



Francesco Cera

Language

English

Nationality

Italian

Country of Residence

Italy

Year of birth

1967

Website Address

<https://francescocera.it/>

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

1990/91

The lessons were

Within a diploma course at the Conservatorium van Amsterdam (Amsterdamsch Conservatorium, Sweelinck Conservatorium)

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?

FIRST CONTACT WITH LEONHARDT IN ITALY My first contact with Gustav Leonhardt was in Bologna, my native city, when in June 1982 (I was fifteen and was studying organ) he came to give the dedication concert of the two Renaissance organs in the Basilica of San Petronio, together with Luigi Ferdinando Tagliavini. I climbed into the organ loft while he was practicing; he didn't notice me, and I recall being struck by his elegant figure, thin, and slightly inclined over the keyboard. I tape-recorded that concert, and listened to it dozens of times; it was for me an immense lesson about the music of Frescobaldi, Cavazzoni, Gabrieli, Trabaci, Merula – and also Byrd and the composers of The Mulliner Book that Leonhardt performed – those magnificent sounds, the meantone temperament, Tagliavini's manner of playing, Italian and full of brilliant energy, and the austere and finely detailed Dutch style of Leonhardt. Both would be my teachers in the future. § I again heard Leonhardt play in the summer of 1983, in Pistoia in a concert he gave during the courses of the Accademia di Musica Italiana per Organo (in those years I attended master classes of Tagliavini, Vogel, Radulescu and Torrent). He played on a harpsichord copied after the large Giusti in Tagliavini's collection, and I was most fascinated by Froberger's Lamento. I was struck by the skill and artistry with which he made the harpsichord "speak" and made the music come alive and be rendered perceptible to the auditors. Other concerts followed, as well listening to his recordings, and after my organ and harpsichord studies I wrote to him asking to study harpsichord with him. § Following a successful audition, Leonhardt agreed to take me among his students, and the following year, the academic year 1990/91, I moved to Amsterdam and enrolled in the Sweelinck Conservatory, taking weekly lessons at his house on the Herengracht.

In this area, you can describe your lessons with Gustav Leonhardt in any way you wish.

A NORTHERN EUROPEAN TASTE § The manner in which Leonhardt gave lessons is well known. The fact that I did not need to repeat a piece after his remarks and demonstration at the instrument allowed me to feel free to let his ideas and stimuli ripen over time, and through the different pieces discussed. The point that he was especially eager to work on with his students was the level of refinement and profundity in performance. My musical training took place in Italy in close contact with Luigi Ferdinando Tagliavini, with Sergio Vartolo, and the young musicians of the early-music movement in Italy (Fabio Biondi, the members of Giardino Armonico, et al.), although not just in the Italian repertoire, but also in the whole European repertoire between the 16th and 18th centuries. A good part of my cultural heritage was my love for art history, inherited from my father Adriano, who was an antique dealer and connoisseur of art, and who brought me to visit museums, churches, and artistic sites throughout Europe, starting during my childhood. Leonhardt was very fond of old art and he very much appreciated my passion, and when meeting my parents he congratulated them on my "elevated manner of experiencing music." What I was most interested to master with him was the performance of non-Italian composers, so I played for him works of Louis Couperin (several suites, the Tombeau and the Pavane), François Couperin, Rameau, Sweelinck, Byrd, Bull, Purcell, Froberger, Böhm, and several works of J. S. Bach

(French Suites, Partitas, the Italian Concerto, the Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue, selected pieces from the Well-Tempered Clavier and The Art of the Fugue). § The main impact on me of his North European cultural heritage was manifested mainly in a “sense of measure” applied to a number of aspects, which I will try to summarize: - THE AMOUNT OF ENERGY TO USE IN THE FAST DANCE FORMS IN SUITES (courante, gigue). He advised me to reduce the energy I used in performing such types of pieces, and he sought to make me see in them the court dances, regulated by the concept of “le bon goût” and by the elegant delicacy expressed above all in the decorative arts of the time. - THE USE OF RUBATO WITHIN A FIRMLY STABLE TEMPO. For Leonhardt it was unthinkable not to maintain a firm and regular tempo, but it was also very essential to give a flexible shape to passages in eighth- or sixteenth-notes that are present in between the regular pillars of the tactus. That was mainly applicable to dance forms in suites and to the sixteenth-note figurations in a fugue. Nevertheless, in performing the genre of the toccata – and in the tombeaux marked “avec discretion” by Froberger, which need a greater freedom in tempo or a periodical variation of the tactus, Leonhardt was inviting me to maintain a “coherence” in my performance, reducing the length of pauses in between sections, in order to maintain the formal unity. - THE "BON GOÛT" IN PERFORMING THE FRENCH REPERTOIRE, seeking a balance between “netteté” of sound (one that is clean, sharp, articulated with utmost precision) and a way of playing “sans contours.” He recommended that I look for both aesthetic concepts in the paintings of Watteau, Fragonard, and the other French masters of the early and mid-18th century. These aesthetic points of reference meant for Leonhardt avoiding striking the keys too strongly (except in some very energetic pieces by Bach or Scarlatti, for instance), concentrating the liveliness of performance more in clean, sharp and regular pronunciation, especially of the eighth-notes – in a courante or a lively pièce de clavecin, inserted in the general flow of the movement. - PLAYING "SANS CONTOURS" in the more melancholic and expressive pieces, meant for him to soften as much as possible and with maximum care the movement of the key, in order to produce the sweetest possible sound from the quill. This can happen by melting together the pluck of the quill with the resonance of the instrument, and more precisely hiding the attack of the quill inside of the resonance produced by the preceding note. - THE RESOLUTION OF DISSONANCES AND SUSPENSIONS IN DIMINUENDO. I remember that he gave me the example of a chord of three notes in 6/4 position. He said that for modern musicians this chord is stable, while for musicians up through the first half of the 18th century this chord was perceived as very tense, and needed a resolution of the fourth and the sixth into a third and a fifth. A similar case is the interval of a fourth that resolves into a third or a seventh that resolves in a sixth. The note of the resolution has to be played “piano,” keeping for a short while the consonant note over the dissonant note. For Leonhardt this extreme care in the diminuendo dynamic was applicable to pieces of any period, including the English Renaissance repertoire or Frescobaldi, without distinction, because he felt that it was indeed essential in a refined style of playing the harpsichord. - A MAXIMUM OF LEGATO BETWEEN PASSING NOTES, especially in slow movements such as allemandes, sarabandes, and above all in the inner voices. On some occasions, Leonhardt wrote in pencil, with a delicate stroke, ties of legato between notes that he wished to be played very legato. In the first staves of the Pavane in F# minor by Louis Couperin, he notated this necessity of slurring the passing notes in the inner voices especially fully (see the image attached below). He had a very similar opinion about the sound in the pavans of English composers, which he clearly associated with the sound of the viol consort. - THE CANTABILE IN THE UPPER

PART, which always has to be the object of special care, by resorting to a slight rubato which prevents stiffness in conjunct figurations; for instance in figurations of four sixteenth-notes in common time he always wanted one to lean slightly on the first note, but of course avoiding pedantry. The use of the aspiration, of which François Couperin speaks, is the most natural means for giving a singing quality to a single note that we need to make stand out, and also the high note of an ascending leap in the right hand can be perceived as more delicate if that note arrives with a slight delay relative to the regular tempo. § It's worth knowing that Leonhardt didn't teach all these important details under a merely technical point of view, but always intimately connected to a deeply perceived musical motivation. A MENTAL LINK § In my youth I was quite introverted, so I wasn't able to enter into long and pleasant conversations with him, as other people did. Nevertheless he showed himself to be well in tune with my character and he appreciated me as a person, with no need for a more "theatrical" approach. § Leonhardt was glad to listen occasionally to my concerts, for instance when he was in the jury of the harpsichord competition in Bruges, and I was performing in the Festival concert season. § Besides appreciating my manner of playing and encouraging my career, he took care that I not feel dependent on his judgment. In this he helped me to feel secure and independent very quickly. On several occasions we visited museums together, sharing our taste for fine art. Leonhardt loved old Italian organs very much, more than one might think, judging from his discography; in fact he was often invited to give the dedication concert after the restoration of a historical organ, especially in Lombardy, Emilia, and Tuscany. That was an occasion for personal connection and meeting, in addition to the concerts he gave in Milan (for which he asked me to lend him my Steiner clavichord) and in Rome, and the telephone call that I made to him every year, without fail. My very last memories with him, from July of 2008, were in Montisi during the master classes and concerts of the Piccola Accademia, where he listened to me playing Frescobaldi and had words of praise.

Curriculum Vitae

Francesco Cera, harpsichordist, organist, and conductor, is considered to be among the best Italian interpreters of early music, in particular for the Italian keyboard repertory of the 16th through 18th centuries, and as a conductor of vocal music. Between 1989 and 1991 he completed his keyboard studies with Luigi Ferdinando Tagliavini and with Gustav Leonhardt, receiving his diploma from the Sweelinck Conservatory Amsterdam. From 1991 to 1994 he was the harpsichordist for the ensemble Giardino Armonico, with which he recorded for the Teldec label and concertized throughout Europe. In 1996 he founded the Ensemble Arte Musica, which specializes in Italian vocal music from the madrigal to the 18th-century cantata. From 1990 onward he has presented concerts as a soloist and as director of Ensemble Arte Musica in prestigious venues such as Musica e poesia a San Maurizio in Milan, the Accademia Filarmonica in Rome, the Festival Monteverdi in Cremona, the Sagra Musicale Malatestiana in Rimini, the Festival van Vlaanderen, the Festival Oude Muziek in Utrecht, Resonanzen in Vienna, Baroktage Melk, the Philharmonie in Cologne, the Festival Alter Musik in Herne, Ladegård in Oslo, the Festival de Musique à Maguelone, Saint-Michel-en-Thiérache, Les Sommets Musicaux in Gstaad, and on historical organs in Scandinavia and elsewhere in Europe. In addition he has collaborated with Diego Fasolis and I Barocchisti, with the singers Guillemette Laurens and Letizia Calandra, the violinists

Enrico Onofri and Marco Serino, and the lutenist and theorbist Francesco Romano. As a soloist he has an ample discography to his credit (for the Brilliant Classics, Tactus, and Arts et Tempéraments labels), which ranges from Italian composers of the 17th century to sonatas by Domenico Scarlatti, from the French Suites and the harpsichord concertos of J. S. Bach to works by D'Anglebert and Correa de Arauxo. In 2019 his box set of 7 CDs was released on the Arcana label, with the four principal keyboard collections by Girolamo Frescobaldi, performed on nine different historical instruments. He has taught courses and seminars at the Royal Academy of Music in London, the Smarano International Organ Academy, the Piccola Accademia Montisi, Oberlin Conservatory, Yale University, Eastman School of Music of the University of Rochester, the Academia de Organo J. Echevarria (Spain), and the Frescobaldi Akademiet in Grimstad (Norway). He is a consultant for the restoration of historical organs for the Soprintendenze of the Salerno-Avellino and Basilicata regions. He holds the chair in harpsichord instruction at the Conservatorio E. R. Duni in Matera.

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