

# The Contacts between Antwerp and the Czech Music Scene in the Second Half of the 19th Century: Edward Keurvels, the Apostle of Zdeněk Fibich in Antwerp

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“The wildest and newest was the performance of the mighty trilogy of the Czech composer Fibich, which was completely unknown in Western Europe: *Hippodamia*, *Pelops and Tantalus*, in which the actors also showed great mastery.”<sup>1</sup> It is significant that Paul Fredericq (1850–1920), a professor of literature and history at Ghent University, considered the performance of Zdeněk Fibich’s trilogy *Hippodamia* in 1893 in Antwerp worthy of mention in his history of the early Flemish Movement.

At the time, Antwerp was the epicentre of the Flemish national movement that was campaigning against francophone domination of Belgian musical culture. The composer and conductor Peter Benoit (1834–1901) was the driving force behind this movement that he underpinned theoretically with numerous writings. He advocated a return to the roots of Flemish music, which in his view could be found in its folksong and in the use of the vernacular, Dutch. With his grand cantatas and oratorios, in which he sang the praises of Flanders’ glorious past and predicted a glorious future, he also managed to mobilise the people and thus to create support for his ideas. This resulted, among other things, in the founding of a Flemish Opera and in elevating his Antwerp Music School in the Royal Flemish Conservatory, the first higher education institute in Belgium to offer teaching in Dutch. It was while at the Music School and the Conservatory that he would begin to incorporate what he referred to as “Bohemian music” into his lessons and concerts.

Benoit’s first contacts with the Czech Lands, incidentally, date from his youth. At that time, he heard about the organist and composer Pieter Deconinck (1790–1853) who had left Harelbeke, Benoit’s birthplace, around 1825 and gone to Prague where he is said to have become an organist and Kapellmeister

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Fredericq, *Schets eener geschiedenis der Vlaamsche Beweging* (Gent: J. Vuylsteke, 1906–1909), 3:301.

at the archiepiscopal church. As laureate of the Belgian Prix de Rome in 1857, Benoit would himself travel to Prague with his stipend in July 1858 to attend the festivities marking the fiftieth anniversary of the Prague Conservatory. Both the city and the conservatory left a lasting impression on him. The letters he sent home contained lengthy descriptions of the city – the Saint Vitus Cathedral in particular captured his imagination –, and he also wrote about searching the archives for manuscripts by John of Nepomuk.<sup>2</sup> This is perhaps where Benoit's interest in Bohemian culture, which he later shared with his students, originated.

This interest in Bohemian culture was stoked by the fact that many Flemings identified with the situation of the Czechs, especially when it came to their struggle for recognition of their language and for emancipation, a struggle also being waged by the Flemish Movement in francophone Belgium. Incidentally, the interest in each other's cultural and political situation was mutual: this is demonstrated for example by the huge amount of attention that the death of Flemish popular novelist Hendrik Conscience (1812–1883) garnered in the Czech press in 1883.<sup>3</sup> Conscience was already translated into Czech in 1846, and many translations were to follow.<sup>4</sup> Just as Peter Benoit carried the honorary title of “the man who taught his people to sing,” Conscience was dubbed “the man who taught his people to read.” Both played an important role in the Flemish nationalists' struggle to protect their language and culture. As such, there was a lot of sympathy in Flanders for the Czechs, who were experiencing a similar plight. This sympathy also extended to other cultural regions that were engaged in a battle for recognition of their language and for greater autonomy, such as Catalonia, Norway and Poland.

Numerous contemporary sources provide us with evidence that this shared history of linguistic and cultural repression was the reason why the Flemish musical movement showed such a keen interest in Czech musical culture. One particularly good example is the introduction published by Antwerpian poet and playwright Huibrecht (Hubert) Melis (1872–1949) to his summary of *Hippodamia* in 1893, entitled *The Czechs and their national musical movement*, in which he draws a clear parallel between Flanders and the Czech region: “At the same time that the Flemings were fighting for their very existence and for artistic independence, in a lost corner of Europe a similar battle was being waged by a wholly neglected people: the Bohemians or Czechs.”<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> André Pols (ed.). *Peter Benoit's leertijd. Honderd brieven aan zijn ouders uit de jaren 1851–1862* (Antwerpen: De Sikkel, 1934), 121–125.

<sup>3</sup> For example, a detailed obituary of Conscience was published in: *Obzor* 6, no. 19 (1883): 316–317.

<sup>4</sup> Wilken Engelbrecht, “De Leeuw van Vlaanderen in het Tsjechisch: waarom zo laat en waarom driemaal?,” *Internationale Neerlandistiek* 54, no. 3 (2016): 169–188.

<sup>5</sup> Huibrecht Melis. *Hippodamia. Dramatisch gedicht in drie afdeelingen* (Antwerpen: Thibaut, s.a.), 3.

Melis refers to the construction of the National Theatre in Prague as an essential work of infrastructure allowing the Czechs to hold operatic performances in their native language; in Flanders it was not until 1890 that the Dutch National Theatre (the precursor of the Flemish Opera) was established. Melis also provides a brief overview of Czech musical history. In his view, Bedřich Smetana belongs to the same school as Antonín Dvořák and in particular Zdeněk Fibich, whom he believes shared many similarities with Peter Benoit, the greatest of these being that they were both composers of music drama.<sup>6</sup> For Melis, following Benoit, music drama was the highest form of musical theatre, because: “This genre allows the artist to fully express his own emotions; it merges the expression of word with the expression of sound, thereby according equal yet individual importance to the two sister art forms, poetry and music.”<sup>7</sup>

He even wonders what would have happened if the Flemings and the Czechs had worked together, writing: “Our Flemish Benoit [...] and the Czech master Fibich could have extended to each other a brotherly hand as fellow travellers, departing from different points of origin to travel paths unknown, embracing each other as brothers in ‘darkest Africa’.”<sup>8</sup> He concludes his introduction to *Hippodamia* with the claim that a small country such as Bohemia serves as proof that a people does not have to be great in number to achieve great things. This sounds very much like an exhortation to the Flemings who were still waiting for a Flemish Opera House (1893) and a Flemish Conservatory (1898). Similar homages to Czech music and this emphasis on the affinity between Flanders and the Czech region can be found in numerous contemporary sources.

So, in his training at the Flemish School of Music in Antwerp (Royal Flemish Conservatory from 1897) Benoit also made room for “Bohemian” music. As Benoit had stipulated in his pedagogy that singing students had to sing in their own language, he had metric translations made into Dutch of foreign-language texts, thus also of Fibich’s cycle *Frühlingsstrahlen* [*Jarní paprsky*, Spring Rays].<sup>9</sup>

Some of these translations were made by Edward Keurvels (1853–1916), a pupil of Benoit’s, who would himself make a career as a composer, conductor and teacher at the Antwerp School of Music and the Antwerp Conservatory, where he also functioned as Benoit’s private secretary. He possessed good organisational skills and was able to help implement Benoit’s often ambitious plans. He

<sup>6</sup> Peter Benoit composed four music dramas (following the tradition of *Drame lyrique*): *Charlotte Corday* (1876), *De Pacificatie van Gent* (*The Pacification of Ghent*, 1876), *Karel van Gelderland* (*Charles of Guelders*, 1892) and the unfinished *Pompeia* (1894–1895).

<sup>7</sup> Melis, 6.

<sup>8</sup> Melis, 6.

<sup>9</sup> The library of the Royal Conservatory in Antwerp keeps an edition of *Jarní paprsky* with a handwritten Dutch translation.

co-founded the Dutch Lyrical Theatre (1890) and the Flemish Opera (1893), and six years later, in 1896, he set up a symphony orchestra that held concerts at Antwerp Zoo. It was via these musical companies that Keurvels promoted Fibich's work in Flanders, and by extension that of other Czech composers. Keurvels was to become one of the most enthusiastic defenders of Fibich outside the Czech Lands.

After Keurvels had read in the Belgian press about the great success of the *Hippodamia* trilogy, he made the first contacts with the Czech music scene in 1891 in letters addressed to the management of the National Theatre in Prague and to Fibich himself.<sup>10</sup> In his letter to Fibich of 24 November 1891 Keurvels refers to the common struggle of Flanders and the Czech Lands and asks for the conditions to present the trilogy to his compatriots as soon as possible. Also, in his letter of 14 December 1891 to the librettist Jaroslav Vrchlický he emphasises the kinship between the Flemings and the Czechs. He also asks Vrchlický to send him the librettos so he can translate them. Three days later Vrchlický answered, also on behalf of Fibich: he would send Keurvels the piano reduction of *The Courtship of Pelops*, together with a German translation ("une assez bonne traduction poétique et littéraire à la fois"<sup>11</sup>). If Keurvels liked the first part, the other parts would follow. Out of sympathy for Keurvels' musical nationalist intentions, Vrchlický and Fibich promised to drop the royalties on the first part and hoped that the National Theatre would provide the full score and orchestral material at advantageous conditions. František Adolf Šubert, the director of the National Theatre, complied: Keurvels only had to pay a deposit of 400 francs and was allowed to copy the scores and parts. In the correspondence both on the Flemish and Czech sides, the common cultural-nationalist ambitions were emphatically stressed.

The communication (in French and German) between Antwerp and Prague went smoothly, and already on 23 December 1891 Keurvels informed Vrchlický that he was very enthusiastic about the score of *The Courtship of Pelops* and was looking forward to the other parts of the trilogy. Vrchlický then invited Keurvels to Prague, an invitation which, as far as we know, Keurvels did not accept.

Keurvels' plan to present *Pelops* to the Antwerp audience in the first half of 1892 proved too ambitious. From a long letter he wrote to Vrchlický on 11 July 1892, it appears that between all his other work he had many practical and organisational problems to cope with: the translation into Dutch was more difficult than expected, there were many questions about the direction and the mise en scène, and the management of his company was not immediately prepared to

<sup>10</sup> Keurvel's letters to Fibich, Vrchlický and Šubert are kept in the Letterenhuis in Antwerp.

<sup>11</sup> "A pretty good poetic and literal translation at the same time."

pay the 400 francs deposit for the material. In the end, Bram Van den Bergh, one of Keurvels' pupils on a study trip to Vienna and Prague, was able to bring all the material to Antwerp.

Eventually Keurvels conducted the Belgian première of *Pelops* on 6 March 1893. Both Fibich and Vrchlický were invited, but in the end Fibich's wife Betty Fibichová would do the honours. A few days before the première Fibichová, who travelled two days by train, attended a Flemish music concert, and according to the papers she spoke extremely highly about what she had heard. The newspapers also called upon all its readers to attend *The Courtship of Pelops* in their masses, as: "The esteemed spouse of the great Czech composer must be able to return to Prague with the message that the Flemings are a people with art in their souls." During the première, which was also attended by Peter Benoit and other cultural personalities, homage was paid to Fibichová in a speech that referred to the linguistic struggles being waged by the Czechs and the Flemings:

Just as you experience the German language as an intruder, so too do we experience the French language; just as your mother tongue is repressed, so too is ours. We are like flowers sown in the same earth; flowers that others want to see perish in the same way. We salute you not only as the wife of a great composer, but as a brave Czech housewife who has taught her children to love their mother tongue, just as every Flemish mother should do.<sup>12</sup>

This was met with a standing ovation.

In his efforts to perform the complete *Hippodamia* trilogy in Antwerp, Keurvels staged *The Atonement of Tantalus* only a few months later, in December 1893. This was the fifth work produced by the Flemish Opera in its opening season, which is a clear sign of the significance Keurvels attached to Fibich's work. Tantalus was once again translated into Dutch by Keurvels (under his pseudonym E. Durward), using Edmund Grün's German translations as his source text, and he once again conducted the performance himself. Unfortunately, the general public did not share Keurvels' enthusiasm for Fibich's scenic melodramas. Despite low attendances and only four performances of *Tantalus*, Keurvels persisted and began rehearsals of *Hippodamia's Death*. However, both the opera's management and the actors rebelled against him, and the final work in Fibich's trilogy was definitively removed from the programme.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> August Monet. *Een halve eeuw Nederlandsch Lyrisch Tooneel en Vlaamsche Opera te Antwerpen. Herinneringen, feiten, datums, namen, cijfers en anecdoten* (Antwerpen: Koninklijke Vlaamsche Opera, 1939), 34–35.

<sup>13</sup> Monet, 36–37.

Not only did this signal the end of Fibich's musical theatrical works being performed in Antwerp, but it also sounded the death knell for music drama as a genre. Despite prodigious efforts on the part of Benoit and Keurvels, the genre did not appear to be viable. Benoit's music drama *Charles of Gueldre* (*Karel Van Gelderland*) did not captivate the Antwerp audience after its première on 29 September 1892 and was taken off the bill definitively after five performances.

This failure did not stop Keurvels from including Czech music in the opera's programme. Unlike earlier attempts, his production (in Dutch of course!) of Smetana's *The Bartered Bride*, which premiered in Antwerp in late 1895, was a resounding success. Only twelve years later Belgium's most prominent opera house, La Monnaie in Brussels, would put on a performance of Smetana's opera for the first time, in French.

Keurvels was also fond of performing works by Fibich, Smetana and Dvořák with his Zoological Garden Concert Orchestra. After Fibich's death, Keurvels conducted on 28 November 1900 the overture to *A Night at Karlštejn Castle* and *At Twilight, Idyll for Orchestra*, an Antwerp première. The programme book included a brief in memoriam in which Keurvels paid tribute to Fibich's music, both for its nationalist message and its artistic value, and he referred to the past performances of *Pelops* and *Tantalus*.<sup>14</sup> Keurvels also conducted the first full performance of Smetana's *My Country* in Belgium. Every time the whole cycle or one of its parts was performed, Keurvels never failed to include a mention in the programme book emphasising its huge importance for Czech culture.

Though it was Peter Benoit who, through his theoretical writings and his compositions, paved the way for the emergence of the national schools and the lyrical genre in Flanders, it was Edward Keurvels who followed in his footsteps to become an enthusiastic promotor of the Czech national school and of Fibich in particular. His great disappointment at being unable to hold a performance of *Hippodamia* in full did not put a damper on Keurvel's enthusiasm, and he continued to conduct orchestral works by Fibich and Smetana. Fibich provided him gratefully with a number of scores, often with a handwritten commission.<sup>15</sup> Keurvels maintained contact with the Czech music scene and sent his condolences to Fibich's wife after the composer's death. In his letter, Keurvels also requested a list of Fibich's works. Betty Fibichová did not respond until 1 May 1901, more than six months after the death of her beloved Zdenko. In her letter she expresses her condolences for the death of Peter Benoit, who had passed away on 8 March 1901, but first and foremost she asks Keurvels to make sure that

<sup>14</sup> The programme books of the Orchestra of the Zoological Garden Concerts are kept in the library of the Royal Conservatory in Antwerp.

<sup>15</sup> These scores are kept in the library of the Royal Conservatory in Antwerp.

her husband's work is not forgotten in future. In her words, this is the only way for "his art to remain among the living not as a dead object, but as a living one."

But the First World War and the death of Keurvels in 1916 put an end to the warm but short-lived interest in Fibich's music in Flanders.



Edward Keurvels (Library of the Royal Conservatory in Antwerp)



Hubert Laroche, Catharina Van den Berg and Elisa Jonkers in *Tantalus* (Library of the Royal Conservatory in Antwerp)



# HIPPODAMIA

Dramatisch Gedicht in drie Afdeelingen

DOOR

YAROSLAV VRCKLICKY,

met doorgaande muziekale begeleiding

VAN

ZDENĚK FIBICH.

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1<sup>e</sup> deel PELOPS; 2<sup>e</sup> deel TANTALUS

3<sup>e</sup> deel HIPPODAMIA

(drama's in vier bedrijven.)

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Kort begrip van den Inhoud des Gedichts  
met eenige Woorden over de Czecken en  
hunne Muziekbeweging, en inzonderheid over  
den Toondichter Fibich,

door

Huibrecht MELIS.

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ANTWERPEN,  
Drukk. CL. THIBAUT, Gratiekapelstraat, 7



## Nederlandsche Schouwburg van Antwerpen

Bestuurder : FR. VAN DOESELAEER.

Bureelen open te half acht ure.	Nederlandsch Lyrisch Tooneel onder het eerevoorzitterschap van PETER BENOIT, Bestuurder der stedelijke Muziekschool.	Aanvang te acht ure.
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DONDERDAG 14 DECEMBER 1893

LAATSTE OPVOERING VAN

## PELOPS

Lyrisch drama in 4 bedrijven (1<sup>e</sup> deel der trilogie HIPPODAMIA),  
naar het boheemsch : NÁMLUVY PELOPOVY, gedicht van  
JAROSLAV VRCHLICKÝ, muziek van ZDENEK FIBICH,  
uit het duitsch van EDMOND GRÜN, vertaald door E. DUWARD.

## VERDEELING :

Oinomaos, koning van Pisa,	M. Van Keer.
Hippodamia, zijne dochter,	Mev. Van den Berg.
Myrtilos, zijn wagenvoerder,	MM. Lemmens.
Pelops, zoon van Tantalus, koning van Argos,	Dilis.
Jolos, zijn dienaar en geleider,	P. Janssens.
Eerste } koorvoerder der ouderlingen	Hogguer.
Tweede } van Pisa,	W. Janssens.
Een roeper,	Van Canter.
Eerste } kamprechter,	Emiel.
Tweede } kamprechter,	Slootmakers.
Een torenwachter,	Michiels.

Kamprechters, slaven, wachten en burgers.

*Het stuk speelt in Griekenland, binst den Heldentijd.*DINSdag 19 DECEMBER eerste opvoering van het zangspel **Lieder-rik**, tekst van Paul Billiet, muziek van J. Mertens.

DONDERDAG 21 DECEMBER, eerste opvoering van het lyrisch drama

**Tantalus** (2<sup>d</sup> deel der Trilogie **Hippodamia**), lyrisch landspel van Peter Benoit enVERWACHT : **Het Meiliel**, lyrisch landspel van Peter Benoit en**De vliegende Hollander**, zangspel van Rich. Wagner.

Familieboekjes te verkrijgen en plaatsen voor te behouden (zonder opleg-  
kosten) aan het bureel van locatie, open van 11 tot 3 ure, 's Zondags en de  
vier eerste dagen der week.

Antwerpen. — Drukk. Cl. Thibaut, Gra lekapelstraat, 7.

Poster for the performance of *Pelops* (Library of the Royal Conservatory in Antwerp)

## The Contacts between Flanders and the Czech Music Scene in the Second Half of the 19th Century

### Abstract

In nineteenth-century Belgium the port city of Antwerp was the epicentre of the Flemish musical national movement that took a stand against the francophone dominance in the Belgian music scene and advocated a return to the roots of Flemish music. This movement of music nationalism was initiated and given a theoretical base by composer and conductor Peter Benoit (1834–1901), the founder and first director of the Royal Flemish Conservatory in Antwerp. The Flemish musical movement sympathised with Czech musical nationalism because of the common struggle for a recognition of their language and for emancipation. Benoit would incorporate 'Bohemian' music in his plans as the organizer of the music and concert scene and as the head of the Conservatory, just like he did with the musical culture of other cultural regions which were fighting a linguistic battle and trying to achieve emancipation. The interest in Czech music and the belief in music drama as an innovative operatic genre led Benoit and especially his student and assistant Edward Keurvels (1853–1916) to perform Zdeněk Fibich's trilogy *Hippodamia* in Antwerp, a plan that was not completely successful. In addition, Keurvels often performed orchestral works by Fibich and Bedřich Smetana, and also the latter's *The Bartered Bride*. The great interest that Antwerp musical life showed at the turn of the century for Czech national music would disappear after the First World War because of Keurvels' death.

## Kontakty mezi Flandry a českou hudební scénou ve druhé polovině 19. století

### Abstrakt

Belgické přístavní město Antverpy se v 19. století stalo centrem národního hnutí prosazujícího vlámskou hudbu proti dominanci frankofonní kultury na belgické hudební scéně. Usilovalo o autenticitu starých vlámských lidových písní a o návrat ke kořenům. Toto vlastenecké hudební hnutí bylo iniciováno a založeno na teoretických základech díky skladateli a dirigentovi Peteru Benoitovi (1834–1901), zakladateli a prvnímu řediteli Královské vlámské konzervatoře v Antverpách. Vlámské hudební hnutí sympatizovalo s českým hudebním nacionalismem pro jejich vzájemné snahy o uznání jazyka a národní emancipace. Benoit začlenil českou hudbu do svých plánů jako hudební organizátor i jako ředitel konzervatoře, stejně tak činil s hudebními kulturami oblastí, které bojovaly

o svůj jazyk a snažily se o vlastní nezávislost. Zájem o českou hudbu a důvěra v hudební drama jako inovativní operní žánr vedly Benoita a zejména jeho studenta a asistenta Edwarda Keurvelse (1853–1916) k myšlence provést Fibichovu trilogii scénických melodrama *Hippodamie* v Antverpách. Avšak tento plán nebyl zcela naplněn. Kuervels často uváděl orchestrální díla Z. Fibicha a B. Smetany a také Smetanovu *Prodanou nevěstu*. Mimořádný zájem o českou národní hudbu, kterým se Antverpy pyšnily na přelomu 19. a 20. století, zmizel po 1. světové válce s úmrtím E. Kuervelse.

### **Keywords**

Antwerp; Peter Benoit; Zdeněk Fibich; Edward Keurvels; music drama

### **Klíčová slova**

Antverpy; Peter Benoit; Zdeněk Fibich; Edward Keurvels; hudební drama

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