

‘Perhaps his greatest quality was his extraordinary musical conviction’

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TEACHING

Gustav Leonhardt was able to teach harpsichord playing at the highest level, on instruments based on those of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This is a phenomenon that had not previously been dealt with nor perfected during the ‘early music revival’ of the earlier twentieth century.

He always shared everything he knew, in a kind of a master-disciple process, through imitation and explanation. Leonhardt’s particular technique that provided for this high-level harpsichord playing was his re-invention of the complex manner of creating what he referred to as ‘keyboard polyphony’, based exclusively on listening, timing and touch. He taught this brilliantly conceived system that contrasted subtlety with intensity through the use of agogic accent and rhetorical inflexion.

Perhaps his greatest quality was his extraordinary musical conviction. In his own discreet manner, he also taught this.

PIONEERING

Leonhardt and Harnoncourt did not know how the result of their research and performances in Vienna in the 1950s would finally turn out. In fact, they were primarily interested in hearing and learning about how sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth century music sounded on the instruments available when the music was written – to know whether the *behaviour* of the ‘original instruments’ made a musical difference in one way or another. Leonhardt *totally* changed the approach to early music – and that of keyboard music. He was a real master of musical rhetoric and of musical syntax. Rhetoric is important, but syntax – the system that allows absolutely everything to fall in the right place at the right time – is the necessary complement.

Nevertheless the long-term effect was not part of his initial interest. This question would have struck him as rather strange: for Leonhardt, a musician with a ‘business plan’ was a phenomenon of the 1980s, not of the 1950s! But when it became obvious that the long-term

effect had indeed had a major influence on the entire music world by the mid-1980s, he knew that he was, along with Nikolaus Harnoncourt and Frans Brüggen, the major musical and artistic force behind absolutely everything that we now consider 'historically informed performance'.

CONDUCTOR

Leonhardt was primarily a harpsichordist and organist – conducting came later. His treatment of the harpsichord and the organ as pure musical instruments – rather than treating them as furniture, gadgets, machines or curiosities – from the finest acoustic examples of the Renaissance and Baroque periods was revelatory. Though he succeeded in making a career as a harpsichordist, organist and chamber musician – with the Leonhardt consort in which he played harpsichord, chamber organ and viola da gamba – he never attempted to make a career as a conductor, he just responded favourably to offers to direct larger repertoire that interested him with baroque orchestras, choirs and soloists. And, he was well aware of the important musical and artistic difference between detailed, intentioned musical direction and conducting (which, 'as long as you know the music', he always considered to be the easiest musical activity, far easier than playing!).

'HARPSICHORD MUSIC PROCEEDS FROM VOCAL MUSIC.'

Leonhardt said, and I also think that all instrumental music is somehow vocally inspired. I refer to Western European repertoire composed before the twentieth-century atonal repertoire, which is not vocally inspired. In the course of the twentieth century, vocal music became increasingly instrumentally oriented. Leonhardt was convinced of the power of purely instrumental music because he was so involved with the finest musical instruments, namely harpsichords and organs. He was also played the cello and the viola da gamba, and from these experiences with bowed stringed instruments he had an intimate knowledge of the bow and of bowing – namely upbow, downbow and whether the bow was in contact with the string or not. It is now time to mention that, at some point, a great instrumentalist must concentrate on what the voice *cannot* do: when you arrive at *that* point, instrumental playing can be as convincing as any singing.

INSTRUMENTS

Leonhardt always searched to match the appropriate repertoire with the appropriate instruments. As an instrumentalist, nothing interested him more than musically exquisite harpsichords and organs. Nothing served his public or recorded performances more than the inspiration he received from a newly discovered instrument. He was always curious, he befriended all the best organ and harpsichord makers, including the ones who made the

instruments heard on this recording. In fact, all he needed for inspiration was the instrument: the expert and exacting musical decisions had all been made decades earlier. Leonhardt himself liked recital programs. He found concert organizers who asked for the Goldberg Variations especially tedious and unimaginative. So, he always made his own choices about how to represent the harpsichord, organ or ensemble repertoire he would perform and record. I particularly enjoy his virginal music, Louis Couperin, Frescobaldi, Froberger, and his Bach harpsichord transcriptions from the solo violin music.

HERITAGE

At this point of heritage, I think that the only thing one could really have inherited from Leonhardt is his musical conviction. Other than that, it is perhaps important to mention that it is France that has inherited much from Leonhardt, through his tradition and the subsequent creation a new generation of harpsichordists – some of whom studied with him and some of whom did not. In the 1960s and 70s, the French musical scene was extremely resistant to Leonhardt and to his approach, then, little by little, his approach eclipsed all previous influences in France, those of Landowska and the *Ancien Régime*. The direct result of this is that there are more fine harpsichordists in France than anywhere in the world. All this via Leonhardt, who began his career with Bach and finished it with Forqueray. This is somehow appropriate – even the finest harpsichords from his personal collection are now here with his old friends. And this very recording – as well as several others from Leonhardt's last recordings – was made for a French label, largely due to the fact that Paris has become the centre of the harpsichord world.

I particularly miss him when I hear his fine organ playing. And when I play on his own harpsichords. Perhaps even more when I hear my friends and students play on them. Today, he is still extraordinarily present for me.

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