

**MARCO
POLO**

Anthology of Flemish Music

DDD
8.223827

Peter
BENOIT

Piano Concerto • Flute Concerto
Overture: Le roi des aulnes

Luc Devos, Piano • Gaby Van Riet, Flute
Royal Flanders Philharmonic Orchestra
Frédéric Devreese



Peter Benoit (1834 - 1901)

Flute Concerto, Op. 43a (Symphonic Tale)

Overture: Le roi des Aulnes

Piano Concerto, Op. 43b (Symphonic Tale)

Peter Benoit was born at Harlebeke on 17th August 1834 and died in Antwerp on 8th March 1901. He is without doubt the most important Flemish composer of the nineteenth century, responsible for the foundation of a Flemish national school of music. He studied at the Brussels Conservatory, where his teachers included Fétis, and won the Grote Rome Prize, the highest musical distinction in Belgium. He made use of the money from the prize for a study tour through Germany and Bohemia and afterwards settled in Paris where, in 1862, he became conductor of the Bouffes-Parisiens. The following year he returned to Brussels and achieved phenomenal success with his *Quadrilogie religieuse* for choir and orchestra and with the oratorio of 1866, *Lucifer*. From then onwards he laid aside instrumental music and concentrated almost exclusively on vocal and choral music with Flemish texts. In 1867 he, settled in Antwerp, where he was appointed director of the local music school, which under his leadership became the Royal Flemish Music Conservatory. In addition to his activity as a composer, he proved himself to be a remarkable educator, conductor and music administrator.

The two *Symphonic Tales*, for piano and orchestra and for flute and orchestra, date from 1865, a turning-point in Benoit's career. These were his last major instrumental works, bringing to a close his first creative period. The original title of these works was Symphonic Concerto, following the established three-movement form, and Benoit considered them a continuation on a larger scale of his *Tales and Ballades*, Opus 34, five suites for solo piano, which had similar programmatic content, although in the case of both the piano pieces and the concertos, it seems clear from the available manuscripts that the titles, which refer to legends from the composer's own native region, were added afterwards. It was in fact very much later, in 1885, that the title *concerto* was replaced by the then more modern title of *Symphonic Tales*.

The *Symphonic Tale*, Opus 43b for piano and orchestra has a detailed programme. In the opening Ballade night surrounds the crumbling castle of the Foresters at Harelbeca. The leaves of the trees rustle in the wind, the moon casts its silvery sheen on the Leie and light falls on the ruins, soaring up in majestic height, bringing glorious memories. Two themes are of basic importance in this movement, the first, announced by the French horn in C minor, introduces the tragic element that resounds as a lament throughout the ballad. The piano takes up the second theme, the chivalrous element, the fame and the pride of the old stronghold. In *The Song of the Bard* a deep voice is heard telling of the ancient Foresters, noble men and women, the days of Harelbeca's past greatness and the dire predictions that threaten it. In *The Fantastic Hunt in the Night* the sky is suddenly filled with doom-laden clouds. The mocking sound of the horns and the roll of the drums resound ominously. A hunting-party gallops by, swift as the wind. Ghostly spectres appear and the air is filled with strange rumours. The wind howls more violently and tears the crumbling castle from its foundations. The spectres swirl about the ruins, screaming in frenzy, while the clamorous sound of the bells is heard from the old tower (the tragic theme of the first movement). As dawn breaks, the noble castle of Harelbeca disappears.

In the finale of this *Symphonic Tale* Benoit has made use of a Flemish folk-song, *A mouse came running by*. This is one of the earliest examples of his use of this procedure. The solo part was later slightly reworked under the supervision of the composer by the famous pianist Arthur de Greef (1862- 1940). This revised version won considerable popularity in Flanders and was included in the repertoire of a number of virtuosi.

The *Symphonic Tale* for flute and orchestra, Opus 43a, is less explicit in its programme. The opening movement, *Will-o'-the-Wisps*, was described at the time as a continual succession of made-to-measure cadenzas. It is based on two main themes, the first a nervous and fiery scherzo motif introduced by the orchestra and then taken over and expanded by the soloist on his first appearance. The second is a more lilting melody in G major. The slow central movement, *Melancholie*, starts with a horn solo theme, varied by the flute. The finale, *Will-o'-the-Wisps Dance* is similar to the opening movement, bithematic and moving from E minor to E major. The work as a whole, although never enjoying real popularity, is a particularly original contribution to the rare high romantic literature of the solo instrument.

Both *Symphonic Tales* were first performed on the same day, 16th February 1866, at a concert organized by Benoit at the Royal Art Association in Antwerp. The soloists were the pianist Sophie Dumont and flautist Jan van Dumon, a teacher at the Brussels Conservatory.

After winning the Belgian Prix de Rome in 1857, Peter Benoit was advised by his friend and teacher Fetis to travel through Germany and Bohemia. The music of Beethoven and of Weber, among others, made a deep impression on him, and this may be heard in his comic opera *Le roi des Aulnes* (The King of the Alders), a work in one act with a libretto by E. Castin, who died in 1861. It was staged on 2nd December 1859 at the Casion des Galeries in Brussels. The performance must have been successful, since Benoit, who until 1863 lived principally in Paris, decided to cast caution aside and stage the piece at the Opera-Comique. For the occasion the libretto was reworked by Turpin de Sansay and the music revised, but to no avail. As far as is known the only surviving form of this work is the manuscript of the second version, which bears the date January 1861 and contains eight scenes for four characters. The only part of the 1859 version that remains is the overture, which was published in 1938 by the Peter Benoit Fund. The original manuscript is in the Antwerp City Archives. The style of the overture must remind a listener of Weber, a composer whose music long held a fascination for Benoit, as his 1860 piano sonata demonstrates.

The Overture starts *maestoso poco largo*, in C major, conjuring up a storm, with a lilting melody in the cellos. The main section, marked *Allegro ma non troppo*, is principally based on two themes, introduced respectively by the first violins and a solo clarinet. Although this music by a 25-year-old composer leans heavily on other influences, it has won popularity in the concert hall for its youthful verve.

Luc Leytens
(@ 1995 translation: Simon Shrimpton)

Gaby Van Riet

Gaby Van Riet was born in 1959 in the Belgian town of Essen and started to learn the flute at the age of eight. At the age of fourteen she won the Tenuto Competition and performed the Flute Concerto of Jacques Ibert with the Belgian Radio and Television Orchestra. She studied at the Royal Flemish Conservatory in Antwerp, in Cologne and in Basle, and from 1978 to 1983 was a principal flautist in the European Youth Orchestra, playing under conductors such as Abbado, von Karajan, Solti and Barenboim. Her many awards include the 1983 Gold Medal György Cziffra in Paris and since that year she has served as principal flautist of the Stuttgart Radio Orchestra, with a busy series of festival appearances throughout Europe.

Luc Devos

Luc Devos, winner of a number of important international competitions, was born in Brussels in 1960 and gave his first public performance at the age of seven. He had his later musical training at the Conservatory in Leuven, in London and in Brussels, embarking on a career that has brought solo recitals and concerto performances throughout Europe, in Japan, South American, the former Soviet Union and Canada. He has performed Mozart concertos on historical instruments with La Petite Bande under Sigiswald Kuijken, with whom he plays recitals and has recorded Mozart violin sonatas. He is also the pianist of the Grumiaux Piano Trio. In 1994 he was awarded the title Young European Musician of the Year by the Belgian Musical Press Union.

Royal Flanders Philharmonic Orchestra

The Royal Flanders Philharmonic Orchestra was established in 1955 by a group of enthusiastic young musicians, their enterprise rewarded by subsidy from the Belgian government, from the province and from the city of Antwerp, where it is based. The orchestra embarked on an annual season of concerts, later adding to this a series of successful promenade concerts, while undertaking engagements throughout Belgium and in France, Spain, Germany Denmark, Greece and the Netherlands.

In 1983, various changes in management and subsidy took place and the orchestra was enlarged to a full complement of ninety-six players. In this form it has assumed an important role in the Flemish community at home and has won distinction abroad, not least in the Linz Bruckner Festival, where its performances were enthusiastically received. The first conductor of the enlarged orchestra was the Bulgarian Emil Tchakarov and since May, 1986, the orchestra has been under the direction of Günter Neuhold.

Peter
BENOIT
(1834 - 1901)

Luc Devos, Piano · Gaby Van Riet, Flute
Royal Flenders Philharmonic Orchestra
Frédéric Devreese

Flute Concerto, Op. 43a (Symphonic Tale)

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|---|--|------|
| 1 | Preludium: Will-o'-the-Wisps: Scherzo vivace | 5:59 |
| 2 | Melancholie: Andante | 7:29 |
| 3 | Finale: Will-o'-the-Wisps Dance: Allegro vivace | 7:01 |
| 4 | Overture: Le roi des aulnes (The King of the Alders) | 7:46 |

Piano Concerto, Op. 43b (Symphonic Tale)

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|---|--|-------|
| 5 | Ballad – The Ruins of Harelbeke Castle: Molto Moderato | 13:07 |
| 6 | Song of the Bard: Larghetto | 9:31 |
| 7 | Fantastic Hunt in the Night: Molto animato | 5:51 |

Recorded at the Elisabeth Hall in Antwerp, Belgium, in April 1995.

Producer: Frédéric Devreese

Recording Supervision: Jean Segers

Engineer: Emmanuel Wautier

Publisher: Peter Benoit Fund, *Conservatorium* Antwerp

Music Notes: Luc Leytens (Translation: Simon Shrimpton)

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(Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique, Brussels)

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The Belgian composer Peter Benoit's two *Symphonic Tales* illustrate in music a narrative content derived from local Flemish legend, but now in concerto rather than purely symphonic form, in a style influenced equally by Berlioz and by Liszt.

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STEREO

Peter
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Piano Concerto, Op. 43b (Symphonic Tale)

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Playing Time: 56'44"

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