

PIETER HELLENDAAAL

Dr David C F Wright

Pieter Hellendaal's father, Johannes, was known as a teacher, book-keeper and candlestick maker. He was also very knowledgeable on the organ being a performer and a composer. He was also a competent violinist. Pieter's mother was Neeljte Lacroix.

Pieter was born in Rotterdam in March 1721 and christened Petrus on 1 April, the third of six children. The Hellendaal family moved to Utrecht in 1731. The eldest two children died on 11 January 1732 at the age of ten years. Shortly after the two deaths, the next month in fact, young Pieter was appointed organist of the Nicholas Church with an annual salary of fifty guilders on condition that his father assist him. But, in the following year, Pieter applied for the post of organist at the Mare Church in Leyden but was not accepted. In 1737 the family home was sold and Pieter became active as a teacher in Amsterdam by advertising in the Amsterdam Courant where he was lodging with Jan van Doon's widow and which house had an organ. In 1740, Mattheus Lestevenon, Lord of Berkenrode and Strijen enabled him to study violin in Padua at the Scuola della nazioni under Guiseppe Tartini.

Pieter was back in Amsterdam on 22 May 1744, and on 7 June he was married at the Ouderkerk.

His first works were published in Amsterdam being six sonatas for violin and continuo, his opus 1, dedicated to Lestevenon. This was 1733. Another set of six sonatas for the same combination was his opus 2 published in 1748..

Shortly after his marriage he had a daughter but little is known of his Amsterdam years.

On 8 January 1749 and for two years he is said to have become a student at the University of Leyden although he was almost 28 years old. Whether he did actually study there is another matter, as many enrolled to met up with fellow musicians and get their respective works played. By late 1749 the organist at the Pieter church, Jan Petit, was indisposed and the town council agreed to appoint Hellendaal who eventually became Petit's successor. He became a citizen of Leyden on 7 November 1749. He appeared as a violinist performing in Amsterdam and The Hague and elsewhere.

He then decided to turn his back on Holland and came to England where he gave his first concert in London on 15 April 1752. He introduced some of his concerto grossos although they were not published until 1758 as his Opus 3. He wanted a job in Britain but was turned down as the music director for the Music Room Orchestra in Oxford although he was acknowledged as a fine musician. In the rejection it is curious to note that he was described as a handsome man of beauty.

Eventually, he was to succeed Dr Charles Burney as organist of St Margarets in Kings Lynn in Norfolk, and this appointment started on 29 September 1760. The following year his six sonatas for violin and continuo Opus 4 appeared in London.

He made Cambridgeshire his home where he stayed until his death and was organist at Pembroke College (1762-1777). He toured the area as a violin soloist but now his health began to fail and his finances were in trouble.

In 1762 he received a medal from the Catch Club for the best canon with his Gloria Patri. He then undertook his final position on 12 April 1777 as organist at Peterhouse leaving the solo violin work to his son Peter. However, father and son appeared together in the great Handel festival of 1784. They sold music from their home and Hellendaal senior still gave music lessons. He also published his eight cello sonatas Opus 5, and some of the Grand lessons for harpsichord with accompaniment of a violin or cello, Opus 6. He also wrote some settings of the psalms, gleses and a cantata.

His health caused him to regularly take to his bed from 1792 although he continued at Peterhouse as and when his health permitted. He died in Cambridge in 1799.

But his set of six concerto grossos were written in 1739 and published the following year are notable. They were called Six grand concertos for violins etc. in eight parts. Curiously they are not in the usual four movements but in five as if the composer wanted to give an encore for each concerto. The first and last concertos end with a minuet, the second with a borea, that is to say a bouree, the third and fifth with a march and the fourth with a pastorale. Only the first two are set in a minor key.

The concertos call for lively performances rather than refined ones. The influence of Corelli and Handel is there but there is none of the profundity that one sometimes encounters with the Handel concerto grossos.

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