

Visiting Roel Dieltiens

Peter François

Nestled in the fields of Bierbeek, about 10 kilometers from Leuven, is the home of Roel Dieltiens. This is where the cellist can relax when he is not on the world stages or in conservatories. Maestro Dieltiens welcomes me with open arms to talk about the cello and his connection to Servais.

Discovering the cello repertoire

Roel Dieltiens was born on 29 July 1956 in Lier and grew up in a musical family. He learned to play the recorder and the piano but only blossomed when he was handed a cello at the age of 14. Then everything took off; he studied at the high school of the Lemmensinstituut, received his First Prize after only 2 years at the Royal Conservatoire Antwerp with André Messens and rounded off his training with the same Messens at the Queen Elisabeth Music Chapel and with André Navarra in Detmold. Roel quickly made a name for himself on the Belgian music scene.

“André Messens handed all of his students the Caprices by Servais. I very much enjoyed playing them. I actually owe a lot to Servais. As a young man I found it amazing. If you want to learn to play an instrument well, then you also need a certain fanaticism in regards to technique and such. Because that is the only way to truly become great. As a Belgian, Servais then takes first place for a young Belgian cellist. It was not until after my education that I heard the recording by Anner Bijlsma of *Souvenir de Spa* – his very first recording of the piece ca. 1970. That was a special experience for me: damn, there are other pieces by Servais than those Caprices! That is when I started my search and it opened up a whole world for me. I drove to Paris, went to The Hague to look for scores and in Brussels I turned the whole Conservatory upside down in an effort to find as much as possible. On top of that, I lived in Berlaar, where the country house of Ernest Van Dyck, Servais’s son-in-law, is located. Van Dyck’s grandson showed me portraits, letters and manuscripts of Servais. I went there multiple times.”

Touring with the Adrien François Servais Ensemble

“During that time, I did not only get to know Servais’s oeuvre better, but also the works by Franchomme, Romberg, Dotzauer and other cello virtuosos. The compositions of that time are all published for cello and piano, cello and orchestra and also for cello and string ensemble. I thought that was an incredibly beautiful thing, such a string quartet or string quintet with a cello solo added to it. It is so

very nineteenth century and does not exist anymore today. That is why I founded the Adrien François Servais Ensemble, with Eva Zylka, Dirk Verelst, Frans Vos and Maurice Aerts. It was a fantastic time. We played together for a long time and gave many concerts throughout Belgium. We played trios by Dotzauer, Paganini variations, duets by Franchomme, ... All virtuoso cello music. Every time, *Souvenir de Spa* was also on the programme, since that was our *pièce de résistance*.



Souvenir de Spa is actually a very good piece. It is typical of that timeframe. *Souvenir de Spa* was the work for the cello before that honour passed to the Dvořák Concerto. It was a piece with which you could impress. Casals played it for his audition in Brussels. It is also a fantastically good piece. It works exceptionally well, it’s put together very well. Obviously, it isn’t easy but it’s also not insurmountably difficult. After a couple years, we made a vinyl recording of *Souvenir de Spa* and also of the string quartet by his son Joseph Servais – an exceptionally good work, totally forgotten. In the end, we played together for some 10 years until my other work blew up. I am very happy to have had that ensemble.”

A few years later, Roel created the Ensemble Explorations with which he toured the world between 1996 and 2012. On the schedule was music from baroque to Rossini and even Ravel and the contemporary composer Luc Van den Hove. His old love for the virtuoso cello repertoire led to a CD-recording with compositions by August Franchomme. “With Explorations I also played *Souvenir de Spa* on occasion, in Ostend for example, for a recital completely inspired on the nineteenth century tradition of alternating with vocal and other soloists.”



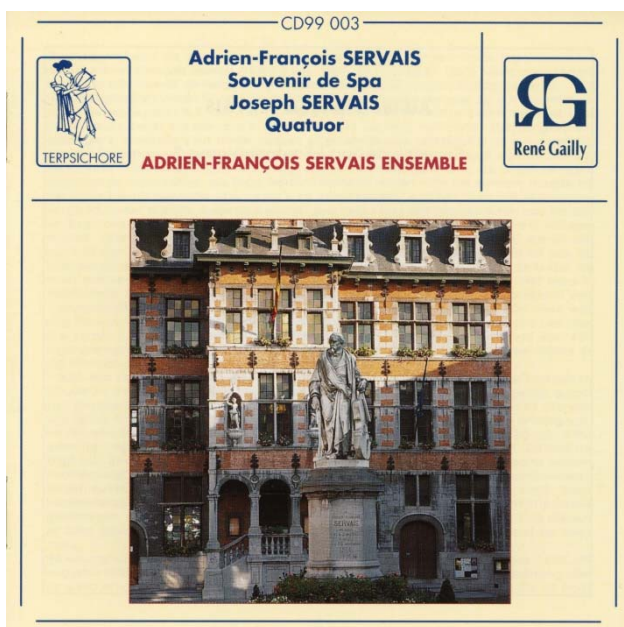
there now. "My students are still given Servais, all of them. Servais demands a type of technique that is not demanded by other great virtuosos. It requires a very specific left hand technique, lots of five finger work. It also includes a lot of thirds and sixths and his staccato technique in the bow is very typical.

Popper, for example, also has staccato

The Adrien François Servais Ensemble in Servais's hometown Halle on 6 June 1985 for the presentation of the Servais vinyl. Left to right: Frans Vos, viola; Maurice Aerts, double bass; Roel Dieltiens, cello; Eva Zylka, 1st violin and Dirk Verelst, 2nd violin

études but they are much easier; with Servais the staccato is almost always combined with double stops. That is very special and not simple! Whimsy is also very typical for Servais's music. There are études for specific technical difficulties, for example for spiccato. Each of the virtuosos has written such pieces but with them they follow a certain pattern, the bow changes always have a specific order. With Servais there is never a pattern, at most occasionally one or two bars and then he pivots, there is no clear line. That is especially confusing and very good for learning. Studying certain movements over and over, like a monkey, does not work with Servais; you need to stay alert, much more so than in other études. For this reason as well, Servais's études remain apt, as much so as the Paganini caprices for violin. Compare it to a sprinter that needs to train for a 110 meter sprint, so he can eventually give just that little extra for the 100 meter. Musicians also need to always be able to go further than what they need to do in the daily concert life and for such a purpose Servais is extremely well suited.

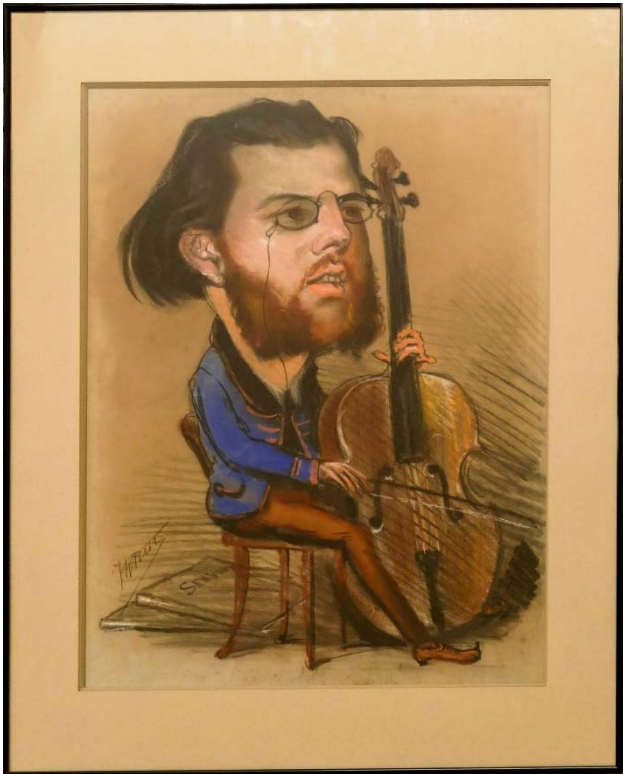
Even more of a challenge is playing Servais with gut strings, as he himself did. A few years ago I had a student who absolutely wanted to try that with the *Souvenir de Spa*. Gut strings are much more sensitive, they screech immediately, react to humidity, to drought, to temperature swings. But what a wonderful sound! I remember it fondly."



CD of the Adrien-François Servais Ensemble with the statue of Servais in Halle on the cover (1997)

Servais in Zürich

Between 1983 and 2002, Roel taught cello at the Lemmensinstituut in Leuven. In 2002 he was appointed at the Hochschule der Künste in Zurich and he still teaches



Caricature of Joseph Servais by the Frenchman Petit, bought by Roel Dieltiens around 1980 in a Brussels antiquary and donated in 2019 to the Servais Society © photo Willy Everaert

Servais at the Queen Elisabeth Competition

“Servais’s Caprices are fun little pieces. I also feel Servais is by far at his best in the shorter compositions. His concertos are spun a bit too long, and in that respect he does not differ from Franchomme and Popper: they also have written very good music but the inspiration was short-lived and therefore the most powerful in shorter pieces. And why not, that is equally valuable. Just recently I played two Servais Caprices during a summer course in Italy. That was a lot of fun and a guaranteed success. That is why I am very happy to have familiarised myself with Servais’s 6 *Etudes* as well now. Contrary to the *Six Caprices*, with obligatory cello accompaniment, the 6 *Etudes* are accompanied by piano. Some of them are very good. A cellist can show off a lot of things. For that reason it’s fantastic that Servais’s *Etudes* are a compulsory piece for anyone wanting to compete in the Queen Elisabeth Music Competition for cello in 2022. Every cellist needs to study one of the 6 *Etudes* and send them as a video for the pre-selection. Amazing, right? I am also pleased that Boccherini and Ysaÿe were given their place in the Competition. If you ask me, there could easily be more ‘variation’ in the repertoire that candidates bring. In 2017 we had four times Dvořák and six times Shostakovich in the finale. While so much more exists. Pity, is it not? The violinists also play *Vieuxtemps* or *Wieniawski* after all, also not the greatest music but very beautiful and effective. Music does not always need strive to improve the world. That is why Servais, especially with *Souvenir de Spa*, also deserves a chance.”

Servais discography Roel Dieltiens

François Servais, *Souvenir de Spa*, opus 2

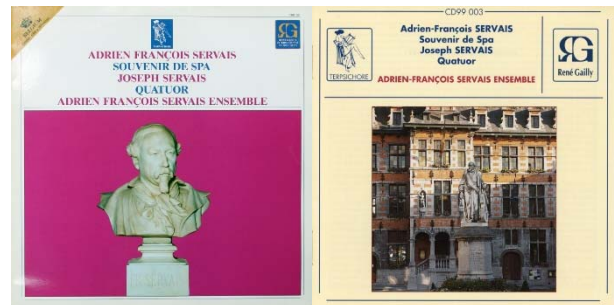
Joseph Servais, *Quatuor*

Adrien François Servais Ensemble

Recorded in 1985 in Studio Steurbaut

Audio formats with this recording:

- ‘Adrien François Servais. Joseph Servais’ (vinyl record) Terpsichore-René Gailly International Productions, 1982 061 (1985)
- ‘Adrien François Servais. Joseph Servais’ (audio cassette), Terpsichore-René Gailly International Productions, 1982 061 (1985)
- ‘Adrien-François Servais. Joseph Servais’ (CD) Terpsichore-René Gailly International Productions, CD 99 003 (1997)



Vinyl record 1982 061 (1985)

CD 99 003 (1997)

François Servais, *La Romanesca*

Adrien François Servais Ensemble: Roel Dieltiens (cello), Eva Zylka (violin), Dirk Verelst (2nd violin), Frans Vos (viola), Frank Coppieters (double bass)

Studio recording BRT 3, 13 January 1987 (Geluidsarchief VRT, MGT/307.369), broadcast on 1 February 1987.

Audio formats with this recording:

- ‘30 jaar Radio 3’ (CD), Radio 3, Brussel, CD Radio 3-30 25 (1995)



François Servais, *Six Caprices*, opus 11 n° 4

Roel Dieltiens, cello & Pieter Stas, cello

Live recording in 1998 in Puurs

Audio formats with this recording:

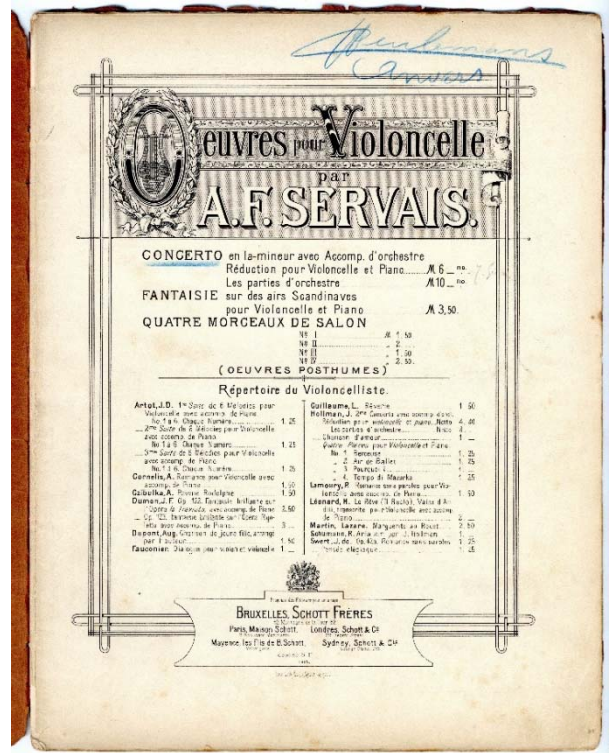
- ‘Op de Klank af’ (CD), Centrum voor Muziekinstrumentenbouw, Puurs, Cmbcd 016523 (1998)

Roel Dieltiens and the Belgian School of Cello Playing

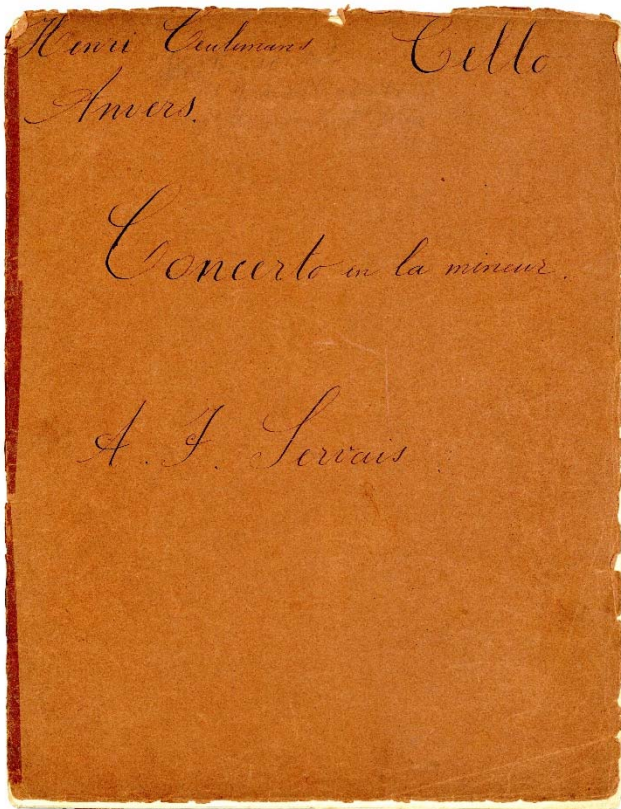
The 'cello-genealogy' of Roel Dieltiens goes back to Servais:

- François Servais (1807-1866)
- |
- Joseph Servais (1850-1885)
- |
- Edouard Jacobs (1851-1925)
- |
- Henri Ceulemans (1879-1949)
- |
- André Messens (1927-1994)
- |
- Roel Dieltiens (°1956)

His teacher's teacher, Henri Ceulemans, regularly played Servais pieces, also with orchestra. The solo parts and the orchestra parts he used, survived and are now part of the Halle Servais Collection, thanks to Roel Dieltiens.



Signature of Henri Ceulemans on his copy of Servais' *Concerto en la mineur*. Beneath: fingers of Ceulemans on the cello part



Henri Ceulemans made himself a cover for the cello part of Servais' *Concerto en la mineur*



Stamp "Henry Ceulemans Violoncelliste" on the first violin part of Servais' *O Cara memoria*, with a slightly changed title by the violinist