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David Vergauwen

**“*Où peut-on être mieux?*’ Masonic music and musicians in  
19<sup>th</sup>-century Brussels”**

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**“‘Où peut-on être mieux?’  
Masonic music and musicians in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Brussels”**

David Vergauwen

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The researcher David Vergauwen has defended a PhD-thesis, entitled “‘Où peut-on être mieux?’ Masonic music and musicians in 19<sup>th</sup>-century Brussels” at the Free University of Brussels (VUB) in Belgium the 21<sup>st</sup> of May 2014.

David Vergauwen born in 1978 in Belgium.

The author has granted us the following interview.

**What were the reasons that led you to focus your research on Freemasonry?**

Finding a suitable subject for my PhD-thesis was actually not that hard. I already did a degree in history as well as musicology and I noticed that next to nothing had been published on Belgian masonic music and musicians. My supervisor, Prof. dr. Jeffrey Tyssens was quick to point out to me that source material was scarce in relation to 18<sup>th</sup>-century masonic music, but that there was a whole that needed to be done on the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century. Thanks to his guidance, I was able to locate the necessary sources and to start working.

**What were the sources you used?**

The source material turned out to be quite diverse: I have worked on masonic sources on the one hand and non-masonic sources on the other.

Masonic sources are to be found at the so called Moskou Archive that can be accessed by way of the CEDOM/MADOC study Centre in Brussels. They boast a substantial archive, very rich in detail information. Next to the Moskou Archive, it was vital to collect information in the archives of two main lodges in Brussels who are still active today.

The non-masonic source material was found at the archives of the Brussels Conservatory, the Royal theatre of ‘la Monnaie’, the main theatre of the city, the Belgian academy of sciences and letters, the archives of the city of Brussels and so on.

**What were the main difficulties you encountered? How did you surmount them?**

What bothered me the most was the unwillingness of one particular lodge in Brussels to grant me direct access to their archive. I have written, called, showed up in person and applied

pressure wherever I could, but this one lodge could not be brought to action. This was particularly frustrating, since I expect there to be documents that would provide valuable clues to questions that remain as yet unanswered.

I do believe that most masonic organizations implement a very open policy of wanting to provide access to scholars wanting to study the history of the fraternity, but as I was able to experience, not every lodge is willing to co-operate.

**What major historical problems has your work resolved?**

As the selection of the source material already made apparent, I was very much interested in the connections of these musicians with freemasonry on the one hand and society on the other. So I tried to make as many connections as I possibly could between the various institutions where these individuals worked and studied and their masonic affiliations. Only by doing so was I able to answer questions like: how professional were those freemasons who played during lodge meetings, what was their social status, where did they come from and what did they do?

I think this sociological analysis is surely one of the most interesting topics of the thesis.

**Please, could you summarize the essence of your thesis in two lines?**

My thesis looked at masonic musicians, their music and their social position in Brussels during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. They turned out to be highly educated and their music turned out to be very diverse, ranging from masonic songs (chansons) to fully orchestrated cantatas. Also noteworthy was their social rise during the whole 19<sup>th</sup> century.

**Now, what are your professional plans?**

I am planning on doing some more research on issues that captured my attention during the PhD, but for which I have had no time yet.

**Would you like to highlight an aspect that has not been covered and you consider worthy of review?**

I very much enjoy the work outside the academic world as well. At the moment I am preparing my thesis for publication, but I won't leave it at that. I am also working on an exhibition at the Museum of Belgian Freemasonry in Brussels that will take place from march until august. Since a musicologist cannot rest before he has put some musicians at work, I have also tried to get the music I discovered performed and registered. I am pleased to say that two concerts will take place in Antwerp: one on Sunday 1 February which consists of songs and a funeral cantata and another on Sunday 22 February, which will bring to live the large masonic cantata for orchestra, soloists and choir, writing for the first king of the

Belgians, Leopold I, in combination with Mozart's masonic cantatas.

People who want to learn more about the exhibition or the concerts can contact me on:  
[davidvergauwen@yahoo.com](mailto:davidvergauwen@yahoo.com)

This interview was done Monday 8 Augustus 2014.

Authors of the Interview: Ricardo Martinez Esquivel and Yván Pozuelo Andrés, Director and Editor *REHMLAC*.