

teachers and students: transmission versus copying

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Gustav Leonhardt's transcription of J.S. Bach's Ciaccona

Musical transmission is a well-explored topic in the history of Western music. In a rare filmed appearance, pianist Edwin Fischer recited, more than explained, how it works: "Beethoven instructed Czerny how to play the Well-tempered Clavier; Czerny taught it to Liszt; Liszt taught it to Eugène d'Albert." The clip is part of the documentary "The Art of Piano" (found at 1:07:31 of this YouTube video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vpiMAaPTze8>). To complete the lineage for the benefit of readers of our time: d'Albert taught Fischer, who was endorsing his then-new recording of Bach's WTC.

In addition to being a great-great-grandpupil of Beethoven, Fischer was also a celebrated teacher. His statement about the musical lineage that authenticated his way of playing Bach can be seen as a statement about pedagogy rather than a display of vanity. It tells us that by the mid-20th century, the idea of a student imitating the example of his teacher was considered more than just valuable in a general sense.

To Fischer, the transmission of skills, knowledge and values from teacher to student in an unbroken tradition was profoundly meaningful: the essence of why one became a pupil, or later a teacher. This idea is not new. In France in the 1670s, J.L. Le Gallois suggested the same pedagogy of learning by imitation in his famous praise of Chambonnière's way of playing: "in order to learn the pieces of each master, it is necessary to study them with the same masters who have composed them, or with their best pupils."

For a student of harpsichord in Amsterdam in the 1980s, however, learning by imitation was *not* normally considered an option. On the contrary. Although a few pockets of resistance remained in some instrument groups, professional music pedagogy in Holland in general had turned away from the days when students were required to slavishly copy their teacher's playing in order to guarantee their own future success. Baroque musicians, especially, were suspicious of the reiteration of unquestioned and untested traditional values. Again, there may have been some exceptions, but in general, the student of Early Music was expected to probe and dismiss, and ultimately to pave a new, personal way for her or his musicianship.

Naturally, when you are still learning the basics, there is no such thing as *not* looking at how your teacher does certain things. To stick out your neck in artistic aspiration before your fingers had yet unlearned their teenage stumbling was, in my recollection, firmly discouraged. Later, however, receiving a good lesson depended more and more on having prepared a full musical statement in advance. This might not be the easiest way to learn (especially because the search for your own 'voice' in a competitive environment of frequent student concerts is a rather nerve-shattering activity), but it is a good preparation for a life as a professional harpsichordist.

What, then, can be done, twenty-five years later, to commemorate the most self-effacing of harpsichord teachers, one who only granted his students the rarest and most fleeting glimpses into his "kitchen," as he called it, who would talk about the "little tricks" of the trade only sparingly, with a dismissive gesture of his hand, and who strongly disliked being imitated?

I was faced with this question when preparing for several memorial concerts for Gustav Leonhardt last year (<https://skowroneck.wordpress.com/2012/01/18/gustav-leonhardt-1928-2012/>). I decided to trace my own experience with Leonhardt's playing back to a point at which my fascination with his musicianship had been more important for me than the question of paving my own musical way, to re-visit a place of special amazement. I listened again, for the first time in many years, to Leonhardt's 1975 recording of his own harpsichord transcription of J.S. Bach's famous d-minor Ciaccona for solo violin from the Partita No. 2 in D minor, BWV 1004 (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mXRlr78A5xg> is a YouTube link to the recording that seems to work at least in some countries).

Leonhardt presented his project of transcribing Bach's works for solo violin during a lecture one evening at one of the annual Bremen *Sommerakademien* for Early Music. This must have been in 1975, very shortly after he made the recording. I remember a few witty first sentences in his quiet voice, whereupon a door burst open and a handful of jolly, noisy and oblivious latecomers entered the hall, carrying with them a heavy cloud of Patchouli and some chairs above their heads. After the commotion had subsided, the speaker patiently repeated his introductory sentences, and a lengthy lecture about the history and function of keyboard transcriptions followed. Then Leonhardt played the Ciaccona for us.

I was familiar with Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli's recording of Busoni's piano transcription of this piece, and hence knew about the meditative quality of the composition, but I was entirely unprepared for the breath-taking, time-arresting and grand quality it assumed in Leonhardt's version and under his hands. The fascination of that evening lasted for me: Leonhardt played the entire Partita in a public concert in Bremen a year later, and afterwards we talked about the Ciaccona. Leonhardt spoke admiringly of Busoni's own piano roll recording of his transcription and the amount of "inégal" passages that can be heard on it (I knew too little at the time to ask him whether he thought that this was due to Busoni's musical choices, or rather an unintended side-effect of the Welt-Mignon recording process). Not long thereafter, his recording became available. I re-recorded it with my little Uher tape machine and listened to it until, many years later, the tape

dissolved into rubbery strands. Then I went to study music, and almost forgot about the entire event. Leonhardt's transcriptions were off-limits for us students in any case. Wisely, I never asked for any of them.

When I returned to this particular version of Bach's Ciaccona last year, it was not only in search of a morsel of that long-gone first fascination. After the funeral service in Amsterdam I started to realize that playing concerts in memory of someone who had been as explicit as Leonhardt in downplaying his own importance for the afterworld needed to be something altogether different than an attempt to play the music the deceased would have appreciated in a manner that would not have disturbed him. Instead, it needed to be the best possible effort to create an atmosphere in which those who knew him and had heard him play could *remember* him. So I took a pair of headphones and a pencil, I transcribed the Ciaccona from the recording, and practiced the piece.

I performed the resulting piece of music at a memorial concert of the Early Music Festival in Stockholm; in a house concert in Staunton, Virginia; in further house concerts at home, in Gothenburg (on the very harpsichord by William Dowd that Leonhardt had used for his recording when it was brand new), and in Bremen; and finally in another public memorial concert in the Haga Church in Gothenburg. The experience exceeded all my expectations in terms of its fascination and brought me back, at least partway, to the Edwin Fischers of the musical world and their concept of a lineage of music teaching.

The piece.

Little needs to be said about the importance of "Bach's Chaconne" within the canon of Classical music, or its compositional qualities. The most outstanding characteristic of this piece, as I learned, is that it is unique in capturing the audience's concentration. It not only enables the performer to show what she or he can (and cannot) do on the instrument, but it provides a guarantee that the audience actually *listens*. People usually don't cough much during such a performance (<https://skowroneck.wordpress.com/2007/11/21/concert-coughs/>); it even seems that they breathe more sparingly. Not many other pieces of our repertoire grant us this kind of luxury, and I know of no other that makes it quite so easy for the performer to make him- or herself heard (and appreciated).

The transcription

To say that Leonhardt's harpsichord version of Bach's Ciaccona is an "effective" concert piece would be a huge understatement. The transcription offers everything that defines good harpsichord writing, good harpsichord playing, and attractive concertizing:

- Leonhardt transposed the suite down a fifth to g minor, and so it addresses the harpsichord's most sonorous area in a most satisfying manner.

- It displays a large variety of approaches to a good, that is, characteristic and flexible harpsichord touch, ranging from extensive, sometimes almost part-written superlegato passages to pronounced articulations and accentuations, rhetorical rests and sharply dotted rhythms.
- It contains some amazingly well-written passages in style luthé (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Style_bris%C3%A9): well-written in that they offer the possibility to create a most luxurious sound, to point out delicacies and subtleties along the way, without losing momentum. In many other harpsichord pieces, an optimal balance of these elements is very difficult to achieve.
- It is a most brilliant showcase of virtuosic textures, written with witty economy of choreography and aimed at maximum effect with comparatively little work.
- It presents a number of nifty registration strategies for the familiar 8'8'4' disposition of a double-manual harpsichord.
- Finally, and perhaps a little paradoxically, it is a strong statement in the tradition of transcriptions of this famous violin piece. Both the rather literal approach of Brahms' piano version for the left hand and the idiosyncratic grandeur of Busoni's transcription can be felt somehow, and yet this is entirely a piece of Bach, a piece belonging to the 18th century, a concert piece reflecting harpsichord playing of the 1980s, and a personal musical statement from Leonhardt – all in one.

Transcribing a transcription: caught between text and playing style

It is time to talk about the most obvious problem, from the transcriber's standpoint, with this enterprise. It is not, as you might expect, to try to hear and notate the fast notes of the arpeggios toward the end of the first section of the Ciaccona. Admittedly, that took some listening and analyzing, but it turned out to be doable.

The problem was where to draw the line between what to write down and what to leave to the moment of the performance. For example, I decided that the registration was part of the transcription, as were some trills and other embellishments. I also made a point of capturing much of Leonhardt's legato and nonlegato playing in my notation, even though such things could also have happened spontaneously. For my own performances, I also made use of a few of Leonhardt's ritardandos throughout the piece, just in order to find my way in its large structure, and to experiment with a performance-stylistic ingredient that I am otherwise less eager to apply.

The strongly overdotted rhythm in the theme, on the other hand, is part of the performance, and when playing the piece I ended up going back and forth between several options. The same applied

to Leonhardt's various manners of breaking chords and filling them up with acciaccaturas. To understand what he was doing at certain moments, and to experiment with achieving roughly the same effect, was enlightening and often even entertaining, but during a performance, a harpsichordist can only produce convincing sonorities in big chords by relying on the moment, taking into account the instrument and the venue. Finally, Leonhardt's rhythmical freedom in the first figure in sixteenths in bars 3 and 4, and his tendency to play some sixteenths that are slurred two-and-two in a slightly lombardic fashion, seemed to me mainly a manifestation of his personal playing style and I avoided imitating them.

What the copycat learned

To take a dictation of such a long piece means listening many times, not merely to the notes, but also to the performance. The performer's most stellar moments, his good moments, his standard solutions, his quirks and mannerisms, and even a few skipped notes all get etched into your brain during the process. There is no escaping from the very thing we were always warned about: using someone else's playing style as the starting point for our own performances. But how wrong, or limiting, is this really?

We can only find out by seeing the entire exercise through to the very end. In late March, after copying out my CD transcription in ink, I put away the CD and started practicing. I put in fingerings, added slurs and written comments and got the work up to speed and "in character." During May, I played it for friends and family, returned to the tricky parts, revised fingerings and timings, and along came the first public performance in early June. The only thing I did directly after the concert was to listen one more time to Leonhardt's CD in order to catch the last few transcription errors. Then I let the project rest for a while.

A few months after this first performance, I received a recording of the concert. What I secretly feared was to hear a weaker blueprint of Leonhardt's original. What I luckily heard instead was only me, playing the harpsichord, sometimes sounding more or less as I had imagined I would, and sometimes not. I made a mental list of things I had to work on: structural decisions and phrasings that I had entrusted to my musical auto-pilot and that I now needed to chisel out more clearly, sonorities that I had imagined but not fully realized, a few issues of choreography and registration that had not worked well under pressure, and so on. The resulting sleeves-rolled-up phase of work had less and less to do with Leonhardt's playing, and more and more to do with what was on the page and in my head. When I played the Ciaccona again, it had become "mine", and when I listened to Leonhardt's recording again during the fall, his interpretation had become surprisingly unfamiliar to me.

Of course, jazz musicians, folk musicians and a few others already know all this: a musical performance born in imitation of a master does not stay there. As soon as the music is internalized, it begins to move, shift, re-arrange itself, change character and intent. If, as in notated music, the

original is prescribed to a large degree, this process may be slow and subtle, but the shifting, changing, and growing happens all the same.

In other words, to begin a musical project by imitating someone else's playing is not a risky thing to do at all. The danger of getting stuck in an interpretive corner is small. You will have a really hard time staying in that corner: if you persist in confronting yourself with the original at all times, with the clear goal of *not* deviating from it, you might succeed for a while, but that would be truly hard work.

Postscript March 2020: After yet another round of public performances during 2017–2018, and after analyzing my accumulated concert recordings of the Ciaccona together with Leonhardt's own in preparation of a lecture–recital at the Academy of Music and Drama (University of Gothenburg), I finally recorded the piece in October 2018. The CD, which includes Bach's 6th English suite, the three lute pieces in E-flat-major and the entire Second Violin Partita in Leonhardt's transcription will become available in spring 2020 at TYXart (<https://tyxart.de/>).