

# A CONVERSATION WITH HARPSICHORDIST AND CONDUCTOR AAPO HÄKKINEN

BY CHRISTOPHER BRODERSEN (Fanfare 2015)

*Your bio says that your musical career started as a boy chorister in Helsinki Cathedral. Is there a rigorous men-and-boys choir tradition in Finland like that of England?*

It's more like the German kind—specifically, Saxon Protestant. So I got to know the Bach oratorios inside out by age 10. The choir master only spoke German, which wasn't a bad thing either.

*Were you sent away to boarding school, as they do in England?*

No, we just went to rehearsals, concerts, and services whenever we were needed. But there were also regular periods when the whole choir stayed together, usually a week or so during school holidays, and of course during concert tours.

*The bio goes on to say that you studied at the Sibelius Academy, later with Bob van Asperen in Amsterdam and Pierre Hantaï in Paris. It also says that you enjoyed the “generous guidance and encouragement of Gustav Leonhardt,” I assume also in Amsterdam.*

I had heard a couple of Leonhardt's recitals already before going to study in Amsterdam as a 19-year-old, and of course we never missed one while there. He had already retired from the conservatory but was still present in the yearly exams and gave regular lectures and master classes there. He always showed great interest in my playing—and made sure to let me know what he thought about it! And when he invited you to his home it was the musical equivalent of going to Buckingham Palace. He sometimes came to my concerts, always ready with remarks afterwards, often in the form of questions.

Leonhardt is usually associated with a supreme attention to details of touch and articulation, a refined eloquence of smallest gestures, and that's certainly something that always came across in his playing. But actually the two words I remember him using the most were “dynamics” and “fire.” For him there was hardly ever enough of either one. At the same time, exaggeration was anathema for him; he typically cited Goethe for his support: “Man merkt die Absicht, und man ist verstimmt.”

Leonhardt's own art was of course very much tempered by restraint and reverence for the composer, but not compromised; a soft voice isn't less dynamic than a loud one, and less can often be more! The last concert I heard him play included Bach's early *Aria variata*, which he told me he had never played before. His career started with *The Art of Fugue* and finished with those early pieces—and he was eager to hear whether I had ever played the *Aria variata*. Another late favorite of his was Christian Ritter's *Tombeau* for the King of Sweden, Carl XI. I quite often play it in concerts nowadays, and cannot help thinking of Leonhardt's fiery restraint in this most harpsichordic of all music.

*It amazes me how influential Leonhardt was and continues to be two years after his death. Almost anywhere you look—Europe, the Americas, Asia—his students, and students of students, are in the forefront of the early music scene.*

I guess Igor Kipnis would be the other important harpsichordist of that generation. But he's largely unknown in Europe.

*Your main teacher in Amsterdam, Bob van Asperen, is of course very well known. There are a few of his students scattered around the U.S. The one you don't hear much about—as a teacher—is Pierre Hantai. What was it like to study with him? I imagine you concentrated on the French repertoire.*

The late 1990s were the only time that Pierre concentrated on teaching with any regularity—lucky timing for me! I'm sure it didn't work for everyone, but for me he was able to open up a new dimension in the expressive possibilities of the harpsichord. He showed how technique can be a means to this end, and how anything less than that should not be tolerated. As for repertoire, the most memorable experiences I had with him were the English virginalists and Scarlatti.

*After receiving your diploma in 1998, you won second prize at the Bruges Harpsichord Competition. That's a particularly grueling competition, and there have been many years when a first prize wasn't awarded. Would you advise an aspiring young harpsichordist to enter the Bruges Competition, or do you think it's perhaps a waste of time?*

Competitions—by all means, at least if you don't have anything better to do! The Bruges Competition has a good reputation because of the long history of remarkable prize-winners and the international standing of jury members. It can be a problem if the jury members come from too many backgrounds, and have too many different priorities. Then it can easily happen that the most boring players win.

*It's all about expression, isn't it? Getting back to Gustav Leonhardt, I think that's what he brought to the table. Many people criticized him for not being a "virtuoso," but he showed the world how to play that most mechanical of instruments, the harpsichord, with great expressivity.*

Yes, and how that challenge can actually inspire the player, and through him the listener.

*Aside from Leonhardt and Hantai, you've worked with many notable figures in the early music world. The one that I find most intriguing is Reinhard Goebel—a very intense, driven musician, to judge from the one time I heard him live. What exactly did you do with him, and what were your impressions?*

For my first collaboration with Reinhard Goebel, I played Bach's D-Minor Concerto—that was driven indeed! And he's been a recurring guest conductor with the Helsinki Baroque Orchestra now for over five years. I would say he's a symbol of the true "early music" approach in his passionate, even fanatical search to understand the meaning and purpose behind the score. And it's very fruitful to exchange thoughts on music and performance practice with him—one realizes how differently people can read the same materials.

*The Helsinki Baroque Orchestra was founded in, I believe, 1999, and you've been its director since 2003. Tell us a bit about the group's history and what sort of "musical climate" exists for Baroque music in Finland.*

Relative to the country's size, there is an important early music scene in Finland. We've been running a monthly concert series at the Helsinki Music Center since the new hall opened in 2011. Although the Helsinki Baroque Orchestra is the only internationally active Baroque group in

Finland, there are other Finish period instruments groups as well, and many of the musicians also work in period ensembles elsewhere in Europe. The challenge with this kind of orchestra is to create a distinctive, personal approach. It takes time and isn't always compatible with "short-run" interests, so groups that just play isolated concerts with large intervals in between or with too flexible of a set-up usually can't get off the ground. So we've been lucky to maintain pretty much the same personnel through the years. On the other hand, regular guest directors bring a welcome change of viewpoint—apart from Goebel, in this context I should mention Erich Höbarth, Enrico Onofri, and Skip Sempé.

*You mention the need to create a "distinctive, personal approach." I think back to the beginnings of the period instrument movement in the 1960s—or at least, when the record labels started to take notice. Back then there were basically two centers of activity, Vienna and Amsterdam. Later, in the 1970s, the British entered the scene. Each of those groups, like the Vienna Concentus Musicus or the players in the Leonhardt/Kuijken circle, had a very distinctive, locale-specific sound. Nowadays, with period groups sprouting up all over—Asia, South America, Australia—the approach is much more internationalized.*

*I'm going to put you on the spot and ask: What is the one, specific aspect of the Helsinki Baroque Orchestra's playing or repertoire that in your opinion sets it apart from other period orchestras?*

Any musician or group with an identifiable approach will insist on some specific ways they hold essential—their "sacred cows"—like La Petite Bande and its *mesa di voce*, or Concentus and its diminuendo endings. By the way, those groups are still active and haven't changed their sound any more than the average modern orchestra during the same 40 or 50 years. There are so many principles and details one can do this way or that, and hardly any time to discuss them however much rehearsal time you have—scoring; articulation; all sorts of agogic, dynamic, and sonic inflection; pitch and intonation; balance and seating; ornamentation. Fortunately, internationalization hasn't gone quite so far that one could set oneself apart from others by a single aspect of one's playing! But I'm convinced the Helsinki Baroque Orchestra has developed answers to most of the recurring questions that set us apart from others; we have a style and are committed to shaping it.

The quest for original sound and meaning is only inspiring when the objective is so elusive, because we can never know for sure how music sounded before the age of recording. I think this is the reason no one is interested in authentic Rachmaninoff, Elgar, or Sibelius. We know it from early recordings—why strive for something that is already there?

*You seem to have scored a minor coup with your substantial new recording of the music of Joseph Martin Kraus, certainly not a household name. How did you first become aware of this music?*

This recording project has been a real labor of love. The musical language of Kraus is a mixture of styles I feel very close to—German *Empfindsamkeit*, Austrian church style, and Classicism. Kraus was the first one before Beethoven to attempt a synthesis of these different styles. His harmony and orchestration are essentially Classical, but the orchestral writing is very forward-looking in its complexity—one doesn't find such richness of simultaneous rhythmical and expressive details before Brahms!

Kraus worked for the Stockholm court while Finland was still under Swedish rule, so his music is very much part of our national cultural history. But it's only in the last five years or so that I've come to know any larger part of his *oeuvre*. Kraus certainly deserves greater international exposure

and popularity. That said, his symphonies have already been recorded a couple of times, so we decided to concentrate on music from his operas. As practically none of it has been published, preparing and choosing from manuscripts was a major undertaking. The help of leading Kraus expert Bertil van Boer has been most important here.

*Did you prepare the performing editions yourself? Where are the manuscripts located?*

I prepared some, Bertil prepared others, and for the rest we simply used copies of the manuscripts. Most of them are in Sweden, in the Stockholm National Music Library and in the Uppsala University Library, the same one that houses the Düben collection.

*Any plans for more CDs of Kraus? A complete opera, perhaps?*

Unfortunately, no.

*Compared with the earlier repertoire, the music of Kraus must represent somewhat of a sea change for your group. It's probably no big deal for the strings to play at a higher pitch, but I imagine the winds need a completely different set of equipment.*

The winds have different instruments for at least every 50 years of repertoire. It's not clear what Kraus's Stockholm pitch was, and whether it was similar to those he used in Germany, France, or Italy. The "Classical" winds nowadays often used for anything from Haydn to Beethoven are in any case too late for most of the repertoire.

*Now that you've recorded a nice sampling of the music of Kraus, are there any other neglected 18th-century Scandinavian composers in need of recordings, ones that we should know about?*

Well, there's a lot more Agrell waiting to be revived. Much of the Düben collection remains unpublished and unperformed. The Baltic Sea was as much a *mare nostrum* for Nordic musicians as the Mediterranean was for southerners. There's certainly a lot of fascinating, high-quality repertoire yet to be discovered.

*The other major release of yours is the 2-CD set of Bach harpsichord concertos on the Aeolus label—music which is dear to the heart of every harpsichordist.*

Bach's set of six harpsichord concertos is a milestone of the repertoire and was clearly an important innovative project for the composer—one imagines a welcome artistic change after all those years dedicated to church music. By the way, apart from the *Brandenburgs*, it's the only complete set of concertos Bach has left us. It's been fascinating to re-examine these thrice-familiar scores. It required dealing with all sorts of issues, such as sources, scoring, relationships between originals and transcriptions—all six concertos are re-workings by Bach of earlier music—all the while aiming at a reading that offers both validity and something personal. Some of the unique aspects of our recording include the use of a 16-foot harpsichord, the absence of a double bass, organ as a continuo instrument, and the unfamiliar key of G Minor for the Fifth Concerto.

*Although other recordings have dispensed with the 16-foot double bass, using organ as the keyboard continuo in these works is probably a first on record. As for the harpsichord, I was intrigued that you used a Hass copy by Robinette and Rutkowski, not a brand that one sees very often any more.*

My instrument is the one that belonged to Igor Kipnis, one which he used for several recordings—though not the famous one of these concertos—and for touring around the U.S. He used to say that it has more kilometers on it than most cars! The craftsmanship is as exquisite as that of the original Hass instruments, and that’s saying a lot. The instrument has been completely restrung and voiced, probably corresponding more closely to 18th-century German ideals, also way louder than it used to be.

*I notice that on another of your CDs—the Couperin, I think—you used a harpsichord by Keith Hill. You seem to have a predilection for American-made instruments.*

Never thought about that, but true! I also often use and have recorded on harpsichords by Joel Katzman.

*I believe you just finished recording the double concertos with Pierre Hantaï. Will you be recording the concertos for three and four harpsichords as well?*

Not in the immediate future.

*The first time I encountered you on CD was your recording of the Rameau Pièces de clavecin en concert, back in 2011. That one rather caught me by surprise—I was not expecting a performance as accomplished and idiomatic as this from three relatively unknown Scandinavian musicians. More recently, you put out a very fine disc of Couperin. You obviously have a flair for this music—any plans for recording more of the French Baroque repertoire?*

Actually, right now in the pipeline I’ve got the Bach violin-harpsichord sonatas, with Erich Höbarth for Aeolus, and the flute-harpsichord sonatas, with Pauliina Fred for Naxos. On the solo front I’d love to come back to the English virginalists, Byrd being the first disc I ever recorded.

*Your bio states that you also concertize as an organist. If you had your choice of all the pipe organs in the world, which one would you like to have unlimited access to on a daily basis?*

Wow, this would be a dream indeed! Obviously I know only a fraction of all the great organs in Europe, let alone elsewhere. The two Renaissance organs in San Petronio in Bologna come to mind first, even though I’ve only had a chance to play there once. The Arp Schnitger in the Jakobikirche in Hamburg and the Müller in the Amsterdam Waalsekerk are two more, for their differing Baroque styles—I know these a little better. Then there are the large Romantic organs in Paris. But I’ve always found the older organs especially fascinating, perhaps because the sound of the period is at least partially preserved in them in a way that isn’t possible with voices or even other instruments.

*I just had a great idea for your next recording project—a brand-new recording of the Handel organ concertos! It would be the perfect blend of your organ-playing and orchestral work. What do you think?*

Sure. The Handel organ concertos are brilliant music and rewarding for everyone involved. Helsinki Baroque Orchestra has a program of music from Handel’s Italian period with soprano Julia Lezhneva that we’re rather busy touring at the moment, and I was just playing his fantastic flute sonatas with Jed Wentz. I wouldn’t want to concentrate on Handel, but his music is always a joy to return to.

*Based on the recent CDs I've heard, I'm sure that you and the orchestra have a bright future ahead. Thanks very much for talking with me today.*

Thank you as well.

KRAUS Overtures: Prosperin. Zum Geburtstage des Königs Gustav. Konung Gustav III Begravnings-kantat. Äfventuraren. Arias: Du in hvars oskuldsfulla blick; Ma tu tremi. Ch'io mai vi possa. Parvum quando cerno Deum. Du temps, qui détriut tout. Sentimi, non partir!...Al mio bene. Hör mina ömma suckar klaga • Aapo Häkkinen, cond; Monica Groop (mez); Helsinki Baroque O • NAXOS 8.572865 (62:47 Text and Translation)

Joseph Martin Kraus (1756–1792), the Swedish Mozart, hasn't exactly been neglected by the record companies. Aside from the numerous collections of opera excerpts, incidental music and chamber works, there is the 4-CD series of the *Complete Symphonies* on Naxos, oddly enough never reviewed by *Fanfare*. The Naxos series was recorded by the Swedish Chamber Orchestra on modern instruments; there is also an excellent series on period instruments performed by Concerto Köln on the Capriccio label. Kraus's complete piano music has been recorded at least three times, most recently by fortepianist Ronald Brautigam on BIS. ArkivMusic even lists a recording of Kraus's opera *Proserpin*, presumably complete, from the 1990s. The present recording focuses, therefore, on a variety of music that has been flying "under the radar" until now, primarily overtures and opera arias. But it also throws the spotlight on a crack period orchestra, which is perhaps the principal reason why you should consider buying this CD.

The Helsinki Baroque Orchestra, under harpsichordist Aapo Häkkinen, has a few previous recordings under its belt, mostly on the Naxos label. Their 2-CD set of the symphonies of Franz Xavier Richter was praised by Barry Brenesal in *Fanfare* 31:3 and 33:2. Jerry Dubins gave a positive review to Helsinki Baroque's CD of the symphonies of Dussek in *Fanfare* 36:3. As impressive as those recordings were, the present disc surpasses them in the excellence of the playing and the recorded sound. Don't believe the period-instrument gainsayers on the *Fanfare* staff: The string playing here is polished and mellifluous, on a par with the best period orchestras around. The string contingent sounds a lot fuller than the numbers (5-5-3-3-1) might indicate, possibly because of the warm, resonant acoustic of Sello Hall in Espoo, Finland, where the recording was made. The winds are mighty fine, too—I especially enjoyed the glowing oboe solo in the slow introduction to the *Proserpin* Overture, the bright, incisive trumpets in the "Birthday" Overture, and the brazen horns in the *Äfventyraren* Overture. Conductor Häkkinen, who also accompanies on the fortepiano throughout, inspires his forces to play with vigor and precision. Given the consistently high energy level, you might mistake these cold-climate Finns for a bunch of hot-blooded Italians!

Finnish mezzo-soprano Monica Groop is the soloist in the arias; she sings with her customary refinement and expressiveness. There is quite a variety here, from the Swedish-language arias, drawn mostly from instrumental music to stage plays, to the Italian-language arias on texts by Metastasio, to the one sacred aria in Latin, *Parvum quando cerno Deum*. I sense that Groop is most inspired by the Italian arias; these seem to lie closest to her artistic sensibilities. She adopts a more overtly operatic style in these numbers, although I have a hard time believing that anyone sang with this much vibrato in the 18th century. Still, her sound corresponds to the present-day "norm" for period-instrument performance, and is never less than enjoyable.

If you're still undecided about this disc, I urge you to audition the *Äfventyraren* (The Adventurer) Overture. Unquestionably the major work on this CD, it is an endlessly inventive, fascinating piece

that either Mozart or Haydn would have been proud to call his own, and Helsinki Baroque plays it to the hilt. Highest recommendation.

**FANFARE: Christopher Brodersen**