

## Sleeve notes – CD Portrait of August De Boeck

August De Boeck was born in Merchtem in the province of Brabant on 9 May 1865. His father was his first music teacher as he wanted his son to succeed him as local church organist. From time to time August could also have some lessons with Benoit Vereertbrugghen (1838-1883) organist at Opwijk and with Jozef Vasteravendts (1835-1901) at Asse.

Between 1880 and 1891 August De Boeck was a regular student at the Royal Brussels Conservatory of Music where he was awarded a First Prize for organ and theoretical harmony (1884), practical harmony (1885) and counterpoint and fugue (1899), as well as the virtuosity prize for organ (1891). He was appointed assistant organ teacher to his professor Mailly in 1886. When he met Paul Gilson in 1899, the latter incited him to continue studying music and so he studied orchestration and composition. Having graduated, De Boeck started teaching privately and succeeded to Benoit Vereertbrugghen as a piano teacher. At that time he composed some small occasional pieces for the prize award ceremony at the local school.

His father died on 26 February 1892 and August was soon appointed as organist at Merchtem and held this position until 1895. On 10 July 1894 De Boeck was appointed organist at the Saint Boniface church at Elsene (Brussels) where he stayed until 1920 and from 1900 to 1920 he was also organist at the Brussels calced Carmelites church. These functions made him write a large amount of religious compositions. He could increase his income by teaching the piano privately and quite some families at Merchtem were very proud to boast De Boeck as private piano teacher.

Between 1893 and 1896 he was very active as a composer and wrote several important compositions. 'The Rhapsody on themes from Dahomey', dated July 1893, was to become his most famous work. He had written down the powerful initial theme during a Brussels performance of a group of ambulant musicians from Dahomey (nowadays the Popular Republic of Benin). The work is less folkloristic or exotic than the title suggests. De Boeck wrote a brilliant composition excelling by means of its melodic inventiveness and its outstanding orchestration.

In 1896 he composed his 'Mass in D major', his famous 'Symphony in G' and the ballet music 'La Phalène' (The moth). This ballet, premiered at the Brussels Opera in December 1913, deals with a moth, actually a fine girl, seducing a Breton fiancé on the eve of his wedding. De Boeck's music is original rather in the processing of the themes than in the invention of original tunes. The orchestration is very colourful and stresses the rhythm of all the dances. When the ballet was premiered some critics compared De Boeck to the French composer Léo Delibes.

His first opera 'Théroigne de Méricourt' was premiered at the Flemish Opera in Antwerp on 22 January 1901. His fairy tale opera 'Winternight's Dream' followed one year later.

At that time, De Boeck was still assistant or complementary organ teacher at the Royal Brussels Conservatory of Music. When Mailly's function became vacant in 1902 De Boeck applied as a candidate to succeed to his ancient organ teacher, but Alphonse Desmet was appointed. De Boeck was deeply disappointed and from then on devoted less time to organ playing.

In April 1902 De Boeck wrote a 'Fantasy' for the brass ensemble of the Royal Brussels Conservatory of Music called "Fanfare Wagnérienne", conducted by Henri Séha. The work is scored for 18 brass players and percussion. Jef Van Hoof later adapted the orchestration of this Fantasy for his "Antwerp Brass Ensemble". In March 1925 De Boeck himself wrote a transcription for symphonic band and dedicated it to the symphonic band "Cercle Mozart" at Mechlin.

De Boeck also wrote a 'Fanfare', in fact a short polyphonic 'flourish' for brass and percussion.

Between 1902 and 1909 he composed a 'Mass in C major', many songs and piano music. In 1904 De Boeck started writing his third opera 'The Rhine Dwarfs' and the next year he finished his cantata 'Ode to Our Lady of Distress' for the Merchtem jubilee festivities. 'Reinaert de Vos' was premiered at the Antwerp Royal Flemish Opera on 9 January 1909.

In the meantime, August De Boeck had become famous and in 1909 he succeeded to Paul Gilson as professor of harmony and fugue at the Antwerp Royal Flemish Conservatory of Music. In 1920 he was appointed professor of practical harmony at the Brussels Royal Conservatory of Music. In 1921 August De Boeck was appointed director of the Mechlin Municipal Music Academy and he succeeded in promoting this institution to a Municipal Conservatory of Music.

In 1911 he wrote a children's cantata 'Gloria Flori' and in 1912 a 'Jubelmars - Jubilee March', a solemn concert march for fanfare band. At that time he also wrote some splendid French songs setting texts by Jeanne Cuisinier to music. His last opera 'La Route d'Emeraude' was to become his masterpiece and was premiered in Ghent in 1921.

De Boeck composed some more important orchestral works such as 'Fantasy on two Flemish folksongs' (1923), 'Concerto for Hans-klavier and orchestra' (1929), 'Nocturne' (1931) and a 'Concerto for violin and orchestra' (1934).

Just like his friend Paul Gilson, the gifted composer De Boeck was involved in wind band music from youth. The village of Merchtem boasted the symphonic band 'Koninklijke Harmonie Sint-Cecilia' and the Fanfare band 'Koninklijke Fanfare Concordia'

The latter had been founded as a choir in 1865 but had been turned into a wind band 'Fanfaremaatschappij' conducted by Florimond De Boeck. August was listed as a member of "Concordia" in 1880 and as assistant conductor of the fanfare band in 1883. Jozef Briers, August De Boeck's grandfather, was conductor of the symphonic band in 1830. So De Boeck was linked to both local wind bands.

Except for his Fantasy, when writing for wind band, De Boeck had quite another purpose in mind than Paul Gilson. He wrote some thirty original works, such as polkas, waltzes, marches, processional marches and overtures, mostly to please his friends in the local bands and not in order to give a new original repertoire to the wind band as a full and autonomous type of orchestra. De Boeck's compositions for wind band are modest pieces with roots in the rural setting of his native village Merchtem. De Boeck's personality as a man and a composer never wanted to break with those roots. On the occasion of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Merchtem symphonic band he wrote his concert march 'Excelsior' in 1929. He composed his overture 'Vrijheidsgeest' in 1935. He also wrote some characteristic pieces or novelties such as Pasquinade, Wals (Waltz), Pan and the march 'Geuze-Lambiek'.

The manuscripts confirm that De Boeck composed his 'Jubelmars - Marche Jubilaire', 'Pasquinade' and 'Wals' for an all brass band, called 'Fanfare pure' (meaning a fanfare band without the saxophone family). Pasquinade is a word derived from the Italian word pasquillo, a diminutive of 'pasquiono', the place where pamphlets and satirical poems were posted up in Rome. The piece can be heard at its best with this mocking character in mind. Pan boasts a short cornet solo imitating the laughter of one of De Boeck's neighbours by means of a short descending chromatic scale. Finally, there is an Ave, a processional march played during the annual religious procession at Merchtem.

In 1930 De Boeck obtained honourable discharge from all his official functions and settled back in Merchtem. He died aged 72 years at Merchtem on 9 October 1937.

Like his contemporaries De Boeck always remained a romantic composer with a broad melodic style and a rich and colourful orchestration. Initially he was strongly influenced by the Russian national school, more precisely by Rimsky-Korsakov and Borodin whose sparkling music influenced his composition style. Soon he got under the spell of both the French impressionism and Wagner's operas. However, there is of course the typical Flemish character which makes De Boeck unique in the Belgian musical world: spontaneous, humorous, colourful and inspired by a strong spiritual and sentimental life.

Some of his works can easily match any comparison with those of famous foreign composers.

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