

HARNONCOURT – LEONHARDT – STRAUB/HUILLET

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translation Misha Donat

B.U. Thank you for returning, on this first day of the holidays, to your work with Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, which is already 45 years ago.

N.H. Is it so long?.

B.U. 1967, and next year Jean-Marie Straub will be eighty. And in conversations with him a few questions have arisen to which he no longer knows the answers, and which only you, or Frau Harnoncourt – I don't know if she is here – can answer.

N.H. If I don't know, and she knows, I can borrow her answer.

B.U. That's great. I have five questions. Is it all right if I begin?

N.H. Yes.

B.U. O.K. You founded the Concentus Musicus together with Frau Hanoncourt in 1953.

The Leonhardt Consort arose at roughly the same time.

N.H. Yes, roughly – a little later.

B.U. 1955, I think. And the two ensembles and their directors had the same intention, which was to renew the manner and the style of playing baroque music.

What led to this simultaneity, and how did you and Leonhardt get to know each other?

N.H. Leonhardt is a year older than me. His mother came from Graz, which is to say the same town as me, but she was married to a Dutchman.

My mother told me that they knew each other as children. Leonhardt, I think from 1947 onwards, after he'd finished his school exams, studied harpsichord in Basel.

After he had passed his diploma with honours, and had written a study on 'The Art of

the Fugue' as his final graduation work, he came to Vienna with the intention of learning how to conduct.

And in that year my wife and I, together with two colleagues - that was in 1950, I think - we also played 'The Art of the Fugue' on four gambas.

And we rehearsed it for approximately a year.

That's to say I knew every note of 'The Art of the Fugue', and... since the Music Academy in Vienna was a comparatively small concern, I saw someone new standing in the corridor, and they said, "That's a Dutchman who speaks very good German."

We immediately got into conversation, and I saw that here was an interesting, intelligent and witty basis for

discussion, and we immediately got into an argument over 'The Art of the Fugue'.

So immediately, instantly, at our first meeting we were very sympathetic to one another, and immediately argued...

"This can only be played on the harpsichord" – and I found it really interesting to play it with four gambas.

From then on, from that day on, we remained friends until his death, just recently.

Musically, he was certainly my closest friend.

And we played many many concerts together.

In Vienna – so long as he was in Vienna: he was permanently in Vienna until around 1955, because he became a harpsichord professor by chance.

And during this time we made music together every day.

And when – I don't know, five or six years ago – I received the Bach Medal in Leipzig, Gustav Leonhardt gave the eulogy.

Very witty, and read from hand-written paper – he never used a typewriter, but always by hand.

And for me, he was and is the harpsichordist of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

No one ever surpassed him, and his approach to the instrument, and his approach to the music, was as highly musical as it was highly intelligent.

And we had one last joint project to record all the Bach cantatas,

and we divided up which ones he was to do and which I was to do,  
and it was a completely peaceable division.

And we also received jointly, I think 20 years ago, the Erasmus Prize in Holland.  
So it was a long-term collaborative project.

And then suddenly – 45 years ago, as you say – I don't remember if it came from  
Straub or from Leonhardt, the question arose:

“A Bach film is going to be made, a Bach film is being planned.”

And Leonhardt said, “You can take part.”

I'm usually very sceptical about such projects,

but he told me, “You can take part, everything is authentic and correct down to the  
last detail.”

And I easily allowed myself to be convinced by him, and immediately changed my  
way of playing on the gamba for this film,

because at that time I held the bow from above,

and of course for the film, for historical reasons, I had to hold the bow from  
underneath, which is how they played in the period.

And so Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet came to Dorfgastein, where we spent  
our holidays with the children, and we held discussions.

And I was already very struck, and I asked, “How did you come to choose us?”

And it was obvious to me that he didn't have any particular visual ideas,  
he didn't perceive us in visual terms.

That was my impression. Instead, he said to us:

“I want the best harpsichordist and the best organist for Bach. And that is definitely  
Leonhardt.”

For him, there was absolutely no doubt. For that reason, Leonhardt had to take the  
role of Bach.

Then he said something similar about me, that he also finds my interpretations  
particularly interesting, and that he had wanted me for the commissioner and

dedicatee of the gamba sonatas, the Prince von Anhalt-Cöthen, and the men from my ensemble for various church concerts.

My wife also played with us, but unseen...

the *violino piccolo*, because the players from another ensemble weren't good enough, and so it was recorded again with my wife, but she couldn't be visible, because only men were playing.

He was extremely precise about that, and also in the historical context he was extremely precise.

Does that answer your first question?

B.U. Yes, thank you, and you have also started to answer the second one, because the film was shot in 1967, but the project dates from 1954-55, that's to say at the same time that you started out, and...

Yes, as you were saying, Danièle Huillet and Jean-Marie Straub were looking for an actor for the principal role, and one day they heard one of the few records of Leonhardt that existed at that time, and it was immediately clear, "He's the one."

And in 1957 they wrote to him, or in any case they went to see him in Amsterdam.

And Leonhardt insisted on having a few days in order to read the scenario, and when they came back he opened the door and said, "I'll be happy to do it."

I even think the recommendation for me to do it came from Leonhardt. I'm not quite sure about it, but I think Leonhardt said to me, "You really must do it, it's so solid, and so profound right down to the small details – he's read every letter from Bach's circle, and everything is correct, and you can take part."

B.U. And can you say something about the shooting in Eutin Castle?

N.H. Yes, I can do that.

Firstly, I was surprised that absolutely everything had to be authentic. Although the film, as far as I can remember, was in black-and-white, even the colours had to be correct.

He and his costume and make-up artists were absolutely first-class.

The wigs had to be perfect, not only to look at, but they had to be perfectly made. And we were dressed right down to our underwear in Baroque clothes. That surprised me: why? Nobody sees that at all.

“You move differently, with the right clothing you are, you accordingly become the right person.”

And that actually convinced me – it went so far that when, in Eutin, we would go for lunch to the next-door inn in costume, we felt: “why are the people in the inn dressed so strangely?” – normal dress seemed so bizarre to us.

Through the costumes and the authentic manner of our work, we were...

There wasn't even an electric socket to be seen in the rooms. I wondered how they did that. These rooms are like 18<sup>th</sup>-century rooms – so absolutely no sign of electricity or anything else.

And then we were seated, and either Straub or an assistant, or Danièle Huillet, I can't remember, said, because Bach, so to speak, presented me with this movement of the gamba sonata for the first time, I was supposed to perform it, and find it beautiful, and approve of it.

And he said, “Now it would be nice if you were to smile at Bach.”

And then I said, “Who is the Prince of Anhalt-Cöthen? Is it you, or I? I know who I have to smile at, and who I don't have to smile at.”

And I don't think I laughed – but that's something you'll probably be able to see.

But I can still remember that I had entered into this character so completely that I immediately assumed authority and that I had the feeling that I knew how I had to behave as a prince, and that a director no longer needed to tell me. He had to say if I was properly lit, or if I should turn my head more to the left or the right – that's obvious; or whether it wasn't well played, and I should perhaps play it again, but my behaviour I had to decide myself.

I must say I was very impressed, and I also saw the costumes of the others, and the accuracy which went far beyond what was visible in black and white.

They were the most expensive fabrics – one never had the impression that the film had to cost as little as possible, but that it had to be as good as possible, no matter what the cost.

B.U. And towards the end of the film there's a scene where Anna Magdalena is lying ill in bed – you were talking about it earlier – it was filmed in a monk's cell in Lüne Abbey, and on the wall is a fresco of Jacob's Ladder. And the commentary says that at this time when Anna Magdalena is ill, Sebastian is on his way to Berlin. And she is somewhat lonely. And in the following scene, between the treetops the camera shows a cloudy, and then increasingly brightening sky, and we hear the first duet from the Cantata No. 140:

“When com'st thou, my salvation? I come, thy share.”

It is the duet for soprano and bass, accompanied by *violino piccolo*, cello and organ. Straub remembers that because this was just after the scene with Anna Magdalena ill, he would have liked to have had a woman's voice.

But Leonhardt was against it, for historical reasons, and Straub says this was the only time he and Leonhardt had a disagreement about a musical matter.

I wanted to ask how you, as a musician, felt about this film project, but you've already answered that. It corresponded with your own musical endeavours, it was practically the same – a pendant, so to speak?

N.H. Absolutely. And perhaps, in this discussion between Leonhardt and Straub, I would have... I wasn't involved, because I wasn't present during this recording, because I think (August) Wenzinger played the cello, my wife the *violino piccolo*, and... I stayed behind in Eutin.

But I believe some solos in Bach cantatas were sung by women – indeed, in my opinion, this was implied by Bach.

(I believe that) he kept quiet about it, and that when boys couldn't cope with them, and weren't as expressive as he would have liked, he allowed a woman to sing, and arranged it in such a way that he never confessed to his church superiors: the woman

could not be seen in the gallery, and officially, of course, everything was sung by boys.

That is my opinion, which I can't prove, but which I have held for a long time, and which I have also discussed at length with Leonhardt.

B.U. And he wasn't of the same opinion?

N.H. In his opinion, everything in Bach... The rule was that women were not allowed to sing. But I knew that in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in the cathedral of Aix-la-Chapelle, where again only boys were allowed to sing – that was in the 1940s and 50s – the young Irmgard Seefried sang almost all the important treble solos. She told me this herself, and so I thought that this trick, this little swindle, had probably been used rather often.

A rule doesn't mean that that's how things are done, a rule is generally there to be broken.

So when the use of the organ in church is forbidden, which was the case for a long time, for me that isn't proof that no organ was used, but proof that an organ was used – or it would not have been forbidden.

It's when the lights at a crossroads are red that I particularly like to go through the crossroads, although I know it's forbidden, because it's much more exciting than going when the lights are green. So a ban... Leonhardt was of the opinion that if a thing was forbidden it wasn't done. They kept to the ban. And I am fundamentally of the opinion that when something is forbidden it's done. Otherwise it wouldn't be forbidden.

B.U. There was no reason to set up a ban.

The film was finished in 1967, and the premiere was in 1968, in Utrecht. You presumably weren't there, were you?

What are your memories of... How was the film received by the musicians, the Baroque musicians, or altogether?

N.H. Well, I was absolutely not involved in the Baroque music scene – I just had my Viennese ensemble, and then there was the Dutch ensemble which I occasionally

came into contact with, and the others all came later. Leonhardt and I were by a long way the first in this regard.

And I only know that the film was greatly admired, but more by cineastes, not in the first place by connoisseurs of Bach and early music. And I saw it for the first, time together with my wife, in a café in Vienna, on television. Because we had no television – we only had one very late on. And so it was broadcast on television, I don't know which channel, and it must have been fairly soon after the premiere – I don't know if the film was shown in the cinema in Vienna. But as I say, we saw it on television near to where we live, and I was totally enthusiastic.

B.U. Thank you very much for having said everything...

I've finished with my questions, but if anything occurs to you..

N.H. I don't think so – I think I've said all I remember.

B.U. And that was a great deal, and I thank you very much, and I think it will be a surprise for Jean-Marie Straub, and he will be very pleased.

N.H. I wish him well, and of course I passed his birthday a long time ago, so to me he's a young man, but I wish him every possible good thing.