

A Portrait of Marcel Poot – sleeve notes

by Francis Pieters

Marcel Poot was born in a family with quite some interest in art and culture at Vilvoorde, near Brussels on 7 May 1901. In 1920 his father Jan Poot, who was a fervent music lover, was appointed director of the Royal Flemish Theatre in Brussels. He also played the clarinet in the local symphonic band 'Harmonie Royale' of which he also became the president. Young Marcel Poot was occasionally invited to play the timpani in that band.

The marches 'Défilé Royal' and 'Nuptial March' are two undated pieces written in his youth. **Défilé Royal** is a solemn symphonic march in the classical ABA form, dedicated to his father and boasting a striking solo for timpani in the final bars. The **Nuptial March**, dedicated to Franz Helsen, is a march with a rather cheerful and optimistic character.

Marcel Poot got his first music lessons from the local organ player Gérard Nauwelaerts. Later he went to the Royal Brussels Conservatory of Music studying from 1916 to 1919 solfeggio with M. Kips, chamber music, music history and harmony with Martin Lunssens, Paul de Maleingreau and José Sevenans and piano with Arthur De Greef.

The encounter with composer Paul Gilson (1865-1942) was of capital interest. Poot studied privately counterpoint, fugue and especially composition and orchestration with the master. At that time Poot had already studied for four years at the conservatory of music and it was Gilson who initiated him into the art of composition. In order to get an official degree, Poot went to the Royal Flemish Conservatory of Music in Antwerp and graduated in counterpoint (1922) – his teacher being Lodewijk Mortelmans – and in fugue (1924). His first mature compositions, such as **Dionysos** (1923) date back from his period of study in Antwerp.

The bacchanal **Dionysos** is a remarkable youth composition with regard to both its form and musical contents, evoking in a splendid way the burlesque scenes of processions and banquets of Ancient Greece. The Bacchanal's orgies are extremely well portrayed by means of a few characteristic themes. In his early wind band compositions Poot follows Paul Gilson's example. The latter was indeed a shining example as to style (especially involving thematic ideas) and orchestration. Poot became Gilson's spiritual inheritor: a most worthy son as successor to the 'father of Belgian wind band music'.

On the occasion of the 60th birthday of Gilson, Poot and six other of Gilson's pupils founded the 'Group of the Synthetists' in September 1925. Besides celebrating this anniversary, they hoped to get more opportunities as a group to have their new compositions performed. A first realisation of the group was the creation in 1925 of their own musical periodical 'La Revue Musicale Belge' with Marcel Poot as general editor. Their collaboration lasted six years and was encouraged, a.o. by Arthur Prevost, conductor of the Symphonic Band of the Belgian Guides Regiment, the only professional orchestra in Belgium at that time.

The collaboration of the Synthetists with the Guides Band was also partly due to Paul Gilson's insistence to compose for symphonic band or to make transcriptions for symphonic band of some of their orchestral works.

One of the pieces on the program of the first 'Synthetists Concert' by the Symphonic Band of the Belgian Guides Regiment on 21 June 1927 was the third part of **Charlot** by Marcel Poot. This band had already performed 'Charlot' completely at a concert in the series 'Concerts Populaires' at the Brussels Opera 'La Monnaie' in 1926. These concerts launched Poot's career as a composer. The three symphonic sketches are inspired by Charlie Chaplin's movie pictures,

setting a short story by Georges Ramon to music. The subtitles of this symphonic poem are: 'Attitudes', 'Struggle for Life' and 'Les dieux s'inclinent'. **Charlot** boasts a fine rhythmical construction and allows the great symphonic band to demonstrate the extreme wealth of its sound scope. The orchestration demonstrates Poot's professional skill and shows undeniable influences of Igor Stravinsky and Richard Strauß.

Poot gradually succeeded in breaking away from romanticism and turned to a Latin clearness and even to jazz music. He refused lyricism and sentimentality by means of using constructive and objective forms and even irony. He soon switched over to absolute music with both entertainment music (e.g. a lot of his chamber music compositions) and expressive sound pictures (very well illustrated by his symphonies).

When he was awarded the Rubens Prize in 1930 he got the opportunity to go to Paris and study with Paul Dukas for some time. Back from his stay in Paris, Marcel Poot started a teaching career, at first in day schools in Vilvoorde and Halle. When the academy of music was created in Vilvoorde, Marcel Poot was appointed piano, solfeggio and music history teacher. In 1933 he was engaged by the broadcasting institution which meant quite a social promotion. He was appointed the very first 'modulator' and then became head of department. He cooperated closely with Théo Fleischman and both were very interested in new forms of expression such as the radio play. By working for the radio, Poot got also interested in film music. In between his first symphony (1929) and his second symphony (1938) Poot composed a dozen of one movement orchestral works, the most popular being his 'Joyful Overture' dating from 1930. This 'Ouverture Joyeuse' was the most often performed orchestral piece by a Flemish composer in the 20th century. Few composers have been so much acclaimed with most flattering labels because of one single composition as Poot has. This very one-sided aspect of his musical language, namely a roguish character, was continually repeated and so during his whole lifetime he was labelled as 'the Till Eulenspiegel (a kind of clown or jester) of Flemish Music'.

Still working for the radio, he also met the conductor Franz André, promoter of the 'NIR (National Radio Institute) Symphony Orchestra'. In 1967 Poot wrote a **Fanfare for Franz André** for three trumpets and three trombones. His **Fanfare for Victory** for large brass ensemble probably also dates from Poot's period with the broadcasting institution. In 1939 he was appointed at the Royal Brussels Conservatory of Music, at first teaching practical harmony (1939-1940) and then counterpoint (1940-1949). In the meantime, he also wrote many articles and reviews in Belgian and foreign music magazines.

His **Mouvement Symphonique** follows the form of the first movement of a classical symphony. A slow introduction is followed by an 'Allegro' based on two main themes. The development is interrupted by a 'moderato' with a rather expressive character. Poot composed this work, commissioned by the wind band 'Société les Chasseurs' from Binche for their hundredth anniversary, in 1938.

After the war, Poot went back to the radio as head of department up to 1949. From 1945 onwards he was chairman of the audition jury with the NIR (National Radio Institute). He left the radio institution in 1949 when he was appointed director of the Royal Brussels Conservatory of Music (up to 1966). He then composed a series of orchestral works and concentrated his composition activities mainly on instrumental music.

Marcel Poot became a member of the Music Committee of the Ministry of Education, a member of the National Council for popular education and chairman of the board of directors of SABAM, the Belgian copyright society (from 1949 to 1977). He was a member of the Royal

Academy of Science, Literature and Art of Belgium. He became chairman of the Belgian Composers Union and chairman of the Queen Elisabeth Contest jury. He was also headmaster of the Queen Elisabeth Music Institution at Argenteuil from 1969 to 1976. He was awarded a prize by the Ministry of Flemish Culture for his complete musical career in 1968. The elderly Poot felt attracted to symphonic music and within twelve years he wrote yet four symphonies and some mature symphonic compositions with clock-like regularity. His style does no longer change, as he has found an own objective, almost terse style of writing. His musical language is linked to a great interest in musical shape.

In 1984 he was ennobled by King Baudouin and became 'Baron Marcel Poot'.

The composer had a lifelong friendship relation with the author Herman Teirlinck. In 1954 he wrote a **Honour Fanfare for Herman Teirlinck** for 11 brass and percussion. Despite his old age, Marcel Poot got some interest in the rising brass band movement in Flanders. He accepted to be honorary president of the Flemish Brass Band Association and composed two works for this – as far as he was concerned 'new' kind of wind orchestra. In 1978 he wrote **Cheerfulness in Brass**, commissioned by the Flemish Brass Band Association and in 1979 an **Intrada** commissioned by the BRT 1 Radio Station.

Loyal to his motto 'inspiration means working' he continued to write for wind band till the end of his life. **Fantasia Concertante** (1978) and **Diptych** (1984) are two later compositions for symphonic band.

Marcel Poot died on 12 June 1988.