



## Thomas Spacht

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### Language

English

### Nationality

American

### Country of Residence

United States

### Year of birth

1933

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

1959-1960

### The lessons were

As a guest student 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?

The opportunity was afforded through a Fulbright Grant. Two American students of Leonhardt at that time were Leonard Raver and Clyde Holloway, both now deceased. Leonard met us at the

boat (no air travel in those days!) before we went to Katwijk aan Zee for a week of orientation and beginning instruction in Dutch language.

**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 had completed my M.M. in organ performance but had no experience with an early keyboard instrument. I had received a Mus.Bac, from Oberlin Conservatory and the M.M. from Syracuse University.

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

Frescobaldi, Sweelinck, Böhm, Bach, Couperin, Scarlatti, also chamber music - Bach sonatas for flute and continuo, Krebs and others.

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

Because I was beginning harpsichord study I played pieces several times in most cases. The chamber music was also rehearsed several times. This would have been a natural progression considering I was not an accomplished player on the harpsichord.

**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.**

First, I need to explain that I also studied organ with Mr. Leonhardt, sometimes at his church (Waalse Kerk Amsterdam) and sometimes at the Kruiskerk in Amstelveen as he was not an official organ professor at the conservatory. All lessons were one hour duration. The number of pieces studied in a single lesson varied depending on length. For example, in the case of a Bach French Suite we might only do one or two parts. The harpsichord at the conservatory at that time was a Gräbner copy, by Rück. The organ at the Waalse Kerk was by Müller and at Amstelveen by Flentrop. There was much discussion about technique, rhetorical matters, articulation, and so on in relation to the harpsichord pieces. With organ, since I was not a beginner, we discussed interpretation of works I had chosen to present, matters of historical registration practice, and so on. There was less interruption by Mr. Leonhardt during the organ lessons but much more during the harpsichord lessons.

**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?**

Yes, he did demonstrate some things. At that time he did not believe in so-called "early" fingering, saying that the great artists probably had moved beyond that. But he did take great care with stylistic matters, especially in the French music. He rarely played himself, preferring that I play after his instruction, i.e., after he had explained what I was to do. But my interpretation of that was left to me to figure out.

**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 refer to various treatises, even writing down several for my use later on. We did not discuss various types of historical instruments except in a general way - the differences between French and Flemish harpsichords at various times, and so on. He guided me toward writings about these matters.

**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?**

At that time he was very enthusiastic about Frescobaldi but also about French composers. We worked on all the préludes from Couperin's L'art de Toucher, for example, and he demonstrated the touch as described by Couperin and others.

**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?**

He did offer some stylistic considerations from time to time. He did not make a formal analysis but placed pieces within a cultural/historical context. I don't recall any analogies or metaphors in particular.

**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?**

No, he really did not. But remember I was a beginner so I lacked the experience to have formed a kind of personal style or strong individual approach.

**What did you hope or expect to achieve from your lessons with Gustav Leonhardt?**

Of course I hoped to learn how to play the harpsichord properly, but also with the organ lessons to gain a different perspective on pieces I already knew, to learn more about the kind of organs I

encountered (including private trips I took to visit historic instruments he recommended and arranged for me to see).

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

Yes. In 1998 following a North German organ tour, I returned to Amsterdam and met with Mr. Leonhardt at his home on the Herengracht. This was an evening of conversation, he having just returned from holiday. Later we went to the Nieuwe Kerk where he improvised for me in the style of C.P.E. Bach, following which we went to dinner and more conversation. The thoughts he shared with me had a profound effect on my thinking about many aspects of music. During the summer before he died, I was attending an organ concert in the Nieuwe Kerk. He walked in just before the start of the concert, looking very frail and tired. I greeted him and after a moment of reflection he said, "Ah, that was a very long time ago." It was a poignant moment and somehow I realized I would never see him again. Indeed, he left halfway through the concert.

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

Yes, absolutely. He showed me what I believe is the correct balance between instruction and a more inductive approach to learning, especially for more advanced students.

**Has your perspective on your lessons with Gustav Leonhardt changed over the years? In what way?**

No, it really has not. I realize, of course, that my experience was in the "early days" if one may use that term. Leonhardt was at the beginning of what would become a world famous career, yet I think his insights and approach to music were probably much the same as they would be later. Of course once he left the conservatory and accepted only advanced private students, usually taught at his home, I suspect he was able to develop more ideas about passing along his vast knowledge and incredible musicianship.

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

The most important thing, I think, was that although we can do research and learn about technical aspects of what now is termed "historically informed" performance practice, the truth is that those factors are only part of the story. We cannot know for sure what the playing of various musicians from the 17th and 18th century actually sounded like, and in many cases perhaps not even the instruments as well. There is a famous story about Mr. Leonhardt that sums up what I believe was an important part of his thinking. The story goes that someone was telling Leonhardt that a certain

musician had explained how a piece of music should be played. Leonhardt replied with words to this effect: Ah, yes, Mr. X has the truth, but there is no truth!

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

The lessons were held in a small room in the conservatory set aside for the harpsichord. We waited outside until the previous student had finished. For the first few weeks Mr. Leonhardt was rather formal and stood at the far side of the room as I played. Later he became more relaxed, often conducted as I played and frequently demonstrated passages in order to illustrate particular articulations, ideas about phrasing and tempo, as well as touch including the use of over-legato in appropriate places. When the lesson was finished he smiled and simply said goodbye.

**Curriculum Vitae**

Mus.Bac., Oberlin Conservatory. M.M. Syracuse University, D.M.A. Eastman School of Music. Teaching career spanned 38 years, the last 22 of which were as Prof. of organ and theory at Towson University, Baltimore, MD. Numerous recitals locally (includes faculty recitals), at Columbia, Yale and Princeton Universities, for a national convention of the Organ Historical Society, Piccolo Spoleto and others. Publications in The American Organist, The Tracker, journal of The Westfield Society. Organ research in The Netherlands periodically from 2000-2010. Presentation on Dutch organ design and use in the 17th and 18th centuries for Historical Keyboard Society of North America convention at Oberlin College, 2017.

**Files / Docs**

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