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Remembering Kenneth Gilbert (1931-2020)

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Kenneth Gilbert was my mentor and friend for almost five decades, but the many who were touched by his humanity, dedication, and supreme musicianship, for all of us, his recent passing is an event filled with loss and reminds us how fortunate we were to be in his circle and be enriched by his affection. That affection was universally returned.

I met Kenneth in the Parisian workshop and studio of Claude Mercier-Ythier. In 1970 I escaped to Paris from Duke University, connected with Alan Curtis to arrange private lessons, and begin my life as an adult. Alan was soon to return to California and Kenneth was riding the first high crest of his impressive career. Gilbert had issued his ground-breaking recordings of Couperin and *Le Pupitre* was beginning to publish his editions. The Royal Flemish Conservatory in Antwerp had engaged him to begin a harpsichord class and this represented the best possible path for me, not yet a performer but on my way.

This first professional high point must have been a moment of unexpected joy for Kenneth. As a young man he noticed a weakening of his hearing. That deficit increased over time and too soon he was severely deaf. A calcification of his middle ear isolated him and cut most of the pleasure in hearing his own work. How ironic and tragically poetic that he shared Beethoven's birthday of 16 December. How fortunate that an operation was developed in his beloved Canada to reverse the deterioration, replace his ear drum and return his sense. His arrival in Paris and Antwerp was a few years after his procedure, and he was prepared and energized for his new posts and his mounting fame. Ultimately he would teach at the Mozarteum and the Paris Conservatory.

I made an appointment to audition for Kenneth with the hope of being accepted into his class. Claude Mercier had an instrument rental business with inferior modern instruments, and was amassing his collection of antiques to be restored and sold. I usually practiced on the Neuperts but for this event we gathered in his living room with a Hemsch of indescribably beauty.

Kenneth was quiet in his demeanor. As I got to know him I would describe him as gentle but for a first contact, he seemed severe and very serious. I played the 23rd Ordre of Couperin. He listened carefully. I played well for a student and showed both a passion and some understanding for the music. After the performance and a positive word he asked if in *L'Audacieuse* at a certain measure where I had a trill on a c# while holding an a under the ornament, if that 'a' was an quaver or a dotted crotchet. I had to look. This was the first window into the meticulous guidance I would receive at my lessons until graduation in Belgium.

I was accepted into his class, a class that included John Whitelaw, Jos Van Immerseel and Scott Ross, all further along and formed as artists than I and all impressive. At the first lesson he asked what I had accomplished most recently with Curtis in Paris and I listed the four works I set to my fingers over six months. He then asked me to select and prepare for the next lesson (in two weeks) two Scarlatti sonatas, two Frescobaldi toccatas, a Pavan & Galliard of Gibbons, four Preludes from the *Art of Playing the Harpsichord* and an Ordre of Couperin, and two Preludes & Fugues from the WTC. Two weeks later I meet with him for our lesson. Those lessons took place at the Vleeshuis Museum on their 1747 Dulcken and I was allowed to practice on this instrument. At the lesson I offered one of the Frescobaldi toccatas and the last page was raw, sloppy. His hand covered that last page as I was finishing. And he challenged me: 'You know, Andrew, you are very smart and capable of doing anything you want. You could be a lawyer or doctor and play the harpsichord in your spare time...'. Shame and fury exploded in me.

Why am I telling you this in a homage to my mentor? It is often mentioned that Kenneth did not expect or appreciate students who imitated him and I have seen

this in action. But more important, he took the effort to locate the *needs* of each student. My need was to focus and work like a professional musician. My need was to get over the amateur satisfaction of playing music I loved and move into a space where I had the skills and industry to accomplish the demands of being a performer. In my case, he needed to challenge me towards this goal. Previous teachers had been happy to have conversations with me about the beauty of this or the power of that ... pleasant stuff, easy stuff. Kenneth located my deficits, boring work for him no doubt, and saw his role as pushing me to my realization or facing me with a truth that I needed to hear and to which I needed to respond with an answer. My answer was to practice six hours a day, every day. My coach was an involved, thoughtful, and dedicated Kenneth Gilbert.

At that same lesson Kenneth noticed that my Frescobaldi toccata was indebted to the iconic recorded performance of Leonhardt. After playing he urged me to pick another as my first entrée into the style of the composer adding that he could hear that I was influenced by a very famous harpsichordist. I agreed but added, 'But Kenneth, I am working the 3rd Ordre of Couperin and I know your performance of this very well'. To which he replied, 'Oh, I don't mind when my students imitate me'. And there he injected his sweet, playfulness that was always a part of a challenging few hours of a lesson.

Kenneth Gilbert was meticulous but always musical. In a group class in which a student played Froberger, one of those laments that appear to be a written out *prélude non mesuré* with the indication *a discrezione*, the student played with little attention to the details of the page's metrical indications. Her sense of discretion was to ignore the different ligatures and times given to each note. Kenneth stopped her and made it clear that before adding 'feelings' to the work, we needed to see what the composer had actually written. There were proportions suggested by the printed page and those were the clues as to where we could go with the word 'discretion'. He wasn't against personal interpretation but he would not stand for it unless we had done our work discovering what the composer had left us for guided interpretations. He insisted that we be meticulous, and respectful of the composer and the score.

But I think of another thing that made me admire Kenneth. He knew so much and was able to impart so much to his students. But, like Haydn, he was also able to grow with the light that would come his way from students with their own gifts. The best example of this was when he taught Scott Ross, a colleague of

mine in the same class in Antwerp. Scott brought to his playing a sensuality to the repertory by adjusting everything he did to the personality of the instrument under his hands. He listened carefully to the nature of the timbre of any instrument, the shape of the tone's decay, and the demands of the actions under his fingers. His tempos and articulations altered if he was playing a fine French or fine Flemish or Italian instrument. He was a 'harpsichord animal' in a way we had not yet heard and in the same way that is found in modern Russian piano playing. Kenneth spotted this immediately and during the time Scott worked with him I could see that his own playing became more beautiful because of it. Any great teacher, and Kenneth was among the really great ones, learns so much more from a worthy student than he imparts. And when the teacher can do this and can benefit and acknowledge it, the lesson becomes an encouragement of the highest order to the student and the act of teaching is the possibility for continuous growth for the teacher.

Kenneth's playing in concert was diamonds for the harpsichordist and often too precious for the music lover. I remember his performance of a D minor Scarlatti sonata played at St Germain des Prés in Paris in a joint recital with Alfred Deller. His ability to suspend time with his exquisitely sensitive touch elevated the moment to something unforgettable and a destination to which I have always aspired. I found this a reliable beauty whenever he approached something ephemeral and fragile. The Allemande from Bach's D major Partita or from Rameau's *Pièces de Clavecin* in A.

Kenneth was a very formal man. For so many years I called him 'Mr Gilbert' and he called me 'Andrew'. Anything else would have been uncomfortable. His clear delineation or boundaries made our relationship comfortable and healthy. The day he asked me to call him Kenneth was a rite of passage. 'We are colleagues now and you should call me Kenneth'. He handed me the most important diploma and from that date there followed several concerts in which we played music for two harpsichords. These were joyful and proud events for me.

I had the pleasure of introducing him to my life, my partners, and finally husband. I had the delight of cooking for him and laughing about the entire world. I HAVE missed him because he has not been present for us for years: he, like my other great mentor, Albert Fuller, suffered from dementia. Two such different men took part in my formation. Yet both of them were so perceptive and intellectually vibrant. The pain of seeing

them retreat into an unapproachable silence was keen and all the students had said goodbye well before Albert or Kenneth died. We all felt the loss before the end.

In my heart and mind Kenneth will always be my mentor, a spiritual father, and a beloved friend. If I make a beautiful sound on the harpsichord, I always know that the recipe for that sound is from Kenneth's guidance. But the thought that he is no longer in our world hurts and leaves a gap, the only solace being that when I go now to play Couperin's 3rd Ordre from Book One, I may

allow myself the feeling that he would be proud of me. And I may allow the thought that I hear his musical voice in mine.

A lengthy set of appreciations and memoirs of Kenneth Gilbert by other leading players can be found in the current issue of the British Harpsichord Society's magazine Sounding Board, xv (December 2020), available at <https://www.harpsichord.org.uk/sounding-board>.

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