

# THE MAGICIAN OF THE CELLO

The Rags-to-Riches Story of the Dutch cellist

Auguste Van Biene

***Information on Auguste Van Biene is included with the kind permission of Dr. Brenda Scott (Dept. of Music, Duke University,) and is to be fully credited for invaluable investigative work on this musician. Her work is hereby summarized for readers of the web page johnstone-music.***

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# THE MAGICIAN OF THE CELLO

## The Rags-to-Riches Story of the Dutch cellist Auguste Van Biene

Born: 16<sup>th</sup> May, 1849 (Rotterdam, Holland)

Died: 23<sup>rd</sup> January, 1913 (Brighton, England)

Auguste van Biene was born in 1849. His first name was actually Ezechiël, but he later changed it to Auguste, something very normal for artists to do at that time. His formal studies were at the Brussels Conservatory, where he was a pupil of Adrien François Servais, and these classes would have been at a most youthful age, because by 15 years old he was already playing as a rank-and-file (*tutti*) cellist in the Rotterdam Opera House Orchestra.

The romantic career of Van Biene started to unfold when he decided, at just 17 or 18, to come across to Britain and 'try his luck'. It is not sure why he made this decision, for he did not even speak English, but his beginnings were not comfortable. He arrived in London with only three pounds and a cello! He had an attic room in Northumberland Court, London. He initially survived literally by playing in the street – *busking* – in the London fashionable districts. He became accustomed to playing on the street corners. And then ... one of those fairytale happenings – the then famous conductor Sir Michael Costa happened to be passing by Hannover Square, and noticed both the cellist and his excellent level of cello playing. He heard several solos attentively. It is said that when Sir Michael asked him why he was playing in the gutter with this level of cello playing, he simply replied in French "Because I am hungry"! Sir Michael Costa left his calling card, urging the young Auguste to ring next day. He was invited to the conductor's home, and in just a few days he was accepted into the cello section of the Covent Garden Opera Orchestra, relieving him of having to play any more in desperation in the streets!

However, Van Biene never forgot that moment from 'heaven'. As a very nice gesture, he vowed that on every anniversary of this date he would go back to the streets to play – on many of these special anniversary street performance 'celebrations' he would raise money for the Music Hall Benevolent Fund. With his career on an up, he was able to acquire a fine Italian cello from the foremost London-based cellist of the day, the Italian-born Alfredo Piatti. Unlabelled, it was later discovered to be a Grancini cello, though Van Biene thought it was a Guarneri.

With such unusual professional beginnings, and seeing that he 'risked' himself by coming in the first place, it should not be a surprise to learn that he would not accept his life-long limits merely by *playing* in an orchestra. He duly branched out as a conductor, involved himself in the theatre, and eventually formed his own company – the Van Biene Opera Company. In his 30's it could be said that theatre management was fast becoming his *principal* activity, and his multi-talents were blossoming into paths as an actor and a playwright himself! In these fields his stage name was Henri Tempo!

The great break-through in his new career was the production of a three-act play called "The Broken Melody". He commissioned it in 1892, partly to place before the public a story relating to the cellist's own early struggles, and partly to introduce the cello itself as a novel and important part of the story-line. The cellist of course was to feature Van Biene, and in the second act the play included a short cello recital. Van Biene varied his short pieces, but included his own version of Bruch's 'Kol Nidrei' every Saturday night! The 'Broken Melody' was a salon piece composed by the cellist, and it was interpreted in a very sentimental and emotional way, thus earning him the popular title of 'The Magician of the Cello'. In many ways the play was conventional for the times, but during the playing of the melody, the cello hero in the play learns that his wife has fled off, supposedly with a lover, and so to the moment the music stops (clearly marked in the score). There was also another important cello solo in the next act, and people enjoyed the music as much as the story. At first critics were not unanimous but certainly curious – comments surfaced like:

*"M. Van Biene is an admirable 'cello player, and might be, in certain parts, an acceptable actor, but those parts certainly do not embrace heroes of romance"*

OR -

*“A Broken Melody, produced at the Prince of Wales’s on Thursday evening last [28<sup>th</sup> July, 1892], is an experiment and not likely to be a successful one”.*

It is nice sometimes to completely and utterly prove the critics wrong – the melody is *still* famous today for its haunting beauty (*it can currently be found on You-Tube*), and the show – with Van Biene himself – was produced over 6,000 times before finally Van Biene brought its performances to a close ! He later quipped that if he had not done so, it would have driven him to a ‘lunatic asylum’ ...

However, there was a successor, and another success story – “The Master Musician”. In the same way as the other play, it gave Van Biene an opportunity to express his wonderful cello playing. He played three melodies, as a kind of small recital during the second act. The last of the melodies was ‘Home, Sweet Home’. It was played for a time in theatres, but then a shortened version of it was introduced into the ‘music hall’ productions at the very end of his life. Indeed, he met his death playing in this very show in the Brighton Hippodrome on 23<sup>rd</sup> January, 1913, aged 63. He went through both scheduled performances that day, but in the second performance collapsed at the end of a piece, and slumped in his chair at the end of a piece – at first the public did not notice anything adrift, but the stage manager, sensing too much an unaccustomed realism, brought the curtain quickly down, and arriving at his chair realized that he had already gone. He was carried to the dressing room by the orchestral principal cello. It was retrospectively a most fitting way to him to pass away, given his dedication to music and the theatre, and he was buried in Golders Green Jewish Cemetery in London. The famous cellist William Henry (W.H.) Squire was a mourner at his funeral (*see the article in johnstone-music “The Late-Romantic English Cello School”*). The words on his grave read:

THE MELODY IS BROKEN

I SHALL NEVER WRITE AGAIN

(THE BROKEN MELODY, ACT 3)

Van Biene's humility and good humour are illustrated by an amusing story he once told to a group of cello students, which was published in The Strad magazine in 1901:

*"I was commanded to play before His Majesty King William III of Holland...I had heard that the King was very fond of tremendous difficulties, so of course I went in for difficulties. When I had finished, the King sent for me. He was sitting in a very big chair, for he was a very big, stout man, and he looked at me very kindly and said, 'van Biene, I have heard all the great cello players in the world.' Of course, I made a bow. 'I have heard Piatti, Popper, Grutzmacher, and Goltermann,' then I bowed still lower. 'But of all the great cello players,' by this time I was bowing nearly down to the floor itself, 'of all the great cello players I have heard, you certainly perspire the most."*

There is more information on Van Biene in an article by Dr. Brenda Scott in The Strad' magazine of October 2001. Any other interesting anecdotes, or factual information, would be most welcomed by *johnstone-music*.

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Auguste Van Biene



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