

Monceaux 2004

by Nigel Munisamy

Christian Durieux is a horn teacher in Monceaux, a village absorbed by the industrial sprawl of the old steel and coal mining city of Charleroi in the French speaking region called Wallonia which comprises the southern half of Belgium. Marie-Paule Verlinde is a horn teacher working in Overpelt, a newly prosperous town up by the Dutch border in Flanders which is the Flemish speaking region and the northern half of Belgium. Both have flourishing classes of keen students of all ages from beginners to conservatoire entry candidates and adults. They have both organised horn class ensembles, Christian especially giving concerts at events in his local area.

By chance, they met and, as the subject of horn ensembles cropped up in conversation, they had the idea of combining forces some day just to see what would happen. Marie-Paule is a member of the Cyprium Belgian horn quartet and spoke enthusiastically of the idea during a rehearsal break. Needless to say the idea immediately grew into a firm project including the students of Claudine Novikow, 3rd horn of the Liège Royal Opera and horn teacher in Embourg near Liège, and Patrick Warson, professional wind band conductor and horn teacher in Maas-Mechelen in Flemish Limbourg, both members of Cyprium.

There was another reason for organising a North/South Flemish/Walloon musical event: Belgium, a particularly small European country, has been more and more politically divided along language lines. Although the majority of people from both language groups get along fine, certain political voices have succeeded in driving organisational wedges to split even cultural life. The project was in no way intended as a political statement but, when you have a horn to your lips the only available language is music!

The word was put out that something was going to be organised, a location was found at a school in Monceaux, due to the involvement of Armand Brique, the Director of the local music school, himself an ex-hornist, and a date set. Claudine busied herself with the elaboration of an internet site (www.french-horn.be) while Christian, Armand, and Marie-Paule sought official and private sponsorship.

It should be noted that events of this nature and at this level are unheard of in Belgium. There is no supporting infrastructure and thus no budgetary resources. The organizers had no secretarial help and only their creative efforts. Fortunately, the



Cyprium. L-R Seated: Marie-Paule Verlinde and Claudine Novikow; Standing: Patrick Warson and Nigel Munisamy



Directors of the various music schools involved and the City of Charleroi's Education Department recognised a good idea and facilitated insurance coverage and provided the Monceaux town hall free of charge, plus a reception.

Music education in Belgium is not strong: there is little or no music education in primary or secondary schools. Instrumental education and music theory are provided in "Music Academies" after school hours or on Saturdays, involving trips across town, often during rush hour. Some towns and villages have local wind bands but there are no school orchestras or marching bands. However, since the academies are state subsidized, the cost is very reasonable and instruments are usually loaned to the students. Adult students are welcomed with free tuition for the unemployed.

Since many of the student's parents were less affluent, the costs were kept to a minimum, and the organisers and teachers participated without pay, for the love of the instrument!

Musically the organisation of the event was kept simple: there was only an ensemble concert given by the teachers and a massed horn choir concert for the students. Preparation for the weekend (it had grown from a single day) became a project in itself: the students, many of whom had had no or limited experience playing more than a melody, had to be taught to play accompanying lines which, on their own, made no musical sense.

Reservations were closed a two weeks before the weekend — in spite of the comparatively limited scope of the advertising, 80 students were expected on the Saturday and 102 on the Sunday! The teacher numbers were augmented by two conservatoire level students, Johnathan Devière and Pauline Michalakis, plus two full time players: freelance player Geoffrey Guerin, and another member of Cyprium, Nigel Munisamy who is fourth horn of the Liège Philharmonic Orchestra.

On arrival, name tags and time-tables were issued and students groups were allocated a staff member and a rehearsal room. Participants who were unknown to the staff members had been asked on their enrollment form if they considered themselves to be high, medium, or low players which meant in practise that a small group of good or optimistic players found themselves on first horn, the mass of students prudently entering 'medium' with a tiny but dedicated group on low 4th or 8th parts. But, somehow this worked.

The group rehearsals on the first day were dedicated to letting everybody get to know one another and just to finding themselves as players within a group. It was gratifying and impressive to notice that practically everybody could already play his or her part so that coaching could concentrate on real ensemble musicality concerns like tempo, dynamics, and tuning. It was also nice to notice that language and background proved to be no barriers — just an opportunity for spontaneous hilarity as unfamiliar names and musical explanations were groped for by staff members.

Come the first tutti rehearsal in the town hall, the sight and sound of 80 horns on stage was fantastic. Anyone in the body of the hall was pushed into the back of their seats by a wall of sound. It was powerful but not brash. The tuning was smoothed by sheer numbers and the sensation was not that

one was witnessing an artificially forced ensemble but of something completely organic and natural.

The Sunday morning saw the staff 'aperitif' concert. This was based around the Cyprium Horn Quartet who performed a selection from their repertoire of arrangements and original pieces for quartet, among which were *Starsign* by Nigel Munisamy who also wrote *The Other 8* which was premiered when Cyprium was joined by the other members of staff to play octets arranged and composed for the occasion.

The main event was conducted by Christian Durieux. He was the only one with the experience of conducting specifically a large horn group and his were the arrangements. Not everybody could be present for both days but on the Sunday the sound level went up from 80 to 92. The two solo horns of the Liège Philharmonic, Nico De Marchi, also professor of horn at the IMEP, and Bruce Richards, willingly volunteered their professional experience as they played alongside the students. Freelance horn player and horn repairman Bill Coffindaffer, who together with the Liège music shop 'Maison Tasset' provided sponsorship and a range of horn related products on site for participating students to try out or purchase, also lent his playing skills to the common goal.

Everyone present was impressed with the whole show. Individuals finally understood what it was all about and after the cries of "encore" died along with the last notes of the repeated last number, the inevitable question was asked, over drinks as top lips were immersed in various cooling liquids, "When shall we do it again?"

The Flemish participants immediately invited everybody up north for the next year but talking about it with the all the

original organisers over dinner, it was wondered whether this would be a good idea. Experience has taught that if negotiations are not initiated immediately the practical side becomes



Monceaux Participants with Music School director Armand Brique applauding.

very difficult with yearly budgets and venues already allocated etc. Also, how do you follow that? No-one wants the next event to be less than the first yet rivalry is not an option. Should the format stay as it was or should something else be tried? If so, then what? Should the whole thing be opened up and spread to involve other schools from further afield or will this become unwieldy, implying a secretariat and a cost increase thereby negating the initial concept? Time will provide an answer as the teams from Monceaux and Cyprium catch up on some well earned sleep.

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