With great appreciation and thanks for:

WENTZ, Jed: “On the Protestant Roots of Gustav Leonhardt’s Performance Style”, in BACH: Journal of the Riemenschneider Bach Institute, Vol. 48, No. 2 and Vol. 49, No. 1.

I applaud Jed’s research into the religious/musical movements which clearly impacted Leonhardt’s artistic approach, especially in his early years as a performer.

Even as a teenager I had noticed the ‘straightforward’ approach that Leonhardt often took towards keyboard music. This approach, especially at first hearing, called for a rigidity in tempo, conservative approach to stop changes, lack of much ornamentation, and overall a rather bland, impersonal performance, though never so rigid that it was harsh or hard-edged. An important positive was Leonhardt’s choice of historic harpsichords and organs when he performed; the sound itself was mesmerizing.

But Leonhardt often abandoned the ‘straightforward’ approach, especially when playing live and especially as he got older (I first met him when he was 48). And he did not impose it on his students. Even when he did perform in a ‘straightforward’ manner, his approach was never totally inflexible, and there were tiny adjustments to articulations, ornamentation and rubato to be detected by those who knew what to listen for. In spite of the fact that I was not wildly attracted to his ‘strict style’, I cultivated our student-teacher relationship knowing that if I understood more about him and his musical choices, I would understand more about early keyboard music.

What Jed has done is to give us some insight into why Leonhardt chose the ‘straightforward’ style in his early performing years. It turns out that in the early 20th century there was intense discussion of the purpose of Bach’s music, first of all in Germany, and how that should affect its performance. There were of course different theorists and protagonists. The dominant philosophical strand included people such as Protestant pastor Karl Greulich, who, quoting from Jed, ‘was convinced that reawakening the non-virtuosic sound-world of Bach’s more religious time would result in a spiritual renewal of the German people. Implicit in this argument is the idea that employing original instruments . . . and children’s voices would detract less from the music’s power to preach’. At the same time, in the early years of the 20th century, people such as musicologist Arnold Schering were already advocating passionately for the use of early instruments. And these twin motivations - historically accurate performances and the belief that ‘pure’ performance was a form of worship - blended together seamlessly.

These ideas took root in the Netherlands as well. An early advocate was Hermann Rutters, who served as the influential music critic of the *Algemeen Handelsblad* from 1915 to 1945. A very important force for change was the Nederlandse Bachvereniging (Dutch Bach Society - well known today for All of Bach as well as its annual Bach passion performances), founded

in 1921 and led by theologian JH Gunning. In 1904, Gunning had written: ‘in Bach’s music piety is always number one and musical expression number two’. He later wrote ‘ . . . all true art is religious, but the most religious is undoubtedly music and the most religious music is undoubtedly that of Bach’.

Leonhardt’s father was an enthusiastic amateur musician, and he joined the NBV board in 1938 (when his son was 10). It is fair to say that Gustav Leonhardt grew up in a home which was not only religious and musical, but that the most influential musicians who visited that home believed that religion (Calvinism) and music were forever entwined. Moreover, there was a belief that simplicity and authenticity in performance brought one closer to God.

The philosophical roots of the ‘straightforward’ style thus lay very deep in Leonhardt’s psyche.

Nonetheless, in my opinion, we can hear Leonhardt shedding the musical tenets of this style in the course of the 1960s. I believe that this was partially due to his increasing interest in French music; he once remarked to me that French music was ‘about beauty, and nothing else’. Of course one cannot play Froberger, Böhm, Bach, Purcell, etc and ignore the French style.

I think another influence was the instruments Leonhardt was playing which - in both the harpsichord and organ worlds - were increasing large, diverse in colour and sensitive in touch. These included both new instruments and, more crucially perhaps, newly restored historic instruments.

And one cannot ignore Leonhardt’s differing approaches to recording and teaching/concertizing. He told me that recordings were ‘documents’, part of the historical record, but wished that somehow, after his death, his own recordings would ‘turn to dust’; he did not see himself as someone who ‘made history’. Many, though not all of his recordings, lean towards the ‘straightforward’ approach. On the contrary, lessons and concerts were opportunities to be bold and imaginative, and to try new approaches which might be discarded before the next performance. In these contexts we could hear the use of rhetorical rubato, articulations which varied from the almost imperceptible to the shockingly dramatic, over-legato, expressive ornaments, the many forms and uses of arpeggiation and notes played together, and the manipulation of inner textures on the harpsichord which made his playing so refined, witty and moving as he matured.

This was the Leonhardt who made my heart beat faster, and who continues to influence my performance decisions to this day. And yet I also have an affection for the ‘straightforward’ Leonhardt, so true to the original score, so determined to use the right instrument for the right composer, and putting his own stamp on each piece in the subtlest of ways.