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FRANS BRÜGGEN REMEMBERED

The eminent recorder player, baroque flutist, conductor and early music specialist Franciscus Jozef Brüggen died in Amsterdam on 13 August 2014, a few months short of his 80th birthday. He was born in 1934, studied recorder and flute, studied musicology and had his first professorship at the Royal Conservatory, The Hague, at the age of 21. Not long after from 1972-73 he was the visiting Erasmus Professor of late Baroque Music at Harvard University.¹ This is incredible now; the field was wide open in one sense, but in another required a lot of hard work. Whereas today we expect everything to be available via facsimile edition or online, he probably had to contend with microfilms printed onto thin, brownish fax paper, and perhaps even copying out items. Libraries were probably less well indexed and the true sleuth had to be willing to cope with dust mites and infrequent library access. While there may have been less security in archives, there were also fewer finding aids, and the electronic age, at least in libraries, had yet to dawn. Seeing the pictures of him, going from a rather dashing 60's figure to a vital older man, you can sense the intensity of his gaze.



A young Frans Brüggen, whose concerts attracted guys wearing jeans and girls in miniskirts, gradually evolved into a seasoned conductor²

Like many in Amsterdam, he was not shy of new music, commissioning works by no less than Luciano Berio in the mid 60's. Berio was at Mills College, CA, which is still known for experimental new music especially for tape, and at some point Brüggen was Regent's Professor (visiting professor) at U.C. Berkeley.³ He also commissioned work from Louis Andriessen, most notably in 1981 the piece "Ende" for two alto recorders played by one person simultaneously⁴; the Conservatory of Amsterdam certainly stresses new and early music in its recorder department to this day. He is most remembered now for his involvement in two major early instrument ensembles, *Orkest van de Achttiende Eeuw*, which he founded and The Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, to which he was named Co-Principal Conductor and Conductor Emeritus. He also conducted the

Radio Kamerorkest (Hilversum) from 1991 until it finished in 2005. It and its successor, the Radio Netherlands Chamber Orchestra, programme both early and new music.

He pioneered the use of early instruments. David Patmore notes, "Brüggen was a leader in the drive towards professionalism in recorder playing, which accelerated steadily with the emergence of vigorously ambitious young Dutch players. He was thus partly responsible for transforming the international view of the recorder from it being seen as a purely pedagogical instrument to one that possessed musical significance in its own right."⁵

When young students visit early instrument collections, there are itching to get their hands on them and play. Why, they wonder, do the stingy curators limit time on the instruments? Students want to hear this sound, this

connection with the past. Of course there is a good explanation. Antique recorders and other woodwind instruments cannot be played for long periods, especially when they have not been played for over a century. This is because the moisture in a player's breath causes the wood to swell. When it dries, the wood contracts again. Even newly made instruments have to be "played in" for progressively longer periods until they can cope with these changes. Unfortunately the early pioneers of the movement did not know how early instruments would react. The story went that Brüggen had been eager as many a young student, with the result that some instruments were "overplayed" and had to be removed permanently from use.



The trio Sour Cream:
Frans Brüggen,
Kees Boeke, Walter
van Hauwe

Brüggen was a rebel against the status quo—something we now associate with early music pioneers. With his trio Sour Cream, in which he played with Kees Boeke and Walter van Hauwe) he made light of people's attitudes to classical music, stating through dramatic irony that people weren't actually *listening* to music. At a concert in Boston, Brüggen pointedly sat on a deck chair with sunglasses reading a newspaper whilst his two colleagues played. It provoked outrage; the irony being that Brüggen was only pointing out that others dis-regard music as aural wallpaper.⁶

Brüggen also struck out against the establishment, working in solidarity with a composer group called the *Notenkrakers*, who protested the archaic and authoritarian programming of the Concertgebouw Orchestra.

Later he would conduct Bach works with that orchestra in 1978, 1990 and 1992⁷; the point of the protest was heard.

Joel Cohen, in his book on the revival of early music, noted that, "Ironically, his originality spawned a host of Frans clones just a few years later. It is flattering for any performer to realize that he is the object of imitation and emulation. For someone with Brüggen's rebellious and individualistic temperament it must have been infuriating as well."⁸

For many Brüggen was an old friend, but chiefly through his recordings and some performances. Just out of curiosity I searched the 'All Music Site'⁹ and counted 98 recordings from 1986 to 2014. This is beyond staggering, because putting one's name to a recording reflects hours upon hours of work, listening, rehearsal and stamina.

Segwick Clark, who writes the popular blog "Why I left Muncie" for Musical America, felt Brüggen stood out above many other "period-instrument proselytizers."¹⁰ He notes, "I got to know Brüggen and his artistry primarily through his recordings on Philips with the Orchestra of the 18th Century, which he co-founded in 1981. Fortunately, however, he and his players were frequent guests at Lincoln Center, usually at Mostly Mozart. He would walk quickly to the podium, bow nervously, and fire the downbeat at his players as if pursued by the furies. His music-making was electric, unpredictable, and, above all, expressive. Just announced on the Glossa label are his new recordings of Mozart's last three symphonies, distributed by Naxos. I can't wait to hear them."

It's clear that Brüggen was a musician because he didn't know how not to be one; retirement wasn't his way. Many attested to his piercing intellect despite physical frailty. Conrad Wilson notes, "Still conspicuously tall and straight, he was a riveting and musically trustworthy presence on the podium. But his physical fragility was constantly evident. As long

as quarter of a century ago, every performance he gave - or so you tended to fear - might be his last.”¹¹

Andrew Watts, co-principal bassoon for the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, recalls Brüggen as a source of quiet inspiration.

“The rehearsal is not going too well. Maybe a bit of untogetherness, some poor intonation. Frans Brüggen looks serious. ‘The really great musician practises like this. He (or she) wakes up in the morning, gets out of bed, picks up his instrument, plays one perfect note - just one absolutely perfect note - and then goes back to bed.’ And then the smile - tension defused, criticism given and taken on board, and a thought for the day. A typical diversionary comment from a conductor who knew what it meant to master an instrument, to be so mentally alert, physically attuned, that you have total control - and knew that we mortals will always have to strive for that. He demanded perfection of others and of himself,

and he sought to achieve it with thoroughness, imagination, humour and understanding. The effect was not repressive, but liberating. He didn’t so much conduct you as play with you. He hated showmanship for its own sake (he didn’t need it - he had charisma) and he wanted to the audience to focus not on the performer but on the work of art. A giant - already greatly missed.”

The Orchestra was unusual in remaining so stable over a great period of time. It is well known that, after meeting travel, accommodation and food costs, the orchestra divides up its proceeds equally among its members, including the conductor.¹² In an interview, Sieuwert Vester, co-founder of the orchestra, said “..., it is Frans. If after 27 years you still adore and still get inspired by your maestro, then he must have the quality of a magician because usually you get very irritated by conductors.”¹³

Singer Nicola Weymss remembers Brüggen thus:

Frans Brüggen shall to me, above all else, forever mean birthday Rameau.

*I sang the part of Hébé in the opera *Les Indes Galantes* with him and the Orchestra of the Eighteenth Century for the first time ten years ago in a tour of Poland, The Netherlands and Italy, the last performance of which happened to fall on my birthday. I was lucky enough to sing Bach, Pergolesi and other gems with him in his role of guest conductor with the Radio Chamber Orchestra in the intervening years, but I always came back to Rameau with the “family”, either in concert tours of the suites with a quartet of voices singing the best bits™, or a live radio broadcast of the whole from the Concertgebouw over my birthday weekend in 2010. (He was, by this last time, already quite frail and had lost much of his peripheral vision, but it spoke enormously of his belief and trust in his musicians that we would do our job without worrying him further that although he couldn’t see to give us cues, we would be faithfully responding to his every move.) Those trusted musicians created a special thing: a co-op orchestra in only the finest sense of the word – every member as important as each other, and all as important as the conductor. Liberating in many ways, I think, and that ethos certainly created an orchestral sound that was instantly recognisable. My first ever rehearsal with them (though not the first with Frans, as he had, his perfectionist hat firmly on his head, already conducted through the entirety of the staging and blocking rehearsals of the Rameau with just himself and a harpsichordist) was pure magic. It sounds terribly clichéd, but coming through into the rehearsal room of the *Theatr Wielki* in Poznan, packed to the gunwales as it was with this extraordinary orchestra, then standing in front of Frans in the midst of rolling bars of Rameau was really just pure magic, the memory of which gives me goose-bumps to this day.*

I was a first year piano student at Birmingham Conservatoire when I came across the concept of early music, and I had little idea about who this man Frans Brüggen was except he could play the recorder rather well. I learned later about his period orchestra, but it was only when I became an early music voice student at the Royal Conservatory of The Hague that I found out just how massive a role he had actually played in the story of the early music revival. A role about which much has already been written, but if I was to choose one infamous Brüggen moment of musical reckoning, it would be a quote from 1970: "Every note of Mozart and Beethoven the Concertgebouw Orchestra plays is from a to z a lie."¹⁴ I'm paraphrasing slightly, but his (and others) stirring-up of a stodgy and conservative music regime was the making of Holland's place in the contemporary, and early, music world, and on a personal note, had it not been for these people, and Frans Brüggen especially, I suspect I would be a struggling piano teacher somewhere in the wilds of Scotland.

Not long before my birthday this year, I heard that Frans was conducting a special project at my old college with current early music students and some of his old guard; I had to go and listen and a rehearsal falling right on my birthday seemed like fate. Frans was incredibly frail, and seeing him being wheeled up to the conductor's podium gave me pangs of selfish regret that this would almost inevitably be the last time he would direct these players, these friends. But then the music started; his hands still remarkably strong in their well-known spiky, rigid, yet expressive forms, and the music he loved so much took over. Talking to him afterwards: "How are you Nicola? Are you still living in Tours?" (the wine region of the Loire unsurprisingly a favourite topic of old) felt wonderful, sad, almost like the closing of a circle, like a goodbye.

What a man. Puzzling, a little shy one-on-one, but so passionate and uninhibited in front of many. Incredibly picky and precise in what he wanted from his musicians, sometimes even a little mean, but if you were lucky enough to hear him utter "mooi" (beautiful) after you finished an aria, you felt on cloud nine.

He was an inspiration. An enigma. A force of nature, even from a wheelchair. He will be missed, but his genius will continue to be celebrated. And I will always listen to Rameau on my birthday.

A good photo of Brüggen in later life can be found here

<http://www.zeelandtheaters.nl/detail/7848/muziekpodium-zeeland-orkest-van-de-achtiede-eeuw>

The Orchestra of the 18th Century will be co-led by Kenneth Montgomery, Ed Spanjaard and Daniel Reuss during their Tour 122, which will include the Frans Brüggen Memorial Concerts in Amsterdam, Rotterdam, and Utrecht. There are numerous photos and videos at their website, many including Brüggen's conducting, even up to May 2014, where with an oxygen tube and in a wheelchair one perceives his intensity. In one video from Tour 115, he says 'Goeie morgen', the orchestra responds, and his smile lights up his face. In another, wittily named 'De Schepping van Frans? [The Creation of Frans]', he is described as impressive (*aanvaland*) but not off-standish, authoritarian, or superficial (*oppervlakkig*) and having comradeship and friendship as a conductor towards his fellow musicians.<<http://www.orchestral18c.com/video.html>>

¹ Joseph Stevenson, "Frans Brüggen", Website, All Music, <<http://www.allmusic.com/artist/frans-br%C3%BCggen-mn0000184236/discography>>, accessed 15 September 2014.

² We have made attempts to find the copyright owner of these photographs, which were found at numerous sites and especially at the Bach Cantatas Website. Any information is welcomed.

³ Aryeh Oron, "Frans Brüggen (Conductor, Recorder, Flute)", Bach Cantatas Website, May 2001, <http://www.bach-cantatas.com/Bio/Bruggen-Frans.htm>, Accessed 10 September 2014.

⁴ Conrad Wilson, "Frans Brüggen", Weblog entry, *Herald Scotland*, posted Friday 15 August 2014, <http://www.heraldscotland.com/comment/obituaries/frans-bruggen.25047237> Accessed 15 September 2014.

⁵ David Patmore, "A-Z of Conductors, Naxos 8.558087-90", Naxos Rights International Ltd. Quoted in, "Frans Brüggen", Naxos website, <http://www.naxos.com/person/Frans_Bruggen/43985.htm>, accessed 17 September 2014.

⁶ Joel Cohen (with photos by Herb Snitzer), *Reprise: The Extraordinary Revival of Early Music*, (Boston: Little Brown, 1985), as quoted in Norman Lebrecht, "Frans Brüggen as seen by his fellow pioneers", Weblog entry, "Slipped Disc", posted August 13, 2014, <http://slippedisc.com/2014/08/frans-bruggen-as-seen-by-his-fellow-pioneers/>, accessed 17 September 2014.

⁷ "Frans Brüggen Dies", ConcertgebouwOrkest, Weblog entry, posted, 14 august 2014 <<http://www.concertgebouwOrkest.nl/en/News/News-overview/2014-2015/Frans-Bruggen-dies/>>, Accessed 17 September 2014.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Joseph Stevenson, "Frans Brüggen".

¹⁰ Sedgwick Clark, "Frans Brüggen—Competitor with the Greats", Weblog entry, "Why I Left Muncie", posted Thursday 28 August 2014 , <<http://www.musicalamerica.com/mablogs/?p=20605>>, accessed 13 September 2014.

¹¹ Conrad Wilson, "Frans Brüggen".

¹² "Orchestra of the Eighteenth Century", Wikipedia website, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orchestra_of_the_Eighteenth_Century, Accessed 17 september 2014

¹³ Marg Wiggins, "Interview with Sieuwert Verster, manager of the Orchestra of the Eighteenth Century", Diverdi/Glossa Music, 24 September 2008, <http://www.glossamusic.com/glossa/context.aspx?id=33>, Accessed 17 september 2014.

¹⁴ In 1970, he said "Every note by Mozart and Beethoven that the Concertgebouw Orchestra plays is a lie from A to Z." He conducted Bach works with that orchestra in 1978, 1990 and 1992. Information from the ConcertgebouwOrkest Website. Joseph Stevenson, "Frans Brüggen", Website,