

Songs for soprano

Who was Anna Agnes Witsen? It's this question that has kept me occupied for the past 30 years. In this photo essay I go in search of the life and times of this woman who in the night of March 5, 1889 walked into a hole in the ice of the pond where I myself, a century later, played so joyfully as a child.



The estate of Ewijkshoeve was in the late 19th century the 'country residence' of the patrician family Witsen. Their son Willem Witsen was a Dutch painter, etcher and photographer associated with the Amsterdam Impressionism movement. Thanks to his generosity, Ewijkshoeve became a gathering place for writers, musicians and painters and formed the backdrop of the Tachtigers movement who proclaimed the principle of *l'art pour l'art*.

When I grew up on the same estate in the eighties of the 20th century, I first heard about the drama that had taken place in that spot a century earlier. I became fascinated by this woman. How could it be that someone was so unhappy in the place where I experienced so many beautiful times? I wanted to look for Anna. Who was she? What drove her? What was her role and how can that be seen in the time in which she lived in relation to the present?

Thanks to the book 'Ewijkshoeve, tuin van tachtig' (1988) by Rein van der Wiel and other sources on the internet, I have quite a lot of information about Anna's life, the circumstances that led to her death and the reactions on that fact in art and literature of that time.

For example, in 1889 Herman Gorter wrote the magnificent poem "In den zwarten nacht is een mensch aangetreden" in response to the death of Anna. Frederik van Eeden wrote on 6 April of that year in his diary about the same sad event. In May Julius Röntgen composed a song on the poem 'Abschied' that reminds one of an 'in memoriam Anna Witsen'. Jan Toorop drew his 'Tuin der Weenen' that has been associated with Anna's death in 1890 and a few years later, in 1899, Frans Coenen wrote 'Vervreemd' about a woman who showed a very strong resemblance to Anna Witsen.

Anna was depressed, she suffered from unrequited love and as a woman she believed that she had failed by staying alone. After all, the main goal in the life of the late nineteenth century woman was reproduction. The glorification of motherhood increased in that time and was seen as the highest achievable ideal for women.

Anna also thought she was inadequate in other areas. She felt that her mere presence bothered her own brother and that her father did not see her. She was charged with severe fears and life unquestionably tormented her.

More importantly, she received little recognition as a soprano singer. Her father initially encouraged her musical development, but then forbade her to carry out the profession on a professional basis. Yet that seemed to be her main goal in life.

The late-nineteenth-century dogmatic ideas about the position of women and how she had to fulfill that role meant for a woman of Anna's position that she should not be a professional soprano vocalist. And although the Tachtigers resisted the old-fashioned, bourgeois ideas with a tooth and nail, there was no one who jumped for the gap for Anna. She was expected to fulfill her duties indoors and show modesty, passivity and restraint. Characteristics that do not seem to match with the impetuous character structure of Anna Agnes Witsen.

It must have felt like a relief to Anna to escape from this reality when she stepped into the pond in front of Ewijckshoeve in the early cold morning of March, 5th 1889.

In general, the history of this place has always fascinated me. The place where I have lived my whole youth has shaped me to a large extent. It is therefore that my photography is derived from the late nineteenth century's artworks made on or inspired by Ewijckshoeve. Works by artists like Willem Witsen himself, W.B. Tholen or Piet Meiners who had their studio's there. Or by their artistic contemporaries who regularly visited this place, such as Jan Veth, Breitner or Mauve. The atmosphere in their works can be characterized as melancholy, sober and often dark scenes. Impressionism and naturalism plays an important role.

In this photo essay I fantasize about the life of Anna in the place that I know through and through, but in a time that is strange to me. They are my own memories that I mix with the imaginations of life back then. Memories, facts and impressions together form my idea of the life of this woman. What was it like to live in that time? What would have happened to me if I had been born in another time and could not have exercised my passion because I am a woman? Would Anna have been happy if she, just like me, was born a century later? These are the questions I asked myself while creating this project.

Is gender equality better today? Maybe a little, but certainly not entirely. It was only recently announced that the opportunities for Dutch women in the economic and political field deteriorated in 2019. This is one of the reasons why the Netherlands has dropped from 27th to 38th place on the Global Gender Gap Index of the World Economic Forum (WEF), behind countries such as Rwanda and the Philippines. A total of 153 countries are compared in terms of (among

other things) economic participation, political influence and access to education.



By telling the story of Anna, I hope to draw attention to the theme of gender inequality that has changed over the centuries but has never disappeared. After all, equal rights and opportunities for everyone are essential for development, prosperity and peace I think.

Jitske Schols, 2019