinSIDE*,
trombone part © Stefan Prins.



morning of the 21st of June. But during the evening performance I felt like I was really “in the moment” and it was clear that, based on their reactions, the audience appreciated the evening performance more too.

Will Nadar continue in the same vein after this experiment? Prins is certainly full of enthusiasm:

We are working hard on a new project, *Der Wanderer 2.0*, which will premiere in 2023. That is the next step after *FITTINGinSIDE*. Think of the game *Pokémon Go*, but without catching Pokémon. The audience will walk around with a tablet that allows them to scan the environment and conjure up virtual musicians. This is really about augmented reality, where a virtual reality superimposes itself on physical reality. Like *FITTINGinSIDE*, it could become a collective experience, taking place in different places at the same time.

‘What do you guys really want with this? What’s your intention?’ asks a bespectacled critic during the final post-conversation. ‘Is it not all a bit “boys-and-toys”?’

Matthynssens responds with something about children clambering up the slide, rather than sliding down it. I chuckle. This is exactly how I had experienced the performance itself: as a game. The improper use of instruments, or in this specific case a medium such as Zoom, is a constant in contemporary music. At its best, it can provide an experience of childlike wonder where new possibilities for play can emerge. The question of intention, then, confounds me. Is not every game essentially unintentional?

Prins, for his part, cannot deny that he is a ‘boy’ with a great fondness for technological ‘toys’. ‘But,’ he offers, ‘I think I want to use the technologies we have at our disposal today to create a poetic reality with them, which touches on our reality, but at the same time puts that reality in a different perspective.’

All those feet navigating the pavement of reality: do they really create a different perspective? Maybe they do. Perhaps not. The strong sense of grief and compassion during the very first performance definitely had that effect. Today, the catharsis seems a thousand times more fleeting: as fleeting as the many online experiences of simultaneity that we have been forced to experience in recent months? Is this ‘just’ a game, then?

An older man, seated in a living room full of books, settles the discussion: ‘Rather than “boys and toys”, I would like to suggest “adults and tools”,’ he says in crisp Oxford English. For a moment, the screen becomes his personal pulpit. ‘Without tools no art. An artist needs tools, yes. But the tool or technology also needs the artist. The artist humanises the technology, tracing the human potential of technology. What intentions do they have in doing so? An artist would probably not create if they knew that in advance. I prefer to speak of desire: always unarticulated.’

FITTINGinSIDE [lockdown version] cannot make one completely forget the desire for ‘live’. That is correct. Both the listeners and the performer, as demonstrated by Moore, are left unsated. Rather than redeeming it, *FITTINGinSIDE* thematises that longing for real sounds and real encounters, for a real and shared reality. It yields a bizarre and moving theatre of parallel worlds. This project thus represents the next step in Nadar ensemble’s innovative trajectory. While in the broad world of classical music there is a general assumption that the context or the audience has no control over the ‘unchanging core’ of a composition, Nadar overturns that assumption time and again. By making the listener aware of the constant game being played between our ears and minds, that core – and the control over what is experienced – naturally comes to rest with the listener in their context and not with the work itself. Nadar in this way consistently pushes at the boundaries of ‘what’ a concert can be.

Is this the format of the future? Let us hope not, because it would mean that the search would end here. The discovery of artistic intimacy in a shared ‘online’ space – however different from the classical ‘live’ – makes one hope and yearn for much more. Can empathy with radically different lives and life circumstances, literally and

simultaneously ‘stepping into each other’s shoes’ in a musical way, lead to a radically different perspective on reality? That is a game that does seem to be worth playing.

The author gratefully acknowledges the support of DARIAH ERIC (Digital Research Infrastructure for the Arts and Humanities), research conducted by Professors Marlies De Munck and Pascal Gielen (University of Antwerp) and Nadar Ensemble.