

Harpsichord & *fortepiano*

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Musical Instrument Research Catalog
(MIRCAt)

A TRIBUTE TO MARTIN SKOWRONECK

21 December 1926, Berlin – 14 May 2014, Bremen

"It is my sad duty to announce that my father Martin Skowroneck, flautist and maker of harpsichords, recorders and baroque flutes, passed away this morning due to complications after heart surgery. He had been in hospital for four and a half difficult weeks. We, his nearest family, were able to say goodbye to him, and my mother was staying with him for the last two days and nights.

It has been a difficult time, and we would kindly ask our friends and colleagues to write rather than call at this time."

—Tilman Skowroneck, 14 May 2014

See cover photo of Martin Skowroneck, courtesy of Jessica Skowroneck.

Martin Skowroneck was a huge influence on Gustav Leonhardt, who together with Frans Brüggen leaves a huge legacy. Many wonder if other younger makers will come to take the place of those who began. Well known throughout the world and with a very long waiting list, Skowroneck insisted on making instruments that were not copies but were inspired by historical models. He was not afraid to change details of originals when he felt it made sense.¹ Yet, despite feeling this freedom, his work became associated with the best of historically informed instrument making and performance.

This influence worked in tandem. Leonhardt was inspired by Skowroneck's instrument and also recommended his work to other influential performers, such as Nikolaus Harnoncourt. In this magazine's interview with Leonhardt, the



Martin Skowroneck in 2013

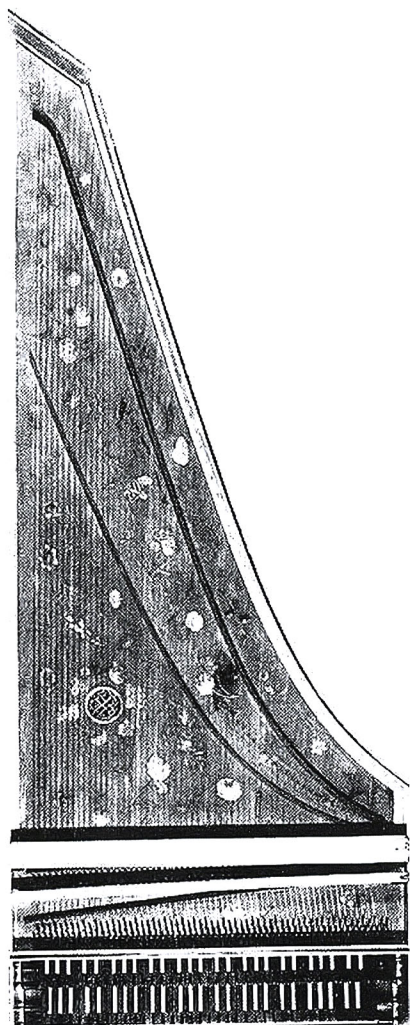
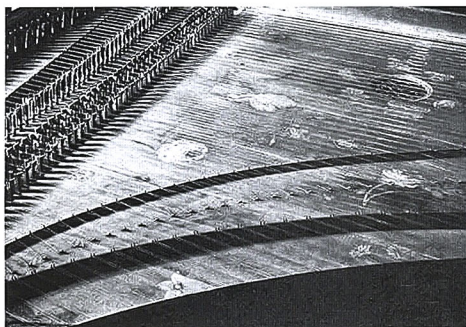
Photo by Robin Blanton- Tilman Skowroneck,
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great master said," (See the quote in the box below)

"Hearing antique instruments in Vienna in the museum, and playing them—also in England—those belonging to Raymond Russell, for instance—made me realise that the modern harpsichords were impossible. Then one day Kees Otten had heard of a wonderful flute maker named Martin Skowroneck in Bremen. By chance we both had a free weekend and decided to drive there together to see him. At Skowroneck's place I noticed there was a harpsichord in the room, as well as all the flutes—it was a revelation to me and I immediately ordered one from him. As a maker he is still supreme. Many others come near, but he has the genius of knowing beforehand what the sound will be like. I have four altogether in this house. They are all different, but all have the same stamp of genius."²



Dulcken harpsichord: Full view and detail of soundboard



Dulcken harpsichord: plan view
Photos by Robert Lautman³

Skowroneck's seminal instruments included his Italian instrument of 1957 and the famous Dulcken in 1962. The writer for the blog 'Semibrevis' describes it thus: "In 1957 Skowroneck completed his No. 7: a one-manual harpsichord 'after an Italian instrument of 1700'. This was his first truly historical harpsichord, and it can be heard in many of the recordings of *Concentus Musicus* from the 1960s and early 1970s."

Leonhardt continued to have an impact, as it was he who commissioned a Dulcken from Skowroneck in 1962. The originals, both dated 1745, were located in Vienna and at the Smithsonian Museum (Washington, D.C.). It was a ground-breaking effort which yielded true success. Skowroneck had some sketches and measurements but was unaware of the original double wall construction, as it had been removed from the Washington instrument. He was unafraid to change things, so when he felt the 8' bridge was too close to the bentside he altered it. He made other instruments based on the Dulcken, each time incorporating more into his own work. Later he was able to document these details in his important 2003 book *Cembalobau*.⁴ The book includes text in both German and English.

Richard Ireland, remembers well a visit to Martin Skowroneck:

"Gustav Leonhardt, Frans Brüggen and now Martin Skowroneck. Another iconic figure gone.

In Australia where I come from, we were all captivated by the recorded sound of Skowroneck harpsichords from the 1960s onwards through the recordings of Gustav Leonhardt. The first of his instruments I ever saw and played was a small 'Italian' model which belonged to Dene Barnett, an academic in Adelaide, South Australia. He also had a Martin Skowroneck recorder. We were mightily impressed as you can imagine and very jealous. Remembering sounds from so long ago is well nigh impossible but I retain a memory of its sweetness and refinement.

In 1975, I came to Europe in part on a harpsichord pilgrimage. I had written to Martin Skowroneck and he was kind enough to invite me to tea. So there I was in Bremen. His house was simple and elegant in the German style and outside was the famous sign announcing Martin Skowroneck as a maker of flutes because that was the formal qualification he had. Inside were bare timber floors and there was a harpsichord. I think I managed one Bach Gavotte which I suppose is better than 'Chopsticks' but it didn't seem so to me and it still embarrasses me to think about it.

He of course was charming. I must have met Mrs. Skowroneck because we had tea and conversation but I have no memory of it. I was altogether too awestruck. He played recordings of students he admired and most of the music he chose to play was improvisatory in style. Oh, to be able to sit and draw forth increasing cascades of sound in an improvised Toccata! It was obvious he valued a sweet treble sound as he remarked how tricky that was to achieve. I think it is already widely known that he disliked booming basses. I think it is clear enough from the many recordings of Leonhardt that his instruments responded to a wide range of demands from a skilled player.

He has written an excellent book called Harpsichord Construction which is full of fascinating views of his own. Not at all a manual for aspiring makers but quirky and thoughtful. There are also some articles which I managed to get from an American organ

journal. One of his special virtues is that he is outside the English speaking mainstream but accessible to us. There he was quietly working away in a country that had a flourishing industry producing awful instruments very efficiently. He had a different sound in his inner ear.

I imagine his 'fraud' ⁵ perpetrated with Gustav Leonhardt is well known. This was a thoroughly Eighteenth Century practice of course, except that in this case no one was out of pocket. I believe it is the 'Nicholas Lefebvre, Rouen 1755' which is entirely built by Martin Skowroneck. Listen to the Deutsche Harmonia Mundi CD of JS Bach Transcriptions played on it by Gustav Leonhardt and I think you will be as blown away by it as I am.

I have chatted to a Melbourne academic who played a Skowroneck [instrument] at a concert in Germany and wondered what all the fuss was about. Apart from being a Philistine, he was perhaps not used to the refinement. Public music making is of necessity a rather shouty business in our culture with our large concert halls. You can hear a solo harpsichord in a large hall but you cannot really say that it fills the hall. There tends to be a big premium for a wow factor and I imagine Skowroneck would leave all that to others. He speaks of first voicing with real quill plectra and then gradually putting in Delrin and matching that to the quill. This is the pursuit of subtlety."

Even those who never met him, but only encountered his instruments were affected.

"From the first time I played a Skowroneck harpsichord, in 1977, I knew that these are instruments unlike any others of their time. Quite simply, they seem to be living things rather than inanimate objects, and they respond to different types of touch in extraordinary ways. Above all, their sound is always more melodic than percussive, and this transforms one's approach to ornaments, for example. My Skowronecks date from 1959 and 1962, and today one can hardly imagine how revolutionary their singing, characterful tone must have seemed in comparison with other instruments of that era."

—Douglas Amrine

Skowroneck had a great influence on other makers.

"I only knew Martin Skowroneck by reputation and the reports that were passed on to me by others, but that was enough to inspire me to delve further into the making of historic models and to question the technical basis of the new harpsichords of the mid C20th. We all owe him something." —David Evans

Maker Colin Booth told us, "He was a generous man of great inventiveness, and one of the pillars on which the harpsichord revival rested."

And he wrote to Tilman:

"I would like to offer my commiserations on the death of your father. I was in touch with him occasionally over the years, but the most impressive example of his kindness and generosity was in 1983, when I was commissioned to make a copy of the Christian Zell for Colin Tilney. Martin corresponded with me about this, and supplied me with copies of his own drawings of the instrument, which of course I still have. A great pioneer, and an excellent man."

Very best wishes,

Colin."

John Phillips, in a 2013 interview with the Wall Street Journal noted,

"Martin Skowroneck, one of my idols, was one of the first Germans to start making historical harpsichords after World War II. I encountered some of his instruments early on, and they were different from anything I had heard before. They never overwhelmed you with sheer beauty of sound. They were players' instruments, a tool for genuine music-making, for making things happen with the fingers, and that was what interested me."⁶

When asked to give his memories for the

magazine, he went on to write the following:

"The last few years have seen the passing of some of the pioneering giants in the world of early music. Two of these, Gustav Leonhardt and Martin Skowroneck, are inextricably linked for many of us. One found remarkable ways to make the harpsichord expressive and the other made remarkable harpsichords where this was possible. Along with their many artistic achievements, both served as remarkable mentors and teachers for those of us who followed in their footsteps, even those of us who never actually studied or worked with them."

I came to the profession of harpsichord making with a background in musicology and as a player, without ever having taken the sensible step of completing an apprenticeship. Instead, I looked to mentors to guide me through my formative years in the craft. Chief among them was Martin Skowroneck, a man and whose work I came to revere, though we only met twice."

The first encounter with a Skowroneck harpsichord was at a concert by Gustav Leonhardt in Hertz Hall at UC Berkeley in 1972. It was one of the early Dulcken models, owned by Alan Curtis. There was much memorable about that concert: my first experience of Leonhardt in person, my first encounter with the music of Forqueray, and a remarkable harpsichord which absolutely filled Hertz Hall. It was all pure magic. Later as a graduate student and occasional harpsichord pupil of Alan Curtis at UC Berkeley, I had the privilege of playing and maintaining several Skowronecks. They were quite unlike any harpsichord I had experienced. Despite the apparently casual construction (I soon learned that it was actually anything but casual), there was a unique, room-filling, singing quality to the sound, manipulable by a supple and sensitive action."

Most striking about these instruments was the clear vision of the maker of what sort of music making tool a harpsichord must be. For Skowroneck, a lifelong dedication to listening, experimenting, learning, and continually refining your work was the only means to achieve worthy musical instruments. The thorough study and understanding of old instruments was crucial, but mindlessly copying them was pointless. When I set out to make harpsichords myself, I always

tried to keep in mind the importance of a disciplined musical vision, always so obvious in Skowroneck's work. His strict and uncompromising example was his most important lesson to me.

I finally met Martin Skowroneck nearly a decade into my career, in 1984, when he and his wife Susanne took an American tour, starting in Berkeley. Their first stop (I am told), was my shop, accompanied by my old teacher, Alan Curtis. I don't remember much about the specifics of that visit, other than he was polite, interested, and jet-lagged. I was more than slightly awed. Still, we made a good connection and corresponded occasionally over the years. He would always end a note to me with 'good luck with your work'.

Our second encounter came in 1999 on the occasion of the Cembalomarathon conference at Stiftung Kloster Michaelstein, in Blankenburg, Germany. The occasion had been built around the arrival of my new copy of the great 1739 Gräbner harpsichord at Schloss Pillnitz in Dresden. We quickly renewed our friendly connection. He told me not to be disturbed by the anti-copy views in his talk. How could I? The real issue for him was people who were too lazy to think or listen. I couldn't have agreed more. After Davitt Moroney's Well-tempered Clavier concert he came up to me with tears in his eyes (Davitt had played magnificently) and told me that he had never imagined that someone could do so much with Gräbner. In all my years making harpsichords, I have never received such a profound compliment, all the more powerful having been uttered by Martin Skowroneck himself."

Clearly retirement wasn't Skowroneck's way, as he was still working actively in his workshop at the age of 85.

Alan Curtis, who is well known for his work in pioneering the use of original instruments, remembers Skowroneck fondly.

I think I first heard of Martin Skowroneck in 1957, when I went to Amsterdam to study with Gustav Leonhardt. He was known then primarily as a flute maker, but had recently begun to make historical harpsichords as well. It was not easy in those days,

especially, I think, in the Land of Neupert, Sperrhake, Wittmayr and other factory-built modern harpsichords, to be taken seriously as a single craftsman, aided only by his wife, dedicated to making by hand, much in the manner of the Baroque makers, a few instruments per year. A description by Leonhardt of his recent visit made me want to go to Bremen as well, which I did, and which happened to be just at the time that Susanne was in the hospital giving birth to Tilman!

I remember that at that moment there was for sale in Amsterdam a fine late-16th-century painting showing a man playing a virginal, that I wanted to buy and had saved money for (already then, only a student, I was a passionate collector of paintings). But when I saw and heard instruments by Skowroneck, I thought, why not buy a real virginal instead. We discussed costs, however, and he convinced me that it made sense to order an Italian cembalo instead, as being more versatile, wider compass, and nearly the same cost. That was an instrument that changed my life, making me a harpsichordist rather than a pianist.

Another life-changing event followed soon after that: Klaas Bolt, who ran the organ course in Haarlem, had asked Skowroneck to bring some instruments there, both flutes and keyboards and, as I recall, they were displayed in the tiny but elegant Waag (weighing house) on the Market Square, right next to St. Bavo. The star of the show was a two-manual Ruckers copy in meantone tuning, my first experience with that temperament and with that type of instrument, and I think I can say that I then "fell in love" with pure major thirds! But also with that instrument, which was later bought, on my recommendation, by friends of mine (Prof. and Mrs. Clifford Truesdell, later of Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore) and often played by me (and many others, including Leonhardt) at their house.

The Haarlem exhibit was a revealing experience to many others as well, including Leonhardt, who taught the organ course, and visitors from abroad, such as Guy Oldham, who I remember brought with him in his briefcase the unique manuscript of Louis Couperin he had recently purchased, and played directly from it. I of course immediately dreamt of owning a two-manual

Skowroneck. The occasion arrived, when he made three Dulcken copies at more or less the same time, though each was a bit different. We used them to record the Bach concertos for three harpsichords (with Leonhardt, Anneke Uittenbosch and me). But the more Skowroneck instruments I acquired, the more I wanted.

Having been hired meantime by the University of California in Berkeley, I was able to order instruments from him also for University use. These included a Zell copy, which arrived by Lufthansa with the packing case horribly damaged. We nevertheless unpacked the instrument and found it in what looked like perfect condition and, amazingly, perfectly in tune. However it soon began to develop problems, and by consulting with Martin and tracing the shipping history, we were able to determine that in fact it had been very badly damaged by being dropped during shipping. Eventually (after a nightmare of bureaucracy) the insurance, together with the airline, paid to have the instrument shipped back, and a new soundboard put in. It was then sent back, arrived intact, and has survived splendidly.

The University also could afford to acquire a large Haas-type clavichord, with four-foot. At the same time I had to content myself with a cheaper, gebunden Hubert copy. I remember that Martin consoled me by saying "you won't be sorry." And he was right. He knew that the idea of gebunden was not merely to save money, but also to have less tension and therefore more resonance. It is a sublimely beautiful instrument, and both Leonhardt and Frans Brueggen often told me "If you ever decide to sell..." But I still have and cherish it.

Upon my arrival in California the local Berkeley harpsichord teacher, Laurette Goldberg, called me to "consult" about what harpsichord she should buy. I remember that I, of course, spoke only of Skowroneck of whom she had never heard and was therefore sceptical. Near the end of our conversation she announced "I think I will buy a Neupert". Silence at my end. Later this conversation became a kind of eternal joke between us, as she became one of Skowroneck's most enthusiastic and vociferous supporters. In fact, later on when Leonhardt, Harmoncourt and I got together and offered Martin and Susanne a trip to the United States,

among other things, to visit all the many instruments that had by then been shipped there, it was Laurette Goldberg who arranged for him to give a "master class" on harpsichord making. To everyone's surprise it was attended by a very large group of fans from the entire California area. I had feared that there might be unpleasant rivalry or even resentment on the part of local makers, but on the contrary it was the beginning of an enormous respect for Martin's work, and I think it was reciprocal, as I remember Martin speaking very highly, especially of John Philips, whose work he admired very much.

A few nights ago, in the calm, cool, late twilight that is so typical of May and June, I walked along the country road I now live on, via delle Campora, just outside Firenze, and I heard my first nightingale of this year. Particularly since this was shortly after hearing the sad news of Martin's departure, I remembered walking with Susanne and him, I think just the three of us, long ago (in the early 1960s?) near their house and having them point out to me the first nightingale I had ever heard.

On a similar occasion a few years later, we went to see the tree that he had painted on the lid of the French double he built for me. Which brings me to a typical tale of Martin's modesty: the double was ready, but had no lid, because we had not decided what it should be, that is, how it should be decorated. As we were talking, I noticed, on the floor, leaning against the wall, behind a table, a painted lid – trees, a stream, a meadow and some sheep. I admired it and asked whether he might do something like that for my French double. He simply replied "Well, that one would be the correct size." In other words, he had taken the enormous trouble to paint a lid but did not want to force me to accept it unless he was sure I liked it! He insisted, before we all retired for the evening, on my telling him anything that I thought could be improved. I finally noticed that there was a rather empty section and suggested more sheep. Next morning, at breakfast, I noticed that there had also been added a shepherd and a sheep dog. He pointed out "Well, if there are more sheep, they need to be taken care of..."

This same French harpsichord, was the beautiful fruit of a wonderful week when Martin and Susanne came to Paris to visit me and we "visited" several fine old French instruments, including the Blanchet in Chateaux Thoiry, where it was kept near an overheated radiator and was cracking. I remember wondering if Martin wanted to protest, or to examine it further, or measure it, but no, he just looked carefully and then said, simply, but with much feeling, "I don't think we can do anything to help this instrument" and we left. I don't think he measured or "documented" anything he saw those days, but it all went into his head. And later out came this clavecin and so many other fine instruments that have given so much joy and inspiration to their owners, their players and their audiences.

He was not only the greatest harpsichord maker of our age, he was also one of the very best of all time. He could look at a tree and say "That would make a fine soundboard" and later prove himself correct. It was magic. One can discuss and define what it is that makes a good instrument, and what the proper

ingredients are, but what makes a superb instrument, like the best that he made, is something else. It is magic. Just as the realism of a Vermeer painting is stronger than the 'reality' it presents, or than can be represented by a photograph, so the presence of the sound of a fine Skowroneck is more intense than one can describe, or than can be represented by a recording. Susanne should feel great pride in having shared so much in that miraculous production. The memories are there and can be comforting, but the instruments are a continuing, living presence that will endure, one hopes, forever. Every morning when I go to breakfast, I pass the "Vermeer" virginal (a muselaar decorated by Martin and Susanne like the one in the Vermeer in the Queen of England's collection) and cannot resist playing a few notes, something which always brings the Skowronecks vividly to mind, and makes me thank them profoundly.

Clearly retirement wasn't Skowroneck's way, as he was still working actively in his workshop at the age of 85.

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- ¹ "Gustav Leonhardt & Martin Skowroneck – Making harpsichord history", Weblog entry, "Sembrevity, blog about early music pioneers," <http://www.sembrevity.com/2014/04/gustav-leonhardt-martin-skowroneck-making-harpsichord-history/>, Accessed 17 September 2014. The passage runs: "The theme of re-creating historically plausible instruments, but not producing faithful copies, is very important to Skowroneck, and it permeates all the design and building principles outlined in his *Cembalobau*."
 - ² "Interview with Gustav Leonhardt," *The English Harpsichord Magazine* 1, 2 (1973):34.
 - ³ Robert Lautman, Photos, in Cynthia A. Hoover, *Harpsichords and Clavichords*. (Smithsonian Institution Press: Washington, D.C., 1969).
 - ⁴ Martin Skowroneck, *Cembalobau / Harpsichord Construction* (Bergkirchen: Bochinsky, 2003).
 - ⁵ Skowroneck created an entire instrument which was made to look authentic but was actually newly made. Skowroneck, Martin, Tilman Skowroneck transl. (2002) " 'The Harpsichord of Nicholas Lefebvre 1755': the Story of a Forgery without Intent to Defraud", *The Galpin Society Journal* 55, (Apr., 2002): 4–14+161., as quoted in "Martin Skowroneck", Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin_Skowroneck>, Accessed 17 September 2014.
 - ⁶ Heidi Waleson, "Master Builder", *The Wall Street Journal*, Weblog entry, Updated Sept. 5, 2013, as quoted in "Gustav Leonhardt & Martin Skowroneck – Making harpsichord history"