

Exploring Franz Reizenstein's Overture: *Cyrano de Bergerac*, op.28 (1951)

by John France

Recently, CPO Records issued a remarkable CD of Franz Reizenstein's Piano Concerto No.2 in F major, op.37 (1959) and the Serenade in F major, op.29a (1951), with the attractive *Overture: Cyrano de Bergerac*, op.28 (1951) concluding disc as a filler. Personally, I would have rearranged the order of tracks to put the overture first and the concerto last.

For biographical details of Austrian émigré composer Franz Reizenstein, I refer the reader to my [blogpost](#) (21 April 2020). The year 1951 was a busy one for him. His most significant work was probably the cantata *Voices of the Night* for soprano, baritone, chorus, and orchestra, a setting of poems exploring the transition from 'dusk to dawn'. Critics have detected the influence of Reizenstein's teacher Ralph Vaughan Williams in this cantata. Another important composition was the Serenade for wind, op.29, which was later arranged for full orchestra, and this is the version featured on the above-mentioned CD. Of great interest, is the film score to the Pathé newsreel *Highlights of Farnborough* (1951).



The *Overture: Cyrano de Bergerac* is 'based' on the eponymous play written in 1897 by the French poet and dramatist, Edmond Rostand (1868-1918). Over the years, it has been revived for the theatre, the ballet stage, the opera house, and the cinema. The plot revolves around Cyrano and his belief that he cannot win the love of Roxane because of his prominent nose. He turns his hand to writing love letters and poems on behalf of his friend Christian to aid his wooing of Roxane. Alas this play is too successful and leads to tragedy. Cyrano is injured in battle and dies of his wounds, without revealing his secret to Roxane.

This overture is easy-going, not difficult to come to terms with and is well-constructed and superbly orchestrated. As a general idea, the work is in a trajectory from Richard Strauss's *Till Eulenspiegel's Merry Pranks* (1894-5) through William Walton's *Scapino: A Comedy Overture* (1940). The main difference is Reizenstein's touch of 'English reserve' absent from the flamboyance of the other two overtures. It is none the worse for that. Sonata form is the underpinning structural principal. After an opening flourish, the first subject fully echoes Cyrano's noted 'panache' or sheer ostentation. This is the dominating mood of the entire piece. However, the contrasting second subject is romantic, lyrical, and tinged with just a touch of melancholy. The development section is surprisingly diverse, with much contrapuntal activity, including a vivacious fugal passage. Bearing in mind that the play is a tragicomedy, it is perhaps strange that the work ends with a stirring coda. This is after the recapitulation of both themes in order. The principal emotion which strikes the listener is that Cyrano, even in his death agony, did not lose his flamboyant manner and reckless courage. With all his lack of self-confidence, his was a life well lived and full of joie de vivre.

The premiere of Reizenstein's *Overture: Cyrano de Bergerac* was broadcast on the BBC at 9.10 pm on Monday, 1 February 1954. The London Philharmonic Orchestra and the BBC Chorus was conducted by Sir Adrian Boult. Other works heard during this concert included Edward Elgar's *Serenade for Strings*, op.20 (1892) and Ralph Vaughan Williams's *Flos Campi* for viola, chorus, and orchestra (1925). George Alexander was the violist. The second half of the concert included a single piece, the first performance of Havergal Brian's great *Symphony No.8 in B flat* (1949). I was unable to locate any reviews of this broadcast.

Writing in the *Radio Times* (29 January 1954) composer and musicologist Norman Demuth wrote a short appreciation of Reizenstein's *Overture*. He explained that it had been composed in 1951 and noted that 'composers have to wait now, as ever, for performance.' Interestingly, Demuth explains that although Reizenstein has a 'deep admiration' for the play, he had never seen it. Knowledge of the plot is therefore 'literary and dramatically imaginative.'

The first public concert performance that I can trace was at the 1957 Proms on Friday 30 August. The *Overture* was placed at the conclusion of the second half of a packed programme. It was preceded by the 'World Premiere' of Stanley Bate's (1911-59) Piano Concerto No.3, op.66 (1951-2). Bate himself was the soloist.

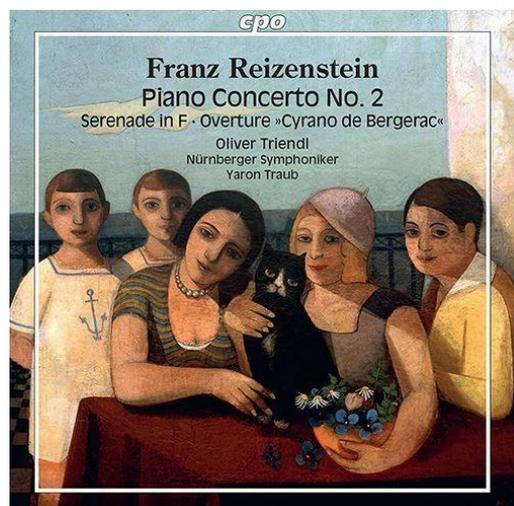
The first half featured three major compositions by Beethoven: Egmont Overture op.84 (1810), the Piano Concerto No.1 in C major, op.15 (1795) and the Symphony No.7 in A major, op.92 (1812). The BBC Symphony Orchestra was conducted by John Hollingsworth (Bate's Concerto) and Malcolm Sargent. Nina Milkina was the soloist in the Beethoven Concerto.

Frank Howes (*The Times* 31 August 1957) was not over impressed by the two 'modern' works. He recalled the previous Friday's Beethoven night (23 August) when the audience were introduced to Hans Werner Henze's *Ode an den Westwind* for cello and orchestra, then extremely 'modernist'. As for the Bate and Reizenstein, they were 'eclectic in style and would have raised no eyebrows 30 [1927] years ago.' He thought that Reizenstein's work was the shorter and the more skilfully compounded of the two.' The *Overture's* 'models are undisguised, and its form creaks twice.' He does not say where. Howes felt that had it had a 'more amply rehearsed performance [it] would have lifted the temperature of the music to somewhat near that of *Cyrano* himself' and that the ideas seemed to lack the panache which is *Cyrano's* dying word.' On a positive note, the 'whole thing is strung together with ability, and could easily make a convincing effect.'

J.N. writing for the *Daily Telegraph* (31 August 1957) understood that the *Overture: Cyrano de Bergerac* 'bore a striking resemblance to [William] Walton's *Scapino*' but 'if it lacked the mordant wit and memorable themes of that exciting work, it is nevertheless a thoroughly professional piece of composition.'

Reviewing the score of the *Overture: Cyrano de Bergerac*, American composer and musical scholar Gardner Read (*Notes*, September 1958) judged that it was 'a robust and vigorous symphonic portrait of one of the theater's most beloved figures, scored for a surprisingly modest-sized orchestra. *Cyrano's* more romantically inclined moments are by no means overlooked by the composer (see the second theme, in E major, *Un poco meno mosso*), and the overture ends in a blaze of A major pyrotechnics: Conductors on the search for fresh, breezy openers for their programs would do well to investigate Reizenstein's overture. *Cyrano* might well have fared worse, musically speaking; that he emerges with white plume intact is a credit to the composer. Who could ask for more?' The score was published in 1957 by Alfred Lengnick & Co.

The only commercial recording of Franz Reizenstein's *Overture: Cyrano de Bergerac* was issued in 2019 by CPO Records (555 245-2). It had been recorded during May 2018. The Nuremberg Symphony Orchestra was



conducted by Yaron Traub and Oliver Triendl was the soloist in the Piano Concerto. I was surprised (and disappointed) that the CD has not yet been reviewed in *The Gramophone* magazine. Three excellent reviews have been given on *MusicWeb International*, the *American Record Guide* and *Fanfare*, respectively.

Gary Higginson (*MusicWeb International*, [October 2019](#)) wrote that 'The last work [on this CD] is an Overture although its length and overall form would put it more into the Symphonic Essay or Poem category but at the time such a nomenclature would have been considered out of step...An enterprising orchestra could indeed take up the work as was suggested at its first performance, which was given by the LPO under Boult.'

Writing in the *American Record Guide* (March/April 2020), Don O'Connor insisted that 'The Cyrano overture has a firmly argued symphonic form. Though the orchestra isn't large, there's plenty of colour. Any connection between Rostand's play and the rather abstract music is lost on me, but that does not detract from the listening pleasure.'

Finally, Phillip Scott (*Fanfare* March/April 2020) writes that 'A more popular work, often played in concert in the 1950s, is the overture Cyrano de Bergerac after Rostand's play. Rollicking and light-hearted in the British overture tradition, its most unexpected feature is a strict fugato passage midway through, showing considerable contrapuntal skill.'

To what extent it was 'often played in the 1950s' is a matter for musical archaeology to unearth. There are two archival recordings of the Overture in the British Library dating from 1954 and 1960.

The *Overture* would make an excellent alternative to the usual suspects which regularly open concerts and it would act as 'entry level' music to one of most creative and fastidious of English composers who remains unknown to most concertgoers.

John France