

Background to the work

THE GREAT STORM OF 1674

The summer of 1674 witnessed an exceptional weather event affecting large parts of Europe. Originating in southwest France on 1st August, the storm travelled northwards gathering strength as it reached northern France, Belgium, Germany, England and the Netherlands. Effects of the storm were reported from as far afield as Hamburg in the East and southern Ireland in the West. It brought with it not only violent winds and rain, but also thunder, lightning and hail, resulting in numerous collapsed buildings, upturned ships, human casualties and disruption to infrastructure. In Strasburg and Paris, hailstones as large as 15–20cm were reported, and in Antwerp the bridge over the river Scheld was destroyed. By six in the afternoon the storm reached Turnhout and Zandvliet in Belgium, destroying many houses and one church. By seven o'clock the front had intensified into a tornado as it reached the city of Utrecht, causing devastation to many parts of the city, including the magnificent Domkerk: the entire nave collapsed, miraculously leaving the bell tower, choir and transepts untouched. Towers of four other church buildings also fell. Other damaged structures included houses and several windmills. Trees were damaged or uprooted, and many people lost their lives due to collapsing buildings. Several other places in the vicinity of the city were also affected, with church towers collapsing in Vleuten, Jutphaas, Bunnik, Houten, and IJsselstein. Damage was inflicted on many other buildings throughout the Netherlands, including churches in Hellouw, Asperen, Hippolytushoef, and Den IJp. Extensive destruction of houses occurred in Hilversum and Landsmeer, and in Amsterdam ships were either set adrift or overturned and sunk.

The *Oprechte Haerlemse Saterdagse Courant* published the following report:

Utrecht, August 2nd. Yesterday evening at half past seven, a terrible thunderstorm arose here, lasting until half past eight; however, the worst occurred in a quarter of an hour: the sky remained constantly lit and in flames, and it was terrifying to hear the thunder and dreadful winds, accompanied by the crashing of chimneys, roofs, facades, and towers, which brought an unusual astonishment to everyone, and this caused many to speak of an earthquake. By 7.30 the church of the Dom, up to the choir, lay in ruins with its pillars completely destroyed, without the Dom Tower being damaged in any way [...]

Various writers extensively documented the terrible tempest in their diaries, such as Merchant Gerrit Jansz. Kooch wrote a rhymed poem in 139 stanzas shortly after the storm, describing the damage in many places. The English diplomat Sir William Temple experienced the storm and wrote a brief account of it, which was included by the English writer Daniel Defoe in a book describing another storm, the December storm of 1703.

In the city of Utrecht, the ruins of the Domkerk remained for more than a century. In 1979, Thea Beckman wrote the youth book *Stad in de storm* about Utrecht and the tornado. In 2018 the Utrecht band *Bloodgod* released the song '*t Schrickelik Tempeest*, also inspired by the devastating storm, and shortly after the disaster, Herman Saftleven was commissioned by the Utrecht city council to create a series of detailed drawings depicting the devastating tornado and its consequences.

A modern-day memorial

It is indeed following this tradition of artistic documentation that, early in January 2024, I was approached by Ulrich Pöhl, director of the Utrecht-based contemporary music ensemble, Insomnio, and its research department, TouchLab, with an ambitious idea to mark the 350th Anniversary of the storm. He imagined a substantial musical work where four cathedral organs would be brought together into the Utrecht Domkerk, and placed around the edge of the audience in the form of a cross. The work would then present a dramatic musical memorial of the storm with the use of the organ of the Domkerk and three other organs from remote locations around Europe.

The project would be made possible with the use of a new internet streaming system designed by Insomnio's research department— TouchLab—founded in 2020 by Ulrich Pöhl. Originally designed as a solution for musicians to work together during the covid pandemic, the system has since been developed further, thanks to the recent fast-developing advances in internet technology, and is now becoming a new artform in itself. For the first time, instruments (and indeed all manner of sound sources) that are fixed in their own remote locations can now be played and heard together, creating extraordinary possibilities for composers. And so it was that on receiving Ulrich's invitation I immediately embarked on the composition, completing it by the middle of April. The performance was planned to take place in the Domkerk on 1st August 2024, at the very time and place that the storm hit Utrecht 350 years earlier.

The result is *Tempestas in memoriam*—a virtuosic piece for four cathedral organs lasting about the same length of time as the storm's 'attack' on the city. The Domkerk's Bätz organ would be heard live, whilst the other three organs would be live-streamed from three remote locations around Europe to three sound systems arranged around the audience in the Domkerk. The three other organs eventually chosen for the project were those of Blackburn Cathedral in England, the Epiphany Kirche in Berlin and the Antonius Kirche in Düsseldorf. As always with TouchLab productions, the performance would also be heard online, and would be accessible later in TouchLab's archives. The organists we invited to take part in the project were Darius Battiwalla, Karolina Juodelyte, Jan Hage and Dominik Susteck, who would perform on the organs of Blackburn, Berlin, Utrecht and Düsseldorf respectively.