

Harpsichord & fortepiano

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INTERVIEW

Pamela Hickman met with harpsichordist, fortepianist and researcher Dr. Tilman Skowroneck on 13 July 2012 (his birthday, in fact), at a venue where he was holding a two-day harpsichord maintenance workshop for harpsichordists.



Photo of Tilman Skowroneck
by Jessica Skowroneck

H & F: Tilman, Do you come from a line of musicians?
TS: Not really a “line.” My grandmother on my mother’s side was a fine pianist. As a teenager, and while on a prolonged stay with her uncle’s family

in Hannover, she was about to receive lessons with Walter Gieseking, who was just rising to fame at the time. But, at that point, her mother called her back home to help in the house. Her talent (and the enthusiasm of my grandfather) did, however, create a family of fervent house musicians.

My father started as a flautist and then began making recorders and harpsichords. First he made instruments for himself, but he soon began to make harpsichords, recorders and Baroque flutes full time, and he has earned some recognition for that. My mother met him when she took flute lessons from him.

Other than that, my family on both sides was more interested in “real” things, as befitting the time: the men were ambitious achievers – engineers, a toolmaker who later became a police detective, a chemist who had a leading position in the development of

photographic film – and the women, housewives. My grandfather on my father’s side did have a lute hanging at his wall, which he had played in his young years. But I mostly remember him smoking his pipe...

H & F: What are your earliest musical memories?

TS: Some memories go back to when I was two years old; one of my parents regularly played me a goodnight tune on the clavichord and there was a lot of singing of children’s songs. Other than that, growing up in the house of a harpsichord maker leads to a somewhat biased musical diet. I was fascinated by what visitors played. I listened to whatever my parents listened to, mostly Renaissance and Baroque music. My mother tried to interest me in music of the Classical period, but as a child I was not keen on it. But I also listened endlessly to a bunch of children’s favorites, such as “Peter and the Wolf” and Hindemith’s children’s song cycle “Wir bauen eine Stadt” (We Are Building a City).

H & F: And how did your own musical activity start?

TS: My parents gave me a little recorder when I was five years old. That was tricky: despite the fact that I was “musical,” so I was told, the coordination of divergent tasks was just too much for me, and I spent some agonizing weeks alternately dropping the instrument,

drooling into it and creating indistinct, half-intended and bubbly sounds. The experiment was duly abandoned.

Then, half a year later, the time was deemed ripe for harpsichord lessons. We had a little virginal at home, upstairs in a little room so I could practice there. From age 5 to 14, I took private lessons on the harpsichord with Jan Goens, the organist at the nearby church. Goens was younger than the venerable harpsichord league in town and just becoming interested in the yet pioneering performance practice movement. So he was a good choice, although he was mostly an organist. He later taught me music theory as well, but never the organ.

H & F: How did your taste in music develop?

TS: At an age still too young to operate the record-player by myself, I listened to records and began to be interested in organ music. Then, in the late 1960's Gustav Leonhardt and his ensemble recorded Bach harpsichord concertos for one, two, three and four harpsichords. Those really fascinated me. What also comes to mind was my liking for the Bach Orchestral Suites.

One day, when I was 10, the conductor of the Bremen Cathedral choir came to our music class at school and selected a few boys to sing the *cantus firmus* at the opening of Bach's "St. Matthew Passion". Curiously, the second *cantus firmus*, in the middle, was performed by the ladies of the choir, a decision that surprised me even then. Then, a year later, my father was asked to play the second flute part with the Vienna *Concentus Musicus* with Nikolaus Harnoncourt when they came to Bremen to perform Bach's "Christmas Oratorio". I heard much of the flute practice at home, a general rehearsal and then the performance itself. In terms of

the development of one's musical taste, there's no way back from here. Possibly around the same Christmas, we had an LP with the harpsichordist Alan Curtis playing music by François Couperin. This was the beginning of a life-long love of the music of the clavecinists.

H & F: Did you go to a music-oriented school?

TS: No, I went to a "humanistic" school (with Latin as the first foreign language), and had a fine and enthusiastic music teacher, but my own musical education was largely private, with the advantage of much detailed attention, and the disadvantage of almost no public exposure. The latter was certainly something that should have been avoided. Playing in public has scared me far too much for far too long into my career and I suppose that earlier exposure to this part of the profession would have helped me a lot in my performing career.

H & F: Where did you take higher musical studies?

TS: I began at the Royal Conservatory of The Hague in 1979, where I went to study with Bob van Asperen. Up until a week before I moved to Holland, I was still completing my alternate mandatory service, working in the hostel of the Sailor's Mission in Bremen. This was taxing, full-time work and at odd hours, and I ended up not working quite as much on the harpsichord as I should have. I was accepted at the Conservatory on probation and, during the first months there, I had to readjust my focus completely; this took more time than anyone was prepared to give me. In November, Bob van Asperen told me he felt my playing was not going anywhere, and dismissed me. But I

thought otherwise and made contact with Gustav Leonhardt – who owned some instruments my father made, also being a friend of the family – to ask his advice. A little nervous at first, I went to his house and played an assortment of pieces by French composers for him, also complying with his request to transpose one of the pieces down a half tone. In January 1980, on Leonhardt's recommendation, I began to study with Anneke Uittenbosch at the Sweelinck Conservatory in Amsterdam. Then, in 1983, interested in experiencing a contrast of approaches, I went to study with Ton Koopman for two years. After that, I had one year of tuition from Gustav Leonhardt himself. In 1999, in combination with my doctorate, the subject of which was Beethoven, I went to Cornell University (Ithaca, New York) where I took lessons on fortepiano with Malcolm Bilson.

H & F: I understand you live in Sweden now.

TS: Yes. I have been living in Sweden for 21 years and do most of my playing there. Following my studies, I first freelanced in Holland for a few years, and then somebody called me from Sweden, informing me of a position as a full-time continuo player in the – what was then to me entirely obscure – city of Borås, a community of some 60,000 inhabitants east of Göteborg. I moved there in October 1991 to help establish "Corona Artis", an ensemble of six players on early instruments; I was to be the group's harpsichordist and fortepianist. For the first six years of its existence, playing with "Corona Artis" was a full-time job; it then became half-time. We played evening concerts in the entire region, we assisted church musicians in the

performance of choral works such as cantatas and we did literally hundreds of children's concerts at schools.

H & F: Does the group still exist?

TS: No. Due to a shift of policy, the financial backing we had been receiving – all government money, in fact – was redistributed and invested in a world music ensemble. So "Corona Artis" ceased to be, although we occasionally play together...either some of us or all players, taking part in various larger projects.

H & F: Do you give solo recitals?

TS: Yes. I have never ceased to play recitals, even though the past decade and a half has been devoted to musicological research as well. I am just in the process of re-establishing a healthier balance there.

H & F: Would you like to mention something about your latest research project?

TS: Last year I concluded a post-doctorate at the University of Southampton (UK) on the subject of 19th-century Viennese piano making; this meant looking into negotiations between makers and customers and seeing how the public influenced changes in piano construction. Everyone knows that piano construction changed much in the nineteenth century: the piano became more than twice as heavy, acquired twice as many keys, etc. We have always supposed that the great composers, with their demands, were responsible for that fast and extensive development. However someone back then had to actually *pay* for the change in piano construction, and we know that people don't pay for just anything; there needs to be some clear future benefit. A

handful of composers and their visions just don't explain that new mechanism. Beethoven, for example, never paid for a single piano in his possession, after he stopped renting an instrument during his earliest Viennese years. In any case, there is a new story to be told, tying in with the sociology and the history of technology. It is coming out as a book and I am now busy putting the finishing touches on it, writing the last chapters.

H & F: Do you also make instruments?

TS: No. That is my father, Martin Skowroneck, who, at 86, is still in the harpsichord making business. Of course, I have seen and learned a lot in my father's workshop and I feel it is important for me to be able to maintain instruments. As in any kind of instrument, good regulation is crucial for the impression a harpsichord makes. The added problem is that the harpsichord *can* be made to sound utterly charmless. Unless everyone involved – the maker who selects a suitable model and uses all his/her skills in making it, the player who develops and maintains a sympathetic playing technique, and the person who does the repairs – works together, chances are that even a good instrument will eventually end up sounding poor. The upside of the story is that a good but neglected harpsichord usually does not require a lot of work to become functional again.

As for the mechanical aspect of harpsichord maintenance, I cannot say the task thrills me greatly – it is monotonous. Regulating a two-manual harpsichord can take three hours and it is fiddly work. My own harpsichords at home are equipped with bird quills and not plastic plectra; keeping them in good shape is even more work-intensive – each quill has a different lifespan.

H & F: What about teaching?

TS: At the moment I am teaching harpsichord and continuo in a master's programme for organists in Gothenburg; I also work as a thesis supervisor in the Teacher Training Department of the university there. Both are tasks I am enthusiastic about. In fact, I am looking for a position to expand my teaching work.



Skowroneck in recital, Gothenburg, Sweden
12 January 2013. Photo by Per Axelsson

H & F: Do you compose?

TS: No. I fear that my tidy harmonic mind is a bit against the trends of our time.

H & F: Have you written arrangements?

TS: Yes. That is very interesting work. One project I was involved in was a recording of a ballet by Anders von Düben – of the third generation of a line of Swedish composers – in the French style around 1700. Shortly after returning to Sweden from studying in France, and clearly in haste, he wrote his "Narvabaletten" (The Narva Ballet) to commemorate the Swedish victory over the Russian enemy at the Battle of

Narva (1700). The score, as we know it today, is printed but fragmentary. Some inner voices are written out for a line or two, but their conclusion is left to the discretion of the musicians. Some parts are entirely missing. The placing of many instrumental pieces between the recitatives is indicated but they need to be selected from works of other composers or must be newly composed. When we recorded this piece under the leadership of organist, musicologist and conductor Hans Davidsson, we were given some arrangements and completions by a Swedish musicologist. Things got complicated when, at the first rehearsal, the oboists sat back and said that their parts were unplayable on the Baroque oboe. So someone had to rework the manuscript in the French style, and I took upon myself most of the completion. The trouble is that Düben wasn't "the sharpest knife in the drawer" when it comes to counterpoint, which made completing the music on a higher standard a bit of an impossible task. It was, however, very entertaining work...

H & F: Now that you have completed your second, large research project, what are your plans?

TS: As I mentioned earlier, I feel it is time to give some more concerts. I have just returned from being part of a marvelous performance of Bach's Christmas Oratorio in the south of Sweden. A lot of really good and enthusiastic Baroque musicians are active in that area, and, most important of all, the atmosphere during rehearsals was great! Other than that, I am in the process of drawing up plans for a new research project about keyboard performance styles in the eighteenth century. Also quite some work is left regarding my previous project...

H & F: How does one combine being a performer and a musicologist?

TS: This is not at all simple! It is difficult to fit both into one day as the mindsets of each are so different. To practice in the morning, then drink coffee, eat lunch and switch over in the afternoon to sitting at a desk doing research is tricky: while you sit and write your mind is still working on the music you were playing in the morning. The other way around does not work much better: you end up trying to play the harpsichord in the afternoon with your mind distracted by concepts from the morning's reading! I try to divide up my activities into longer periods as much as possible. Sometimes it's difficult to get everything done.

H & F: How does it work with practicing harpsichord and fortepiano?

TS: Actually, this is a similar problem. A few years ago I participated in a fortepiano-flute recital of early romantic music in the brilliant style. Stylistically, this is a bit off-the-edge compared to what I usually play and I practiced a lot for that. Following the concert, I had a harpsichord recital within a few days. That was very hard to do, and I now usually avoid this kind of situation.

PH: What harpsichord repertoire do you especially enjoy playing at this stage in time?

TS: I am very comfortable with French Baroque music and like to include some of that repertoire in most recitals. I also have a real love for music of Elizabethan England. The latter is challenging to perform, and it is a little sad that one usually cannot include too much of that style in a single concert. Not many audiences are prepared for a whole evening of Elizabethan harpsichord music, and an overload is not the

way to make audiences understand and enjoy the exquisite beauty of this style better. And, of course, little can be done on the harpsichord without J.S. Bach in the picture!

H & F: What about contemporary music for harpsichord?

TS: I am getting more interested in this, but I may still have a long way to go. During the autumn, I taught a lesson on Ligeti's "*Passacaglia Ungherese*", and I found that it was extraordinarily rewarding music to practice and teach. I am also preparing "Six Harpsichord Miniatures" by Mark Janello, winner of the 2012 Aliénor Competition for new harpsichord music. It is a tonal work and easy for me to access, much more so than most of the harpsichord music written in the 1960's and 1970's. With my approach to the harpsichord as a "vocal" instrument, I am not interested in too mechanical or percussive an approach to the instrument. The harpsichord is an instrument that can sound very ugly!



Tilman Skowroneck teaching a masterclass, Metz, 22 January 2013. Photo by Ann-Catherine Bucher.

H & F: How do you see trends in harpsichord-playing at the moment?

TS: The only really clear trend I am seeing is... that there are more

and more excellent performers emerging all the time.

H & F: Do you think the general concert-going public gets exposed enough to harpsichord/fortepiano music? Does the general public attend choose to attend concerts of it?

TS: Since I would like to play more recitals than I am doing at the present, my answer to this question should, of course, be "no". The problem is a little more complex, however. From my experience, it is not easy to get opportunities to perform harpsichord recitals, but, after such a concert, everyone is always pleasantly surprised because the musical experience has been so rich and varied, the sound so absolutely fresh, and so on. Because we can not force audiences to come to listen to us and undergo this experience, we have to appeal to those who attend by doing what we do as well as possible, and if we are also invited to talk, to speak enthusiastically about the instrument and its repertoire.

The fortepiano, however, is a little trickier. Many people who are acquainted with the sound of modern pianos and pianists seem to be stuck in a direct comparison between the two, and some decide against historical pianos *after* having listened to them. Indeed, being able to enjoy the best examples of performance on early pianos, many listeners need to acquaint themselves with it, and for some this is not the easiest thing. So it can happen that I play a recital of music by Mozart and Beethoven on early keyboard instruments and audience members come to me afterwards to discuss how "successful" one or the other composer had sounded on the

instrument. A harpsichordist rarely faces such discussions any more.

H & F: Is this music only reaching the ears of professionals?

TS: Well, no, I don't think so. No matter what you play, and on what, you will always have to seduce the audience into spending time, not just the act of sitting there, but with you and with the music. There is no difference between the harpsichord and any other instrument when it comes to this....only a musician guiding you, through her or his music, into paying attention to what is happening *right now* will make a lasting impression. In this respect, my inspiration comes from two viola da gamba players: Wieland Kuijken and Jordi Savall.

H & F: What is the ideal venue for this music? What are some of the best venues in which you have performed?

TS: Any medium-large hall or church with not-too-sleek surfaces is good for harpsichord or early piano. Many Swedish country churches seem to be ideal. If the "after-sound" becomes too long, for example, in a larger church, the player risks playing everything too slowly. More frustrating is if the sound of the hall is very dry. It makes you self-conscious, and this is hardly ever good for a performance. But it can be an interesting task to make things work well against huge odds. Wieland Kuijken once told me how he ended up having to begin a Baroque programme alone on the viol in an immensely large hall. The solution was for him to play with the softest sounds, in order to encourage the audience to pay attention...It is very tempting to try to produce (by registration or – on the fortepiano – touch) as much volume as possible,

especially if you begin to fear that people can not really hear you well. But often, a step back actually works much better.

H & F: Having known the great Gustav Leonhardt, what would you, personally, like to say about him?

TS: The year that has passed since his death last January has been full of unexpected professional experiences. I have now played at two memorial concerts for Leonhardt and am expecting to play in another in early January. ..Leonhardt was an immensely engaged listener; it is when we play at a memorial concert for him that we are most aware of his not being with us.

Apart from that, one gets confronted with the matter of influence and imitation. Leonhardt was very strongly opposed to imitation of his playing style. The reason was that, according to him, the performer is, or should be, of little importance beyond bringing great music to life. So how does one commemorate someone in a concert, who, instead, would have liked us to focus on great music and on our own ways of bringing the music to life? For me, the answer has been to search for ways that make my participation in these concerts meaningful for me alone, to play such music that has symbolized to me what Leonhardt meant and did for music. But then, in spite of all, such a choice makes it look a little as if one has quietly chosen to imitate his style after all! It is only in the context of a memorial recital that one momentarily takes that risk.