

The Belgian Horn School: a neglected tradition rediscovered

by John Humphries

At Christmas, 1977, twenty eight and one half million people turned on BBC1 to watch the Morecambe and Wise Christmas Show. The play what Ern wrote that year starred Eric as Cyrano de Bergerac and Penelope Keith as the Queen of France. "What would it take for you to kiss me?" asks de Bergerac. "Chloroform" replies the Queen. For this viewer at least, Eric in tights, pointy shoes and a long nose is the vision which comes to mind most readily whenever de Bergerac's name is mentioned.

Dim memories of that sketch may provide one reason why Flemish composer Robert Herberigs' symphonic poem for horn and orchestra, *Cyrano de Bergerac* is so little known in the UK: perhaps we just can't take it seriously! And that is a pity, because it is an engaging and dramatic work for horn and large orchestra written in 1912 in a style reminiscent of Dukas with a splash of *Till Eulenspiegel* thrown in for good measure. It is one of the earliest orchestral works in the long life of an extraordinary man who combined the careers of composer, opera conductor, professional artist and writer of popular fiction. The first performance of *Cyrano* was given by the Ghent horn player Charles Heylbroeck and in the 1950s it received its first recording in a performance by Maurice van Bocxstaele. Van Bocxstaele was Heylbroeck's pupil and a player whom Edmond Leloir rated at least as highly as Dennis Brain. *Cyrano* is today represented in the CD catalogue by a single recording made in 1995 by Van Bocxstaele's pupil

André van Driessche. Among its present-day champions is Jeroen Billiet, a young Belgian who like Herberigs has already pursued a multi-faceted career, in his case as professional horn player, teacher and tireless researcher into Belgian horn playing history.

Cyrano de Bergerac, played flawlessly on a Van Cauwelaert F piston horn was the centrepiece of a recital which Billiet gave recently as part of his final submission for the title of "Laureat^e of the Orpheus Institute" in Ghent. The rest of his recital also consisted of little-known pieces by Belgian composers and ranged from the *Fantaisie* by Martin-Joseph Mengal, played on hand horn, through to the *Chant d'Automne* by Robert Guillemyrn played on a 1930 Alexander. The recital also included a performance of the *Introduction, Theme and Variations* for two horns by Louis-Henri Merck, which was notable less for the music itself than for the fact that Billiet and Marc De Merlier played it on mid-19th Century "Modèle Merck" instruments made by Mahillon with just two valves. While these instruments were common during the transitional

period between hand horns and valve horns, surviving two-valvers in working order are rare and to hear them played with such expertise is rarer still.

In writing about Herberig's *Cyrano de Bergerac*, I have shamelessly plundered the second part of Jeroen Billiet's submission for his Laureate. This is a detailed account of 200 Years of Belgian Horn history and a work which chronicles this hitherto neglected area of the instrument's development with enthusiasm and authority. The performers, their instruments, their teachers and the music they played are all described with passion and the interviews which the author conducted with old-time Belgian players are entertaining and revealing. Readers curious to find out more about a fascinating by-road of horn history can obtain a copy of this eminently readable dissertation directly from the author at www.corecole.be, price £39 for the book, 3CDs and a CD Rom and Jeroen asks anyone with any additional information about Belgian horn players in England to contact him at jeroen.billiet@corecole.be.

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Belgian horn players in Britain: musical migrants from a small country

by Jeroen Billiet

In 1830, a riot which followed a Brussels performance of Auber's opera *La Muette de Portici* sparked Belgium's quest for independence from Holland. This was eventually achieved when a peace settlement which called for Queen Victoria's uncle, Prince Leopold of Saxe-Coburg, to be crowned King of the Belgians was agreed. Leopold was quick to see the need to revolutionise his underdeveloped kingdom, introducing the first railways in mainland Europe and copying Britain's industrial system. His extremely liberal laws encouraged investors to apply a ruthless capitalist model though for many years this created not wealth, but extreme poverty for most Belgians and it was not until the turn of the 20th Century that the situation began to improve.

The King was also determined to introduce a proper system of musical education, with music schools in Brussels, Liège, Ghent and elsewhere, but musicians remained very poorly paid, and even those with fixed positions in military bands found survival a struggle. Nevertheless, by 1840, a whole generation of brilliant musicians had appeared, and foreign concert organisers regularly poached talented youngsters from Belgian orchestras and bands in the years after their graduation. Many went to France as the Belgians shared not only a language but much of their cultural life and musical style with their southern neighbour, but others went further afield.

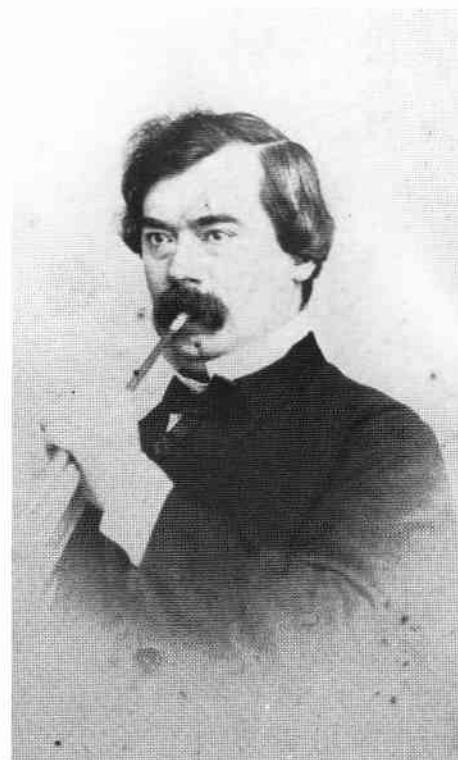
The prospect of higher salaries in Britain was undoubtedly an attraction, but there was another reason why The United Kingdom was a popular destination for Belgian horn players.

Until about 1875, British orchestral horn players favoured the natural horn over the valved instrument and, although Belgian players were mainly trained for the valve horn from the 1840s onwards, most still learned hand horn skills and would have been able to adapt easily to British orchestral expectations.

Many Belgian players got their first taste of English musical life touring with the band of the Belgian Guides, an organisation which made several visits during the 2nd half of the 19th Century. Among their number were almost certainly the horn players Jean-Désirée Artôt (1803 - 1887), Louis-Henri Merck (1831 - 1900), Charles-Modeste Simar (1819 - 1894) Alphonse Stenebruggen (1824 - 1895) and his brother Jules (1831 - after 1872). Some, including Simar and the Stenebruggens then obtained positions in the orchestra for the immensely fashionable concerts put on by the conductor Louis Jullien. With his brightly coloured waistcoats, his immaculate white gloves, his bejewelled baton and his immense flair for showmanship, Jullien and his concerts were phenomenally popular in Victorian England and offered excellent employment opportunities for players.

Simar played for Jullien from 1854 to 1857 and was joined by Jules Stenebruggen in 1857. Alphonse took part in Jullien's US tour of 1853-4, but then worked on the continent until 1880, when he returned to London to play in a series of concerts with some of the most distinguished musicians of the day. According to the Belgian periodical, *Le Guide Musicale*:

Our compatriot Mr A. Steenebruggen, the famous horn player, who is at this moment in London, has been invited to play at the principal musical gatherings, and everywhere he goes, he is a great success. Notably so in the Floral Hall and in the Steinway Hall, where he played a Romance by Saint-Saëns accompanied by the composer. He has - amongst other things - been the partner of Mr Charles Hallé and Mme Norman-Neruda for a trio by Brahms.



Alphonse Stenebruggen
Photo: Baden-Baden City Archive

This performance of the Brahms *Trio*, said by the horn historian WFH Blandford to have been the first in England was a piece with which Stenebruggen seems to have been particularly associated: he was an experienced performer on the hand horn, the instrument for which Brahms intended it and knew the composer from summer seasons spent playing in the orchestra at Baden-Baden. There is even circumstantial evidence to suggest that composer and horn player worked on the piece together. On the strength of these performances, Stenebruggen was appointed principal horn at Covent Garden though he had returned to Strasburg before 1885.

Among Stenebruggen's other concerts during the 1880 tour was one in which he took the horn part in performances of the Beethoven and Hummel Septets at London's Musical Union. In 1877 an identical programme there had featured another Belgian horn player, Pierre Van Haute (1824 - 1882), and it is possible that he had recommended Stenebruggen for the concert. Van Haute had studied with Martin-Joseph Mengal in Ghent before gaining a 1st Prize in Gallay's class at the Paris Conservatoire and the



position of principal horn at the city's Opéra Comique.



Pierre Van Haute circa 1860
 Photo: *Royal Ghent Conservatoire Library*

A photograph of him, taken around 1860 shows a man who was clearly far from wealthy: the right arm of his coat is seriously damaged, with a large tear at the shoulder. In the hope, perhaps, of improving his financial position, he tried his luck in England, where his name began to appear on concert programmes both as "Van Haute" and in its French translation, "Du Bois". By 1867, he was among the best musicians in London when Jules Rivièrè hired him to play first horn for a series of concerts in the Alhambra Theatre in Leicester Square. In 1871 he was living in the capital with his wife, and he played in concerts at Covent Garden in 1873, but during the 1870s he frequently worked in Manchester. During 1871-2 he played third horn in the Hallé Orchestra and in 1875 succeeded Paquis as its principal. It is to be hoped that by this time, his financial position had become sufficiently secure for him to afford a new jacket!

A Belgian-born horn player who had a longer lasting effect on British musical life was Henri-Louis Vandermeerschén, (1866 - 1934) the son of a fishmonger who studied at

the Brussels Conservatoire under Merck, winning 1st Prize for horn in 1885. Eugene Goossens, a former colleague of his in Belgium, then invited him to London to play in the Carl Rosa Opera Company where he spent five years as the ensemble's principal horn. There he met and married Annetta Laubach, the principal contralto, helping to make his move to the United Kingdom more permanent.

It was as a member of the Queen's Hall Orchestra that Vandermeerschén made his mark: on 30 September 1903, the orchestra was thrown into confusion when Robert Newman, the orchestral manager announced that the freelance players would henceforth be put on annual contracts and could no longer send deputies to rehearsals. 46 of the players resigned immediately and a committee of six, including Vandermeerschén was formed to recruit musicians for a new organisation which was to become the London Symphony Orchestra. When Adolf Borsdorf had to stop playing first horn, Vandermeerschén shared the principal's job with Thomas Busby and played with the LSO until 1932 when ill-health forced his retirement.

Raymond Meert (c.1880 - c.1950) was from a slightly younger generation than Vandermeerschén

and studied with Charles Heylbroeck in Ghent, where he obtained a 1st Prize in 1903. By 1907, he had moved to Glasgow, where he played 3rd horn to Alf Brain in the Scottish Orchestra and the following year became section principal when Brain moved to London. A further move to Manchester in 1916 saw him become 1st horn in the Hallé Orchestra, a post he held until 1938, with a break of three years from 1934 - 1937 when he played 3rd to Alan Hyde. During his time in Manchester, he also played first horn with the Liverpool Philharmonic Society and, on 16th February, 1928, was soloist in Mozart's 3rd horn concerto with the Hallé at the Free Trade Hall. From 1943 - 1945 Meert returned to the orchestra to help out as 4th horn. Blandford heard him play and described him as "quite

Founding members of the London Symphony Orchestra at the Worcester Festival (currently displayed at the Barbican Centre, London). Vandermeerschén stands at the right on the back row. His trademark spectacles with blue lenses can be made out in the photograph.

Photo: London Symphony Orchestra



good, with a fine command of the high register, though like other braves Belges he is over-fond of the B-flat alto crook".

Throughout his career, he played on a single horn made by Mahillon, the Belgian manufacturer who from 1844 until 1922 maintained a branch in London.

In 1912, Frédéric Goedertier, another Heylbroeck pupil joined Meert as 2nd horn in the Scottish Orchestra. He was slightly older, having won a 2nd Prize at Ghent in 1893 and his appointment may have been at the invitation of either Meert himself or of the orchestra's Belgian leader, Henri Verbrugghen. He does not seem to have settled, for in 1914, he emigrated to New York. Whether he found the British freelance way of life difficult to cope with is not recorded, though 44 years earlier, *Le Guide Musicale* had warned its readers that:

The UK (and London in particular) will soon become the magical place for all travelling musicians. Those who move fastest are already trying to get contracts. Soon there will be ten thousand of them, of whom there might be a hundred who will be able to achieve the goal of their visit to this city: the others will return with nothing, with empty pockets and disillusioned as never before.

Meert was the last high-profile Belgian horn player to work in Britain and, since the 1960s, the UK has become a net exporter of horn players. Some, including RAM professor Pip Eastop have even held posts in Belgium, but the Belgian nation's contribution to the mix from which the British horn style developed is one which should not be forgotten.

Jeroen Billiet

Jeroen Billiet (born Tielt, West-Flanders, Belgium 1977) studied the horn at the Royal Conservatoires of Ghent and Brussels with Luc Bergé. He took masterclasses with André Van Driessche, Froydis Ree Wekre, Ulrich Hübner and Claude Maury as well as lessons with other leading players.

In 2001 he passed the final exam for horn with great distinction in Brussels, and obtained the degrees of Master in Music and Master of Music Education in the same year.

Since 1999 he has been a freelance-player with several orchestras (including Prima La Musica, I Fiamminghi, Flemish

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Opera, Flanders Symphony Orchestra, l'Opéra Royal de Wallonie . . .). During his studies he took a particular interest in historical performance practice, taking up the natural horn in 1999. From then, he played and toured with some of Europe's finest ensembles performing on period instruments: l'Orchestre des Champs Elysées (Philippe Herreweghe), Lles Agrémens, Concerto Köln, Anima Eterna (Jos Van Immerseel), Il Fondamento (Paul Dombrecht), les Musiciens du Louvre-Grenoble (Marc Minkowski) . . . mostly as principal horn. On a regular basis he can be heard in recitals or chamber music. His interests stretch from the early baroque horn to the modern horn.

Besides this, he is teacher of horn at the conservatoires of Tielt, Bruges and Oudenaarde.

Since 2001 he has worked on an academic post-graduate study at the Orpheus Instituut in Ghent, and obtained the title of "Laureate of the Orpheus institute" con brio in June 2008.

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