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Some readers may have enjoyed the interview that our predecessor, The English Harpsichord Magazine, *conducted with Leonhardt in 1974. The photo (by Chris Steele-Perkins) which accompanied the article is reproduced on our front cover. That interview can be read freely online at <www.harpischord.org.uk>.*

LEONHARDT THE ENIGMA

By Micaela Schmitz

Gustav Maria Leonhardt (1928-2012)

The king is dead. Long live the king!

...So who is poised to be the next king? Leaving that question to one side, we must pay tribute to the extraordinary personage that Leonhardt was and the legacy he left.

People spoke of him in hushed tones, and gave him that distinctly British honourific- Mr. Leonhardt. Some were so in awe of him they often would not think to ask him out to a meal after he'd played a concert, and I once heard an anecdote that a student at one of the Dutch conservatories saw a lonely old man in the canteen, and bought him a coffee because she pitied him. That man was Leonhardt.

There have been and will be many tributes to the great man. There is a 15-CD boxed set retrospective available entitled "Gustav Leonhardt: The Edition" which was released in April of this year, which includes recordings produced by Wolf Erichson for the DHM, Vivarte and Seon labels. It includes Leonhardt's final Goldbergs, chorales and other works on historic organs in Germany, Switzerland and Italy.

Different views show him as a performer, a pedagogue and as a man, and it's worth considering these each in turn.

First Impressions

Lon Tuck called Mr. Leonhardt the "grand guru of the Baroque musical revival," stating that "as harpsichordist, organist, conductor, musicologist and teacher, he has influenced the new crop of Baroque musicians as much as any single person."[1]

The Telegraph described him thus: "Instead of big orchestras, baton-waving conductors and the shimmering rubato so beloved of the Victorian and Edwardian audiences, Leonhardt considered the way that the composer might have experienced his music: a simple sound, a clean line and minimal ornamentation. He unearthed expressive qualities that had disappeared under the weight of romantic-style performances."[2] For those who today are used to the clean articulation and fast tempi so common in HIP (historically informed performance) it may be easy to forget how revolutionary Leonhardt was in a time when the heaviness of conductors like Furtwängler was prevalent, and where organists tended to connect and blur phrases.

Adeline Sire (*The World*) noted "Leonhardt's efforts popularized a lighter sound, using small ensembles and period instruments. That was especially evident on the recordings he made of Bach's sacred cantatas, about 200 in all."[3]

John Kraglund (*Toronto Globe and Mail*, 1982, wrote that "Leonhardt is a very sober man whose sense of humor, if it exists, is not permitted to surface when he is in the midst of a performance," and it was noted that he wanted to have oil lamps rather than electric lighting at a performance of Monteverdi's *Coronation of Poppea*[4] and for years lived in an Amsterdam canal house built in 1605.[5] Clearly, some American writers misunderstood his desire to live in an old house; in Europe truly old houses are sought after, with a grand canal house in Amsterdam being about as good as it gets!

The Guardian noted that "His own playing was marked by superlative technical assurance, lucidity, intellectual authority and gravitas – gaiety and humour came less easily to him – and initially he was criticised for too coolly dispassionate and austere a style: later, however, he himself acknowledged that he might have been over-severe and adopted a more relaxed, more expressive approach."[6] Perhaps what happened is that he warmed up and mellowed as he grew more into his "elder statesman" role.

Craig Zeichner of Ariama Classical Music wrote: "I'll go out on a limb here and call Leonhardt the father of the period instrument revival. Sure, a case can be made for Arnold Dolmetsch and the recorder, Alfred Deller and the countertenor voice, or Wanda Landowska and the harpsichord, but Leonhardt set the pace for a movement that ultimately won the race." These days, historically informed performance (HIP) is now the norm.[7]

Goldberg Magazine noted that "Gustav Leonhardt's distinction as both man and musician lies not with the longevity of a career that spans more than 50 years – extraordinary though that is – but with his unique place in the history of the revival of the historic harpsichord and the technique appropriate to the instrument. Remarkably, Leonhardt's position of eminence has been achieved not by being a great proselytiser or communicator. On the concert platform he can indeed appear distant, even austere, an image that some, quite wrongly in my view, have identified as a characteristic of his playing.[8]

This statement does embody the intrigue of the man. He was not an ebullient person or a showman, but a quiet presence. Never flamboyant, he let the music speak through his playing. He did not feel it necessary —as performers often do today— to share much verbally with his audiences, and when he did he chose his words carefully and said little. He certainly could appear either cold or standoff-ish but that may have masked simply the seriousness with which he treated music. As an interviewee he was not a shrinking violet but was quite forthright about what he felt has stood the test of time.

Beginnings

Leonhardt was born in 1928 in s'Gravenland, near Hilversum, The Netherlands, not surprisingly in a Protestant family. They went into hiding to avoid forced labour in German-occupied Amsterdam.[9] In Leonhardt's own words, the harpsichord was his match accidentally and quite naturally:

"When I was about ten-years-old, before World War II, my parents, who were not musicians, but were great music lovers, used to play a lot of chamber music with my brother and sister. Almost every night we would play music. Extraordinarily for amateurs at that time, my parents thought that since they sometimes played Telemann and Bach, they should have a harpsichord. So they ordered one, and since I was usually the keyboard man I was put on the harpsichord and played my written-out continuo part – badly."[10]

During the war, with school cancelled, and little entertainment, he became acquainted with how to maintain the harpsichord, and became very interested in Bach. He became interested in old organs, studying with van der Horst.[11] In 1947, he eventually resolved to study at the Schola Cantorum in Basel, a place he regarded at the time as the only place to study early music. He learned organ and harpsichord from Eduard Müller. This was fortuitous, as Müller was one of the first to advocate against frequent manual changes on organ, instead insisting that one must use touch for contrast. When Leonhardt first studied, the replicas were not great examples, and were strung with steel wire, and organs were not maintained historically. Gradually he realised that the field had been in his words, "overlooking" the evidence.

Early Career

After a stint learning conducting in Vienna, Leonhardt felt more drawn to the National Library and spent hours copying out music by hand from their archives. Of course, we know that many composers learned their craft by copying out by hand the music of acknowledged masters. There Leonhardt met Nikolaus Harnoncourt, filled in at the harpsichord and thereby landed a post as Professor at the Hochschule in Vienna, where he taught from 1950-1952. He began recording soon after.[12] By 1953, he was teaching in Amsterdam[13] and had founded the Leonhardt Baroque Ensemble (later called the Leonhardt Consort) which began to focus on 17th century repertory.[14]

He often programmed lesser known composers with Telemann sitting alongside Ritter, Böhm, and others.[15] Later he added English virginalist music, and French music with not just Couperin and Rameau but also le Roux, Duphly, Royer, Marais[16], Campra, and Lully,[17] and the music of Frescobaldi and Scarlatti.[18] He did not, however, hold much store in Handel, feeling that his work was intended for mass consumption.[19]

Bach and Other Composers

Leonhardt, far from desiring a pedestal status for himself, did not treat Bach this way either. While he revered the musical work, he felt that Bach's personal life had no bearing on this, noting, "I'm not saying that Bach was a scoundrel, but if he were it would not matter. We have the music and that leaves me speechless."[20] Leonhardt came to French music later, valuing the seriousness and structure of north German or English virginalist music, but finally realising that the superficiality of French music is balanced by its elegance. "...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.... But

the charm, the control, and the elegance of French music! All the harpsichord pieces sound so beautiful by themselves — you don't have to labour."[21]

Like Bach, throughout his career he was a church organist,[22] playing for many years at the Waalse Kerk and at the Nieuwe Kerk,[23] Amsterdam. He wanted things done in context, preferring there to be no applause after a Passion, and refusing to conduct a Passion after Easter.[24] Seeking instruments close to originals, he owned instruments firstly by Martin Skowroneck and later also by David Rubio.[25] However he was not interested much in fortepianos. After making two recordings of Mozart on an 18th-century instrument, he stated his preference for the immediate contact with the string available only on the harpsichord.[26]

Colleagues

Leonhardt fell in with the right crowd. He made friends with Melkus and Badura Skoda while in Vienna, and[27] with "...musicians like Brüggen, Bylsma, or the Kuijkens, we always had the same view right away when we came to the first rehearsal. A fine musician will know the reason if it was not together on the first play through. So the second time you play the piece, without a word being spoken, things are right. In a good ensemble the player does not play his part, he plays the piece."

Leonhardt attributed their success to having the right approach and using their awareness to get things right, often as early as the second playing. He also noted that "it was Forqueray who said that one should be proud to play without rehearsal, *à livre ouvert*."[28] He also worked with Alfred Deller, praising his extraordinary skills with bringing out texts.[29] At this time it must have been a heady feeling, as they unearthed treasures and performed them from copies made by hand or eventually the precursors to photocopies.

Leonhardt recorded early on for the Bach Guild [Vanguard], following this with Bach cantatas with Harnoncourt for Teldec, 1971 -1990. It was later that Leonhardt was to remark on Harnoncourt's tendency to adapt his interpretations to make them more popular with mainstream audiences, although this did not stop Leonhardt collaborating with him on Bach's entire cantatas from 1971-1990.[30] He also recorded virginalist music for Alpha, and Monteverdi's Vespers with Frits Noske's liturgical reconstruction, noting that "on a record you are not at a service, so I think the artificial recreation of a service is basically an error."[31]

A trailblazer, he recorded "The Art of Fugue" in 1953, which became a reference for all concerned with issues of tempo and dynamics.[32] He later noted that this was not his best recording of the work[33] (though he bettered this on a second attempt), and followed this first recording with a monograph on the work.[34] People began to take note. Leonhardt, pleading the cause of the harpsichord and later the clavichord, insisted that what needed to change was the listener, not the halls in which they were played.[35]

Trips Abroad and Further Work

Leonhardt made frequent visits to the U.S., even acting as visiting professor to Harvard University in 1962 and 1969, [36] and he was founding director of the New York Collegium for its short span.[37] He also edited the complete works of Sweelinck in 1968.[38]

He later noted that conducting is "the easiest way out in music. It's

the best-paid way out and you can't play or sing a wrong note! I agree you can mess up by doing the wrong things, but still it is so easy."[39]

As has been noted previously, negative comments about Leonhardt were rare. Critics did sometimes disparage his conducting,[40] which clearly did not hold for him the intrigue that chamber music and solo playing did. He was also criticised for missing the humour in French lighter music, for overly free rubato and over-accentuation in that style of music, and as well for being reluctant to take repeats on recordings.[41]

Like many exacting performers, Leonhardt was not satisfied with just one version and in fact recorded Bach's "Goldberg Variations" three times[42] (in 1952, 1965 and 1979)[43], and the Partitas and the Art of Fugue twice.[44]

In 1967, he appeared as Bach in the film *Diary of Anna Magdalena Bach*. Leonhardt brushed off any suggestions of grandeur by noting that he simply did the role of a musician, and that the enlightened Jean-Marie Straub was wise to choose a musician (rather than actor) as his priority; in fact the film and audio were recorded at the same time (which is now quite rare).[45]

Leonhardt as Teacher

Leonhardt taught many, including Christopher Hogwood, Alan Curtis, Jacques Ogg, Ton Koopman, Bob van Asperen, Christophe Rousset, Skip Sempe, Pierre Hantaï, and Lisa Crawford, to name a few. He noted that he probably got on well because he never taught more than five students at any one time and had lots of choice in whom he took. He prided himself in the fact that all these students developed in very different ways. "If I felt that I had something to say or criticize, I always first asked myself and then the pupil for the reason they were doing something I did not agree with or did not understand. So we always compared our particular views."[46]

He served on every jury for the famed Brugge competition since its inception in 1965-2010. That often his students won is probably more a testament to his ability to attract only the best students, since he didn't teach that many; however it clearly did create some "awkwardness."[47]

Martin Pearlman (now music director of the Boston Baroque Orchestra), studied with Leonhardt in Amsterdam from 1967-1968, and noted, "He was an extraordinary teacher. He was in some ways more of a coach than what you might think of as a normal teacher, in that he didn't teach technique... he left that to for you to figure out or get somewhere else." This links with the idea that Leonhardt expected those who studied with him to be fairly accomplished and would not want to waste time on basics.[48]

Views on Early Music Performance Practice

Leonhardt said that the historic performer's "mission is to know as closely as possible what the composer might have wanted, or what was possible in the period during which he was composing," and that this was sometimes thwarted when performers "have drawn exaggerated conclusions from new discoveries like inégalité, which was blown up to ridiculous proportions."[49] He also noted "When the elements— fingering, ornamentation, etc., are overdone—that is where musicology goes wrong."[50]

Leonhardt also was quick to dismiss slavish adherence to what a composer had available, since as practical

composers and music makers they would have to just get on with what they had in the circumstances they found. Certainly the so-called "*Entwurff*" or letter to the council in Leipzig implies that Bach really did want three to four singers per voice part, even if he didn't always get what he wanted. Leonhardt spoke in favour of this practice as opposed to one-per-part singing, noting that singers could and would have shared music, as paper was then more expensive than singers' fees. He remarked that the issue of using or not using a harpsichord in cantatas is still unresolved. Also, treatises often include complaints about performing practices- which shows not only that some didn't like them, but that they were in vogue too.

In 2006, Leonhardt acknowledged that "...most of our playing is based on hypothesis. That is because we cannot do better. Perhaps we may be able to do a little better, but at the moment much of what we do is pure hypothesis. We really do know very, very little."[51]

Leonhardt noted that many people have jumped on the early music bandwagon, by buying cheap violins, adding gut strings and copies of bows, and generally seeking the "easy way".

Honours

Leonhardt was presented the Medal of Honour for the Arts and Sciences from the Netherlands in 2009, and with Harnoncourt (for their complete Bach cantata cycle) the 1980 Erasmus Prize. He was awarded honourary doctorates by the universities of Dallas, Amsterdam, Harvard, Metz and Padua. In 2007 he was made Commander in the Crown Order in Belgium.[52] He had Erasmus honourary doctorates in 1983, 1984, 1991, 1998, and 2000.[53]

Gustav Leonhardt, Cité de la Musique, Paris, in 2008. *Photograph:* Paul Ruet, Creative Commons Licence.

His last bow

His last performance was 12 December 2011 in Paris, after which he announced that was to be his last public appearance.[54] He gave no indication of what illness affected him, but clearly he knew his time was limited.

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3 Adeline Sire, "Global Hit: Remembering Baroque Music Master Gustav Leonhardt," *The World*, 18 January 2012.
4 *The Telegraph*.
5 Shudel, "Obituary," *The Washington Post*.
6 Lionel Salter, "Gustav Leonhardt: Harpsichordist at the heart of the early music movement," *The Guardian*, 17 January 2012. N.B. This was prewritten by Salter, who died in 2000. Online, *The Guardian*, accessed 13 July 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/music/2012/jan/17/gustav-leonhardt>.
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9 Shudel, "Obituary," *The Washington Post*.
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11 "Gustav Leonhardt: An Interview", *English Harpsichord Magazine* 1, no. 2 (Apr 1974).
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15 *The Telegraph*.
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17 Allan Kozinn, "Gustav Leonhardt, Master Harpsichordist, Dies at 83", *The New York Times*, 18 January 2012.
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23 Salter, *The Guardian*.
24 *The Telegraph*.
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30 "Gustav Leonhardt," *The Telegraph*.
31 Leonhardt, quoted in Online, "Early Music World", Accessed 3 July 2012.
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33 "Gustav Leonhardt: An Interview", *English Harpsichord Magazine*.
34 *The Telegraph*.
35 *The Telegraph*.
36 Salter, *The Guardian*.
37 Kozinn, "Gustav Leonhardt," *The New York Times*.
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44 Online, "Gustav Leonhardt, Warner Classics", Accessed 12 July 2012, <http://www.warnerclassics.com/artist,GustavLeonhardt _ 1883.htm>.
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