



Gerard Kempers (1948–2005): a personal statement¹

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I first met Gerard in 1975 in Örebro (Sweden) at the Nordic Piano Teachers' annual conference and workshops. Both of us were like fish out of water in discussions about the best fingering techniques to use in Beethoven sonatas. I had been asked to talk about popular music education and Gerard was on the lookout for fresh ideas for his art college in Lelystad. 'I didn't have a clue what you were actually saying' (in Swedish), he told me, 'but it seemed to make sense'. What Gerard said *he* was trying to achieve in his college made perfect sense to me. He was determined to democratise music (and media) education: he wanted to right the wrong that consisted of excluding the music of the popular majority from officially sanctioned institutions of education and research. I had found a good friend and powerful ally. We kept contact from that time until very recently.

A couple of years later we started to formulate ideas about setting up some sort of conference or organisation that would bring people together from different countries, disciplines and professions, something that could counteract the isolation and marginalisation experienced by anyone at that time trying to study popular music in a serious fashion. Gerard, an unstoppable humanist and democrat, was dedicated to this cause. His energy and enthusiasm were matched only by his enviable interpersonal and administrative skills. I still don't know how he pulled off the extraordinary feat of organising the first International Conference on Popular Music Research in Amsterdam (June 1981), as a result of which IASPM was founded. It was on a shoestring budget that Gerard managed to book a large lecture theatre and the foyer of one of Amsterdam University's central buildings; he even found funds to enable speakers from Eastern Europe to attend the five-day event. All I had to do was to send out a call for papers and to plan the sessions. Gerard did virtually *all* the rest. It is no exaggeration to say that without his resourcefulness, hard work and dedication there would have been no Amsterdam conference in 1981 and, without that conference, no IASPM, at least not until many years later.

Gerard came to the second IASPM conference in Reggio Emilia (1983) and to the third in Montréal (1985). Although he was as happy as I was to see IASPM gain strength, he was disenchanted with its increasing bias towards the academic side of popular music studies. The association's inter-professional aim, which respected the competence of musicians, journalists, media workers, cultural administrators as well as of university academics was, he felt (and I agreed), being sidelined. The point here

is that Gerard did not just think: he *did*. He put ideas into action and his passion for democratic empowerment led him to work first in radio and TV education, then in documentary film-making, and finally in politics. I was, and still am, an academic by trade who needed IASPM, whatever its weaknesses at that time. On the other hand, Gerard, a symphonic percussionist, accomplished jazz and rock drummer (see his excellent book on the topic, *Method for Pop and Jazz Drums*), teacher, cultural administrator and media practitioner (popular music knowledge if ever there was!), had little use for IASPM the way the association was going in the late 1980s and early 1990s. I sorely missed his pragmatism and no-nonsense populism during that rather dull and unproductive IASPM decade of over-theorising. His absence in IASPM since the mid-1980s has also meant that very few members are aware of the crucial role Gerard, his knowledge of popular music and his practical passion for the people, played in the establishment of an association that has helped many of us out of the hole of isolation and marginalisation. These paragraphs are here to set that record straight.

I am also very grateful to Gerard because, even during what I see as the fallow years of IASPM (c. 1985–c. 1995), he always seemed to find time to incorporate my brand of research into his own practical and didactic democratic agenda. His unmistakable interest and enthusiasm encouraged me greatly to believe that what I was trying to do as an academic was not totally useless. In 1987 we produced a series of school radio programmes about popular music for AVRO (Hilversum). To my great surprise and delight (Gerard was much more confident!), this series, *Muziek maakt alles mooier* (which roughly translates as ‘Music Makes it more Amusing’), ended up winning the prestigious international Japan Prize for best educational radio production of the year. Although I had planned the series’ content, I think our success was largely due to Gerard’s professionalism, efficiency and ability to lead and work together with a team. I was particularly struck by the excellent rapport he established with *all* collaborators on the project, particularly by his respect for the competence and creativity of our sound engineers. I learnt a tremendous amount from Gerard by working on that project, knowledge that has enabled me to subsequently improve my teaching and presentation skills.

During the 1990s Gerard produced several important documentaries. He was particularly passionate, I remember, about the fate of Rinus van Galen and Maarten Mourik, both of whom he interviewed at length about their time doing forced labour in Nazi Germany’s munition factories and about what happened to them after the war. Although they were only two of 500,000 Dutch citizens deported into forced labour on behalf of the Third Reich, Gerard was able to give a public voice to all those half a million of his forgotten fellow countrymen. The stories of those two men represented, he thought, an important part of Dutch history that had to be brought out into the open.²

For the last few years of his life, Gerard worked as member of the local borough council on the ticket of *Leefbaar Zuidoost* (LZO, literally ‘A Liveable South-East’), a party which he co-founded (no surprise there!) and which is clearly dedicated to grass-roots democracy (again, no surprise!) in the multicultural south-eastern suburbs of Amsterdam where he lived. Just type <Gerard Kempers Amsterdam> into the Google search box and you will uncover a huge amount of incontrovertible evidence (in Dutch) of Gerard’s unswerving dedication to real democracy, transparency, political accountability, ecological common sense, economic and social justice, etc. One channel Gerard used a lot to help him towards these goals was his weblog,

<http://gerardkempers.punt.nl/>, to which you will find hundreds of hyperlinks from individuals and organisations in the Netherlands (especially in Amsterdam Zuid-Oost). It is typical that friends and colleagues first suspected that something was wrong when his weblog went silent because, right up until the end, his life was passionately dedicated to shining a light where it was dark, to giving a voice to those who had none, and to empowering those who had no power. His bullshit detector was keen and infallible, but he was always ready to listen to those who dealt openly and honestly with him. He wanted to make whatever world he lived in a better place, whether it was in music education, media production or local politics. He was a man of great integrity, originality, generosity and moral courage. In his all too short life he probably managed to change more things for the good than most of us are ever likely to achieve. He put his neck on the line and made a real, positive difference. If anyone lived out the maxim 'love thy neighbour as thyself', it was Gerard. I am deeply saddened that this truly good man is no longer with us. At the same time, reflecting on my knowledge of this man who I was privileged to call my friend, on this occasion of his untimely death, I feel all the more resolved to stand up to the big bullies and *Ja-Sagers* of this world, all the more determined to do my best to give whatever light, power and voice I can to those who have little or none. I'm certain that Gerard would not have wanted it any other way. I will miss him badly. Venceremos!

Endnotes

1. This personal statement first appeared as Tagg, P. Gerard Kempers (1948–2005), <http://tagg.org/zmisc/GKobit1.htm-TOF> (1 October 2005).
2. Documentary *Een koffer in Berlijn* (1997). See also, for example, *De maakbaarheid van de natuur* (1996) about nature conservation issues in the Netherlands.