

Gustav Leonhardt

AN INTERVIEW

Gustav Leonhardt has probably done more than any other harpsichordist to bring to the concert platform and recording studios the sound of historic harpsichords, originals and copies of originals. He lives in a beautiful old house facing one of the canals in central Amsterdam, and received your editor in a spacious room, wood panelled, with a fine old viola da gamba hanging near the door and large windows looking onto the courtyard at the back.

Editor: Readers will be interested to know what circumstances first brought you to the harpsichord. Did you approach it from the piano or the organ, or did you go straight to it?

Gustav Leonhardt: Like so many children, I started to learn to play the piano at the age of six. My parents, being keen amateur musicians, had a lot of chamber music at home and they happened to have a harpsichord. Then when I was about ten I had piano and 'cello lessons, and in fact began to concentrate more on the 'cello. Towards the end of the war I was hiding from the Germans—I could not go out. It was a time of great anxiety for my parents, but wonderful freedom for me—in fact I studied hard in 1944/45 at the age of sixteen.

Editor: The end of the war must have brought many changes for you.

Gustav Leonhardt: Yes, I had to start school again. I also became interested in old organs and had private theory lessons with van der Horst. Then in 1949/50 I went to the Scola Cantorum at Basel where I studied harpsichord and organ with Eduard Müller. At that time they had no historic instruments, but I was able to play on a tracker organ—I should have refused already then to play on an electric one! After that I had a year in Vienna, studying conducting, but I spent most of my time in the library—a wonderful time. I copied by hand a whole pile of music.

Editor: Yes, we had to work hard in those days—no Xerox facilities! But one learns more by the personal effort of hand copying.

Gustav Leonhardt: The treatises and music which I copied then have been invaluable to me.

Then one day I played at a concert in Vienna and was heard by the Director of the Hochschule (in those days it was known as the Academy) and he invited me to teach there. So in 1952 I had this appointment for three years. In 1953 I was offered a similar position in Amsterdam, and for the rest of the time travelled to and fro between the two. I have done a lot of teaching, but I think that now the concert element is stronger and teaching is going into the background.

Editor: Who were your particular friends when you were in Vienna?

Gustav Leonhardt: In particular Nikolaus Harnoncourt—then there were Eduard Melkus, Badura Skoda and a number of other pianists.

It was in Vienna in 1953 that I started recording. I began rather too boldly with the *Art of Fugue*; but it was not good (I think now). Since then I have done about 150 records, of which about seventy are solo.

Editor: Which harpsichords do you like playing best?

Gustav Leonhardt: 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 Skowronek in Bremen. By chance we both had a free weekend and decided to drive there together to see him. At Skowronek'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. That was the first (*indicating the harpsichord behind where he was sitting*). He now has a waiting list of about sixteen years!

Editor: I hear that you also think highly of David Rubio's instruments.

Gustav Leonhardt: Yes, Rubio is also very good. That is one of his over there (*indicating another harpsichord, standing by the side of the Skowronek*

—there were also two oblong virginals in the room, one of the type known as muselar with the keyboard to the right, the other with the keyboard to left.)

Editor: Of all the works you have recorded, have you any favourites?

Gustav Leonhardt: Not really, I have liked everything I have recorded. Some I have done twice, such as the *Art of Fugue* and the *Goldberg Variations*. The same is true of the organ music.

Editor: The first record I had of yours was of Louis Couperin and d'Anglebert; Frans Bruggen brought it over. Then some Bach, and Froberger

*The Director of *Syntagma Musicum*.

fSee G. Leonhardt: *In Praise of Flemish Virginals of the Seventeenth century*, in *Keyboard Instruments* (Ed. Ripin) Edinburgh 1971.



Photo: Chris Steele-Perkins

in which you played both harpsichord and organ.

Gustav Leonhardt: The Couperin was Harmonia Mundi; the others in the Telefunken *Das Alte Werk* series. I am now recording with Seon-Philips except for the Bach Cantatas, and Harmonia Mundi who have brought out such works as Lulli's *Le Bourgeois Gentilhomme* and Campra's *L'Europe Galante*—the next will be Rameau.

But with me conducting is really a side line — it's too easy! It does not involve any technique: but you have to know what you want. It is mainly the wish to do the unknown works.

Editor: I understand that just now you are very busy with rehearsals at the Opera for Monteverdi's *L'Incaronazione dli Poppea*,

Gustav Leonhardt: Yes, not only that, but we are also doing // *Ballo delle Ingrate* and // *Combattimento*.

But I am really more interested in solo works and small chamber groups: I tend to lose interest as things become larger.

Editor: Your collaboration with Frans Bruggen has been very successful. How did it start?

Gustav Leonhardt: In mutual admiration — each

for what the other was doing. True ensemble only comes when people have the same idea about the music—without discussion. Ensembles which have to discuss the music and rehearse a lot are no good. In the eighteenth century it was Forqueray who said that one should be proud to play without rehearsal, *a livre ouvert*.

Editor: What do you feel about the early technique in harpsichord playing?

Gustav Leonhardt: The study of the early technique is one of the ways of learning about the music. If you disregard one element of the music, either of its composition or performance, you will go wrong. I have the conviction that a work of art cannot be altered in one or more details without it suffering—it is a unity, I will say. But what the listener does with early music, I don't know and should not be concerned.

If you look at an early painting— anyone can look at it even if he does not understand it. But a musician is obliged to reproduce a work of art as the composer might have conceived it, so that the listener can be confronted with it as with an old painting. This may not be possible, but it should be our goal. We should also know about the margins of style: and these can be wide margins.

An historic instrument or a good replica is one of the means: but a good instrument does not necessarily make a good player! There are so many instrument maniacs who only listen to the sound! It is the same with ornamentation maniacs! A good musician is more universal and knows how to integrate things. He reads about music to understand it, the ornamentation, the fingering and what the instrument suggests, *plus* his own intelligence—and that may finally make a unified picture of a piece.

Baroque music being music of detail with no phrasing indicated (phrasing as distinct from articulation), asks for this unifying element of coherence above the detailed playing. This is the musical element which cannot really be taught.

The more I penetrate into the music the less I wish for modern means: stops and fingerings. The old fingerings bring out the unity of the music and the means of attaining it. When the elements— fingering, ornamentation, etc., are overdone—that is where musicology goes wrong.

Editor: So you advise students to go back to the original sources.

Gustav Leonhardt: When reading sources one only reads what one wants to read. Read it again after five years, and the meaning can be different! At the same time, this means that teaching has little effect unless the pupil comes in the same direction. Integration comes when the student finds things for himself. The student should not get only extracts from books and from his teacher, but should read the old texts for himself. So many of these are now available in facsimile that the days of Dolmetsch and Donington are over. But there are still many unclear things, such as *inegalite*— even in Couperin. When I play a piece now, I have to choose, although one could equally well defend another reading.