

The Story of Roel Dieltiens, Cellist

Like so many musicians, Roel Dieltiens came into contact with music in playful fashion from infancy onwards.

His father (Lode Dieltiens) was both a composer of choral works and songs and a teacher of harmony and theory at the Antwerp Conservatory and the Lemmensinstituut in Leuven (Belgium). However, more important to Roel Dieltiens was the fact that Father was also organist of a Catholic village called Berlaar in the province of Antwerp. Hence, as a child, Roel Dieltiens regularly lingered in the church, up above the choir gallery and close to the great organ on which his father played works by Bach, Buxtehude, Bruhns, and others. A distinctly impressive experience for a little boy.

Moreover, his father conducted the parish choir and there was a great deal of singing during the church services. But at home too, under Mother's wing, singing was normally a daily occurrence.

So there was music everywhere. Which meant it was also in the normal course of events to learn to play an instrument.

For all the children, the procedure was the same: first they learnt the recorder, then another instrument was added. This was usually the piano, as it was in the case of Roel Dieltiens.

When he was seven years old, he had his first piano lessons with his father at home. A year later he was allowed to go to the music school in Lier, where he ended up in the class of a highly respected but strict teacher. All this went well but slowly. Too slowly, in the view of the piano teacher, who felt that the talent that was there ultimately had to be developed. The pressure that she therefore began to exercise quickly became unpleasant for Roel Dieltiens, who preferred many other things to studying the piano.

During his adolescence, his aversion to his teacher in particular and music in general became so great that he wanted to give it up completely. But his father was unwavering in his resolve. As long as the children were in secondary school, they must continue to take music lessons. As a necessary complement to all those non-creative subjects at day school.

Roel Dieltiens was permitted to give up the piano but had to choose another instrument. His brother Koen, who was already a very good recorder player and could use an accompanying instrument, suggested that the cello would be a good choice.

Just because he was obliged to by his father, and because it would please his brother, but without the slightest interest in the instrument itself, Roel Dieltiens decided to switch to the cello.

He was then fourteen years old.

The cello teacher in the very same music school was the antithesis of the dreadful piano teacher. He always arrived late, chatted a lot, and had absolutely no ambition for Roel Dieltiens. He taught him more or less how to hold a cello. No more scales and so on, no more boring studies or finger exercises. Now and then the teacher played him something, and then Roel Dieltiens had to find out for himself how he could achieve something similar. And that was exactly what the teenager yearning for independence wanted: to do everything for himself. After only six months of 'teaching' Roel Dieltiens knew that he wanted to be a cellist.

In 1971 he enrolled at the Musichumaniora (specialist music school) of the Lemmensinstituut in Leuven. Alongside his general academic studies, he gained a wide-ranging musical training there that was of great importance to his future.

The highpoints of the school year were the annual performances of Bach's *St Matthew Passion*. Each year they were given with a different conductor and orchestra, and with the older students from the higher departments of the conservatory in the choir.

Wonderful to listen to, but the sixteen-year-old Roel Dieltiens would have preferred to take part himself.

And he managed to do that when Helmuth Rilling came to conduct and happened to be without a continuo cellist for a few days. As the only cellist in the school, and without any previous experience, Roel Dieltiens was privileged to play the continuo.

Unforgettable days.

After these extremely important and influential years, Roel Dieltiens applied for admission to the Flemish Royal Conservatory in Antwerp. This was shortly after the highly reputed cello teacher André Messens was appointed there. In spite of the fact that he had only recently taken up the cello, and to everyone's surprise, Roel Dieltiens was admitted.

To this day, Roel Dieltiens asserts that he owes everything to this man who believed in him right from the start.

After just two years of purely technical study and discipline Roel Dieltiens gained his first diplomas, including a First Prize for cello, in 1976.

His talent was also noticed by the then director of the Conservatory, the concert pianist Eugène Traey, who was later to become president of the celebrated Queen Elisabeth of Belgium International Music Competition. Thanks to Traey's influence and personal involvement, Roel Dieltiens had the opportunity to obtain concert experience, notably through exchanges with other conservatories abroad such as Amsterdam, Paris, Hanover, and Geneva.

As if that were not enough, Roel Dieltiens also came into contact with the harpsichordist Jos van Immerseel, who was then a final-year student at the same conservatory and was

looking for collaborators for his musical experiments. Here was a chance for Roel Dieltiens to make use once more of his early family experience with Baroque music. From that time on, parallel performance on the modern and Baroque cello would prove to be a constant in his career.

At the urging of his teacher André Messens, Roel Dieltiens was admitted as a pupil to the 1977-80 cycle of the Queen Elisabeth Music Chapel. This is a sort of private school for promising young soloists who wish to go on to advanced study after obtaining their final diplomas. They are permitted to do so with the teacher of their choice. And for Roel Dieltiens the choice was clear: a further three years under the guidance of André Messens. A choice he has never regretted since.

In any case, this advanced course was an ideal opportunity for Roel Dieltiens to make up for his late start on the cello. Because of this, he had next to no basic repertoire, and the three years offered him the chance to remedy that defect.

He could then concentrate all his efforts on studying and nothing else, since all the teaching was free and all the professors were on the campus. It was a dream. So his teachers included the composer Victor Legley (who later dedicated his Cello Concerto op.101 to Roel Dieltiens) and the violinist Carlo Vanneste, who taught chamber music. Although he had to get through a very heavy programme each year (two concertos, six major repertoire pieces, and four études), Roel Dieltiens developed steadily over the three years, and ultimately passed his final examination with the grade 'Graduate in Cello with Virtuosity and High Distinction'.

The examinations he sat were judged by an international jury. One of the members was the elderly French cellist Étienne Pasquier (cellist of the famous Trio à Cordes Pasquier and a close friend of the composer Olivier Messiaen, with whom he had given the first performance of the *Quatuor pour la fin du Temps*). After the examinations they had a long conversation which led to a friendship that lasted for years. In the time left until Pasquier's death, Roel Dieltiens learned an enormous amount from him about the ins and outs of the music of the first half of the twentieth century. Pasquier lived and worked in Paris, the metropolis that was then a veritable focal point of the European musical scene.

During the final concert that Roel Dieltiens gave as a prizewinner at the Music Chapel, he was spotted by the celebrated Hungarian violinist André Gertler and promptly invited to be a member of the Quatuor Gertler with which the maestro intended to conclude his rich career. The collaboration lasted four years, during which they played quartets by Hindemith, Ravel, Bartók, Schubert, and Mozart.

Also on the quartet's programme was the Brahms Clarinet Quintet, for which the world-famous Flemish clarinet virtuoso Walter Boeykens was invited. This was how Roel

Dieltiens got to know someone with whom he would later collaborate intensively for ten years in the Ensemble Walter Boeykens.

Barely a week after the final examination at the Music Chapel it was off to Geneva (CH) for a summer course with Roel Dieltiens' great model, the magnificent French cellist Pierre Fournier. This was his first contact with the international world of the cello and the extraordinarily captivating personality of Pierre Fournier.

Virtually straight after this, the same summer, he went on to the Accademia Chigiana in Siena (I), where the noted cello teacher André Navarra gave his summer course. Right from the start it was clear that Navarra was the better teacher for Roel Dieltiens, who therefore became his student at the Musikhochschule Westphalen-Lippe in Detmold (D). He combined these studies with his jobs as a cello teacher at the Lier Music School and as principal cellist of the chamber orchestra Collegium Instrumentale Brugense, conducted at that time by Patrick Peire.

In these years of musical boom, Roel Dieltiens also came into contact, through his connections in the Baroque world, with the oboist Paul Dombrecht, the violinist Sigiswald Kuijken, and the Flemish countertenor René Jacobs, who at that time was a star in the vocal firmament and was only just beginning to conduct Baroque operas. Alongside the German lutenist Konrad Junghänel, Roel Dieltiens was for many years the regular continuo player for Jacobs.

In the same period he also got to know the Flemish musicologist and radio producer Pieter Andriessen, who played a very important role as a 'backstage figure' who always gave Roel Dieltiens his unconditional support.

His studies finally came to an end with his participation in 1982 in the Internationale Akademie für Solisten in Wolfenbüttel (D) and the award in 1983 of the Diploma d'Onore from Siena, both under the direction of André Navarra.

Having already had one foot in the concert world for several years, Roel Dieltiens swiftly became a well-known figure on the international music scene soon after finishing his studies. This was, obviously enough, because of his outstanding performances on the cello, but also because from the outset he had had the good fortune to share the platform with some of the biggest names in both traditional classical repertoire and early music. Consequently, Roel Dieltiens never entered any international music competitions. This was largely because he felt an aversion to the very idea of 'competition', which for him is incompatible with music-making, but also partly because in any case he already had

concert dates in abundance and had no need of the 'career springboard' sometimes provided by such events.

1997 was a crucial year.

Roel Dieltiens was asked to join the Orchestra of the Eighteenth Century in the Netherlands – which he did, playing there for many years with intense conviction, since Frans Brüggen was a great inspiration to him.

In the same year he recorded for Harmonia Mundi France the CD 'Le Violoncelle virtuose', featuring works by Auguste Franck. For this occasion he gathered round him an ensemble of leading international musicians, who applied themselves with great enthusiasm to a fresh, faithful and emotionally searching performance of this little-known music of the nineteenth century. The name of the group, Ensemble Explorations, was originally intended to serve only for this one recording, but was used again just a year later for a collaboration with Les Ballets C. de la B. (B) on a production by Alain Platel. Alongside an outstanding cast of dancers, actors, singers and acrobats, Ensemble Explorations performed 'Iets op Bach' (Something about Bach), a show that was staged more than 150 times in venues all over the world.

This exploration of Bach in all his facets laid the foundations for the continuing activity of an ensemble that would subsequently scale the heights internationally. Working on the basis of intensive rehearsal sessions, the musicians prepared new programmes. The motivation for this was deliberately to break the force of habit. To achieve that goal, they repeatedly explored afresh every aspect of the repertoire to be studied, right down to the smallest detail. Scores, composers and stylistic periods were (re)discovered and investigated. Within this framework, the decision to perform on period instruments was logical and self-evident.

In this way, Roel Dieltiens' Ensemble Explorations succeeded for around fifteen years in replacing the great masters in their authentic setting, stripped of all entrenched traditions. Contemporary works and music by lesser-known composers, often unjustly forgotten, were presented to the public with the same freshness and penetration.

After this long and intensive period which Roel Dieltiens devoted almost exclusively to his ensemble, he is now returning increasingly to his 'roots' as a concert cellist. He has the great advantage of being able to look back on many years of exceptionally rich and varied musical experiences. Years in which extremes have touched and which now make him an unusually exciting artist.

Thus, for example, his interpretation of the Suites of J. S. Bach on the Baroque cello was acclaimed as the benchmark while at the same time his recording of the legendary

Sonata for solo cello op.8 by Zoltán Kodály on a modern instrument was praised as the 'only genuine alternative to János Starker'.

He gives recitals with pianists as diverse as Andreas Staier and Frank Braley, appears as a soloist with the Orchestra of the Eighteenth Century, but also the St Petersburg Philharmonic Orchestra, and plays with the ensemble Archibudelli, but also with the Hungarian world music group Muzsikás.

In addition to the standard cello repertoire, he also performs compositions dedicated to him, including pieces by Luc Van Hove (B) and William Bolcom (USA).

Since 2002 Roel Dieltiens has been Professor of Cello at the Hochschule der Künste in Zurich.

His recordings are released on Accent, Harmonia Mundi, and Etcetera.