

Fitch, Frances Conover. *Musicians and Composers of the 20th Century*, s.v. "Gustav Leonhardt." Armenia, New York: Salem Press, 2009. Used by permission of EBSCO Information Services.

A preeminent figure in the Early Music movement of the twentieth century, early keyboard player Gustav Leonhardt influenced countless students, record buyers, concertgoers, and musician colleagues through his energetic, quietly passionate performance and leadership style, his impeccable scholarship, and his brilliant and sophisticated mind. He championed the cause of the music he played and respected, rather than his own virtuosity, though that was remarkable. As a teacher and conductor he encouraged in his fellow musicians a sense of humility and curiosity about European music of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. He taught them how to breathe life into a repertoire that was, at the time, being performed in an abstract and largely intellectual manner. His particular insight into the concept of Baroque music as speech, and the role of rhetoric and articulation in creating that speech set his playing of the harpsichord apart from that of his contemporaries.

The Life:

Gustav Leonhardt was born into a musical Dutch-Austrian family, between the two world wars. His childhood home was in 's Graveland, a country town with stately homes near Hilversum in the province of North Holland, The Netherlands. His parents were accomplished amateur musicians with eclectic tastes in music, and the study of music was expected in their household. Gustav and his sister, Trudelines, were steered toward the piano and a harpsichord that their parents had bought for occasions when they played chamber music of Bach and Handel. It was rare to own a harpsichord before the Second World War, and having this one at home, during wartime when school was cancelled, provided the young Leonhardt with an opportunity to learn to regulate and play the instrument.

Gustav Leonhardt's father was on the governing board of the Concertgebouw Orchestra and of the De Nederlandse Bachvereniging (The Netherlands Bach Society) known for its performances of Johann Sebastian Bach's *St. Matthew Passion* it has given since 1922 in the Grote Kerk, Naarden. These performances under the direction of Anthon van der Horst were uncut, and he conducted from a facsimile of the original manuscript. Two organ continuo players were used, one of whom played from a thoroughbass rather than a written realization. This first foray into historical performing practice in the Netherlands greatly impressed Gustav Leonhardt. Also a prolific composer and a prodigious keyboard player van der Horst was Leonhardt's theory teacher in this early period. Recordings of Wanda Landowska played a part in shaping the young Leonhardt's interest in the harpsichord and his search for an expressive style of playing it.

Gustav Leonhardt spent his student years in Basel, Switzerland and Vienna, Austria, and then returned to Holland, where he lived for many years in an eighteenth-century canal house in Amsterdam. In 1979, he published a book about the house called [Het huis Bartolotti en zijn bewoners](#). He married violinist Marie Leonhardt, a native of Lausanne, Switzerland, and they had three daughters. Mr. Leonhardt was on the faculty of the Sweelinck Conservatorium in Amsterdam, and served as organist, first of the Waalse Kerk and later the Nieuwe Kerk in Amsterdam. This same Nieuwe Kerk position was held during the seventeenth century by Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck. During his 25-year tenure at the Waalse Kerk, Mr. Leonhardt collaborated in the restoration of an important historical 1680's

organ that had been rebuilt in 1734 by Christian Müller. At the age of 79, Leonhard was still playing or conducting 100 concerts per year and actively recordings new repertoire.

Musical Career:

Having studied cello and piano in his early youth, and theory during his teenage years with Anthon van der Horst, Leonhardt began his organ, harpsichord and thoroughbass studies at the age of 19 with Eduard Müller at the Schola Cantorum in Basel, Switzerland. At the Schola Cantorum, he received his Soloist's Diploma *magna cum laude*. Subsequently, he studied musicology and made his harpsichord debut in Vienna, Austria. Between 1952 and 1955, he was professor of harpsichord at the Vienna Music Academy, and began a long teaching career at the Sweelinck Conservatorium in Amsterdam, The Netherlands in 1954.

Leonhardt began his extensive and influential recording career in the 1950's, both as a soloist playing the music of J.S. Bach, and with The Leonhardt Baroque Ensemble, a group that included his wife, Marie Leonhardt, and Eduard Melkus, violins, Alice Hoffelner, viola, Nikolaus Harnoncourt, cello, and Michel Piguet, oboe. In 1954, the group recorded two Bach cantatas with Alfred Deller, for whom Leonhardt had great admiration. During his student years in Basel, Leonhardt had an English friend who owned a 45 rpm recording of Purcell songs performed by Alfred Deller. Leonhardt was most impressed by Deller's expressive singing and text delivery, and during a 1948 visit to London, the two friends daringly called and invited Mr. Deller to tea. Leonhardt subsequently invited Deller to make several radio recordings in Holland, and in 1954, a commercial recording was made in Vienna. The Leonhardt Consort, starting in 1955, went on to produce numerous concerts and recordings. The Library of Congress catalog lists more than 120 individual commercial recordings made by Gustav Leonhardt, not only as harpsichord, clavichord, fortepiano and organ soloist, but also as conductor. Many of these recordings were made on antique instruments in churches, museums and private collections.

In chamber music performances and recordings, Leonhardt collaborated with virtually every "early music" performer of note, as well as many who were considered to be more in the mainstream. His close colleagues in Holland and Belgium included Wieland, Sigiswald and Bartold Kuijken, Anner Bijlsma, Elly Ameling, Max van Egmond, René Jacobs, and Frans Bruggen.

In 1967, Leonhardt played the role of Johann Sebastian Bach in Jean Marie Straub's film "The Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach," directed by Danièle Huillet. The film won a British Film Institute award, and includes an appearance by the noted cellist and conductor Nicolaus Harnoncourt in the role of the Prince of Anhalt-Cöthen.

Between 1971 and 1990, the Leonhardt Consort, working jointly with Nikolaus Harnoncourt's *Concentus Musicus*, recorded all the Bach cantatas. This massive undertaking successfully created the first substantial representation of the historically informed performance movement that so influenced playing styles in the last 30 years of the twentieth century. Leonhardt also recorded all the major keyboard works of Bach as well as his own harpsichord transcriptions of some of Bach's compositions for strings. He published a study of *The Art of Fugue* and numerous musicological articles, and contributed as co-editor of a publication of the complete keyboard music of Jan Peterszoon Sweelinck.

Leonhardt had a parallel career as an organist, serving two Amsterdam churches, the Waalse Kerk and the Nieuwe Kerk, and making several recordings on historical European organs. While his primary instrument for recitals was harpsichord, he also had command of the organ and the fortepiano, and in later years, explored the clavichord, a keyboard instrument combining organ pipes and plucked strings.

Students from all over the world traveled to Holland to study with Gustav Leonhardt, sometimes waiting several years and living in the Netherlands for some time. He attracted students who went on to have noteworthy performing careers, among them Bob van Asperen, Alan Curtis, Richard Eggar, John Gibbons, Christopher Hogwood, Ton Koopman, Martin Pearlman, Frederick Renz, Christophe Rousset, Skip Sempe, and Andreas Staier. Others traveled for short-term study, and dozens of young musicians played for him in master classes at conservatories, universities and festivals in many countries. His insights and suggestions were valued by singers and instrumentalists of all types, because of his ability to clarify the nature of a piece of music and encourage a player to focus on and project that nature in a performance. His use of such expressive words as “spicy, luscious, wild, pathetic, and bliss” in teaching belied his reserved personal manner. He was in steady demand as an adjudicator for harpsichord competitions.

An impressive polyglot, Gustav Leonhardt taught and lectured with ease in several languages. He was Horatio Appleton Lamb Professor of Music at Harvard University in 1969-70, an honor that was also conferred on Bela Bartók in 1943. He was awarded honorary doctorates by several universities including Harvard (1991). In 1980, Gustav Leonhardt and Nicolaus Harnoncourt were jointly awarded the Erasmus Prize by the Praemium Erasmianum Foundation in recognition of their notable contributions to European culture, notably the recordings of the cantatas of Bach..

In later years, Leonhardt was in increasing demand as a conductor, both in Europe and abroad. Among the groups he conducted aside from the Leonhardt Consort were The Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment, La Petite Bande, and The Netherlands Bach Society. He conducted the inaugural concerts of the New York Collegium in 1998.

Musical Legacy:

Never a flamboyant showman, Leonhardt was sometimes criticized for his cool and detached manner. He was a passionate performer: serious, witty, expressive and thoroughly engaged with the music he played. He could clarify for a listener the contrapuntal and harmonic dimensions of a composer's creation and reveal its underlying structure as well as its elegant surface layers. His improvised ornamentation sounded spontaneous, and his keyboard playing had extraordinary rhythmic suppleness and variety. As one of the founders of the historically informed performance movement of the twentieth century, Leonhardt helped to release music from the grip of both overly dry scholarly interpretation and of Romantic self-indulgence, and his performances of lesser known works vastly increased the repertoire. Through collaborations with builders of early keyboard instruments, he also contributed to the revival of historical principles in instrument building.

Gustav Leonhardt's keen musicologist's mind and lack of ostentation were as much a part of shaping his legacy as were his stunning abilities as a keyboard player. He taught respect for a composer's musical statement within its cultural context. Rather than assume that a puzzling element of a piece was a weakness, a mistake, or a copyist's error, he studied writings of the

period, searching for the musical truth. Thus he discovered levels of subtlety, nuance and design that won admiration for the music itself. His ability to use articulation and the concept of Baroque music as speech set a new standard in harpsichord playing throughout the world. However, his influence reached far beyond solo keyboard playing – his work with colleagues and students brought historically informed performance into the respected mainstream of classical music.

Frances Conover Fitch

Further Reading

Cohen, Joel and Herb Snitzer. “Gustav Leonhardt,” in Reprise: The Extraordinary Revival of Early Music. Boston: Little, Brown, 1985. Joel Cohen addresses the contrast between Leonhardt’s personal manner and music performance in a lucid and penetrating description. He argues that Leonhardt is “a Diogenes holding up the lantern of musical truth.”

Leonhardt, Gustav. “In Praise of Flemish Virginals of the Seventeenth Century,” in Keyboard Instruments: Studies in Keyboard Organology 1500-1800. Ed. Edwin M. Ripin. New York: Dover, 1977. An eloquent, concise and thorough study and description of Flemish virginals and *muselars*, the particularities of their timbre, their construction and suitability to their repertoire.

---. “Johann Jakob Froberger and his music.” L’organo, vi (1968), 15-38. A study of Froberger that elucidates wider trends and influences in European music of the seventeenth century.

Schott, Howard. “‘Ein Volkommener Music-Meister’. Gustav Leonhardt in Profile.” The Musical Times 133:1796, 1992. A long-time acquaintance of Leonhardt talks about details of his life and musical legacy.