

Unico Wilhelm van Wassenaer (1692-1766): Aristocrat, Diplomat, Mystery Composer

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In his work *Nederland's Beschaving in de Zeventiende Eeuw*, published in 1941, the renowned Dutch historian Johan Huizinga writes that in the Dutch Republic the nobility played an insignificant role socially as well as culturally and intellectually; and that if this was true of the nobility in the province of Holland, it was even more so of the nobility in the eastern provinces of the Republic.¹ He writes of the latter in particular that as a group it was neither receptive nor productive when it came to things cultural, and that its members spent their lives on their isolated country estates (*sloten*) pursuing their primitive agrarian interests. To Huizinga the glory of the 17th century and its echo in the 18th was solely and exclusively a product of Dutch middle-class society: “*de burgerij*” (Huizinga 1941: 58, 65, 103; 1946:20; see also Roodenburg 2010: 135-136). These broad generalizations by the revered historian Huizinga – a medievalist and cultural historian who began as an Orientalist – effectively ‘buried’ the Dutch nobility as a topic of research for the next half century, and it is only during the past two decades that this situation has started to turn around. Evidence for this, for example, is the annual publication entitled *Virtus, Jaarboek voor Adelsgeschiedenis* which commenced in 1994.

Unico Wilhelm van Wassenaer, 1692-1766, aristocrat, diplomat and composer was very much everything that Huizinga claimed the Dutch nobility of the 17th and 18th centuries was not. The son of Jacob II van Wassenaer Obdam, and Adriana Sophia van Raesfelt tot Twickel, Unico Wilhelm was born at Twickel, his parents’ estate, or manor, near Delden in Overijssel, a property that was part

¹ This paper is an expanded version of a lecture presented at the CAANS-ACAEN Conference in Fredericton, N.B., May 2011.

of his mother's dowry.² The Van Raesfelts, a family that originated in the town of the same name in the lower German Rhineland, had played a prominent role in the province of Overijssel for about two centuries. Unico's mother died when he was only two years old, following which Unico and his older siblings appear to have been raised, at least for the first years following their mother's death, by Agnes van Wassenaer Obdam, a sister of the father who lived in The Hague. Agnes was a close friend of Mary Stuart, the wife of William III, the stadholder-king.³

Unico Wilhelm's paternal grandfather, Jacob I van Wassenaer Obdam, was the not so famous Dutch admiral – although that point is debatable – who, in the naval battle of Lowestoft (June 13th, 1665) in the second Anglo-Dutch war, managed to pull off the largest Dutch naval defeat in the 17th century. He died in this engagement when his flag ship, *De Eendracht*, exploded as a consequence of an enemy shell penetrating the ship's gunpowder storage room. In Van Wassenaer's defence it ought to be mentioned that his training had been a military, rather than a naval, one, and his appointment to the position of admiral had been a political decision.

Unico Wilhelm's father, Jacob II van Wassenaer Obdam, who had a law degree from Oxford, ended his career in the army of the Dutch Republic even less gloriously than had his father in the Dutch navy. At the beginning of the War of the Spanish Succession, Jacob II was given command of one of the Dutch forces. In the Battle of Ekeren – Ekeren lies just north of Antwerp – fought on June 30 of 1703, Jacob thought that all was lost when his force was trapped by a French one. Removing his general's insignia from his uniform, he deserted his own troops, but in the evening of that same day one of his subordinate officers managed to lead them to safety. Disgraced as a result of his conduct, Jacob's military career came to an abrupt end.

It was perhaps because of their father's conduct that Unico Wilhelm, and his older brother Johan Hendrik, the only two sons of Jacob II who grew to manhood, never served in the military, the normal occupation of their class, either because they chose not to do so, or because they were prevented from doing so. The two of them do not, however, seem to have experienced difficulties in seeking and obtaining a number of prominent civilian posts commensurate with their position as members of what had been for some centuries, and remained, a leading aristocratic family in the Dutch Republic.

² On the long history of Twickel see Haverkate, Brunt & Leyssius 1993.

³ For the details of Unico's life and cultural environment, including the musical one, I am most indebted to Rasch 1993a, b and Van der Klooster 1993.

Politically the Van Wassenaers were *Staatsgezind*⁴ and that probably did not harm Unico Wilhelm's and his brother's successes in landing what were, in essence, political appointments during the second *Stadholderless* period in the history of the Dutch Republic which lasted from 1702 to 1747. The Van Wassenaers claimed that their lineage was more ancient than that of the *Oranje-Nassaus* and saw no reason why they should defer to them in any way.

As members of one of the Republic's oldest and most distinguished families, Unico Wilhelm and his older brother Johan Hendrik were regularly called upon to undertake diplomatic missions on behalf of the government in The Hague. The secretary of the French embassy in The Hague observed that Unico Wilhelm could not only boast of a very distinguished birth and lineage, but that he was also a man of great talent, with a strong and spirited personality, as well as one who knew his way around high society and was comfortable in it (Aalbers 1993: 205). In other words, he was well suited to fulfil the role of diplomat. However, on more than one occasion Unico Wilhelm, as well as his brother, declined the request to undertake a diplomatic mission on behalf of the Republic, for diplomats often ended up paying much of the cost of such missions out of their own pockets in addition to which their interests at home might suffer while out of the country.

Unico Wilhelm's most important diplomatic missions came during the War of the Austrian Succession which broke out in 1740 and lasted until 1748. After some arm twisting by Grand Pensionary Van der Heim, he was persuaded to undertake a diplomatic mission to the court of Louis XV for the purpose of dissuading the French from invading the Austrian Netherlands, a perennial Dutch concern. However, this mission, which lasted from May to August of 1744, was unsuccessful.

More successful was Unico Wilhelm's diplomatic mission to the court of Clement-Augustus, the Prince-Bishop of Cologne who was simultaneously Prince-Bishop of Münster and three other prince-bishoprics in Germany. Since much of Clemens-Augustus's territory bordered on that of the Low Countries, it was important to keep him out of the French camp in the war, and in July of 1744 the Republic and England had persuaded him to sign a treaty with them against the French in return for a substantial annual subsidy. Not long after returning from Paris, Unico Wilhelm was sent to Cologne to ensure that the Prince-Bishop lived up to his treaty obligations and to prevent the French from winning him over to their side, for that is where the Prince-Bishop's natural inclinations lay. After the

⁴ This meant that the Van Wassenaers favoured an increase in the political powers of the various estates in the Dutch Republic, both at the provincial and at the national level, and a reduction in the political powers and influence of the House of Orange.

war came to an end in 1748, Unico Wilhelm does not appear to have undertaken any more diplomatic missions and by that time he was getting on in years – for the 18th century, at least.

Musically trained from a an early age onward, Unico Wilhelm appears to have picked up, while abroad on missions for the Republic, some of the musical influences and inspirations that went into the composition of his six *Concerti armonici*.

When one thinks of the cultural scene in the Dutch Republic, composers are not exactly the first thing that comes to mind and they would appear to have been relatively few in number for a number of reasons. In Catholic and Lutheran countries, the church was a major employer of musicians and composers – J.S. Bach’s more than 25-year association with the St. Thomas church in Leipzig is a prime example. In the Dutch Republic, the dominant Calvinist church had very mixed feelings about the use of music in church services and did not, as a consequence, exactly constitute a conservatory of music. It was still pretty much a question of “four bare walls and a sermon,”⁵ as a critic described a Calvinistic worship service in the 16th century. Furthermore, what passed for the court in the Dutch Republic, the establishment of the House of *Oranje-Nassau*, did not see the creation of a court orchestra (*hofkapel*) before the days of Stadholder William IV who was married to Anna of Hannover, daughter of George II of England. Anna, a talented musician in her own right and a student of Georg Friedrich Händel, appears to have been the driving force behind the creation of the court orchestra, first in Leeuwarden and later in The Hague, following the elevation of her husband to the position of stadholder in all of the seven provinces of the Republic (Baker-Smith 1995: 75,⁶ 124, 127, 158; Rasch 1993b: 122, 162-163, 167). However, as court orchestras went, this was a late-comer, and that fact must have contributed further to the paucity of notable musicians and composers in the Dutch Republic. For in most jurisdictions in Europe, musical entertainment was, and had been for a long time, a regular occurrence at the royal courts and the courts of the great nobles which thus provided employment for both musicians and composers. The Hungarian Count Nikolaus Esterházy, for example, was the primary patron of Joseph Haydn. After having painted a rather grim picture of the musical scene in the Dutch Republic, it would

⁵ The exact origin of the phrase “four bare walls and a sermon” has never been established, but it was most likely first coined in England.

⁶ Baker-Smith (1995: 75) writes that Anne of Hannover possessed a “fabulous music library which has disappeared without a trace.” In the second half of 1750 Händel spent some time in the Dutch Republic where he gave a number of organ concerts attended by Princess Anne and her husband, Stadholder William IV (King 1991: 372-386).

appear that in the 18th century there was a greater number of Dutch composers than is generally realized at present, but most of their work now seems lost and their compositions are known only from 18th century sheet-music catalogues and auction catalogues (Rasch 1993b: 157-160).

So, in light of all of this, it came as a pleasant surprise for many classical music lovers in the Netherlands when it was revealed, in 1980, that the six *Concerti armonici*, which had been attributed to the 18th century Italian composer Giovanni Battista Pergolesi since about the middle of the 19th century, were, in reality, the work of Unico Wilhelm van Wassenaer. So the question arises how all of this came about? How did compositions by a Dutch nobleman come to be attributed to an Italian composer who died at age 26, and to whom were attributed, as late as 1942, a total of 148 compositions of which now no more than 30 are considered to be from his hand. Pergolesi's best known work, incidentally, is his *Stabat Mater*.

The six *Concerti armonici*, chamber music for four violins, were first published in The Hague in 1740. Their publisher was an Italian musician named Carlo Ricciotti who had settled in The Hague after he first arrived there with a French opera company in 1702.⁷ On the title page Ricciotti dedicated the *Concerti* to Count Willem Bentinck, son of Hans Willem Bentinck, First Earl of Portland, and his second wife, Jane Martha Temple, but the name of the composer is not mentioned. On the following page, Ricciotti elaborates on the dedication but again does not give the name of the composer, except to say that the *Concerti* are from the hand of a nobleman who holds Bentinck in the highest regard. From the very beginning, the *Concerti* enjoyed a certain popularity not only in the Dutch Republic, but in England as well. There the *Concerti* were first published by John Walsh in 1755 who promoted Ricciotti from publisher to composer of the *Concerti*. About the same time, John Johnson, a Londoner like John Walsh, also published the *Concerti* but did not name Ricciotti as their composer. However, the edition of the *Concerti* by Walsh, naming Ricciotti as their composer, won out in popularity over that by Johnson and remained for sale in London well into the 19th century.

The Polish composer Franciszek Lessel, a student of Joseph Haydn who died in 1835, was the first to first attribute the *Concerti* to Giovanni Pergolesi in a manuscript now in the Library of Congress in Washington. In this particular manuscript, Lessel first attributed the *Concerti* to Händel, but then changed the attribution to Pergolesi, one that became almost universally accepted before long and gave the *Concerti* a status and reputation which they might otherwise

⁷ For the history of the *Concerti armonici* I am primarily indebted to Dunning 1980 and Rasch 1993c.

not have enjoyed. Believing the *Concerti* to be Pergolesi's, Igor Stravinski reworked one of them for the "Tarantella" in his ballet *Pulcinella* which dates from 1919. In 1940, the *Concerti* appeared as volume seven in a publication of Pergolesi's collected works.

After Pergolesi had been widely accepted as the composer of the *Concerti armonici* for more than 150 years, the question of their origin was once again raised following World War II. In Britain musicologists unearthed old scores of the *Concerti* published by John Walsh that named Ricciotti as their composer, but this attribution failed to acquire any traction. Research by the German musicologist Hans Joachim Moser, who suggested some names in connection with the *Concerti*, also failed to bring the riddle any closer to a solution. Then in 1963 the Dutch musicologist Albert Dunning advanced the name of the 18th century Italian composer Fortunato Chelleri as the composer of the *Concerti* after having conducted a more thorough historical and musicological study of these works than anyone before him. However, only six years later he retracted his 'discovery' as possessing too little solid evidence (Dunning 1980:7-8; Rasch 1993c: 39-43). That is where matters stood until 1980 when Albert Dunning finally solved the mystery of the *Concerti*, and their origins, after having been attributed to a total of ten different composers over time before Unico Wilhelm van Wassenaer emerged as their real creator.

In December of 1979 Albert Dunning, who was then teaching in Italy, happened to meet a party of Dutch art historians in Paris, one of whom was his friend Jacques Vis. He joined the group for a coffee and good naturedly chastised the art historians for being too quick in attributing unsigned works of art to this or that artist. He continued that musicologists were much more circumspect in that regard by citing the example of the *Concerti armonici*. To Dunning's utter surprise Wouter van Leeuwen, one of the art historians, then mentioned that some years previously, while cataloguing the contents of the library of castle Twickel near Delden in Overijssel, where Unico Wilhelm was born and which he later inherited, he had come across an 18th century music manuscript that, in so far as he could remember, could have something to do with the *Concerti armonici*. Dunning wasted no time travelling to Delden and was able to establish very quickly that the manuscript in question is what amounts to the autograph of the six *Concerti armonici*. For even though there is no signature of any kind on the manuscript as such, the *Concerti* are preceded by a hand-written note in French which, translated, reads: "Partition of my concerts, published by Mr. Ricciotti, nicknamed Bacciccia. These concerts were composed at different times between 1725 and 1740." Comparison of the handwriting in which this note was written with many signed documents, as well as letters, by Unico Wilhelm van Wassenaer allowed Dunning to conclude that no one but he could have written

the *Concerti armonici*. Dunning published his quite sensational discovery in a monograph, published simultaneously in both Dutch and English, in 1980 which also contains a facsimile of the score of the *Concerti* (Rash 1993c: 43-47; Roodenburg 2010: 120-121).

To the note just quoted, Unico Wilhelm added a longer one in a smaller hand, and perhaps at a later date, in which he throws some light on the origins of the *Concerti armonici*. He writes that as he was completing them, he would take the *Concerti* to the *collegium musicum* in The Hague, of which he was a member, and the *Concerti* would then be played by this musical ensemble. In addition to himself he mentions as its members Willem and Carel Bentinck, Ricciotti, who played the first violin, and a number of other foreigners. He continues that after he had completed six *concerti*, Ricciotti requested his permission to publish them, which he refused to give. However, with the support of Willem Bentinck, Ricciotti managed to change Unico Wilhelm's mind after some time, but he made it abundantly clear that his name was not to appear anywhere on the published *Concerti*. Ricciotti even suggested that, as their publisher, he dedicate the *Concerti* to Unico Wilhelm, but that idea he rejected as well. It was finally agreed that they would be dedicated to Willem Bentinck, and Ricciotti added to that, without Unico Wilhelm's permission it would appear, that the *Concerti* were composed by the hand of a prominent figure ("*illustre mano*"). Unico Wilhelm concludes his own note in the manuscript that his *Concerti* thus ended up being published very much against his own initial inclination and intention. To which he adds that some of the *Concerti* are passable, others mediocre or of poor quality and that he might have revised the latter if he had had the time to do so before consenting to their publication (Dunning 1980: 3-6, 11-12; Rasch 1993: 15, 18-19, 43-47). Was it then on account of their musical quality, or lack thereof, that Unico Wilhelm refused to have his name attached to his own compositions? To this question we will return after we look briefly at the cultural environment in which Unico Wilhelm grew up, and especially the musical one.

Surviving account books of the Van Wassenaer family reveal that Unico Wilhelm and his siblings received music lessons from an early age on as they were growing up in The Hague, and it may be assumed that his aunt Agnes, an accomplished musician herself, had a hand in this. Between 1707 and 1709, when he was a teenager, Unico Wilhelm lived in Düsseldorf where his father served as Dutch ambassador at the court of Elector Johann Wilhelm who supported a substantial musical establishment that employed a number of Italian musicians including, for a time, the prominent composer Arcangelo Corelli. It is generally assumed that this musical environment in Düsseldorf had a major impact on Unico Wilhelm's musical formation and development. Following

his legal studies in Leiden, which he commenced in 1710, Unico Wilhelm undertook the usual Grand Tour of Europe, and the countries he visited included, most likely, England, Germany, Italy and France. His visit to England may have been at the invitation of King George I. For when the Elector George of Hanover travelled to England in the fall of 1714 to assume the English crown following the death of Queen Anne, Unico Wilhelm provided him with lodgings at Twickel, his birthplace near Delden, for one night. Grand Tours, following the completion of university studies, were traditionally undertaken to broaden one's education, and it is safe to assume that Unico Wilhelm used the opportunity to add, amongst others, to his musical knowledge and proficiency as well as to his musical library. In 1788, Unico Wilhelm's last surviving son, named Carel George, sold much of the family's library, including forty-four musical scores as we can learn from the auction catalogue that has survived of this sale. These titles, together with the surviving eighteenth-century musical publications in the library at Twickel provide some insight into the musical tastes of, and influences on, Unico Wilhelm and his family.

Around 1720 Unico Wilhelm settled down in The Hague where he held several offices but continued to spend the summers – or at least part of them – at Twickel, and it may be added that that is the name he was commonly known by, rather than by the name Van Wassenaer. Before long, Unico Wilhelm formed, with other music lovers living in The Hague, a *collegium musicum* and it was this musical ensemble, of which Ricciotti as well as Willem and Carel Bentinck were also members as we have seen, that first performed the *Concerti armonici* as they were being composed between 1725 and 1740. The *collegium musicum* may have collapsed not long thereafter, because the War of the Austrian Succession which broke out in 1740 led to a call for the elevation of William IV to the position of stadholder in all of the seven provinces of the Republic, one that was opposed by the Van Wassenaers but strongly supported by the Bentincks.⁸

And why did Unico Wilhelm object so strenuously to being named the composer when he reluctantly allowed Ricciotti to publish the *Concerti armonici*? In the 17th and 18th centuries it was simply not seemly for a member of the nobility, one who held high public offices, to be known as a composer, for composers were, in the final analysis, still regarded as trades people, although perhaps less so than they had been centuries earlier due to the impact of the Renaissance. Members of the nobility simply did not work with their hands, and musical composition was still regarded, to a large degree, as a craft and hence the preserve of the non-noble classes. It was acceptable for a member of the

⁸This paragraph and the previous one are based on Rasch 1993a, b and Van der Klooster 1993.

nobility to pursue music in all its form as a leisure activity, but not as professional pursuit which implied receiving payment for one's work. One manner in which composers sought financial reward for their work was by dedicating it to a prominent individual, hoping thereby to loosen his or her purse strings. This common practice was perhaps another reason why Unico Wilhelm wanted to avoid all suggestion that he had composed and was now having the *Concerti* published for mercenary reasons; and the best way to achieve that was not to have his name appear on the published score in any form whatsoever (Rasch 1993a: 82-84). Whether Ricciotti benefitted financially from dedicating the *Concerti* to Willem Bentinck is not known.

According to the theories of Pierre Bourdieu, Unico Wilhelm's musical activities, both as a musician and as a composer, were much more than a simple pastime, but a conscious and deliberate effort to augment his cultural and social capital (Roodenburg 2010: 121-122). Cultural accomplishments, whether it be music making or painting, or the acquisition of large libraries or collections of curiosities as was common at the time, were one way to establish and enhance one's cultural and social stature and reputation amongst one's family and friends, but the pursuit of these things, certainly amongst the aristocracy, could never take on the character – at least not overtly – of real work. All was undertaken with an air of studied indifference, and accomplishments were downplayed, as was done by Unico Wilhelm when he wrote that some of his *Concerti* were passable, and the rest mediocre or downright poor. And yet, they are of such quality that they came to be attributed to such well known composers as Händel, Corelli and Pergolesi. However, an honourable person – and the aristocracy still considered honour as its special domain – did not boast about his cultural accomplishments or make them public.

Amongst the aristocracy at least, these so-called leisure activities of a cultural nature constituted the real work, according to Bourdieu and those following in his footsteps, and cultural pursuits generally consumed more time than any other activity or occupation. An aristocrat might distinguish himself as a diplomat or as a magistrate, but only in his cultural pursuits could he truly stand out and acquire renown. And the reason for, and importance of, building up cultural, and hence social, capital in this fashion was twofold. To begin with, cultural and social capital could be translated into real capital, that is to say into the acquisition of senior civil and military positions, and cultural as well as social capital was perhaps indispensable in such instances. Secondly, it was through their cultural and social capital that individual aristocrats, and the aristocracy as a class, could distinguish themselves from those below them at a time when their political relevance and influence was generally on the wane, as well as distinguish themselves from the *nouveau riche*. In summary, amongst the

aristocracy it was not good form – in theory at least – to allow leisure or leisure activities (*otium*) to become busyness (*negotium*), but that is, in fact, what often happened, and the underlying reason was to build up cultural and social capital that could be quite indispensable in the acquisition of prominent and lucrative positions and offices.⁹

The discovery, in 1980, that Unico Wilhelm van Wassenaer, rather than Pergolesi, was the composer of the *Concerti armonici* led, not surprisingly, to a search for other compositions by him. Around 1990, the Belgian flutist Willem Brabants discovered three sonatas for recorder by Unico Wilhelm in a manuscript in the University Library at Rostock, to which can be added two minuets found in a collected work published in Amsterdam in 1718. From 18th century auction catalogues we know that Unico Wilhelm composed at least three other pieces for instrumental music, but they now appear to be lost. In the field of vocal music, he composed two motets – i.e., ecclesiastical vocal music. One of these motets was performed for Queen Maria Leczinska, the wife of Louis XV of France, in Easter Week of 1746 when Unico Wilhelm was on another diplomatic mission in Paris. Other compositions by him might still be tucked away in libraries or archives, or misattributed to some other composer (Rasch 1993a: 62-70; 1993d).

Not being a musicologist, I will note just briefly what the Dutch musicologist Kees Vlaardingerbroek writes about some of the technical aspects of the *Concerti armonici* and the various musical influences they betray. From a musicological perspective the *Concerti armonici* are, according to Vlaardingerbroek, quite eclectic in nature. The most noticeable influences are Italian, which accounts, no doubt, for the fact that they were attributed to Pergolesi, and even to Corelli. French musical influences are surprisingly few, writes Vlaardingerbroek, while in some instances the *Concerti* betray influences of older German and English musical traditions. And yet the *Concerti* are not without originality. Vlaardingerbroek even speaks of a capricious originality. He concludes with the observation that while the mystery as to the composer of the *Concerti armonici* has been solved, we are really no closer to the riddle that the *Concerti* themselves pose from a musicological perspective, and he attributes that primarily to the fact that, in the final analysis, very little is known about the musical history of the Dutch Republic in the 17th and 18th centuries (Vlaardingerbroek 1993: 261-262).

Johan Huizinga wrote that Dutch society of the 17th and 18th centuries was, at heart, *burgerlijk* in nature from top to bottom, an assertion that was repeated not many years ago by well known historians such as Arie Theodorus

⁹The last two paragraphs are based on Van Bunge 2010; Sturkenboom 2010; Roodenburg 2010.

van Deursen, Herman Pleij, Jonathan Israel and Simon Schama (Te Velde & Aerts 1998). However, in recent decades both sociologists and historians have also come to argue fairly convincingly that society of the *ancien régime* in the Dutch Republic was very much of a multicultural one: multicultural along horizontal rather than vertical lines. This has led to an upsurge in the study of the aristocracy as a class and the realization that without putting the aristocracy fully in the picture in all its varied aspects, our image of society in the Dutch Republic is incomplete, and Unico Wilhelm van Wassenaer very much proves the point.¹⁰

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¹⁰ In North America, the most readily available, and recent, compact-disc recording of the *Concerti armonici* is: Wilhelm Wassenaer, *Concerti Armonici*, performed by the Aradia Ensemble, directed by Kevin Mallon, and is published under Naxos label, Catalogue Number 8.555384.

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