

# Notes on the Program

By James M. Keller, Program Annotator, The Leni and Peter May Chair

---

## *Cyrano de Bergerac Overture, Op. 23*

### Johan Wagenaar

The character of *Cyrano de Bergerac* is well known through numerous works of stage and screen, most of which trace their ancestry to the play unveiled by Edmond Rostand in 1897. Ostensibly based on the life of the 17th-century French writer, military man, and nasally imposing swashbuckler, Rostand's verse-play riffs freely on verifiable incidents. It grew instantly popular after its premiere in Paris on December 28, 1897. Within a year the play also would be published in English, German, Italian, and Dutch translations.

When Johan Wagenaar memorialized this tale in music in 1905, he was already recognized as a leading light among Dutch composers. After graduating in 1885 from the conservatory in his native Utrecht, he found work there as a teacher and organist. He was named organist of the Utrecht Cathedral in 1888 and took over as director of the conservatory in 1896. In 1892 he spent a year in Berlin and Vienna; in the former city he was instructed in counterpoint by Heinrich von Herzogenberg, who is mostly encountered in posterity as a member of the Brahms circle. After returning to the Netherlands, Wagenaar directed leading choral societies in Utrecht, Arnhem, Leiden, and The Hague, sometimes leading then-unfamiliar scores by Berlioz and Mahler. From 1919 to 1937 he served as director of the Royal Hague Conservatory. By the time he died, he had been decorated six times by the Queen of the Netherlands and twice by the King of the Belgians.

Dutch composers of the late-19th and early 20th centuries are generally obscure today outside the Low Countries. This qualifies as unjust neglect in several cases, most notably

Julius Röntgen (1855–1932), a founder of the Amsterdam Conservatory (and a distant relative of the Röntgen who discovered X-rays); Bernard Zweers (1854–1924), who drank from the well of Wagnerism; Alphons Diepenbrock (1862–1921), noted for his vocal works; and Wagenaar, who was admired for his rock-solid technique. Their music largely reflected Germanic ideals, although the question of Dutch identity did come up. A bit of a tempest swirled when, in 1907, a newly published cultural history of the Netherlands stated that Dutch music lacked any national character. Wagenaar published a rebuttal, arguing that

---

### In Short

**Born:** November 1, 1862, in Utrecht, the Netherlands

**Died:** June 17, 1941, in The Hague

**Work composed:** 1905, completed on February 16

**World premiere:** unknown; earliest known performance, November 2, 1905, in Amsterdam, by the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, with the composer conducting

**New York Philharmonic premiere:** February 24, 1921, with Willem Mengelberg conducting New York's National Symphony Orchestra (which merged with the New York Philharmonic that year); this performance marked the New York Premiere

**Most recent New York Philharmonic performance:** July 2, 2018, at the Shanghai Symphony Hall in Shanghai, China, Jaap van Zweden, conductor

**Estimated duration:** ca. 14 minutes

“true” Dutch music was characterized by “simple, spirited, or firm melody, by a sense of the cozy and quietly sensitive, a sharp rhythm, and, finally, a sense of humor.” Among the works he summoned as evidence was Zweers’s Third Symphony (1887–90), subtitled *An mijn vaderland (To My Fatherland)*, which showed how Germanic influence might be combined with authentically Dutch themes.

Although Wagenaar’s *Cyrano de Bergerac Overture* does not focus on a Dutch topic, its musical characteristics are precisely those he outlined. The Germanic influence is unmistakable, particularly that of Richard Strauss; Wagenaar’s opening pages seem sprung from the loins of Strauss’s 1888 tone poem *Don Juan*. The *Cyrano de Bergerac Overture* is, in fact, a tone poem without being called one. Each of its connected (and musically interlocked) episodes portrays a different aspect or two of the title character’s personality, and the various traits are marked in the score itself. That swaggering, fanfare-like beginning (*Allegro con brio*) is labeled “Heroism,” and it

quickly cedes to a tender *Andante espressivo* headed “Love, Poetry.” Listeners may hear something of Berlioz — perhaps of the dramatic symphony *Roméo et Juliette* — in the spacious melody and unorthodox harmonic balance of these passionate pages, which depict Cyrano’s yearning for his beloved Roxane. The Berlioz flavor continues in the insistent repeated notes with which the winds accompany the accented theme of the violins and violas when the piece shifts into the quicker tempo of “Loyalty, Strength of Character.” Wagnerian, *Meistersinger*-like staunchness inhabits the next section, “Cheerfulness, Chivalry.” The listener is then ushered through “Sense of Humor,” more “Chivalry,” and “Satire,” after which the piece drifts into dreamier expanses (*Andante*) and then revs back up for a gallant ending.

**Instrumentation:** three flutes (one doubling piccolo), two oboes, two clarinets, two bassoons, four horns, three trumpets, three trombones, tuba, timpani, triangle, and strings.

---

## Sources and Inspirations

Cyrano de Bergerac was a real French playwright and duelist (1619–55) whose life is most familiar from highly fictionalized depictions of him as a poet with a nose so oversized that it stops people in their tracks. That characterization began with Edmond Rostand’s 1897 play, which also set the plot that has become best known: Hercule Savinien Cyrano de Bergerac is a nobleman serving in the French army, an intellectual who is full of self-doubt about his looks. He believes that his ugliness denies him the “dream of being loved by even an ugly woman,” much less the beautiful Roxane, whom he adores.

Alas, Roxane is in love with Christian, a handsome, if ineloquent, cadet, who enlists Cyrano to draft letters for him. In the famous Act III balcony scene of Rostand’s play, Christian declares his love for Roxane, in words whispered to him by Cyrano, who hides in the shadows. Roxane eventually realizes the true author of the words with which she has fallen in love — though too late for Cyrano, who lies mortally wounded after being struck by a wooden beam dropped on him by an enemy.



Benoît-Constant Coquelin as the title character in the premiere of Rostand’s *Cyrano de Bergerac*, in 1897