Crazy about Organs

Gustav Leonhardt at 72

By Jan-Piet Knijff

Gustav Leonhardt (photo: Lukasz Rajchert; by kind permission of International Festival Wratislavia Cantans, 46th edition)

This interview was first published in Dutch in Het Orgel *96 (2000), no. 5. Leonhardt had been made an honorary member (*Lid van Verdienste*) of the Royal Dutch Society of Organists in the previous year. Apart from small adaptations in the first few paragraphs, an occasional correction, and explanations, no attempt has been made to update the content of the article for this translation. The interview on which the article was based took place during the 2000 Leipzig Bach Festival. Leonhardt read the article before it went to the editor and was very pleased with it. I am grateful to the Royal Dutch Society of Organists and the editor of* Het Orgel*, Jan Smelik, for permission for its republication.*

Gustav Leonhardt (1928–2012) was—perhaps after Wanda Landowska—the most influential harpsichordist of the twentieth century. As Professor of Harpsichord at the Amsterdam Conservatory he introduced countless young musicians from all over the world to the interpretation of early music, especially the music of Johann Sebastian Bach. From his work with the Leonhardt Consort—with his wife Marie as first violinist—grew a limited but no less significant career as a conductor: Leonhardt's contribution to the complete recording of Bach cantatas for Telefunken and his renditions of operas by Monteverdi and Rameau are milestones in the history of recorded music.

As an organist, Leonhardt has not become nearly as famous—perhaps because organists in general don't tend to become famous in the way other musicians do, perhaps also because he limited himself to early music. Even among Dutch organists, Leonhardt remained an outsider. Therefore, his being made an honorary member of the Royal Dutch Society of organists in 1999 was an important recognition of a man who has helped define the way we have listened to and performed early music for more than half a century.

I spoke with Leonhardt in the summer of 2000 in Leipzig. He was chairman of the jury of the prestigious Bach competition for harpsichord; ironically, Leonhardt's former student Ton Koopman held the same position at that year's organ competition. I met the master after one of the competition rounds and we walked together to our hotels. Leonhardt is often said to have been formal; it is well known how he used to address his Dutch students with the formal pronoun *u* (pronounced [ü]; the equivalent of the German *Sie*); this must have come across as utterly prehistoric in the 1970s. But in fact, Leonhardt was extremely friendly; he conversed easily and openly about a host of topics. As we passed by the Thomaskirche, Leonhardt volunteered his opinion of the new Bach organ by Gerhard Woehl.[1] The conversation quickly moved from Woehl to Silbermann, and Leonhardt mentioned the organ at Großhartmannsdorf, which he played in the film *The Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach*: "You know, that Posaune 16 . . . " His face and gestures spoke louder than a thousand words. I asked why no organbuilder today seemed to be able to make such a Posaune. "Look," he said dryly yet firmly, "first of all, you have to *want* it."

In 2000, at 72, Leonhardt was very much alive and well, still playing some 100 concerts a year. For a concert in Göteborg that year, he didn't even have a hotel: he arrived in the morning, played a concert in the afternoon, and flew on to Portugal in the evening for a concert the next day. I asked whether he enjoyed traveling; he shrugged: "I mean, it's simply part of it." Leonhardt was happy to have the interview on his 'free' Friday, when there were no competition rounds. "But if you don't mind, could we do it early?" What is early, 9 AM? "Well, earlier would be fine too." 8:30, 8 AM? "Just fine." It sounded as if 6:30 would have been OK too.

Jan-Piet Knijff: How did you become interested in organ and harpsichord?

Gustav Leonhardt: Through my parents, I think. They weren't professional musicians—my father was a businessman—but they were enthusiastic amateurs. What was rather unusual was that, even before the Second World War, we had a harpsichord at home, a Neupert, a small one.[2] My parents played Beethoven and Brahms for pleasure, but from time to time also Bach and Telemann. Apparently they thought they had to buy a harpsichord for that. I had to learn how to play the piano as a boy; I mean, *had to*, it was simply a part of life. I don't remember liking it very much. When the harpsichord came, they let me play written-out figured-bass parts. I didn't care much for it, but of course, it must have shaped my musicality. During the last few years of the war there was no school, no water, no electricity. Marvelous, of course—especially that there was no school! Moreover, I turned sixteen that year, so I more or less had to hide from the Germans. My brother and I took turns being on the lookout. It was all very exciting. During that time, I was so attracted to the harpsichord. And since there was little else to do, I simply played all the time. And of course, there was the enormous love of Bach. Dad was on the Board of the [Dutch] Bach Society, where Anthon van der Horst conducted.[3] At fifteen, I started studying music theory privately with van der Horst. Yes, that I enjoyed very much. I often pulled stops for him at concerts. That's really where my love of organs comes from.

J-PK: You went to study in Basel. Would it not have been logical to study in Amsterdam with van der Horst?

GL: Maybe, but harpsichord was high on my wish list too. And the Schola Cantorum in Basel was at the time the only place in the world where one could study early music in all its facets, including chamber music and theory. It pulled like a magnet: I *had* to go there.

That was in 1947, only a few years after the war, and Holland was really still a poor country at the time. There was very little foreign currency, so studying in Switzerland was not all that easy. Thankfully, my father had business contacts, so from time to time, I went on bicycle from Basel to Schaffhausen to pick up an envelope with Swiss francs . . .[4] I studied both organ and harpsichord with Eduard Müller, for whom I still have the greatest admiration and respect.

J-PK: Can you tell me more about him?

GL: He was first and foremost an excellent organist, who in addition was asked to teach harpsichord, I think. He was the organist at a terrible organ, but whenever a new tracker was built—Kuhn or Metzler in those days—we went to try it out, right away, you know.

The way people played Bach on the organ was still pretty dreadful at the time, with many registration changes, swell box, that kind of thing. But even then, Müller played completely differently. For example, he would tell you that it was common to change manuals in this-or-that bar, but that that was simply impossible, because you would break the tenor line in two! So I learned from him to analyze very 'cleanly' and to use that as the basis for my performance.

Harpsichord playing was still very primitive in those days. The instruments I played on in Basel were simply awful. It wasn't until later that I came to know historic instruments. The idea that you used different types of harpsichords—French, Italian—didn't play a role at all. I did collect pictures of historic instruments, but really without wondering what they might sound like.

Strangely enough, Müller was not at all interested in historic instruments as far as harpsichords went. On the other hand, he was very precise with articulation. You had to play exactly the way Bach wrote. Bach was the order of the day. A little piece by Froberger or Couperin every now and then, but mostly Bach, really. August Wenzinger,[5] with whom I studied chamber music, was much broader in that regard. He played the whole repertoire: French, Italian, and the seventeenth century as well. We also had to sing in the choir, Senfl and Josquin, but also monody. That was a revelation. We had Ina Lohr,[6] who was the first to use the old solmisation system again as the basis of her theory classes. Everything was incredibly interesting.

Look, things were kind of black-and-white at the time. On the one hand there was Romanticism, and that was horrible, so you wanted something different. The *Neue Sachlichkeit* played an important role. I think I actually played very dryly in those days.

J-PK: Many people would argue that you still played dryly many years later.

Gustav Leonhardt at the Nieuwe Kerk, Amsterdam, May 2008 (photo: Douglas Amrine)

GL: Everyone is free to think whatever they want, but I personally think I have allowed much more emotion in my performances over the years.

J-PK: Were there still others who influenced you as a young musician?

GL: [Immediately] Hans Brandts Buys.[7] We lived in Laren, near Hilversum [between Amsterdam and Utrecht—JPK]. I played cello as well, and I sometimes played the cello in cantata performances he directed. I never studied with him, but he had an enormous library, most of all about Bach. In one word: a dream. I used to spend hours there, browsing, making notes. Brandts Buys also had a two-manual harpsichord, something quite unusual at the time. He had an enormous respect for what the composer had written. I learned that from him.

After my studies I got to know Alfred Deller, the famous countertenor.[8] I had heard a tiny gramophone record of his and was incredibly impressed. It showed that singing could be more than a dead tone with tons of vibrato. Diction: that was what it was all about. The tone helps the diction. Deller was a master in this regard. That is incredibly important to me. We organists and harpsichordists have to think dynamically too. We have to *shape* the tone.

J-PK: After your studies you became Professor of Harpsichord in Vienna.

GL: Well, I mean, I taught there and yes, it was called 'Professor.' I actually went to Vienna to study conducting, even though it did not interest me very much. I don't even remember now why I did it. It may have been at the urging of my parents. Organ and harpsichord, how was one ever going to make a living that way? With conducting one could at least pay the bills, that kind of thing.

But the most important thing in Vienna was the library. I'd sit there all day, from opening till close, copying music—by hand of course—and making notes from treatises. I still use that material today. Much has been published since, but not nearly everything.

J-PK: What kind of things did you copy?

GL: Oh, everything. Froberger, Kuhnau, Fischer . . . Tablature too, I could read that easily back then—I'm completely out of practice now. I also copied lute tablatures, just out of interest.

In Vienna I got to know Harnoncourt.[9] We were just about the only people interested in early music and played an awful lot together, viol consort also. That was relatively easy for me because of my cello background.

But after three years Leonhardt had had enough of the Austrian capital and returned to the Netherlands, where he was appointed Professor of Harpsichord at the Amsterdam Conservatory. At the end of the 1950s he became organist of the Christiaan Müller organ of the Eglise Wallonne, the French Protestant Church of Amsterdam.

GL: My wife is francophone and we both belong to the Reformed Church, so we went to the French church as a matter of course. I knew the organ already, but it was in very poor condition at the time. The action was terrible and it played very heavily. So when the position became vacant, I said that I was willing to do it on the condition that the organ would be restored properly. That was fine. I knew Ahrend already, so he restored the organ, with Cor Edskes as consultant.[10]

J-PK: How did you meet Ahrend?

GL: I don't remember exactly. In any case, I had seen an organ they had built in Veldhausen.[11] That was a revelation back then, but I have recently played the organ again and it was *still* a revelation. That doesn't happen very often, that one thinks the same way about an organ so many years later.

J-PK: What made Ahrend & Brunzema so special?

GL: I don't know. They just understood organs somehow. They had ears and just knew how to get the sound they wanted.

J-PK: Ahrend has often been criticized for imposing too much of his own personality on an instrument when restoring it, for example in Groningen.

GL: Well, I mean, he does have a strong personality, and in the Martini [the *Martinikerk* at Groningen—*JPK*], a great deal had to be reconstructed. In such a situation one can hardly blame anybody for putting his mark on a restoration.

J-PK: Was that also the case in Amsterdam?

GL: No. A lot of Müller pipes had survived in excellent condition and the new pipes Ahrend provided matched the old pipes very well indeed. Yes, the *Waalse* [*Eglise Wallonne—JPK*] is definitely the best-preserved Müller in my opinion—not that there is a lot of choice, unfortunately.[12]

J-PK: You made a whole series of recordings on the organ, including composers such as Froberger, Couperin, and de Grigny . . .

GL: . . . who really don't belong there at all. You are totally right about that and I really don't remember why we did it. Perhaps Telefunken wanted some diversity in the repertoire. On the other hand [he continues almost triumphantly], what should I have played on the Amsterdam Müller instead?

J-PK: The Genevan psalter, I suppose.

GL: [He laughs, covering his mouth with his hand.] Precisely—or Quirinus van Blankenburg.[13]

J-PK: As a harpsichord teacher, you have had a tremendous influence on a whole generation of harpsichordists from all over the world.

GL: Oh, come on . . . For a long time, I was simply the *only* one.

J-PK: Have you never wanted to teach organ?

GL: I've never really thought about that. But even for harpsichord I never had more than five students at the same time. That was more than enough. The rest of the time I was *so* busy with concerts and recordings.

[The conversation moves in a different direction; Leonhardt clearly wants to discuss something else.]

I don't know if it's on your list, but the difference between organ and harpsichord, I wouldn't mind saying something about that. Look, the harpsichord has in a way stopped at some point in time. The organ went on, but changed completely. In my view, organ and harpsichord are intimately connected. To a large extent, the instruments shared the same literature and performers played both instruments. That stops at the end of the eighteenth century and in my mind it's only because of its function in church that the organ has continued to exist. In other words, without the church, the organ would have died out as well. Interest in the organ at the beginning of the nineteenth century was practically zero, really.

All right, so the organ continued to exist. But over time, it changed *so* much that, really, it became a different instrument, at least in my view. That is a problem for the present-day organist that really does not exist for harpsichordists. How can a man serve so many masters? I don't believe that is possible; at least, I can't.

The problem is, we aren't theorists. Musicologists can study different styles—that's not a problem. But we musicians have to take the work of art in our hands . . . [an expressive gesture] . . . and *present* it. That is something completely different; it demands much more ability to empathize. I have to say, when all is said and done, the colleagues whom I admire the most tend to be those who specialize at least to some extent.

[I mention an early-music specialist who at the same time is a jack-of-all-trades. Yes, Leonhardt agrees: a great

Marie and Gustav Leonhardt at the Grote Kerk, Alkmaar, May 2008 (photo: Douglas Amrine)

musician.] But even so, you can hear that he plays so much other music as well.[14] It's a problem, of course. Take the flute: How much literature is there from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries? Three Bach sonatas! We harpsichordists can bathe in a wealth of early music. One can easily spend a lifetime with it.

J-PK: Don't you think the old composers are so far away from us that it is more difficult to empathize with them?

GL: No, I don't. If you really study the time and the art of the period in all its facets—painting, architecture, and so forth—a composer like Froberger can come just as close as, say, Widor. And look, Widor has become early music too by now. One has to study that just as well. It's no longer our own time; it's not self-evident.

J-PK: You had to practically put yourself in Bach's shoes when you played the lead role in Jean-Marie Straub's film, *The Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach*.

GL: It wasn't acting, you know. Performing in costume, that's all. Just because I happened to do the same things as Bach did: playing organ and harpsichord, and conducting. Well, except for composing, of course. [A gesture of profound awe.] I found it a very respectful film, it was made with a lot of integrity, and I enjoyed contributing to it, also because Bach has determined my whole career.

J-PK: I think Frans Brüggen once said in an interview, 'Leonhardt *is* Bach.'[15]

GL: [A gesture makes clear that he couldn't disagree more.] I consider Bach the greatest composer who ever lived. But I also see him as a composer in his time, not just as some remarkable phenomenon. In that sense, I'm not a Bach man.

J-PK: Your career has mostly focused on harpsichord playing and conducting.

GL: Well, no, not conducting, that has always been a side path; I don't do it more often than once or twice a year. The Bach cantata project, too, was really only one or two weeks a year. Conducting to me is in a way the same as playing chamber music, except I happen not to be playing.

J-PK: My point is that as an organist you have been relatively free to do whatever you wanted.

GL: That is true. The harpsichord is my livelihood; the organ is in a sense a luxury. It's also a different kind of instrument. [Enthusiastically:] One can be crazy about an organ, I think. Harpsichords don't really have that. That is because an organ usually has a much stronger personality than a harpsichord; that is part of what makes it such a fantastic instrument. On harpsichord, one has to work much harder to get a beautiful sound. A good organ does half the job for you if not more. A good organ *dictates*—in the best sense of the word—much more than a harpsichord.

J-PK: With all your interest in past centuries it seems that there is one aspect of our time that interests you in particular.

GL: I think I know what you mean.

J-PK: Fast cars?

GL: [Big smile—for a moment he looks almost boyish.] As the Germans say, *Wenn schon, denn schon*.[16] If one needs a car at all, surely a beautiful one is better than an ugly one. I just got a new Alfa 166, three liters, and it really is a great pleasure. It's a rather fiery one, you know, the kind that just wants to go out for a ride. In the city, he has to stay on the leash, but out of town . . . Yes, a real pleasure. ■

Jan-Piet Knijff never studied with Gustav Leonhardt, but is a fourfold Enkelschüler (student-of-student) through three of Leonhardt's harpsichord students (most significantly Kees Rosenhart) and an occasional organ student (Ewald Kooiman). A performer on piano, organ, and harpsichord with additional interests in music history, music theory, and classics, he lives in Armidale, NSW, Australia. Current performance projects include Bach's Cantata 49 and Bach transcriptions by Cornelius, Reger, and Vaughan Williams.

Notes

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1. Gerhard Woehl built the new Bach organ (IV/61) for the *Thomaskirche* in the Bach year 2000.
2. The founder of the firm, Johann Christoph Neupert (who was apprenticed to Johann Baptist Streicher in Vienna) and his descendants were avid collectors of historic keyboard instruments. Still in business today, the firm built its first harpsichord in 1906.
3. Dutch organist, conductor, and composer Anthon van der Horst (1899–1965) was conductor of the Dutch Bach Society from 1931. He taught organ at the Amsterdam Conservatory, where his students included Albert de Klerk, Piet Kee, Bernard Bartelink, Wim van Beek, and Charles de Wolff.
4. Schaffhausen, on the Swiss-German border, is some 60 miles from Basel.
5. August Wenzinger (1905–1996) was a cellist, viol player, conductor, and a pioneer of historically informed performance practice. He taught both cello and viol at the Schola Cantorum from 1933, where his most famous student (apart from Leonhardt) was no doubt viol player Jordi Savall, who succeeded him in 1974.
6. Ina Lohr (1903–1983) studied violin in Amsterdam and theory and composition in Basel. One of the founders of the Schola Cantorum, she taught theory there on the basis of solmisation. She was also assistant conductor to Paul Sacher with the Basel Chamber Choir.
7. Johann Sebastian (Hans) Brandts Buys (1905–1959) came from a large Dutch family of musicians, which included some fine composers. A pioneer of harpsichord playing in the Netherlands, Brandts Buys was also active as a conductor. As a performer and musicologist he specialized in the music of his namesake, J.S. Bach. Brandts Buys had an unusually strong interest in historically informed performance and was the first in the Netherlands to conduct the *St. Matthew Passion* with a small choir and orchestra (1947). Leonhardt presumably took part in performances with the Hilversumse Cantate Vereniging (Hilversum Cantata Society), which Brandts Buys led during the war years 1943–1945.
8. The countertenor Alfred Deller (1912–1979) was central in reviving and popularizing the countertenor in the twentieth century. He founded the Deller Consort in 1948. Benjamin Britten famously wrote the role of Oberon in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for Deller (1960), who recorded it with the composer conducting.
9. Nikolaus Harnoncourt (b. 1929), cellist, later conductor, founder of the period-instrument ensemble Concentus Musicus Wien (1953, first public performance 1957). Harnoncourt's Concentus and the Leonhardt Consort collaborated for a recording of Bach's *St. John Passion* (1965) and shared the complete recording of Bach's sacred cantatas for Telefunken's *Das alte Werk*.
10. Jürgen Ahrend (b. 1930), German organ builder, active 1954–2005. In the 1950s and '60s Ahrend and his then-associate Gerhard Brunzema (1927–1992) were perhaps the most serious, consistent, and successful in reviving the seventeenth- and eighteenth-century North-German organ style.
11. In Bentheim county, Germany, near the Dutch border. The organ was built by Ahrend & Brunzema in 1957, and enlarged with a Rückpositiv by the Dutch firm Mense Ruiter in 1997.
12. Other surviving Müller organs include those in Haarlem, Leeuwarden, Beverwijk, and the *Kapelkerk* at Alkmaar.
13. Apart from more imaginative works such as the cantata *L'Apologie des femmes* (The Women's Apology, 1715), Quirinus van Blankenburg (1654–1739) published a *Harpsichord and Organ Book of Reformed Psalms and Church Hymns* (The Hague 1732).
14. Fortunately, I no longer recall whom I mentioned to Leonhardt.
15. The Dutch recorder player, flautist, and conductor Frans Brüggen (b. 1934) performed extensively with Leonhardt in such groups as Quadro Amsterdam and the trio with cellist Anner Bijlsma.
16. 'In for a penny, in for a pound.'

Misfortune turned to joy at St. Gabriel's Episcopal Church in Monterey Park, CA, which lost its new Rodgers organ as well as the altar and sacristy to fire in 2010. With the help of Robert Tall & Associates, organ consultant Tony Ha, and Church Keyboard Center of Pasadena, CA, the congregation once again is singing with a Rodgers organ - this time, an Allegiant 678 with a beautiful hand-crafted cabinet, double expression, toe pistons, 20 internal memory levels and 114 organ stops. The pipe portion of the installation was completed by Ryan Ballantyne.

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