



Tilman Skowroneck

Language

English

Nationality

German

Country of Residence

Sweden

Year of birth

1959

Website Address

www.skowroneck.de

Year(s) in which you received lessons from Gustav Leonhardt

The academic year 1986–87.

The lessons were

A kind of stuck-on year on top of my conservatory diploma in Amsterdam; Leonhardt had agreed to teach me, but there was no degree at the end.

How did you first come into contact with Gustav Leonhardt, and how did you get the opportunity to study with him? Did you have to wait before you could become his student?

The Leonhardts had established a friendship with my parents several years before I was born. So, I was acquainted with him privately since my very early childhood. For later establishing a “professional” relationship this circumstance wasn’t necessarily a straightforward advantage: we both were initially perhaps more comfortable having conversations about cars than about music. I remember being impressed by his sardonic humor even more than by his musicianship for a long while as a child. When I entered conservatory in 1979, I had, of course, listened to his recordings and a fair number of his recitals, also to a number of his masterclasses in Bremen during the mid-1970s, and perhaps most importantly, to his playing in private. At the time he still had no idea how I played. I went to visit him around November or December ’79 and played a few pieces for him; he asked me to transpose one of them and tested a few other things and then advised me to study with Anneke Uittenbosch and come again to play for him in a few years’ time. It must have been around 1982 or so that he agreed to teach me, so yes, I did wait.

Briefly describe your level of musical education when you started lessons with Gustav Leonhardt. How many years had you studied an early keyboard instrument? What academic qualifications did you have, if any?

I began with harpsichord lessons at around 5 ½ years, so that must have been in early 1965. I always had private lessons as a child, which was a good thing for continuity, but had severe drawbacks regarding public exposure. This hit me like a hammer when I began to study in the Netherlands (first with Bob van Asperen, later with Anneke Uittenbosch and Ton Koopman): initially I had, for instance, no consistent practicing method, and – even worse – I had no tools whatsoever in place for dealing with stage nerves. So, while being a through-and-through early keyboardist from day one, there was a period when I had to take a number of extra laps in order to put some sorely missing building blocks in place. At the time I began studying with Leonhardt, I had a teaching diploma in my pocket.

What repertoire did you study with Gustav Leonhardt? You may answer along general lines or give a list.

At least two English Suites by J.S. Bach: no. 1 and no. 5. J.S. Bach, 4th Partita in D major. J.S. Bach, Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue. J.S. Bach, Concerto for 2 harpsichords in C major BWV 1061 (with Pauline Schenck). J.S. Bach, Violin Sonata in c minor BWV 1017 (with Ryo Terakado). J.S. Bach, The Art of the Fugue, Contrapunctus 6. J.P. Sweelinck, 'Est-ce Mars'. G. Frescobaldi, Romanesca variations, one of the Capriccios, at least one Toccata, and the Ruggiero variations. At least one Toccata+Suite by Froberger. At least one Prélude and Suite by Louis Couperin (certainly the Prélude in d minor). G. Böhm, Prelude, Fugue and Postlude in G minor. A selection of pieces by DuPhly. D. Scarlatti Sonatas K. 490, 491, 492. There was more repertoire, including some virginal music, which I don't recall specifically.

Did you present each piece of music only once, or more often? Was this your own choice?

It became clear quite early on that Leonhardt's preference was to listen to any given piece once. I remember asking whether he wanted to hear an English suite again the next week, and he said, "No, why?" So I prepared new repertoire every week, with one exception: After a very concentrated lesson on Frescobaldi's Romanesca variations I decided to come back with the same piece and some very specific things to ask and show. That seemed to be ok for him, and we got a few more things sorted out that day.

Please describe a typical lesson or various types of lessons you received. For example: the frequency, length and location of the lessons, the specific instruments used, the number of pieces you typically presented, how much discussion there was, how much Leonhardt played and at what point during the lesson, etc.

Some slight variations of a student's typical arrival routine have been described by many others: one would press the brass doorbell button at Herengracht 170, listen to the slightly delayed ringing somewhere deep within through the thick green door, enter the dark marble hallway and march somewhat more than halfway down where Leonhardt stood near the stairs at the right to shake hands. Lessons took place in the large salon located on the same floor. Only once he came to our apartment for teaching Bach's C major double concerto, because we had our rehearsal set up with two tuned harpsichords ready. Usually I was given some private time to warm up. Then he entered, and seated himself quite far away from the harpsichord, almost in the corner of the room. The format of the beginning of a normal lesson, then, was that of a private performance. At the core of his teaching efforts was first and foremost the student's task to play in an engaging manner, in spite of any possibly distracting factors, such as the early hour, the rather shallow and light touch of the harpsichord (the von Nagel Mietke which he used, for instance, on his second recording of Bach's Partitas) or one's nervousness. Lessons lasted for around 1 1/2 hours if I recall correctly. Afterwards I usually was invited to a small cup of very strong espresso downstairs in the room beside the kitchen, which famously housed an old wall clock with a near-deafening bell. I found there to be a strong connection between the specific repertoire and how much Leonhardt came "out of his shell," and began to talk about the music's content and expression (or to sing, whistle or conduct it, or demonstrate at the instrument, which he sometimes did very much, sometimes not at all). It certainly also depended on the situation whether he provided some detailed musical solutions or even on occasion some technical feedback, or kept his comments more general. Sometimes he spent very much time on a very short fragment of music. I remember working for an entire hour on a one-page Froberger Allemande. The range of expressive variation he was asking for within these few notes was extraordinary. This was also one of the rather few occasions where he let me try and re-try passages endlessly in order to find better solutions. Conversely it could happen that he listened to an entire Suite only to say afterwards, "good, fine – do you have anything else?" In such a case it sometimes remained unclear whether he found it not worth wasting words on this particular music, whether he found my playing "good enough", or in fact too lackluster for commenting. I knew his double-bottomed humor too well, and sometimes didn't feel safe even with his positive feedback: what to make, for example, of the comment "this was good, could go directly on a record," coming from someone who was so outspokenly ambivalent about the lasting importance of recordings? Leonhardt often dodged performance-

practical issues with a “we don’t know.” The clearest example may be his attitude towards Louis Couperin's Préludes, where he simply said, "we really have no idea at all how they played this kind of music" (we had a full lesson about the piece nevertheless). But his ideas about musical professionalism were clear-cut and pragmatic. The lesson about Bach's C minor violin sonata (together with Ryo Terakado) turned into a high-tempo chamber music session where no time was wasted, although passages were re-tried multiple times until they "sat"; the atmosphere felt more like an orchestra rehearsal. Instead of performance practice, he often addressed the musical content of a piece, typically re-casting the idea of “emotional expression” into a quest for being “convincing” on stage. Formal analysis (mostly polyphonic or motivic things) did occasionally come up, but never took the lead; stylistic considerations were often joined with a strong associative approach ("this should sound like trumpets" for the opening of Bach's C major double concerto; he was able to demonstrate how this sounded, on my own harpsichord! And I had had no idea...).

Did Gustav Leonhardt discuss and/or demonstrate keyboard technique, fingerings, hand and arm position, etc.? If so, did he relate these aspects to different periods, traditions and/or national styles of early keyboard music?

Technique was a matter of the musician's "kitchen" and not something one should have to discuss very much. Students were expected to have a solid technique. Notoriously difficult-to-play-really-clean pieces like Bach's Chromatic Fugue were, hence, firmly re-directed to the practice room if they turned out too messy during a lesson (talking to some colleagues, I learned that I was not the only student for whom this particular piece suffered this fate). Nifty solutions for difficult spots belonged, to him, to the category of "little tricks" ("truucjes"), mostly a personal thing about which one didn't need to make much noise. I do, however, recall that he showed me a few practical hand distributions in a certain piece (not remembering which), and he demonstrated his approach to hand relaxation and some finger substitutions at the keyboard. He also did come over to look at my fingering (5-32132) at the third beat of bar 2 in Bach's first English suite (Prelude), because with some sheer luck I had managed to keep all the chord notes tied over on my first attempt, without compromising speed or the regularity of the 16th notes. Another thing he demonstrated at the keyboard for me was his "truucje" to gradually take away the inner notes from big chords in order to influence the diminuendo. What he did discuss was touch (especially precision and lightness) and relaxedness. Relaxation was also one of the themes I recall from the masterclasses I listened to as a teenager: "Have you ever thrown a cat out of the window?" - Shocked silence, stammering denial – "well it is interesting, isn't it, how they actually never get hurt; they always land on their four paws, entirely relaxed and flexible. That's the ideal, that's how your arm and hand should feel."

Did he discuss historical? ? performance practice or different types of historic instruments, refer to musicological research, performance treatises, ornament tables, etc.? If so, in what particular situations and musical contexts?

He did certainly discuss instruments, but not during lessons.

Did you notice that he commented at greater length or with more enthusiasm on particular pieces, composers, or types of repertoire? If so, which ones?

As mentioned above, there was certainly some variation, but of course it is unclear if this was a matter of his mood, or the piece or composer. It seemed to me that Bach's first English Suite was more interesting for him to teach than the fifth, which I basically only played through once. Perhaps not many students come with that piece, because he commented on the pleasing effect of hearing the three Courantes in succession with a hint of surprise. Otherwise, from the composers I worked on, Froberger, Frescobaldi, Georg Böhm and Sweelinck seemed to engage him especially. Händel, on the other hand, was not a welcome composer – a known fact – and I did not try to convince him otherwise.

How did he engage with the works you presented? For example, did he offer stylistic considerations or make a formal analysis? Did he place the pieces within a larger context, musical or other? Did he use metaphors or make analogies when talking about the music?

I have not mentioned any extra-musical references earlier. Only recently I stumbled over the name of a sculptor that I had scribbled in the margin of a score for inspiration; when I played Sweelinck, he asked whether I had visited the Frans Hals museum in Haarlem and looked at those "healthy and rosy-cheeked" people depicted by Hals. At the end of my last lesson, for which I had chosen pieces by Duphly, he reminded me at the door that this music was like some exquisite bonbons: enticing and quite pleasing on the outside, but "with a soft filling."

Did he ask you to defend your interpretive choices? More generally, did he approach questions of personal autonomy and individuality as a performer during your studies? In what way?

As mentioned earlier, the ultimate goal was to be "convincing." There is a subjective side to this (hacked articulations and a butcher's touch were, to him, not convincing, so there's that...) but "convincing" is also a matter of developing, and maintaining, an inner logic in the course of a performance; a matter of making one's next musical decision dependent on decisions one just has made, and of not botching an intended effect halfway through. This is not a matter of preconceived "interpretive choices" but of planning (for instance, taking into account inner-voice syncopations), listening, and following through (for instance by timing the release in a manner that matches the initial attack of the note; if I had made a different attack, my release would need to be different, too). This manner of thinking about polyphony, sound and timing has become absolutely indispensable for my own way of working at the harpsichord. We did not discuss artistic autonomy during lessons, but in other contexts. I was fascinated by the piano series in the Concertgebouw at the time, and talked about the many attitudes and stage personas of the various pianists who performed there. He would have nothing of it: the performer was necessary to bring

the music to the audience, but the music was the important thing, the performer's persona meant nothing to him. I remember feeling some ambivalence about this position at the time, because it contained so much self-denial, or rather, an apparent disinterest in the impact that Leonhardt himself was able to make during a good recital. He seemed dismissive of the very thing everyone else liked about him.

After your period of study, did you have further contacts with Gustav Leonhardt that contributed to your development as a musician?

Unfortunately I moved to another country, and contact became more sporadic than I would have wished. What was heartening was his support at some professional junctures, like when he came to listen to my first public performance on the fortepiano, or called me with congratulations after reading my dissertation about Beethoven – especially because both were not areas of his outspoken interest.

Did his approach to teaching influence the approach you have taken with your own students? If so, how?

My own teaching is certainly influenced by Leonhardt's approach to touch and sound, to putting down a tone in a certain way and following through with a matching kind of release. Many things happen also in the moment, unplanned – all of a sudden one hears oneself say things that, upon reflection, come straight from his pedagogical toolbox.

What are the most important things Gustav Leonhardt taught you, or the ways he most influenced you as a musician?

While he was always kind and, actually, patient, he also clearly believed in a kind of non-negotiability regarding quality music making. So here are two things to carry away from his lessons: don't be harsh on yourself, but don't give up on your ideals, even hard-to-achieve ones.

Curriculum Vitae

Harpsichord studies in The Hague and Amsterdam 1979–1986. Freelance harpsichordist in NL until 1991. Harpsichordist and fortepianist in the Swedish Baroque group Corona Artis from 1991 until 2005 when the group lost state funding. Musicological studies at the University of Gothenburg from 1996, concluding with a PhD in 2007; one term of fortepiano studies with Malcolm Bilson (Cornell University) in 1999. Postdoc at the University of Southampton 2009–2011. Senior lecturer of musical performance at the Academy of Music and Drama, University of Gothenburg since 2017.

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