



Frances Conover Fitch

Language

English

Nationality

American

Country of Residence

United States Of America

Year of birth

1951

Website Address

www.francesconoverfitch.com

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

1976-79

The lessons were

As a guest student at the Conservatorium van Amsterdam (Amsterdamsch Conservatorium, Sweelinck Conservatorium)

Individual private lessons

In public masterclasses as a player (participant)

In public masterclasses as a listener (auditor)

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?

I first heard of Leonhardt from a former student of his: my first teacher, Lisa Goode Crawford. My sister and brother-in-law worked for the Cambridge harpsichord builder William Dowd, who spoke of Leonhardt as representing the pinnacle of harpsichord playing. I heard stories from Lisa and others that made it clear what an important and treasured experience their studies with Leonhardt had been. So in 1972, I wrote to Leonhardt and was accepted as a student, but was told I would need to wait for four years. In 1976, I moved to the Netherlands.

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 held a Bachelor of Arts degree from Bard College when I applied to Leonhardt for lessons, and had studied harpsichord with Lisa Goode Crawford for two years at that time. By the time I went to Holland, I had acquired a Master of Music degree from New England Conservatory of Music where I studied with John Gibbons. I had also attended masterclasses with Kenneth Gilbert, Albert Fuller and James Weaver.

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

Couperin (Louis and François), Rossi, Sweelinck, d'Anglebert, J.S. Bach, Scarlatti, Frescobaldi, Byrd, Randall, Duphy, Balbastre, C.P.E. Bach, Croft, Handel, Froberger, Purcell, Rameau, Mozart, Tomkins, Gibbons, Chambonnières, Pachelbel, Picchi, Weckmann.

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

Sometimes only once, but usually more. These were my decisions.

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.

My lessons were always at Leonhardt's house on the Herengracht and usually lasted for an hour. For the first five months they were twice or three times a month, depending on his schedule. After that, I lived in Paris and traveled to Holland to have a lesson on each of two consecutive days for the remainder of that academic year. Over the following two years, I had a number of lessons a month or more apart. There were two Skowronek instruments in the room where I had my lessons. As I remember, one was a Flemish double and one a French double. On one occasion I was taken upstairs to play an English virginal and, on another, to play a fortepiano. In any one lesson, I probably presented 20 or 30 minutes of music, which could have been an entire Bach partita or one set of variations and two prelude-and-fugue pairs. Leonhardt always demonstrated some at the keyboard, unless my playing was boring that day. It needed to be either quite good or quite bad in order to inspire him to jump in and show me what he would do with a piece. There was also discussion, and I always went to the nearby British Council library to write down - before they left my head - as many of his words of wisdom as I could remember.

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?

Leonhardt was singularly uninterested in discussing technique. He might suggest a better fingering if I was in need of it, but in general, he made it clear that my technique was my business. He would not concern himself. Nevertheless, he was kind when I apologized for playing wrong notes and he said, "Everyone does that. You should have counted the number of wrong notes I played yesterday" (in a concert I had attended). He demanded things of me - especially articulation - that challenged my technique and this eventually led me to take about five months off, during which time I worked very hard on my own technique, using Cortot's and Dohnanyi's methods and Cramer's etudes. Leonhardt's only acknowledgment was, "It seems beneficial to have your lessons far apart..." I knew then that I had succeeded. One day: "If you really hear the sound in your head (i.e. a whispered, mellow tone versus a louder, more aggressive one), your fingers will do it somehow. Just be sure you hear it." Another day: "Don't think about the keys or notes or anything but the music."

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?

There was little emphasis on any of this in my lessons. One day I said, "Why is this not a trill ending?" (in Duphly's La Forqueray). Answer: "Because it is 'not' a trill ending." He discussed the relationship between notation and rhythmic alteration, but that was based on his own knowledge of (in this case) Froberger's works. If I hadn't started with the knowledge I had, I might have received more of this kind of information from Leonhardt. One day he mentioned "all the sources which say that the saraband is the fastest dance of all in this period", but didn't say which sources they were - the repertoire was Purcell, and I did find a source on my own.

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?

My impression was that Frescobaldi and Froberger called forth greater response, as well as English virginal repertoire, French repertoire and Bach. The only composer he looked down on was Handel: "Handel is such common, empty music - trite - but it will work if done/presented with a certain conviction, i.e. 'I'm exactly sure of what I'm doing - I'm perfect!'".

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?

Lots of metaphors and analogies: "The bottom of the key is your friend."..."The bassline gesticulates wildly at this point - exaggerate it." (Rossi toccata)...For an idea that's easy, i.e. a toss of the head or hand, relax the hand and play it easily, lightly, "with a toss of the hand, so to speak."..."More like an allemande" means "more retiré, detached, at a distance."..." A heavy upbeat [is like] a heavy hand gesture, not a nervous one, like a fat man moving, not a thin, nervous one." (Bach Overture)... "As if falling from your sleeve."..."Completely wild, vulgar, coarse, flamboyant; heels clicking, arms flailing, real Flamenco craziness; make as much noise as possible."

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?

He asked me to play with conviction and rarely took exception with my interpretive choices. He was trying to get me to trust the music and get the focus off of trusting myself, since that involved a lot of self-doubt and self-criticism: "Unquestionably, what is lacking is conviction: your belief in the music, not of whether you can play it, but in it, itself."... "You need to be more involved with the music."... "More whimsy" or "more wit."... "Follow your imagination."... "Beyond a point it can be dangerous to have someone listen and tell you their ideas, because the ideas get imposed."

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

I wanted to be able to play as much like Gustav Leonhardt as possible, especially to be able to play really slowly and expressively on the instrument. He was the only harpsichordist I'd heard who could really do that, aside from his many other skills and general musical brilliance. In addition, in my youthful insecurity, I suppose I was looking for his imprimatur as a 'good player'.

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

I sent Leonhardt my first recording and was delighted when he responded positively, saying that he enjoyed hearing real conviction in my playing: "and conviction 'while' playing." He came to one of my ensemble concerts given in Holland, and gave positive feedback. I wrote a biographical article about him (NB: reproduced here in pdf form) for Salem Press's Musicians and Composers of the Twentieth Century, and spoke to him on the phone about some of his life history I hadn't been sure about. After he read the article, he left me a phone message, thanking me for my "too, too kind" biography of him.

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

I think it made me determined to help my students get to the essence of a piece, to read the notation carefully, to understand the context of a repertoire, and to believe in their own interpretation. One experience made a real impression on me. Leonhardt invited me to a concert he was giving with Alfred Deller, telling me that Deller was perhaps his greatest musical influence. It oriented me even more toward singers and what we instrumentalists can learn from good singers.

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

Not much. I know that the lessons really formed me as a performer and teacher.

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

The importance of a solid technique (however you acquire it). Understanding what the composer was trying to say: seizing on a character. Never being lukewarm about a piece in performance - playing with conviction. Finding the appropriate gesture. Always taking time for things. Listening, singing, having ideas, keeping the inspiration going.

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

I got what I was looking for, but so much more! At my last formal lesson, Leonhardt said, "I've told you everything I want to tell you." This made it clear that I had plenty of work ahead of me to put everything he had told me into practice, but that I could relax about my identity as a harpsichordist. I have gone back to my post-lesson journals many times over the last forty years and always find something again that is useful to me. I enjoy reading about the lesson after which I was invited to stay for sherry, and being reminded of the generosity of his guidance as well as his insistence that I stand on my own two feet. A inestimable gift at that point in my musical development - my late twenties.

Curriculum Vitae

EDUCATION: Bard College, New York, 1973: BA in music; Igor Kipnis New England Conservatory of Music, Boston, 1976: Master of Music (Early Music); John Gibbons and Yuko Hayashi Sweelinck Conservatorium, Amsterdam, 1976-79: Gustav Leonhardt and Veronica Hampe Further studies with Kenneth Gilbert, Albert Fuller, Lisa Goode Crawford & Harald Vogel
TEACHING: Ferris University, Yokohama, Japan: Guest Professor in Performing Arts Division, 2012-13 Tufts University: Applied Music Faculty 2000-present Brandeis University: Applied Music Faculty, 2004-present New England Conservatory of Music: Faculty 1981-present Longy School of Music: Faculty, 1982-2010; Acting Dean, 1999-2000; Chair, Early Music Department 2001-2010 Master Classes taught at Washington University, St. Louis; National University of Mexico, Oberlin College, and Eastman School of Music Licensed as an Andover Educator to teach the course, "What Every Musician Needs to Know About the Body"
SCHOLARLY AND PROFESSIONAL WORK; AWARDS George Seaman Award for Excellence in the Art of Teaching Published (2012) Running the Numbers: A Thorough Figured Bass Workbook for Keyboard Players in collaboration with Jack Ashworth. Articles in Encyclopedia of Keyboard Instruments (Garland), and Musicians and Composers of the Twentieth Century (Salem) Papers for Dance History Scholars & Historical Keyboard Society of North America Episcopal Diocesan Music and Liturgy Committee (Massachusetts) Board service for American Guild of Organists, Boston Early Music Festival and Cape Ann Symphony
SOLO PERFORMANCES: among others: Massachusetts Institute of Technology, The Gilmore Festival, and Festival de Musica Antigua in Mexico City
ENSEMBLE PERFORMANCES: among others: Newberry Consort, Boston Camerata, Handel and Haydn Society Orchestra, Boston Cecilia, New England Bach Festival, Boston Early Music Festival, Aston Magna, Aix-en-Provence Festival, Tölzer Knabenchor, Pepsico Summerfare and Concerto Castello
RECORDINGS: O Ye Tender Babes (English Virginal Music) Protégée of the Sun King (guests) Affetti Musicali, Music in the Court of Leopold I (Concerto Castello) The Merrie Company (Judith Bedford) War & Peace, Messe des Morts, Nueva Espana, Lamentations & Angels, A Baroque Christmas (Boston Camerata) English Music for Viols and Organ (Les Filles de Sainte-Colombe) Mass in Time of War (Boston Baroque) Virtuoso Recorder Music (John Tyson) Suites for Dancing (Boston Baroque Soloists) Samuel Capricornus: Geistliche Konzerte für Sänger und Violon da Gamba (Long & Away)
RADIO AND TELEVISION: Westdeutsche Rundfunk, Cologne Hessische Rundfunk, Frankfurt-am-Main Bayerische Rundfunk, Munich Radio Nacional de España and Spanish Television, Barcelona Radio France, Paris BBC, London US Public Radio (American, National and Minnesota)

ADDITIONAL EMPLOYERS: St. John's Church in Beverly Farms: Minister of Music 2017-present Unitarian Universalist Church of Greater Lynn: Director of Music 2002-2017 Trinity Episcopal Church of Topsfield and Boxford: Music Director 1994-2002 Emmanuel Church, Boston: Organist and Assistant Music Director 1991-94 St. John's Episcopal Church, Gloucester, MA: Music Director 1979-89

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