

# Gustav Maria Leonhardt

(May 30, 1928–January 16, 2012)  
*A Personal Tribute*

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DAVITT MORONEY



Photo: Lukasz Rajchert

**T**HOSE OF US WHOSE LIVES were touched by Gustav Leonhardt's influence had some time to prepare for his death. For several years it had been no secret that he was facing severe medical challenges. A few years ago, at Bruges, I was surprised to find myself discussing matters of personal health with him over dinner. It was unexpected from a man I had always imagined would shun such an intimate topic. Having learned that I had recently been in hospital, he suddenly abandoned his reserve, with concern and genuine warmth, and was then frank and lucid about his own illness. With

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a grave sparkle in his eyes and the kind of wry smile he reserved for his own witticisms, he commented “yes, this is all rather a challenge—more difficult, I think, than playing the Goldbergs!” It was typical of the man: the concern behind the cool façade, the understatement, the musical in-joke, and the self-deprecating seriousness that came from an unflinching honesty.

He seems to have confronted his illness, and its final inescapable recurrence, as a moral challenge. His fortitude in the last years was no doubt supported by his Protestant faith, yet it struck me as also being the result of a humanistic choice, a stoic’s answer to the stark decision facing human beings who have to confront such a challenge: will we consciously go forward towards death, diminished morally as well as physically, or will we choose to triumph with the spirit, taking the grim physical experience as an opportunity to be ourselves to the very end? This is similar to the implicit question behind the best of the seventeenth-century “*Vanitas*” paintings that he so admired, in which music is often presented ambiguously: will our music be just a source of vain pleasures, accompanied by drinking and merry-making, or will it invite us to some higher world of experience? For sixty years Gustav Leonhardt’s public position on this choice had always been extremely clear, and it did not waver one iota at the end. His elegant, self-effacing manner of making his exit from the concert scene, at his last solo recital in Paris just five weeks before his death, was a way of keeping true to his lifelong vision of himself and of his moral choices for music and for life.

His death is the end of an era. The obituaries began the process of mythologizing him, simplifying an ambiguous and complex musician into unambiguous and convenient certainties. His personal impact will inevitably fade with the passing years, as memory operates its treacherous, eulogizing transformations. I have written this tribute because few of the obituaries gave sufficient space to what seems to me to have been most essential about him. I want to bear witness to his ability to have a transformative effect not so much on “the early music movement” (as many obituaries stressed) but rather on individuals.

This text is intended as a tribute to his complexity and to the difficulty of identifying what made Leonhardt Leonhardt. His immensely rich musical life was shared generously with the countless musicians whom he accepted as younger colleagues. The professional bonds many other people had with him no doubt surpassed mine; indeed, there was nothing particularly special about my relationship with him.

All of us, when talking about other things, end up talking about ourselves. People who imagined his teaching to have been simply the transmission of

musical ideas dating from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries missed the point. He transmitted ideas that were congenial to him. By selecting them as the basis for his teaching and his musical life, he was laying bare more about himself than was revealed in any interview. Similarly, in this tribute I necessarily reveal myself and my own bias. I recount the ways in which he affected me, so there can be no real objectivity here. I try to consider how I viewed the extraordinary man who was at the heart of the brilliant legacy, with his contradictions and sometimes perplexing attitudes. For his teaching, my comments are based on what I remember of my own experience, but I am writing over thirty years later and relying on memory. The fine line between what was taught by him and what was learned by me can sometimes be difficult to negotiate, but I have tried to capture here what I have always thought he taught me and what I most attribute to him in my own approach to the harpsichord.

The thoughts that follow are grouped under four larger headings. I: The creative tensions between his reforming tendencies and his natural conservatism. II: The cultural context at the time he launched his career, and how it affected the nature of that career. III: Performance as criticism, and his approach to concerts and recordings. IV: His art of playing and teaching the harpsichord.

## I. A Reforming Conservative: "Cultivated Madness"

Gustav Leonhardt was a gentleman. His exquisite, reserved courtesy was legendary, but his manners were not just something from another age and another world; to him, they were a philosophy of life. He listened to people and waited to speak, not wasting anyone's time with empty words. His sharp intelligence cut straight through to the core of issues under discussion, taking rapid short cuts to conclusions that seemed evident to him. He was a master of the quiet, witty quip, which could sometimes (when justified) be cutting, but never cruel. On rare occasions, his courtesy and his silences could be excruciatingly cool.

He always wore a tie. (The idea of him in jeans or shorts is impossible to imagine.) In the mid 1980s, at a formal musical evening at Versailles to which the men had been asked to wear dinner jackets ("black tie"), he was the only guest in full white tie and tails. He carried it off with natural aplomb, making everyone else feel underdressed by commenting (as we waited in line to enter the *Galerie des Glaces*) "I thought I should dress ... *properly*, for Versailles." The harpsichord playing was like the man: reserved, attentive, subtle, mannered, refined, witty, exquisite, and with no wasted gestures. His playing also always

“wore a tie,” by which I mean it was usually at least minimally formal; mostly, however, it was highly formal.

His public persona was serious. In an earlier age, it would have been defined as an embodiment of natural *gravitas*. It was also somewhat at odds with the private persona. (The moment when he asked you to call him “Utti” rather than “Mr. Leonhardt”—never “Gustav”—was carefully chosen, in private.) He had a fine sense of humor and was a good raconteur. He liked good food and fine wine, without excess. I can remember his almost schoolboyish delight in showing me an excellent little restaurant in Rome near the Palazzo Farnese that was quite invisible from the street and where the owner greeted him like a family member.

The man already knew who he was when he first performed *The Art of Fugue* in recital on April 8, 1950 in the Vienna Musikverein’s Brahmssaal. It was a polemical choice of program since most musicians then judged the work to be “abstract.” Many people still do refer to performances on the harpsichord as “a harpsichord version,” but Leonhardt (like Tovey and Husmann before him<sup>1</sup>) was determined to demonstrate that the work was not merely ideally suited to the harpsichord but also specifically composed for it. These ideas were backed up soon afterwards by one of his rare written texts, and his most extensive one: *The Art of Fugue, Bach’s Last Harpsichord Work; An Argument*<sup>2</sup> He remained a forceful proponent of this understanding of the work all his life.

Although Leonhardt appeared to be a conservative person in his dress, language, and manners, his musical message was not conservative. His lifetime corresponds to a period of radical changes in styles of musical performance. These changes, of which he was so formidable an agent, were more reformation than revolution, and indeed he had more sympathy for the sixteenth-century

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<sup>1</sup> Donald Francis Tovey, *A Companion to ‘The Art of Fugue’* (London: Oxford University Press, 1931); Heinrich Husmann, “Die ‘Kunst der Fuge’ als Klavierwerk: Besetzung und Anordnung,” *Bach-Jahrbuch* 35 (1938): 1–61. According to Isolde Ahlgrimm (in an interview with Richard Hallinan in 1989), it was she who drew Leonhardt’s attention to Husmann’s 1938 article in the *Bach-Jahrbuch*. In February 1950 she apparently publicly announced her own intention to play the work in Vienna on the harpsichord, but Leonhardt then rapidly prepared his own concert and performed it just six weeks later, thus managing to do so for the bicentennial year of Bach’s death and beating her to it. Ahlgrimm’s own performance of the work took place only eighteen months later, in October 1951, as part of her series of *Concerte für Kenner und Liebhaber*. See Peter Watchorn, *Isolde Ahlgrimm, Vienna and the Early Music Revival* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), 80–83.

<sup>2</sup> Gustav M. Leonhardt, *The Art of Fugue, Bach’s Last Harpsichord Work; An Argument* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1952). This text has long been out of print and urgently needs reprinting in English.

Reformation of Calvin and Zwingli than for the Enlightenment or the French Revolution. His demeanor was regularly referred to, even in some obituaries, as being that of a “Calvinist pastor”; this happened so often that the image has become tired. It is hardly original to note that his musical views were in many ways comparable to the religious views of sixteenth-century reformers. He was a leading reformer, protesting against stylistic abuses while pointing out a new way “forward to the past”. His musical positions were in harmony with—or, more likely, a direct product of—his own private worldview. They meshed seamlessly with his professional associations in Amsterdam with the Waalse Kerk (the Huguenot church where he was organist from 1959 to 1982) and the Nieuwe Kerk (the Reformed Calvinist Church where he was organist from 1981 onwards).

I evoke the Reformation cautiously because he would probably have been irritated by such a reference, judging it to be frivolous. He did not wish the newly established principles of early music performance to be treated as if they were Articles of Faith. Yet some of the cultural parallels with the Protestant Reformation are instructive, in particular the curious combination of progressive thinking and conservatism. The sixteenth-century Reformers were also paradoxical progressives, wanting to go back to original, “authentic” texts of the Bible and to the “authentic” practices of the early Christian Church, eliminating what they saw as the “corrupt” traditions of the intervening centuries; but their disciplined social *mores* were a reaction to what they saw as contemporary license. The post-Romantic approach to playing Bach that Leonhardt judged, with comparably Puritan moral disapproval, to be musically corrupt (a kind of musical decadence) was, in his view, based on a reliance on the authority of debased musical traditions and unreliable musical “scriptures.” More than a whiff of moral superiority went with the sweeping away of decadence.

However, Leonhardt did not have the proselytizing zeal of a missionary towards those who had not yet been converted. He was no zealot, no “guru,” and did not wish to interfere in anyone else’s choices. What zeal he had was directed mainly towards people who were already converts, those who (in Calvinist fashion) already felt themselves to have been “saved.” Musicians who were still untouched by personal revelation were not his primary concern. This may explain his general disinclination to express himself through articles and polemical essays, with the notable exception of his important early monograph on *The Art of Fugue*. He wrote few program notes or record sleeve notes; he also engaged relatively little with the general public and published few foundational texts. The interviews he gave often contain unexpected statements, formulated

in brief and ambiguous phrases. Moreover, he admitted “I became a musician so as not to speak. When playing, I express everything I can. If that is not enough, words cannot add anything.”<sup>3</sup> In this way he avoided direct textual engagement in most of the public debates about style and managed to sidestep attempts at verbal justification of what he did. The emotional effect of his musical performances was allowed to stand as the principal justification for his performance style. One eminent critic has evoked this by referring to his “seraphic silences.”<sup>4</sup>

He frequently brushed aside the word “authenticity” as if it were an irritating mosquito. Typical of his ambiguities on the subject is a much-cited comment attributed to him that seemed to go viral in the days after his death. *If one manages to be convincing, the interpretation sounds authentic. If one strives to be authentic, one will never be convincing.* The fact that it now risks becoming his defining internet statement would probably have appalled him, especially since his comments on the matter have here not only been mistranslated but also radically truncated. These two sentences open a generally overlooked text he wrote in 1977 for his second recording of Bach’s Brandenburg Concertos, one of the rare exceptions to his reluctance to write formal texts about performance. *Zur Interpretation auf Originalinstrumenten* (“On Performance Using Original Instruments”) is a concise four-paragraph text dealing in Leonhardt’s own fashion with the heated question of “authenticity.” English was not the original language. The German text is *Wenn man zu überzeugen vermag, macht das Dargebotene einen authentischen Eindruck. Wenn man sich bemüht, authentisch zu sein, wird man nie überzeugen.* A better English translation might be: *If one is able to persuade, what is offered creates an authentic impression. If one is striving to be authentic, one will never persuade.*<sup>5</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See the text by Ivan Alexandre that prefaces the interview by Gaëtan Naulleau (*Diapason* [May 2008]: 26). Alexandre, writing in French, cites Leonhardt as saying “Je suis devenu musicien pour ne pas parler. En jouant, j’exprime tout ce que je peux. Si cela ne suffit pas, les mots ne peuvent rien.”

<sup>4</sup> Richard Taruskin, *Text and Act: Essays on Music and Performance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 311; the text containing this phrase first appeared in the *New York Times* on January 27, 1991.

<sup>5</sup> The text was printed with the 1977 Seon recording of the Brandenburg Concertos. It is very likely that the printed German text presents the “original” version (rather than a now untraced hypothetical Dutch version). The first English version cited above appears in the European Seon issue of the recordings; no translator’s name is given for this particular text but it was probably translated from the German by Avril Watts (named elsewhere as translator). In the Philips issue, a different English translation was made by Robert Jordan: “If one is convincing, what is offered will leave an authentic impression. If one strives to be authentic, it will never be convincing.” In the issue of these recordings for ABC Classics (1977), the French and German texts were

The rest of Leonhardt's 1977 text confirms that he was far more concerned with the strong imprint or "impression" made by a performance and with the art of rhetorical persuasion through music than with "authenticity" in the ways that that word had been co-opted. His statement was often misunderstood and will no doubt go on being misinterpreted. In its various inadequate translations, it has inadvertently provided apparent ammunition to the musical flat-earthers who have closed their ears to the expressive possibilities of historically informed performance on original instruments. When I mentioned this to him, saying that people used his comment as justification for playing Bach on the piano (or on saxophones and marimbas), he just raised his eyebrows, shrugged, and dismissed them as "silly people who don't think." He wasted little time on "silly people." In Calvinistic terms this was like recognizing that they had not been saved.

The principal authenticity to be found in his lifetime of playing is an authenticity to himself, a fidelity to his vision of what it meant to be Gustav Leonhardt. And that, in itself, was not a small thing. Some artists reinvent themselves every ten years or so. Not Gustav Leonhardt. In his person, his teaching, and his playing, he remained true all his life to the same essential vision.

The balancing act resulting from his conservative manners and his radical, reforming purpose gave a unique quality and force to his message. For more than half a century his writing, publishing, and lecturing were not undertaken to help make his message radiate out centrifugally; rather, his concerts, recordings, and teaching acted together centripetally, like a natural force of gravity, drawing in an increasing number of people to study with him, either privately or at the Amsterdam (Sweelinck) Conservatorium, where he taught from 1954. These musicians had already experienced their own "conversion" from

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omitted but the English was once again different and was thus a third translation from the German, this time by Gilbert A. Gibson: "If one can be sufficiently convincing, the present offering will make an authentic impression. If one has to struggle to be authentic, he will never be convincing." (The French version in the European Seon issue was also given without a translator's name, but is probably by the French translator listed elsewhere, Jacques Fournier: "Si l'on est capable de convaincre, ce que l'on offre à entendre produit une impression d'authenticité. Si l'on se met en peine d'être authentique, on ne convaincra jamais." A different French version, probably by Pierre Balascheff, is found in the Philips issue: "Lorsqu'on parvient à convaincre, on donne une impression d'authenticité. Lorsqu'on s'efforce d'être authentique, on ne pourra jamais convaincre.") When the recordings were released on CD by Sony, even worse things happened to Leonhardt's short text, when it was cut in half and the ideas unceremoniously reorganized. For more details concerning the history of this text, including a full edition of the German and a new translation, see Davitt Moroney, "Gustav Leonhardt's 'Authenticity,'" *Early Music* 41, no. 1 (February 2013): 86–98.



the post-Romantic approaches to performing baroque music. They gravitated towards him not to be converted but because they were entirely ready to receive his instruction. And he trained a veritable army of keyboard players, many hundreds of musicians, who then became the centrifugal force in the sense that many of these organists and harpsichordists saw themselves as militants dedicated to spreading “the word” around the globe. As a result, his vision and conviction have become primary sources of inspiration for much of what is now taught to keyboard players in universities and conservatories around the world, wherever there is any methodical training in “historically informed performance” of early keyboard music.

Leonhardt was an impressive, powerful, and quietly dominant man. Many people looked up to him as a kind of father-figure. So strong was his influence, so absolute his authority, that a few harpsichordists even had to have their Oedipal moment—in the sense of “killing” the father. It usually took the form of needing to reject his approach to the instrument. (One famous Dutch player is said to have exclaimed in frustration, during a radio interview at the start of his highly successful career, “I am not a little Leonhardt!”)

His conservatism also expressed itself in occasional published comments on modern society. He mistrusted and shunned what was “common” and “vulgar”. Some of his more patrician statements now read like uncomfortable relics of a more elitist age. For example, his four-page text in praise of Flemish virginals (1971) expends almost one quarter of its length on condemnations of modern society, opening with the sentence: “In our time, aversion to the average, the common, and the popular is a feeling which some of us cannot help developing.” In case we had missed the point, the text continues: “Ear and eye, man’s noblest senses, are confronted with such uniformities as endless rows of modern flats filled with loveless, standardized furniture, and with the non-stop wireless and tireless music heard in dwellings, shops, and even restaurants. These nourish the aversion and induce the unhappy few to attack the appalling normality with extravagant abnormality, to replace the common by the unheard-of, and to combat the unhealthy ‘sanity’ of the average with a cultivated madness.”<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Gustav Leonhardt, “In Praise of Flemish Virginals of the Seventeenth Century”, in *Keyboard Instruments Studies in Keyboard Organology*, ed. Edwin M. Ripin (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1971, p. 43; rev. repr. New York: Dover, 1977, p. 45). The thought behind the last phrase derives directly from a *locus classicus* of aesthetic thought, Plato’s *Phaedrus*: “there is a form of possession or madness, of which the muses are the source”; “he who, having no touch of the Muses’ madness in his soul, comes to the door and thinks that he will get into the temple by the help of art—he, I say, and his poetry are not admitted; the sane man disappears and is nowhere when he enters into rivalry with the madman.” Several centuries later, a similar idea



The lens through which Leonhardt was here observing social and cultural history looks, at best, prelapsarian, and at any rate uncomfortably at variance with the trends of modern Western civilization; in his lifetime they also left him open to the charge of cultural elitism. Nevertheless, I cite these problematic comments because they illustrate something important about the man. His cultural home base, the natural center of his ethos, was the world dating from before the Industrial Revolution. It is striking that he should have identified himself as being among the “unhappy few,” not the “happy few.” The choice of words is revealing.<sup>7</sup> His discomfort with many aspects of modernity was genuine, but purely personal. A little later in the same text on virginals he opined that “Paradise seems to have got lost some 150 or 200 years ago, when the tastes of the educated and the uneducated started to diverge,” adding (with a touch of humor) that in that earlier age “grand ladies, average ladies, common ladies, perhaps even popular ladies ... all liked to be depicted with their instruments.”

These published statements were expressions of his more conservative side rather than of his reforming iconoclasm. But maybe we do not need to analyze his distaste for modernity in too postmodern a way; rather, we can see it as being somewhat Miltonian, a Puritan’s lament for *Paradise Lost*. It expressed his unhappiness for the loss of an earthly paradise—purely mythical—that was inhabited by an equally mythical cultured elite, who were all well educated, could afford to have virginals, and to commission their painted portraits with those instruments. I discussed this recently with the harpsichord builder John Phillips, who noted that Leonhardt’s lament for a lost paradise “is not merely a statement of his inherent conservatism, it is also his motivation to reattain that paradise through his music... He saw the Flemish virginal as a powerful vehicle for this.”<sup>8</sup> Leonhardt’s motivation was not so much to reject modernity but instead to bring some lost beauty back into our modern world. For that,

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was also transmitted by an influential Greek text attributed to Longinus: “For I would confidently pronounce that nothing is so conducive to sublimity as an appropriate display of genuine passion, which bursts out with a kind of fine madness and divine inspiration.” (*On The Sublime*, VIII.)

<sup>7</sup> Maybe Leonhardt knew that the phrase “the thousand happy few” comes from Canto 11 of Byron’s *Don Juan*, where it refers ironically to vapid socialites at dinner in an “earthly Paradise”—not company he would have enjoyed, I think. Yet in 1968 he referred to Sweelinck, in the Introduction to his edition of the Fantasias and Toccatas, as follows: “He was one of the happy few that can unite exquisite detail into a whole of surprising coherence and grandeur.” (See note 16.)

<sup>8</sup> Private communication, February 25, 2012.

imagination was needed, along with the fire of “extravagant abnormality” and “cultivated madness.”

## II. Cultural Context: A “Child of His Time”

It is not surprising that a European born in 1928 should have felt that Paradise needed rebuilding, that the Garden of Eden needed replanting. For a Dutch boy of Leonhardt’s age, Eden had been devastated between the ages of twelve and seventeen.<sup>9</sup> The destructive madness of the Nazi occupation of Amsterdam, the Dutch famine during the winter of 1944–45, the destruction of Berlin, Bonn, Caen, Coventry, Dresden, Essen, Monte Cassino and so many other great historic sites, followed by countless other atrocities and the discovery of the death camps, all contributed to bringing to an end the known civilized world in Europe.

He turned to the harpsichord at an early age. Just before the start of the Second World War, when he was ten, his parents had bought a harpsichord. He noted in 2006 that “during the last year of the War everything in Holland stopped; there was no electricity, no water, and we had to hide from the Germans. School was also stopped, which was marvellous for me, the best thing about a year when unimaginable horrors were going on elsewhere in Holland. Our house was in the countryside, so although we were not eating well, we were not suffering the hunger endured by those in the cities. It was then I started to look at our harpsichord with fresh eyes.”<sup>10</sup> A year later, he recalled: “At that period, adolescence, one judges everything in black and white. For me the piano was ugly and the harpsichord was beautiful.”<sup>11</sup>

In the years just after the War, the *Zeitgeist* was for a general clean-up, a rebuilding and renewal; it was propitious for many fresh starts. Some music festivals began at that time specifically as a way of bringing together musicians and audiences who had been fighting each other shortly before, in the belief that recognition of a common cultural heritage could help provide war-torn Europe with a path away from political divisions.<sup>12</sup> In this context, Leonhardt’s

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<sup>9</sup> His parents’ home was in Laren, about thirty kilometers to the south-east of Amsterdam.

<sup>10</sup> See Brian Robins, “Interview with Gustav Leonhardt,” *Goldberg Early Music Magazine* 41 (August 2006): 32–44.

<sup>11</sup> “A cette époque, l’adolescence, on juge tout en blanc et noir. Pour moi, le piano était laid, et le clavecin était beau.” This interview in French by Jacques Drillon appeared with the title “On n’enseigne pas la beauté” in *Le nouvel Observateur* (November 15–21, 2007).

<sup>12</sup> One such festival is the *Internationales Bachfest* in the border town of Schaffhausen in Switzerland.

natural gravitation towards Bach and German music cannot be seen simply as a neutral musical choice; at that time, for a Dutch musician—albeit of Germanic and Austrian culture (his mother came from Graz)—it was a choice that could not be devoid of political resonance, based on an implicit plea for a return to pre-war sanity.

This complex cultural heritage would later make him an ideal person to incarnate Bach in the 1968 film by Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, *The Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach*. Straub later commented that it was “important that the person who, let’s say, impersonates Bach in this film—he impersonates Bach after all—is not German. Because of what happened in this country ... mainly between ’33 and ’45, I am glad to have found a Dutchman.” Leonhardt was not comfortable with Straub’s later insistence that the movie was a “Marxist film” or with Straub’s dedication of the Munich screening to the Viet Cong; he told Kailan R. Rubinoff in 2008 that Straub had “really spoiled the whole thing for himself and for the film by explaining that it is a film on work, and with Mao, etc. The ultra left element came so clearly that many people didn’t want it. Nor did I—I felt sorry. I felt only sorry; I think it’s silly what he said, because the film doesn’t show that.”<sup>13</sup>

Leonhardt was a product of his complex time and place. He inadvertently touched on this point right at the start of his career, in his 1952 monograph on *The Art of Fugue*: “Contrary to the widely spread opinion claiming Bach to be the individual genius, in constant struggle with his surroundings, unrecognized, overcoming his epoch, we want to emphasise that Bach was necessarily a so-called ‘child of his time.’ He did *not* struggle with his time, he was *not* the lonely genius, he was *not* conquering for himself his ethical and aesthetic foundations... *The style offers a complete fulfilment of every possible desire*. Style is something greater and stronger than any genius.”<sup>14</sup> If he thought about this

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land, started in 1946.

<sup>13</sup> The film was premiered at the Utrecht Film Festival on February 3, 1968 and also shown that year at the film festivals in Berlin (February), Cannes (May), Venice (May), Prades (July), New York (September), and London (November); it won the German film critics’ prize and other prizes in London and Prades. See Kailan R. Rubinoff, “Authenticity as a Political Act: Straub-Huillet’s *Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach* and the Post-War Bach Revival,” *Music & Politics* 5, no. 1 (Winter 2011). Rubinoff recounts how German producers tried to insist the film makers should use Herbert von Karajan to play Bach, and gives details of her July 3, 2008 interview with Leonhardt.

<sup>14</sup> Leonhardt, *The Art of Fugue*, 53–54. The italics are in the original. The quotation comes from the third section, “General Remarks,” which was omitted from Jacques Drillon’s French translation, *L’Art de la fugue, Dernière œuvre de Bach pour le clavecin; argumentation* (Paris: Éditions Van de

later, he probably understood how the central concept must also apply (*mutatis mutandis*) to himself. He was also, inescapably, a child of his time; the prevailing cultural movements in his youth (along with the reactions to them) were greater and stronger than any individual, even one as brilliantly strong-willed as he was. Understanding that, rather than searching for absolutes in what he achieved and taught, can lead towards a better understanding of the nature of his achievement.

At the start of his career, new starts were also underway in Europe, not just in musical performance, but also in music publishing and instrument building. It is easy to forget that when Leonhardt was a student, many editions of harpsichord music took the form of highly opinionated versions made by famous pianists—a tradition that had started with Czerny's version (complete with metronome marks) of *The Well-Tempered Clavier* "in the manner that I well remember these fugues being played by the great Beethoven."<sup>15</sup> Pianistic emendations, additions, fingerings, and phrasings—intended, no doubt, to reveal the music—all in effect radically obscured earlier texts. More important, many of these adaptations were so badly suited to the harpsichord that they were, at best, irrelevant, and at worst, unplayable and in contradiction with the instrument's nature. Choosing to maintain the status quo in terms of Bach performance was simply not possible for the young Leonhardt; his choices were related to what he perceived to be the pursuit of Truth.

In 1948, Günther Henle in Munich had launched his *Urtext* editions of music. The theoretical "neutrality" of *Urtext* editions is just as opinionated, in its way, as the interventionist nature of earlier ones since the supposedly invisible editorial interventions are merely masked by being hidden in a Critical Commentary at the back of the volume. Nevertheless, such editions could be more flexible for the thoughtful user and marked not only a clear break with the recent past but also a return to earlier styles of editions. The year 1950, the year of Leonhardt's famous *Art of Fugue* recital in Vienna, was the bicentennial of Bach's death (leading to the planning of the *Neue Bach-Ausgabe*), and was

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Velde, 1985). Drillon made several good interviews in French with Leonhardt and is also the author of an important book that awaits translation into English: Jacques Drillon, *Sur Leonhardt* (Paris: Gallimard, L'Infini, 2009).

<sup>15</sup> *Vorwort/Préface* to Czerny's edition of *Le Clavecin bien tempéré* par Jean Sébastien Bach (Leipzig: C. F. Peters [1839]). The bilingual preface gives the phrase in German ("nach der wohlbewarten Erinnerung wie ich eine grosse Anzahl dieser Fugen einst von Beethoven vortragen hörte") and, slightly differently, in French ("en me souvenant de la manière, bien imprimée dans ma mémoire, dont j'ai entendu jouer ces fugues au grand Beethoven").

also when Otto von Irmers clean new edition for Henle of *The Well-Tempered Clavier* first appeared.<sup>16</sup>

We now have some distance from the philosophical ideas underpinning this earlier stage of the modern “early music movement,” since we have started to deconstruct its larger cultural symptoms. It is hard not to note the slightly chilling concepts of cleansing and purity that “*Urtext*” could embody. We also have a broader view of the way any musical texts—even those found in facsimiles of “original editions”—have involved some level of editorial intervention that now requires conscious intellectual scrutiny.

Leonhardt’s career could hardly have developed the way it did without the movement in favor of cleaner editions of musical texts but there was also the parallel movement in favor of reviving historical instruments. He was not alone in taking this path, even as a harpsichordist and organist, but his position carried unique weight since he became the most successful and influential player of his generation.

In the 1960s, his focus seems to have been mainly directed at texts and performance styles but he also turned his attention to the harpsichord itself, or rather to harpsichords, in their enormous historical variety. His earliest recordings, in the early 1950s, had been on twentieth-century instruments built by the Ammer family; they then represented a serious Germanic attempt to move beyond the “progressive” Pleyel and Neupert models (that he had found as a student at the Schola Cantorum in Basel) and forward towards a “Bach harpsichord,” although the effort was hardly radical and was still conceived in terms of technical progression forwards. The real revolution in harpsichord building had already been launched by Frank Hubbard and William Dowd in 1949 (following the pioneering work of Hugh Gough), with a call for a move backwards, a return to fuller respect for the building practices of the past, along with a process of exploratory restorations of a few antiques in private collections and museums.

Throughout his lifetime Leonhardt contributed immensely to this movement, and his perspective naturally included organs as well. He worked inti-

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<sup>16</sup> Leonhardt’s own modest contribution to *Urtext* editing was the elegantly sober 1968 edition of Sweelinck’s keyboard fantasias and toccatas: *Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck, Opera Omnia, Volume I, Fascicle I: Keyboard Works: Fantasias and Toccatas* (Amsterdam: Vereniging voor Nederlandse Muziekgeschiedenis, 1968; second rev. ed., 1974). Curiously, the work of fifty years of editorial “cleansing” has in recent years been undermined by the fact that many earlier “interventionist” editions of baroque keyboard music—now out of copyright—are once again freely available on the internet. The battles over texts now need to be waged afresh, although on different terms. The internet nevertheless also makes available in wonderful fashion many original sources.

mately with the finest harpsichord and organ builders of three or four generations, notably Martin Skowroneck and Jürgen Ahrend, but also with Frank Hubbard and William Dowd, and then with many younger builders. The Holy Grail here was always a moving target. We can now recognize for what they are some of the “historical harpsichords” on display in *The Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach*; the instrument played by Leonhardt (as Bach, accompanying Nikolaus Harnoncourt, as Prince Leopold of Anhalt-Cöthen) is of a date with the 1960s wigs they are both wearing and the pianistic fingerings of Christiane Lang (playing Anna Magdalena).<sup>17</sup>

Things have moved on a great deal since then and are still moving. Although Leonhardt was polite to all builders, he did not encourage everyone equally. He rarely played the instruments on display at the Bruges Competition and Exhibition (Flanders Festival) since a photograph of himself politely seated for thirty seconds at a harpsichord would too often be used as a selling point by a pushy instrument builder. He would happily comment in private on some excellent modern instruments. He did not especially like harpsichords that were too neutral or too bland and docile. He liked them to have character in their fundamental sound. For him the instruments were not servants that just obeyed; ideally, they were autonomous partners that proposed unique beautiful sounds that he could manipulate as they inspired his imagination.

### III. Performance as Criticism; Concerts and Recordings

The natural restraint of Leonhardt’s personality found its creative tension in the unexpected freedom of his performances, through the juggling of opposites. He espoused the idea that restraint, when freely accepted, can be liberating, opening the way to fuller personal expression while also defining the parameters of that expression. In other words, “Less is more.” This is an old idea, but it found wide intellectual currency in the late 1960s and was popularized culturally at that time.<sup>18</sup> We can now see the “early music movement” as part of

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<sup>17</sup> We can also now notice that the stand under the harpsichord is based on the one under the 1745 Dulcken in the Smithsonian, which may not even be original. As for Christiane Lang, she charmingly uses her right-hand thumb on the C#s in the *Menuet* from the first French Suite, under “Bach’s” watchful (yet indulgent) eye!

<sup>18</sup> It is mentioned in the 1855 poem by Robert Browning (1812–1889) on Andrea del Sarto (“Well, less is more, Lucrezia: I am judged”); but before that (as Tilman Skowroneck has kindly reminded me), it was also familiar from Goethe’s sonnet *Natur und Kunst* (Nature and Art), written in about 1800: “Wer Großes will, muß sich zusammenraffen; / In der Beschränkung zeigt sich erst

a greater social movement, a musical equivalent of two cult books of the time, Frances Moore Lappé's *Diet for a Small Planet* (1971) and E. F. Schumaker's *Small Is Beautiful* (1973). We can recognize the debates in the 1980s and 1990s about one-to-a-part Bach performance, between Joshua Rifkin and others, as latecomers to the party. Leonhardt was never an advocate for the strict one-to-a-part approach to Bach's choral works that emerged a little later, although he would happily work with small groups. As late as 2007 he was still dismissing one-to-a-part choirs as "rubbish."<sup>19</sup>

An earlier arrival at that party was the Telefunken/Teldec series of complete Bach cantatas that he undertook with Nikolaus Harnoncourt, starting in the late 1960s. These recordings are musical counterparts to the same cultural movement and are comparably defining moments in the history of musical performance in the twentieth century. They were cited in most of the obituaries as a landmark. What was less often mentioned is the practical point that the scale of the project provided many "original instrument" musicians in continental Europe with a clear professional planning over several years, putting a substantial amount of regular work on their calendars. This is what was most needed for the standards of ensemble performance to improve and for the players to rediscover what it meant to play together, how to incorporate questions of tuning and temperament into the wind and brass instruments, and many other such practical matters. The differences between the earliest cantatas and the last ones in the series are indicators of the enormous work achieved in creating new professional standards.<sup>20</sup> In 2006, he commented on his early recordings: "if I listen now to the records we made then it surprises me that although I can find things to criticise, I find nothing to be ashamed of." He added, specifically about the cantata series: "again, I'm not ashamed of it when I revisit some of the recordings. Of course, our earliest contributions were not made in the best acoustics and often the wind players especially were not completely at ease with their instruments. But I think after about Cantata 35 or so we normally got

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der Meister . . ." ("Whoever wants to do great things must accept confinement: / Mastery first shows itself under constraint...")

<sup>19</sup> Interview by Jacques Drillon, "On n'enseigne pas la beauté," *Le nouvel Observateur* (November 15–21, 2007).

<sup>20</sup> A comparable point can be made for "original instrument" musicians in England a few years later, in relation to Christopher Hogwood's recordings with the Academy of Ancient Music of the complete Mozart symphonies, for Decca. This was pointed out to me in about 1990 by the producer of that series, Peter Wadland, who described it as a conscious factor in the decision to record the complete symphonies.



things pretty right without having to think about too many wrong notes and so forth. Also, of course, the soloists were variable, especially the boy sopranos, although some were marvellous. Perhaps one might look now for a higher technical quality, but conceptually there are not many things I would now do differently.”<sup>21</sup>

When I first heard the Harnoncourt/Leonhardt cantata recordings I was disappointed. I remember feeling in about 1975, when I was still a student in London, that the great chorus of *Nun ist das Heil*, BWV 50, Bach’s monumental piece of sextuple invertible counterpoint, had been reduced to a feeble exercise, in this case by Harnoncourt and the Vienna choirboys. In some other cantatas recorded early in the cycle, Leonhardt and the politely hooting boys of King’s College, Cambridge (so English), were not much more convincing. Yet the size and longevity of the cantata project was educational in the strictest sense for the much better boys from the Munich-based Tölzer Knabenchor and especially those from the Hannover Knabenchor, two excellent choirs given more prominence in the later recordings in the cycle. However, as I listen now to the same recording of BWV 50, it no longer strikes me that way at all because I am listening to different things. I look less for a heavy monumentality and more for a clarity of contrapuntal intricacy; and through that I now perceive a different kind of monumentality, less in the sound and more in the conception. So I have changed. Less can indeed be more, when the parameters of measurement have been adjusted.

The cantata project was a major achievement but at the time it was not the one that most affected me. The recording that changed my life was the set of Brandenburg Concertos recorded in 1976–77 for the Seon label (the one that included Leonhardt’s text “Concerning Performance on Original Instruments” although I promptly ignored that text, like most people, and concentrated on the mesmerizing power of the performances). There was an extraordinary line-up of stars performing: Frans Brüggen, Kees Boeke, Sigiswald and Wieland Kuijken, Lucy van Dael, Richer van der Meer, Anner Bylsma, Anthony Woodrow, Paul Dombrecht, Ku Ebbinge, Bob van Asperen, and others, with Wolf Erichson as the producer and Dieter Thomsen as the sound engineer.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Robins, “Interview with Gustav Leonhardt.”

<sup>22</sup> The list of original instruments for this recording is impressive. The harpsichord, however, is—oddly—a 1975 Paris Dowd, after Blanchet. Tastes had moved on since the days of *The Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach*, when the 1745 Dulcken in the Smithsonian Institution was considered the ideal model of harpsichord; but taste had not yet reached the moment where copies (or rather, hypothetical recreations) of German instruments by Mietke had become popular. In

There, the principles of one-to-a-part performance (a decade ahead of the main debates concerning the choral works) added immeasurably to the clarity and freedom of the playing; certainly Leonhardt would not have dismissed the idea as “rubbish” in this instrumental context. The extraordinary performances overwhelmed me with their elegant simplicity, brilliance, and rhetorical force. Listening to them now, they seem as vital as ever. Many instrumentalists to whom I have spoken over the years also cite this recording as having been a watershed in their lives.

Leonhardt was a modern minimalist but only in the sense that he believed “less” of one kind of expression (enthusiastic “Romanticism”) definitely leaves room for “more” of a different kind of refined expression (restrained control); moderate tempos leave time for more nuances of phrasing; having fewer musicians leaves room for greater individual freedom for those who do play. Greater emotional impact can be achieved through the combination of these restraints and liberties. We can now see his performance style as a reaction to the excesses of the post-Romantic movement, as a natural and corrective swing of the cultural pendulum. It would have been impossible without the styles that preceded it in the earlier part of the twentieth century. Perceptive critics have noted that such playing was an entirely twentieth-century artifact.<sup>23</sup> Leonhardt would not have been at all surprised by this view and knew well that players in the twenty-first century would discover quite different ways of playing. Each generation needs to reinvent its own Bach, just as he had done.

His playing was, like the man, usually sober and restrained, and performed with moral conviction. It is strange that it should once have been unappreciated and even thought to be wayward by certain critics who misunderstood the revolution that was underway in performance of eighteenth-century music. I remember one distinguished British music critic nastily referring in the 1970s (on BBC radio) to “the famous Dutch harpsichordist who plays for those people who know where the beat used to be.” I took this to mean the critic was disconcerted by the fact that the rhythm was wayward and unmetronomic and that listeners would not know precisely where the beat was unless they knew already the piece; but such critics and listeners were confusing individual beats with the much larger sense of measure and pulse. Many musicians then still saw Bach mainly as the start of the glorious musical history that followed, through Haydn and Mozart, Beethoven, Mendelssohn and Brahms, to Schoenberg, Stravinsky,

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1977, the Blanchet model had its brief moment as a most highly favored keyboard.

<sup>23</sup> Notably Taruskin, but also others in his wake.

and Hindemith. Leonhardt was playing from a quite different viewpoint, with Bach as the culmination of the equally glorious but relatively unknown seventeenth century, from Sweelinck, Frescobaldi, Froberger, Scheidemann, and Lübeck, through Muffat, Pachelbel, Reinken and Buxtehude. The rhetorical language of these composers, and the controlled freedoms implied by that language, were at the heart of the enterprise and there was no going back. The genie was out of the bottle.

His negative early critics, the ones who seemed certain that Bach was most “correct” when performed as a kind of metronomically cold counterpoint, may never have been converted to the newer language embodied by his playing.<sup>24</sup> In due course, however, his self-assured patience bore fruit. By about 1980 a new generation of younger critics had appeared, many of whom understood the radical premise. They helped build his legendary position as the most eminent harpsichordist in the world. By the late 1980s, it was a role that almost no one contested.

For Leonhardt, as for other great players, performance was an act of criticism in the best sense of that word, a process by which he analyzed and (to take a metaphor) operated with surgical skill on a work, laying it open so that the audience could perceive the wonderful nature of its innards. This was no post-mortem. The piece emerged full of pulsating, inner life. At the end, we had not only enjoyed it and reveled in the beautiful sounds he had made; we had also come to a better understanding of the piece. That it was intelligent playing, and proudly so, seems so obvious that it is almost pointless to mention the fact. His performances involved the highest intellectual organization of sounds into music.

As we now look back over his career, we can note that the trajectory of sixty years of music making, recording, and teaching had an arch and unity, illuminated by a musical vision of single-minded coherence, a high degree of faithfulness to his own guiding principles. It was a kind of “high fidelity” of an

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<sup>24</sup> Oddly, he was at first attacked on both sides, including by critics who saw themselves as bearers of the flame for the harpsichord. Putnam Aldrich, a former Landowska student, opined in 1954 that Leonhardt had a heavy touch, a defect that was described as “a common fault of organists or pianists who have transferred their technique to the harpsichord without making the proper adjustment—an adjustment which, incidentally, may well take several years of intensive practice to achieve satisfactorily. In the opinion of this reviewer, Leonhardt cannot be ranked as a mature harpsichordist until he overcomes this obstacle.” See Putnam Aldrich, “Points Contrapunctus,” *Saturday Review* (July 31, 1954): 50.

intellectual order, quite different from that supposedly espoused by recording engineers of the period.<sup>25</sup>

Leonhardt tended to avoid slogans like “high fidelity,” or “authentic performance,” dismissing them as “silly.” Although recordings were an important part of his professional activity, he was generally not very interested in them as such and rarely listened to them. (An exception seems to have been the first recordings sent to him by students; he dutifully responded, and usually with supportive comments.) As for the actual sound of his own records, he often left that to the engineers. He could be unconcerned about technical aspects of recording, as long as the engineer had managed to capture the nuances of his touch at the keyboard. Yet here also, the advantages of a long career can be seen. As he achieved his position of eminence, the younger engineers started off more humbly, simply asking him where he wanted the microphones placed. He knew the answer to that question. Leonhardt’s fidelity to his personal vision and the fidelity he and his colleagues had towards earlier sources and earlier instruments were other kinds of “high fidelity,” in a different dimension from what the earlier generation of recording engineers had meant by that phrase. For him, any idea of “high fidelity” would have been closer to what he meant by “authenticity.”

I have never felt that he played the way he did because it was merely “historically correct.” He played the way he did and played the repertoire that he did because his style of playing and his choice of repertoire corresponded perfectly to his own personality and his own rhetorical range. That range was immense, while having its natural, human limits. Maybe he found justification for his choices in texts and treatises from earlier centuries, but his fingers essentially spoke (like his verbal speech) as expressions of a refined personal rhetoric

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<sup>25</sup> I say “supposedly” because “high fidelity” was often anything but faithful, producing a quite artificial balance between the instruments. I once questioned an old-style *Tonmeister* (from Deutsche Grammophon’s Archiv Produktion) about this, as he was setting up his microphones to record the magnificent antique Couchet/Blanchet/Taskin harpsichord, in 1983. The sound he had engineered (sitting with his headphones in his studio in another room at the other end of the building, without ever really listening to the instrument “in the flesh”) was certainly beautiful; but it was not really like the sound of the actual instrument as heard in the room where it was standing, and thus not at all “faithful”, not any sort of “high fidelity” to the instrument itself. I asked him what the point was of using a unique antique if his electronics radically altered the sound; he responded loftily that my view appeared to be that his job as recording engineer was “to make a recording of a unique, ideal object in the room” whereas his own view of his job was “to make a unique, ideal recording of the object in the room.” Thirty years later, his response still bothers me and remains a warning to all performers about the subtle aesthetic battles that can occur during any recording.

whose gestures, critically, were amplified by restraint. He saw no paradox in this, freely admitting that there was an incompatibility between his own personality and the approaches to performance that were heavily tinted by early twentieth-century, post-Romantic or neo-Romantic performance styles. All his life, he fundamentally disliked and mistrusted all unrestrained versions of Romanticism, and frequently said so. This was a defining, formative factor in his musicianship. He even described Romanticism in 1952, in the essay on *The Art of Fugue*, as an “infection,” a “mould” that caused the musical fruit of “overripe” Classicism to begin to rot: “The cankerous growth of romanticism infected the skin of an overripe fruit. The Art of Fugue was the first work tainted with it. But the mould was *on* it, and not *in* it (this is essential), it was a mere flavour, and the skin was powerful enough to keep the fruit protected against the infection till about 1790.”<sup>26</sup>

Germanic music of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was the main source of his everyday musical nourishment. The Protestant and Germanic world of his upbringing and training in the years after the Second World War had given him a natural bias in favor of Bachian counterpoint, and this bias was congenial to his personality. He also liked music by many other northern composers, especially William Byrd and Louis Couperin (whose music he played more in concerts than on recordings), but he always returned home with a sense of quiet relief. Italy remained an enticing foreign world, a permanently attractive musical Shangri-La that he visited very happily as a northern tourist, basking in the prodigal generosity of its sunny invention.

He was, I feel, less at ease with the works of François Couperin. For most audiences (and many players), the surface coolness of Couperin’s works, beside the furnace of Bach’s, tends to make them fade into the background. Also, Bach simply occupied too big a place in Leonhardt’s life for there to be a fully comfortable, regular space for François Couperin, at least on the formal concert stage. He may have judged Couperin’s subtly evocative world to be too dependent on essential ornament rather than on structural counterpoint, perhaps feeling that a language owing so much to ornament could never be *as essential* as one that owed so much to counterpoint. If so, it is a strangely essentialist

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<sup>26</sup> This passage, being part of “Section III, General Remarks,” was omitted from the 1985 French translation. According to the translator, Jacques Drillon (private conversation, March 28, 2012), the decision to omit the whole section was Leonhardt’s. This is, I think, understandable; we can easily respect here the judgment of a more mature musician concerning his *folie de jeunesse*; however, the fact that he was able to write such a sentence in 1952 underlines the significance of this strongly-held view at the start of his career.

position for a harpsichordist, but one that supports the idea that he was a “child of his time,” unable (or simply unwilling) to escape entirely from the overriding cultural mind-set of his generation and his Germanic background and training. He commented in 2006 that he found much French music to be “lovely, but nearly always superficial. For a long time I found this to be a deterrent, until I realized it had such marvellous qualities of sonority and refinement, although it remains essentially superficial.”<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, he had an unexpected taste for later French music, a kind of sweet tooth for musical desserts by Forqueray and Pancrace Royer. Accordingly, he usually placed such pieces at the end of his musical menus, following the Germanic protein, and played them with unexpectedly flamboyant informality.

There was a fruitful tension between Leonhardt’s formality and his informality. A curiously informal attitude pervades some of the solo recordings. A few very minor slips of the finger are allowed to stay, relatively unobtrusive instrumental pings and clicks are left in place, and other oddities such as audible page-turns also occasionally remain. I do not think this is because he did not care about such things. I suspect he was once again on a different wavelength from the *über*-technicity of modern recording methods. The fact that such “imperfections” can be removed by editing usually leads to their being removed. Yet they bothered him less; he was sometimes happy to leave them.

Today, many harpsichordists graduate from their music conservatory having recorded the Goldberg Variations and with a video of the recording already posted on YouTube; a CD is used as a visiting card that helps them launch their careers. In the 1960s, attitudes were generally quite different since the control of the technology was in the hands of a corporation of specialists and less accessible. Recordings were, almost by definition, a sign that artists were already well advanced in their international career, not at the start of it. Recordings were an indication that in the professional *Gradus ad Parnassum* a chosen few had reached at least the lower summits. Many artists saw their recordings as a way of giving permanence to their personal vision of “masterpieces,” finely honed through long experience on the concert platform. This view was fairly common; it went with the solo artist’s self-fashioning and with the substantially honed ego that was (and still is) thought necessary to maintain most performing careers.

Leonhardt certainly had the substantial ego. In 1999 he replied to German interviewers, who had asked if there were any Bach works that had intimidated

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<sup>27</sup> Robins, “Interview with Gustav Leonhardt.”

him, “No, I was never that modest.”<sup>28</sup> However, at least in his later years, his ego seems not to have been invested in the same way in the idea that his performances were eternal or to be set definitively in stone. On the contrary, each concert performance became a unique occasion to demonstrate how a particular piece might sound on a given day. Recordings were not so much formally posed portraits as snapshots of a single living moment, capturing an event whose importance was precisely that it was as ephemeral as pleasure itself. He therefore often made solo recordings in less time than most other players. He went to the studio, or to the organ in a church, and simply played the chosen works a couple of times, knowing that if he were to record them again the next day they would be different. There was great self-confidence and assurance in this approach, but also humility. I noted earlier that his playing was “usually at least minimally formal; mostly, however, it was highly formal,” and I was referring to the extreme seriousness with which he approached all music making. But there was also this informal side to it, in counterpoint to the surface formality of circumstance. It was a celebration of the inner ephemerality of the most moving musical experiences. Audible page-turns, keyboard noises, and occasional finger slips can actually support this impression by keeping alive the illusion of a concert rather than neutering the performance into artificial sterility; they can bring a recording closer to the universe of a concert by supporting the impression that it is just one of the many versions of what might be possible with the music.

He wrote in 1979 that it is “the *player’s* task to digest and bring all historic material back into *musical* language. Indeed, *all* material; concentration on only several points is non-artistic (for those who succumb there is more honour to be drowned in the sea than in a lake)... Only an artist can get away with anything irregular, but he needs luck too. He should not count on luck, however, and never decide beforehand how far to go over the mark... An artist prepares for weeks, months and years ... but lives only for moments. Moments, then, that have no sense of time. Moments that never will come back in the same way. They might be called moments of grace if listeners can take part in them.”<sup>29</sup>

His finest concerts were inimitable in just this way, permeated by the wonderful impression that he was discovering and revealing each piece afresh each

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<sup>28</sup> Q.: “Y a-t-il des œuvres de Bach qui vous ont intimidé ?” A.: “Non. Je n’étais jamais si modeste.” (Interview in German by Cornelia Geiser and Bertrand Brouder, given in Amsterdam on October 8, 1999; available in French: <http://weltkunst.blogspot.com/2012/01/entretien-avec-gustav-leonhardt-1999.html>)

<sup>29</sup> Gustav Leonhardt, “Introduction,” *Early Music* 7, no. 4 (October 1979): 452.



time he played it. As a performance style, it was both dangerous and relaxed, a high-wire act by someone who knew the music so well he could sit back and allow it to roam freely and become something different each time he played it. This would not necessarily happen throughout a whole concert, especially when he was on tour, or tired; but it usually did happen at least once in each recital, and always at the critically important moment, the evening's emotional center of gravity. One or two such moments of grace were certainly enough for any concert and often there were many such moments. They could move even the most stony-hearted listeners. Jacques Longchamp, the sober senior critic of the distinguished French newspaper *Le Monde*, once reviewed a concert where Leonhardt played Bach's canonic variations on *Vom Himmel hoch* on the new baroque-style organ in the Lutheran *Église des Billettes* in Paris. That evening, for a brief moment, the prelapsarian worldview won an important victory over modernity. I remember that Longchamp simply wrote that as Leonhardt played, time stopped and the birds were singing in the Garden of Eden in the cool of the evening.

#### IV. The Art of Playing (and Teaching) the Harpsichord

Leonhardt may not have chosen François Couperin as his most frequent companion onstage, but his eyes lit up with a quiet inner contentment and affection whenever he spoke of the composer; it was not a fire, but warm red embers. One aspect of the individual legacy of each of these men is comparable and may be summed up in the words *L'Art de toucher le Clavecin*. Like Couperin, he seems to have discovered much of this art (or perhaps rediscovered it) as a result of his own thoughtful private study. Leonhardt's art of "touching" the keys and of "playing the harpsichord" was unique.

Like a modern photographer who, having been raised in a world of color, rediscovers the subtlety of black-and-white photography, in which the absence of reds, blues, greens, and yellows can be a positive element, Leonhardt embraced the multiple shades of grey of harpsichords and tracker organs, showing just how many shades there are and how profoundly expressive they can be. He trained his own fingers to coax these *grisaille* shades from the instruments; he encouraged harpsichord builders and organ builders to understand how the keyboards and the actions of their instruments needed to offer such possibilities to players; and he encouraged students to explore the multiplicity of shades of grey that can be possible.

This partly explains why his teaching was so influential. One only has to remember the way the hundred unlucky contestants at Bruges would stand in line for hours for their two minutes with him and hang onto every cryptic word that he patiently uttered. I know from hearing the comments of many players afterwards that he was unfailingly polite and helpful, while also usually homing in on a single particular point. His pedagogical instincts made him try to give each person one basic idea that could be taken away and thought about; these players could then, if they chose, work on improving their playing in this specific area over the next six or twelve months. He knew that for those who had personally chosen to follow the “right path,” and who had talent and imagination (he referred to them as students “with ideas”), progress could be steady and incremental as long as they worked in a regular manner. Despite this patience, he did not really have a universal vision of an infinitely perfectible musical world. He knew that not everyone was perfectible and thought that there was not much hope for those who lacked genuine talent or had no musical imagination, no ideas. This may sometimes have seemed a little brutal, but it was often kinder in the long run.

Although he was not doctrinaire, he did firmly believe in individual responsibility for every single note that is played. The principles that stood behind everything he taught were few and supple. They could hardly be viewed as doctrines or Articles of Faith, but were instead complex ways of listening and hearing. In his own performances, he did not always hold on to the principles he taught. The moments when he let go could be the highlights of a concert—not because of the letting go, but because he was for a moment following something else, more vital and essential than a principle: a living moment of transient pleasure. I do not know that he would have defined it this way; did he think of such moments as the never-ending pursuit of beauty that is always just out of reach, as glimpses of the lost paradise? Was this what he meant by moments “that have no sense of time ... that never will come back in the same way”? Yet despite this focus on moments, he was not a player who could not see the forest for the beautiful trees. Although he loved each branch and each leaf, caressing them all as he played, he never let the main part of his brain stray from the view of the musical forest itself, which it was his primary purpose to reveal. Small details acquired great force when displayed by him (and perceived by the listeners) in what he took to be their rightful and balanced place as part of the whole. This overarching structural vision shone like a spotlight on complete movements, on the place of single movements inside larger works, and on the place of works in whole recitals. In 1979 he commented about concert perfor-

mance: "But as one may not force things which one has to be grateful for, the adventure remains; part of it consists of the hope for integration of the many moments of beauty into a larger whole, giving them coherence and bringing them to their logical end."

This search for the balance between beauty of the moment and coherence of the whole depended for its fragile life, in his view, on the combination of the player's imagination, intellect, and touch. Imagination was the most important part of this partnership, but he could not teach that and acknowledged that he could not teach an understanding of beauty. And intellect has many forms, not all of which can be expressed verbally. On the other hand, he could teach and talk about touch. He therefore spent much time in lessons on the production of dynamics.

Before Leonhardt, most teachers and players, as well as listeners, had concluded that a rigorous evenness of sound was one of the defining features not just of the harpsichord (as then built by builders) but also of harpsichord music itself (as then played by players). Strong characterizations of individual performances were expressed through strong characterizations of tempo and registration. Teachers explained elements of baroque style without paying much attention to specific techniques of subtle keyboard dynamics from note to note; instead, they spent time talking about such crude things as manual changes and "terraced dynamics" from phrase to phrase.

Leonhardt challenged this approach radically and with the same directness with which Charles Darwin challenged "false facts" (as against "false views"). One of Darwin's more striking observations is this: "False facts are highly injurious to the progress of science, for they often long endure; but false views, if supported by some evidence, do little harm, as every one takes a salutary pleasure in proving their falseness; and when this is done, one path towards error is closed and the road to truth is often at the same time opened."<sup>30</sup> Little of Leonhardt's time was spent on people he thought had false views, but much of his teaching sought to counter a perception that was widely accepted to be an absolute truth yet is (as he showed so clearly) a false fact: that the harpsichord is incapable of dynamic nuance through touch. This is a convenient false fact for those who reject Bach on the harpsichord and is still generally thought to be true by many people today. Such a perception remains highly injurious to the

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<sup>30</sup> Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (London: John Murray, 1871). The phrase is found in the opening paragraph of chapter 21, the "General Summary and Conclusion." See full text online at <http://darwin-online.org.uk/contents.html#descent>.

progress of knowledge of (and experience of) harpsichords and harpsichord music.<sup>31</sup>

If Leonhardt had missionary zeal, much of its center of gravity was here, rather than in his approach to matters of correct performance practice. He did not teach “authentic performance” to his students, of course. There were much more important things to talk about. Those who studied with him were taught to react in a variety of possible convincing ways to the instrument they were playing; they were taught to bring analytical intelligence, musical experience, and emotional passion to bear on each note in the score. And that was only the starting point because they also had to deal technically with an instrument that can so easily become inexpressive.

Builders needed to learn to voice quills in such a way that the plectra could produce regularity when the player’s touch was regular; but players also needed to learn to play in such a way that the quills could, at will, produce specifically chosen irregularities designed to sculpt dynamic contours onto the musical line. These contours are produced almost entirely through touch, by controlling the rapidity with which the strings are plucked, by varying the force transmitted by the fingertips, and by timing with micro-second precision when each and every note is sounded and released. An important part of the art of the builder is to produce keyboards and plectra that give a neutral regularity yet are also inherently capable of generating an irregularity of sound, if so solicited; and an important part of the art of the player, the real *Art de toucher le Clavecin*, is to take in hand that apparent neutrality and master it by actively doing something, disturbing the neutrality in order to produce a persuasive musical discourse.

This has always struck me as being the most important part of Gustav Leonhardt’s legacy. It was taught and shown to students, one by one, over many years. Leonhardt spent less time on style and much more on the technical matters of making the harpsichord speak expressively. Most of the recent obituaries have stressed his immense influence on the early music movement, but much of this influence was brought about patiently, incrementally, by transforming over a period of more than fifty years the playing of the countless individuals who had the privilege of learning from him and hearing him demonstrate his own touch.

My perspective here no doubt betrays my own personal bias and reflects the impact of my private lessons with him. In other words, this is what I learnt

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<sup>31</sup> The modernist embrace of “terraced dynamics” is another “false fact,” comforting to those who wish to characterize music of the pre-Classical era as “inexpressive.”

from him. Perhaps he felt it was less necessary to talk about questions of style in my case and that it was more urgent to address questions of touch. In his 2007 interview by Jacques Drillon (part of which is translated at the end of this tribute) he said “It’s not good to have a method,” adding “I listen to a student, I see what’s missing in the playing—it’s never the same thing—and we work on it.” So other people who studied with him will have had experiences that were different from mine. Certainly in 1981, during my lessons, he concentrated above all on a few things, again and again.

During my lessons, Leonhardt kept repeating the phrase “without dynamics, the instrument is nothing.” That is how I remember it now, and maybe I remember this most because it was a revelation at the time, especially when he demonstrated precisely what he meant. I understood with a deep shock that when he said “volume” it was not a figure of speech; he really meant actual volume, not just intention.

“Does every single note have its chosen volume?” he would ask. “Is each note consciously louder or softer than the one that precedes and the one that follows?” His focus on dynamics did not focus just on the ability to produce volume, in the sense of being able to play one note louder than its two neighbors; by definition, he also taught the equally essential converse ability to soften any single note in relation to its neighbor, at will. His approach had presumably been developed as a reaction against some of the inferior harpsichord building and voicing of the 1960s and 1970s, which often left instruments incapable of producing such nuances. Although, on the whole, the better builders did voice their instruments to produce a neutral evenness, this was not of much use unless on the one hand the voicing was capable of responding to the player’s imperious desires during the concert, and on the other the fingers were capable of demanding something precise and specific of that voicing, in relation to every single note.

Leonhardt did not just home in on how the notes start, on the loud or soft attack (which he likened to the variety of consonants available in a language, noting that the “vowels,” or the way the notes were sustained, were mainly the responsibility of the builder). He also insisted incessantly that I pay more attention to how the notes end, that is, to my conscious control of the dampers sitting on the top of the jacks. His masterly demonstrations of varied ways to control resonance were transformative, as was the simple basic advice “as you play a chord, so you should normally release it” (except in special circumstances). Many players, even today, break almost all their chords, simply rolling them upwards as they play the notes, but then almost always release all the notes

together, paying scant attention to controlling the subtle effects of the damping. Leonhardt demonstrated how such mechanical playing has a more limited expressive range; he then illustrated how varying the control of the dampers could alter the overall sound by giving it much greater subtlety. When I asked for still further clarification, he showed me (with a sly little smile) some “trade secrets” not to be found in any treatises, sharing his technique for releasing many of his chords, at varying speeds and from the thumbs out towards the little fingers in each hand. It is almost invisible to the audience since the hands do not move, only the fingers (and they only move about half an inch); yet the effect on the sound can be just as radical as the effect of dynamics on the attack. He did not just do this for cadence chords, but throughout a piece, in every measure. He controlled the texture and resonance with exceptionally detailed micromanagement.

The audience at a concert can, on the whole, hardly perceive these dynamics and shadings, which are largely achieved by speed of attack (and partly by control of the micro-silence before an important note) and by variety in the release; however, an attentive audience can unquestionably hear the effects of such an approach to dynamic touch and can perceive that it can give contour to the melodic lines and create a hierarchy among the harmonies, rendering a performance more expressive. To better understand the concept we can transpose a telling comment by Couperin (originally made about minute rhetorical silences between phrases) and say that these essential dynamics and shadings can create effects that are objectively “almost imperceptible in general,” yet if they are not part of a performance “people of taste notice that something is lacking.”<sup>32</sup>

Leonhardt even went as far as recommending I should sometimes practice with the lid closed, on the grounds that “if you can still produce the dynamic effects, they will be strong enough to reach the audience once the lid is open.” (Perhaps for this reason, he usually sat as far away from the instrument as possible, to gauge the effects from a distance.) I am fairly sure that this central focus on dynamics was a permanent core of his teaching and therefore something that other harpsichordists who studied with him over the decades will recognize; certainly in 1981, when Leonhardt was in his 50s, it seemed like a major preoccupation.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> François Couperin, *Préface to Troisième Livre de Pièces de Clavecin* (Paris, 1722).

<sup>33</sup> I am grateful to the many former students of Leonhardt who have contacted me since the first version of this *Tribute* appeared, to say that their experiences were very similar, being parallel if

His insistence on dynamics made me think about Couperin's comment that he and his ancestors had discovered how to give the harpsichord "a soul."<sup>34</sup> Leonhardt provided a key that allowed me to imagine what Couperin might perhaps have meant by "soul." Maybe Couperin actually meant something different, but that is not so important. The essential lesson was about making the instrument seem to breathe today, about giving it dynamic life and hearing it vibrate in specific ways that we, the players, choose and impose.

The most important lesson was the most difficult one. I had prepared a Pavan and Galliard by Byrd, the beautiful but rarely played B-flat major pair; about which, maddeningly, he just said "Yes. Good. Next piece." Then I played Bach's Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue. At the end there was a long pause, and finally a slow but cautiously affirmative "Ja..." I looked over at him, sitting in the opposite corner of the large room, and waited for further comment, but none came. All he said was "Yes ... fine ... yes." He was clearly not as happy as he had been with the Byrd and was thinking about something. I asked what was wrong with the performance. "No, nothing was wrong," he replied. I felt particularly frustrated and decided to press the point until I got a clearer and more satisfactory response. After all, surely Gustav Leonhardt had something to say to me about the Chromatic Fantasy?

He eventually admitted that what had bothered him about my performance had been *missed opportunities*. The phrase has haunted me for over thirty years and I am grateful for it. It was fairly devastating, conjuring up a vast image of nebulous lost possibilities. Yet I could not get him to identify anything specific. That was the moment when I realized that it was sometimes hard work receiving a lesson from Gustav Leonhardt. The experience was not for the faint-hearted, but not because he was intimidating. He really wasn't. He was

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not quite identical.

<sup>34</sup> François Couperin, *L'Art de toucher le Clavecin* (Paris, 1716), 15: "it has until now seemed almost impossible that one could give a soul to this instrument; nevertheless, as a result of the efforts with which I have developed the modicum of natural talent that heaven gave me, I will try to explain how I have fortunately been able to touch the people of taste who have honoured me by listening to me." ("Il à paru presque insoutenable, jusqu'à présent, qu'on put donner de l'âme à cet instrument : cependant, par les recherches dont j'ay appuyé le peu de naturel que le ciel ma donné, je vais tâcher de faire comprendre par quelles raisons j'ay sçu acquérir le bonheur de toucher les personnes de goût qui m'ont fait l'honneur de m'entendre...") Couperin referred again to this idea in the *Préface* to his third book of harpsichord pieces (Paris, 1722): "I will always be grateful to those who, by an infinite art, supported by [good] taste, can manage to make this instrument capable of expression; it is what my ancestors strove to do." ("Je sçauray toujours gré à ceux qui par un art infini, soutenu par le goût, pouront ariver à rendre cet instrument susceptible d'expression : c'est à quoy mes ancêtres se sont apliqués.")



charming and welcoming, and he gave both you and the music his closest attention. A lesson was hard work because he was sometimes too generous with encouragement and reluctant to criticize. While trying to correct things he felt were individual weaknesses (“I see what’s missing in the playing—it’s never the same thing—and we work on it”) he also always saw what was good in a student’s performance and tried to build on it.

It was only when he agreed to come to the harpsichord and play certain passages in the Chromatic Fantasy that I understood a great deal about the immense intensity required to play such music and the close attention to every single note that was needed. This is where the primary part of the partnership between imagination and touch was so important. I had simply not brought enough musical imagination to the table, and by quite a long shot. (In this case, less had definitely been less.) My hands were not transmitting enough instructions from my brain to the keyboard.

His hands were large and his fingers strong (quite unlike those of Bach or Couperin as shown in their portraits). Sitting next to him, I felt there was an overwhelming intensity of intention being directed at individual keys through the fingertips of those virtually immobile hands, like a steadily-held blowtorch. The paradox, emotional and verbal, was the way those hands that were so *immobile* could produce results that were so *moving*. For students who had the ears to hear, such lessons were incomparable, unforgettable. A concert audience, sitting further away, usually perceived only the effects of this red-hot intention without necessarily being aware of the hidden technique that made it possible. The rare exceptions to this were the fleeting moments when his right foot would rise from the stage, only to fall at a peak of musical intensity. These were rare fine-line cracks in the immensely controlled equilibrium of his technique, moments when he was revealed to be a human like the rest of us. It was a reassuring quirk, like the restrained little smiles that would occasionally cross his face while playing. The *New Yorker* critic Penelope Gilliatt referred to these (when reviewing *The Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach*) by saying that “an arctic smile plays round his lips when he gets to a pleasing bit,”<sup>35</sup> but most harpsichordists knew better. The smile was a shy sign of complicity, with the music and with the audience who knew it well.

He had other quirks. He hated the fortepiano, even saying in 2007 “I truly detest the fortepiano, as an instrument. One feels nothing, one does not feel the

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<sup>35</sup> Penelope Gilliatt, “A Current Cinema: A Report on a Party,” *The New Yorker* 44, no. 31 (September 21, 1968): 140 (evoked in Rubinoff, “Authenticity as a Political Act” n. 52).

string, one throws something, it falls back as it can... Compare it to the harpsichord! Now there's an instrument! Fine, precise, sensitive!"<sup>36</sup> He was oddly unenthusiastic about the harpsichord music of Rameau and judged Haydn severely. He thought Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, especially the last movement, was "vulgar" (and found the heroism in Beethoven "ridiculous").

The most well-known quirk was that he claimed to have very little time for Handel, whom he judged to be "a bad composer, vulgar!" His students knew not to bring Handel to the lessons. His mistrust for Handel's sublime theatricality vaguely evokes the words of Dr. Steger, the Leipzig city councilor who in 1723 had earnestly hoped that Bach's compositions would not be too theatrical. Yet there was a touch of theatricality about the way Leonhardt referred to Handel, with a scowl and a big hand gesture. At such moments, we could catch a glimpse of the youthful iconoclast, delighted to be making mischief. Perhaps he simply felt that Handel had betrayed his plain Protestant heritage along with his Germanic contrapuntal skills and sold out to the seductive operatic charms of Catholic Italy. Or did the extraordinary composer who was born in Germany, finished his training in Italy, found professional success in England, and published his French *Suites de Pièces de Clavecin* in 1720, seem a bit too opportunistic to him, both unsettled and unsettling? It remains a mystery to me that Leonhardt should have remained all his life so impervious to the glorious nature of Handel's music. It is a mystery that places him among "the few," and surely the "unhappy few." I regret that he seems not to have found his path to the immense pleasure experienced by the "happy many." It seems like such a *missed opportunity*.



After one visit, for a long and rather intense lesson, he invited me to descend to the large "below stairs" kitchen in his seventeenth-century Amsterdam house on the Herengracht (where an Italian harpsichord sat in a corner, ignored, rather like a worthy servant, staying out of sight of the noble instruments upstairs). The high row of windows cast a beautiful soft light of late afternoon onto the ceiling, from where it was reflected onto the stone floor. With meticulous gestures, he found some biscuits and made tea. The event took on an unexpected

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<sup>36</sup> "... je déteste vraiment le pianoforte, comme instrument. On ne sent rien, on ne sent pas la corde, on jette quelque chose, ça retombe comme ça peut... Comparé au clavecin ! Voilà un instrument ! Fin, précis, sensible !" This and the other comments here come from Drillon's interview "On n'enseigne pas la beauté", *Le nouvel Observateur* (2007).

formality. I suddenly understood, with a sweet pang, that this had been my last lesson.

Then, with the concern of a master sending an apprentice out into the world, he gave me five rules for life as a professional harpsichordist. (1) People should never pay to hear our wrong notes; we must practice and must take every concert extremely seriously, no matter how little the fee. (2) Every time we play a concert, people must talk about it; it doesn't really matter what they say. (3) Every time we play a concert, we should not leave without having planted the seed of another project in the mind of the organizer. (4) It won't matter how well we play if people don't fundamentally desire to help us. (5) We should never forget that people are most likely to help us build our careers if helping us also helps them build their own careers.

He must have done this, or something comparable, with countless students over the years. Perhaps he varied the advice somewhat according to the student. The specific points are less important than his personal concern that all the training and hard work should now be transformed into a successful professional career. He often intervened, behind the scenes, to help his students. It was thanks to a severe personal note from him in 1989, addressed to the director of Henle Verlag, that my keyboard edition of *The Art of Fugue* was able to appear without suffering the indignity of having fingerings added by a specialist in piano fingerings. I had been unable to convince Henle that the absence of piano fingerings was essential (less is more), but a forceful note from Leonhardt, sent immediately when I asked for his help, settled the matter in one magisterial stroke. His lifelong commitment to that particular work was only the public part of the story; his help for a former student was the private part.

No one who came into personal musical contact with Gustav Leonhardt remained untouched. For most people his teaching was intensely powerful. As memories of his sharply phrased comments returned, the effects went on working for decades after the lessons were finished and, in my case, still continue resonating over thirty years later.

When tea was over, he told me I could always return to play for him ("not a lesson, of course") if ever I had an important project coming up for which I felt I needed advice. Then, with careful formality, we shook hands.

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## APPENDIX

### Gustav Leonhardt with Jacques Drillon

Extract from “On n’enseigne pas la beauté” (“One cannot teach beauty”) *Le nouvel Observateur* (November 15–21, 2007).<sup>1</sup> Translation from the French by Davitt Moroney.

**J. D.:** *Do you have good relationships with the young generation of harpsichordists?*

**G. L.:** Not bad ones, at any rate. I no longer teach; that makes a big difference. I must say that I rather miss it. All my life I have played solo recitals and have traveled; only my students offered me human contact. Concert organizers are all well and good, but I saw so little of them... There are friends as well, of course, the Kuijken and Frans Brüggen, but I miss young people, with or without ideas.

**J. D.:** *Have you found a method of teaching?*

**G. L.:** No, none. It’s not good to have a method. I listen to a student, I see what’s missing in the playing—it’s never the same thing—and we work on it. Or rather, it’s the student who works on it, one lets the student do it. I ask “Why do you play the bass like that?” The student either knows or doesn’t know, but must find out why. This type of reasoning can be taught—but not beauty.

**J. D.:** *Are you aware that you have left a mark on your students?*

**G. L.:** No.

**J. D.:** *Bernard Foccroulle, the new head of the Festival of Aix, said that in four lessons with you he learnt more than in all the rest of his training. You had put your finger on a sore spot.*

**G. L.:** Good. That is what I wanted to do. It’s the reason that my students are all so different. And I am proud of this.

**J. D.:** *What about style? Can’t that be taught?*

**G. L.:** A little... One can at least learn what goes against a style and what is impossible within a certain stylistic context. I can explain that. But between the margins of what is possible there is so much variety, in two centuries, between different countries and personalities! Even the treatises don’t agree. So it is very

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<sup>1</sup> <http://tempsreel.nouvelobs.com/culture/20071116.OBS5277/on-n-rsquo-enseigne-pas-la-beaute.html>

risky to say “it is this style.” There are so many combinations between the different parameters! And they knew it at the time. It even happened that people would exaggerate in one direction or another, would make it a point of honor to be original. That does not produce the best works. Goethe said it wonderfully: *Man merkt die Absicht, und man ist verstimmt* When an intention is too visible, it irritates. And this is true for everything, even politics.