

Theatre of the absurd

From Christian radio to the first televised breasts, VPRO has navigated an obscure path to become a broadcaster with a clear vision of adventure, surrealism and optimism in its programming.

By Venetia Rainey
Photography Jussi Puikkonen



1 Surrounded by cameras, a grey-haired Frenchman dressed in black methodically turns the crank on a hurdy-gurdy. Next to him, a young Dutchman works his fingers up and down an alto clarinet, the instruments' notes merging to create something between jazz and folk.

Throughout the rest of the day the same cameras will record a German ensemble playing Renaissance-era melodies inspired by Martin Luther's compositions and a Belgian band fusing pop, rock, folk and classical music. It's just another average Tuesday for the crew behind VPRO's popular *Free Sounds* programme, a wonderful 50-minute Sunday-morning show that is a classic example of the sort of outward-looking, unusual, in-depth content that the Dutch television network is known for.

"We don't want to do what everyone else is doing," says *Free Sounds* producer Barbara Duives as she takes a break between sets. "We see our show as adventurous."

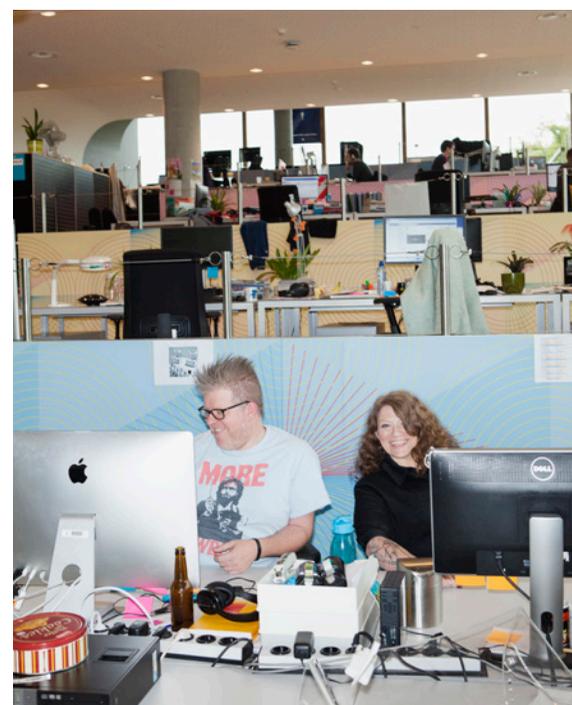
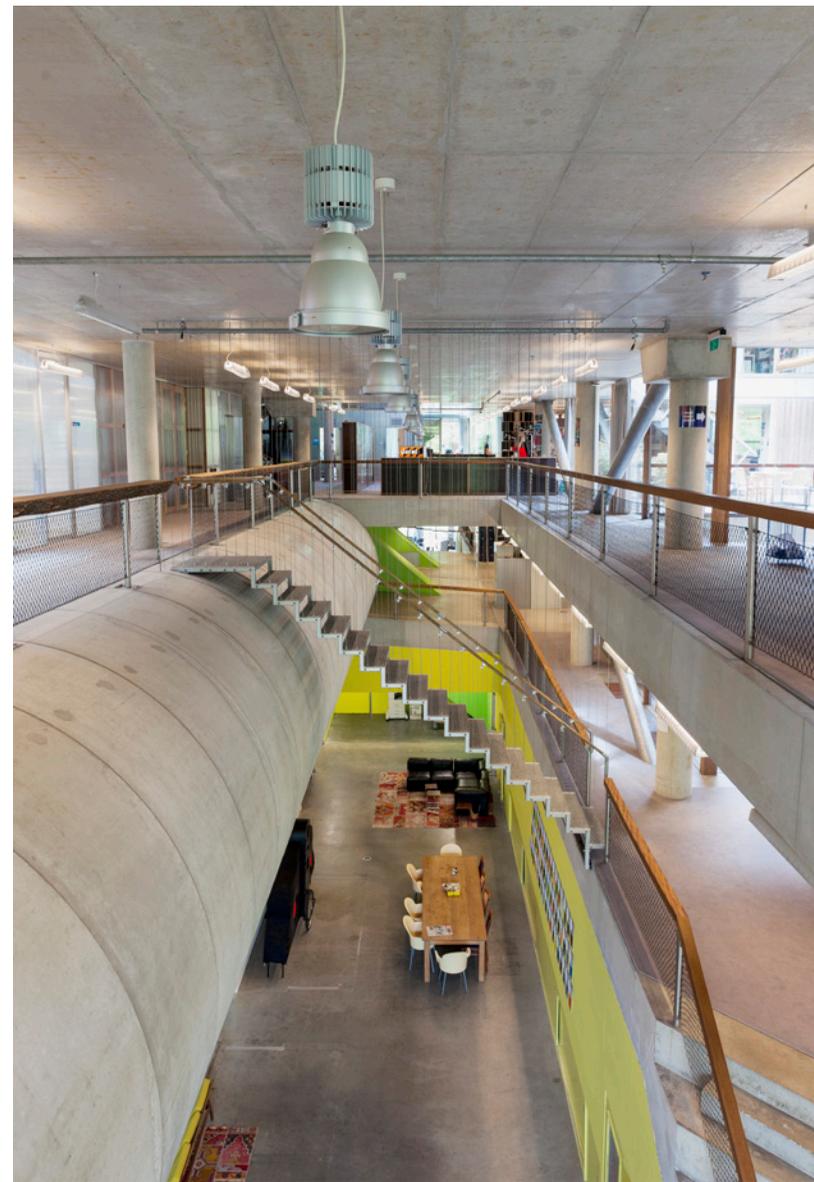
This might as well be the tagline for VPRO. The *Vrijzinnig Protestantse Radio*

2 Omroep, or Liberal Protestant Radio Broadcasting Corporation, began life as a Christian organisation back in 1926. However, it later shed its religious affiliation and made its name pushing the boundaries of what could be shown on Dutch television during the 1950s and 1960s, most notably broadcasting the first pair of televised breasts in 1967 as part of legendary visual artist Wim T Schippers' *Hoepla* programme.

These days the broadcast association is a bit more regular, enjoying a €66m yearly budget, including support from 300,000 paying members and €41m in state funding. It employs 318 staff at its sprawling office in Hilversum (a media enclave just outside Amsterdam) to create television and radio for national broadcaster NPO, plus online content for its own website and a printed weekly guide. Yet the network still prides itself on producing excellent work that goes off the beaten track, straying into the absurd.

One particularly interesting television programme, *De Hokjesman* (*The Pigeon Hole Man*), sees a fictional

(1) Singer Giovanna Ostiana (2) Filming 'Free Sounds' (3) 'Made in Europe' advert (4) VPRO office (5) Branded coffee break (6) Flo de Haan and Celine Dechamps putting content online



19th-century anthropologist roam around the Netherlands and examine well-known local subcultures as if they were completely foreign. In another, a Dutch photographer travels down the Yangtze River to speak to ordinary Chinese people about their country. A third, due to be aired later this year, takes an international look at the current and future role of artificial intelligence in people's lives and what it means to be human.

"We are always asking questions about this world," says Stan van Engelen, editor in chief of the television department, which produces about 2,000 hours of shows a year. "Our programmes are a translation of those constant struggles."

This is not straightforward network television; think of it more as the broadcasting equivalent of the weekend paper. And the closest the network comes to the news is its "future affairs" show *Tegenlicht*, or *Backlight* (see page 159). VPRO could be compared to Vice TV (but for adults and perhaps watched by more people). Its eccentric and gripping content, which is aired on NPO because VPRO doesn't have its own channel, has no real competition in the Dutch market – and perhaps not in the world.

Part of this is down to the fact that Engelen likes to push his work "almost to the edge of it becoming art", with an emphasis on innovative storytelling forms. "You [as a viewer] have to put your energy into it," he adds. "It's a risky way of making television these days but I think that might be quite a Dutch thing because it's very stubborn. We take a lot of risks. There is an unwritten rule here that you don't go looking for the easiest way."

Cue *Made in Europe*, which aired earlier this year. Based on a book of essays by the late Dutch journalist Pieter Steinz, the fascinating eight-part documentary series explored the culture and art that bind an increasingly fractured continent, from Beethoven and Pussy Riot to James Joyce and Lego.

"We thought it was very interesting to use this book to tell a story about Europe," says Maarten Slagboom, a journalist, researcher and editor who worked on the series. "Not about bureaucracy, Brexit and financial crises but the other

Europe: what we have in common and what people often forget.”

This quest for a different perspective marks all of VPRO’s television output, from documentaries and music shows to youth programming and dramas. The network also has a whole department called Dorst, or Thirst, where young artists can try out more experimental ideas.

“VPRO has pioneering and experimenting in its DNA,” says Slagboom. “It’s always researching new forms of making television. For us it is not a disposable medium; we want something to be worth seeing two or three times.”

Considering it was about art and Europe (“Two words that people find kind of offensive,” says Slagboom, laughing), *Made in Europe* did well, garnering about 275,000 viewers weekly. Its target audience, the Dutch creative class, is around two to three million strong. VPRO’s travel documentaries regularly get about 700,000 viewers weekly. The most popular show on the network, *Sunday with Lubach* – a sort of Dutch version of John Oliver’s *Last Week Tonight* – now gets upwards of one million viewers. Its host, Arjen Lubach, is the closest thing VPRO has to a celebrity presenter. The comedian shot to fame after his satirical “Netherlands second” video mocking Donald Trump went viral and was aped by countries across the world.

Overall, however, the broadcaster eschews widely recognised names in favour of experts and opinion leaders who are well known within their field, something its loyal but fiercely critical audience appreciates. *Made in Europe*, for example, was presented by Belgian writer and poet Dimitri Verhulst, who few outside the Benelux literary world are likely to have heard of.

This doesn’t mean that VPRO isn’t interested in reaching outside the Dutch-speaking world. In fact, it claims to be the only network in the Netherlands engaged



(1) Villa VPRO (2) Maarten Slagboom (3) Nel Koopman has worked at VPRO for about 40 years (4) Filming ‘Free Sounds’ (5) ‘Free Sounds’ studio in Utrecht (6) Lunchtime (7) Managing director Lennart van der Meulen (8) Stan van Engelen, editor in chief of the TV department



Key shows

Tegenlicht (Backlight): A weekly formatless documentary show that explores “future affairs”.



Zondag Met Lubach (Sunday with Lubach): A weekly satirical news show hosted by comedian Arjen Lubach.



Zenith: Black comedy series for teenagers about two children whose parents have replaced themselves with robots.



Himmeler’s Hersens Heten Heydrich (Himmeler’s Brain is Called Heydrich): A docu-drama series about an attack on a top Nazi by two Czech soldiers in 1942.



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in a serious effort to do so, by subtitling its programmes into other European languages and distributing them for free on YouTube thanks to funding from the European Commission.

Located on the fourth floor of the network’s headquarters – an architectural triumph designed by Dutch agency MVRDV that’s known as Villa VPRO – just outside Amsterdam, the YouTube team’s desk doesn’t look out of the ordinary. But this is one of the few places in the sprawling building where Dutch is not king. “VPRO is well known here but not so much abroad,” says Celine Dechamps, who helps put content online and seed it on social media. “Some people who are passionate about documentaries know us because we win awards but the rest of the world does not. So we’re trying to get more attention.”

The team runs three channels: the most popular, Metropolis, features short videos about strange habits all over the world presented by locals; another collects classic VPRO documentaries such as *The Pigeon Hole Man*; and a third shows

travel series and world stories. Their focus is currently Spain, France, Belgium, the UK and Ireland, with Germany in their sights further down the line.

Some may think VPRO’s content is too unconventional and left-leaning to gain widespread appeal but managing director Lennart van der Meulen is bullish about the network’s prospects and stridently defends its unapologetically liberal outlook. “I think that if you define your public as the creative class you can reach an audience that is not only Dutch.

“In the fight between patriotism and globalism, we are globalists,” he adds, gesturing outside at the trees that can be seen from his floor-to-ceiling office windows. “We are rather optimistic but I think you can’t be too optimistic in this time.” — (M)