

## **Uri Golomb**

### **Interview with Ton Koopman**

Ton Koopman is one of the few musicians who can perform virtually the complete works of Bach; as harpsichordist, organist and conductor, only the works for unaccompanied melodic instruments (flute, violin and cello) fall entirely outside his purview. And he has fully seized the opportunities which this versatility has offered him. He has already performed – and recorded – all of Bach's organ music, and covered substantial parts of the repertoire of the keyboard, chamber, choral and orchestral repertoire.

In 1995, he commenced perhaps his most ambitious project – the recording of Bach's complete cantatas, both sacred and secular, for the Erato label. Despite the project's artistic success, its completion was threatened last year when Warner, Erato's parent company, pulled the plug on the series. This decision was all the more frustrating since it came when the project was already more than half-finished. Koopman, however, was undeterred: when he announced Warner's decision, his statement included a commitment to find some way to see the project through to the end. When we met, in December 2002, news was already spreading about the project's forthcoming rejuvenation. Our interview naturally focused, therefore, on issues related to Bach's vocal music – its performance and its meaning. I began by asking him about the state of the project.

We have recorded almost everything now – there are only about twelve cantatas left, and then we will have recorded everything. We were talking for quite a bit of time with some of the major record companies, but none of them had the money or the guts to do it. For the last 8 months we were in negotiations with Andante, a company that specialises in marketing music on the internet and in streaming and wanted to establish a record label. We agreed that they would issue the recordings, though we were not to publish their name in advance. That was at the end of July, but we later decided that we wouldn't do it with them. We are going

to do it ourselves; we are establishing our own label for the Bach cantatas – and maybe other things as well – together with Challenge Classics. We are aiming to release volume 13 by early March, and continue at the rate of three volumes a year. I now also own the tapes of the Bach cantatas that were previously released by Erato; so these older volumes, numbers 1-12, will be published with the same label, one per month. The label will be called Antoine Marchand, which is the French for my name, Ton Koopman. It will have different distributors in different countries. I had hoped that vol. 13 would be on the market in October, but Andante kept delaying its release; so we made the decision to go our own way. We have already been working on the designs of the album covers – we were working on two tracks, as we were still hoping it would work out with Andante.

So the aim is for Volume 13 to come out by the beginning of March, Vol. 14 in the middle of the year and Vol. 15 in December 2003 or January 2004. We have been negotiating with the distributors about the order of releasing the previous volumes – whether we would start with volume 1, or go backwards from volume 12. Volumes 11 and 12 have only been available for a very short time; so my preference would be to start by re-issuing these newer volumes, and work backwards towards the beginning. We have yet to make the final decision on this; but the one positive decision we already made is to re-release them all within 12 months, and make the entire series available on the same label. There will be a new look – the old one is expensive, and is owned by someone else – but the notes will still be provided by Christoph Wolff.

Your series was the first to include the secular cantatas alongside the sacred cantatas, as part of the same series.

Yes, we did those as the fourth and fifth volumes of the series. I knew from the very beginning that, if I would not record them soon, the secular cantatas might not be recorded at all. So I suggested that we begin with the cantatas – both sacred and secular – Bach wrote before coming to Leipzig, but proceed with the complete Leipzig secular cantatas before starting the series of the Leipzig church cantatas. This is indeed how it worked out, and I'm glad we did that. You will also find, in the later volumes, the secular models of some of the church cantatas. When Christoph Wolff and I discussed the volumes devoted to the secular cantatas, we didn't think of including these models. But as the project proceeded, we both felt it

would not cost so much to add these works as well; so now you can find, on the same CD, the secular model alongside its “parody” – the church cantata. This not only makes for an interesting comparison; it also demonstrates that Bach’s sacred and secular cantatas are written in the same musical language. In general, I believe that in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, music for the church, the court and the theatre belonged to the same mainstream, and Bach’s music was no exception. When you see how many of his church pieces are parodies of music written originally for a secular context, this becomes especially evident.

More generally, you seem to have a strong affinity to the secular side of Bach’s style and *oeuvre*. In this context, you once criticised some performers for being “too Calvinist” in their attitude to Bach. What exactly did you mean by that?

The word “Calvinist” itself is, perhaps, not well chosen. I was trying to characterise those musicians who approach Bach’s music without a genuine feeling for Baroque music – and specifically, without appreciating the connection between sacred and secular idioms. This connection seems to pose a problem for many people today – but 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century ideas of Christian faith, and of styles appropriate for the liturgical music, were very different from today’s ideals. Lutheran orthodoxy in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Leipzig was not quite the same as Lutheran orthodoxy today; and Bach himself was not a puritan or a fundamentalist. All his music – whether it was written for the church, for the court or for Zimmerman’s Coffee House [the meeting place of Leipzig’s Collegium Musicum] – is very clearly the work of the same individual.

Obviously, Bach believed very strongly in God. But I don’t believe in Bach the Fifth Evangelist; I think this image makes out of a genius something that he doesn’t need. He was a normal believer by the standards of his time, and this normal belief is strongly evident in his church cantatas. This is the point of view that informs my performances of these works. I don’t perform them as if, in German towns in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the only thing people did on Sunday was go to church and read the Bible. For me, Bach was too much a person of the world to be more involved in religion than any other normal person would be; he was no priest. I think that the religious element in his life and music is overrated sometimes.

Of course, when I say that, then some people say directly “oh, he’s better suited for the secular cantatas than for the church cantatas”; but I believe that I take

good care to understand what Bach means in his music. I do not try to decipher these works by delving deeply into 20<sup>th</sup>-century theology; but I believe that I can nonetheless arrive at a correct understanding of the music.

How do puritan tendencies translate into actual performance style? I certainly sense that your performances accentuate elements such as dance rhythms and concerto-like virtuosity – elements which some Bach performers tend to downplay. Is this what you mean by overrating the religious element?

This is part of it. Musicians who approach Bach from a puritanical perspective tend to employ few or no ornaments, and they are too restrained in their application of dynamics, too uniform in their articulation. I think that's wrong, and results from a misunderstanding. This division between "sacred" and "secular" elements belongs much more to our own time than to the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries. In Sweelinck's keyboard music, even in the most profound pieces, there are moments when he suddenly goes into triple metre – sometimes only for one or two bars. This is just one example of the same sort of rhythms being present in both dances and church music; and I think we make too strong a division between sacred and secular if we treat these rhythms differently in different contexts. Baroque culture did not make much of these distinctions. If you go into German Baroque churches in different parts of Germany – the Catholic part and the Protestant part – you could see that they employ different styles of decoration and architecture; but in both cases, the church is clearly a Baroque church, employing a style similar to that of "secular" buildings. For example, the preacher's pulpit could be extremely secular in some of the Northern German towns – you'll be amazed at the naked breasts you see sometimes, for instance in Stade, Germany – but to people at that time, it would have seemed normal. We, on the other hand, live in a time when the church is losing some of its power, and we tend to make the distinction between believers, or churchgoers, and non-believers or atheists. But not going to church does not necessarily make you a non-believer; you can still believe in your own way, even if you do not feel at home anymore in one of the old religions. And I think one of the good things about Bach's cantatas is that they can turn atheists into believers – so strong is the affect that Bach's music gave to the words.

But even this strong affect is not limited to his church music. In fact, I regret that we don't have operas by Bach; they would have shown us a fantastic side of Bach that we don't know so well. In the big secular cantatas, like *The Contest*

*between Phoebus and Pan* (BWV 201), you can see Bach's talent for dramatic characterisation, for representing the personalities of different people. And in the church pieces it's the same: Bach characterises personalities in the Passions or the sacred cantatas just as clearly. Nonetheless, it's sad that we don't have a real opera by Bach. It could have happened. When Bach tried to get away from Leipzig, he had only two places to go – Dresden and Berlin – and I think in both places, he could only have written secular music. He didn't get a job in either of those places, which I think is unfortunate; because after that point he didn't compose many cantatas anymore. True, he still worked on the *Matthäus-Passion* and the *B minor Mass*, and wrote a lot of instrumental music; but we lost out on Bach the opera composer, and that is something I would have loved to hear.

You mentioned your wish to understand the meaning of Bach's music. For some scholars and performers today, the key to the meaning of Baroque music is musical rhetoric – the construction of a piece of music along the same lines as a classical speech, which was often discussed in Baroque treatises on music. Some musicians today regard musical rhetoric as a code, which allows for a translation from music to words; Nikolaus Harnoncourt is perhaps the most prominent advocate of rendering Baroque music as *Klangrede* (speech-in-tones). Other musicians and scholars suggest that this emphasis on rhetoric is exaggerated and misplaced. Where do you stand in this debate?

I think that, as a method of analysing Baroque music, rhetoric is fantastic. Analytic methods from the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries were developed with 19<sup>th</sup> century music in mind, and they don't work so well when applied to Baroque music. Rhetorical theories, which were developed in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, provide a much better guide to understanding what the composer meant.

But after that, you still need to interpret the music in performance, and at that stage I am not sure that rhetoric is all that helpful. I am not saying that performers should ignore this issue entirely. My attitude is that, as a performer, you should think of yourself as an orator; you should communicate with your audience, bring your ideas over to your listeners. But if the general idea of the piece is clear to you, then it does not matter much whether you go into rhetoric in greater or lesser detail. I don't go very far into rhetoric, because I think it's not very helpful for a performer. In fact, my impression is that the people who know the most Latin terms for rhetorical figures do not always know how to make music out of their knowledge.

Rhetoric was only of limited use for composers as well. In Holland, a priest called Joannes Albertus Ban studied the music of his contemporaries and immediate predecessors – composers like Gesualdo and Monteverdi – and prepared a catalogue of figures and intervals which were appropriate for specific words. He then declared himself the best composer, because he knew how the great composers did it. But his contemporaries did not share this judgement. In 1640, there was a competition between him and the French composer Antoine Boësset; both composers were asked to set the same texts to music. The contest was presided by Ban's fellow priest and music theoretician Marin Mersenne, and by the Dutch poet Constantijn Huygens – both of them important composers as well. The two judges unanimously declared Boësset as the winner. I have seen the two pieces – they were published afterwards – and I agree with the judges' decision. It might be true that Ban knew the rules of rhetoric better; he knew exactly which interval was judged as best suited to which word. But he could not do anything with this knowledge. He simply wasn't as good a musician as Boësset, who occasionally "sinned" against these rules – but nonetheless wrote a better piece of music. So it's true that there have been musicians, both then and now, who consider rhetoric a sort of magic wand, who think that, if they know everything about it, they would be able to perform or compose well. But the magic doesn't happen. So let's be careful about this; let's not to give it too much importance. But I don't say it's unimportant. It helps me to understand – but not to perform.

Has working with period instruments made you understand the music better – not just in terms of how it should sound, but also in terms of what it means?

I think that, if you perform with the right tools – with the correct instruments – it obviously teaches you a lot. A good instrument, and a good player, will tell you much about the possibilities and limitations of music-making. You can imitate the elements of Baroque interpretation on modern instruments, but it would still be an imitation. There is really no substitute for the real thing – for using actual Baroque instruments or good copies. But simply playing the correct instruments – or even playing them well – is not enough. Over the last 40 years, the way of playing these instruments has improved enormously – at least, the technique has improved; but the interest in knowing **why** we use them has diminished. In the 1960s and 1970s, when I studied with Leonhardt, all students were interested in reading treatises,

examining the original sources; they were eager to know everything. But these days, I notice that many of the good performers are less and less interested in sources. Great musicians like Harnoncourt, Leonhardt, Brüggem, like myself and others have made many important discoveries; and younger players seem content with relying on those discoveries. They go off and make music, relying on what the earlier generations have taught them; they often do not bother to do their own research. I think that's dangerous because, if we are wrong, the next generation should find out our mistakes, and correct us.

Of course, when reading old sources, you end up taking out of them what fits your personality, but you have to be careful; you cannot introduce something which is not there at all. If all the Baroque sources speak in great detail about articulation and its importance, you cannot simply dismiss this element; and the same thing goes for vibrato. You should work with what the sources tell you, and think about how to apply it.

And the instruments themselves teach you much. The limitations of baroque instruments playing in different keys – like the more covered keys or more open keys on the Baroque oboe – teach you something, and not just about playing techniques. In our performances of the cantatas, I used different pitches simultaneously, as Bach himself did. We performed the early cantatas in A = 465, a whole tone higher than the old pitch (A = 415); but the woodwind instruments played, sometimes in 415 and sometimes in French pitch, A = 390. That was the first time anybody tried this out. I think it worked really well – and I think it also revealed something about Bach's ideals.

For example, in the early cantatas, it might seem as if the oboe has to play many covered notes; but when you do the transposition, you realise that Bach actually let the oboe play in good tonalities. Bruce Haynes once suggested that Bach deliberately used "bad" keys in some of his cantatas in order to express suffering; but, in my view, this is not true in the early cantatas, and he now agrees with me. If you check Bach's original sources, you can see that he avoided the bad keys in his early works: if the piece is in F minor, Bach allows the oboe to play in G minor, which is a much more open key. In later works, Bach did allow the oboes to play in different keys. Perhaps this was because he had better oboe players; but it is also true that, in these works, he started to use the sound of closed keys as an expressive

– you could perhaps say “rhetorical” – device. In these later works, he does not use this transposition anymore; if you hear a sense of strain and suffering in the sound of the oboes, that’s how it is meant to sound. But in the early works this element was not in his mind yet. He just composed the most beautiful music, full of sadness. A good example is Cantata 131, where the oboe and bassoon play in A minor, instead of G minor. It was only later that he introduced very difficult tonalities in oboe and bassoon.

But this is the sort of thing you can only discover when you take care to use the instruments appropriate for the work, and examine the original sources. For example, in the duet in Cantata no. 155, Bach writes a bassoon solo using notes that are not within the range of a Baroque bassoon. In the liner notes to his recording of that work, Harnoncourt speculates that, although the contra-bassoon didn’t exist at this time, Bach already had access to such an instrument. But this shows that in this case he did not check the sources directly, because in the original score you see that the piece is in A minor, but the bassoon part is written in C minor – that is, the bassoon was playing in French pitch. So there is actually no problem. Thanks to transpositions, Bach had more notes; when he used a French oboe, which was pitched 1 ½ tone lower, this gave him an extra 3 notes in the bass.

I think that’s a fascinating aspect of Bach’s compositional technique: the instruments taught him something, and he took full advantage of it. So, although I sometimes perform Bach’s music with modern orchestras, I still think there’s nothing better than Baroque instruments for that.

How do you see your role as a conductor – are you dictating a pre-determined interpretation to your players, or do you create the interpretation in co-operation with them?

If I work with my own orchestra, it’s in co-operation with my musicians, my friends. The final decision is still mine, and everybody accepts that. But if you play with fantastic musicians, and they come up with a question or an idea, it would be stupid not to listen to them, not to take them seriously. I’m also a chamber musician, and it’s great fun to work with great musicians; so obviously I listen to what they have to say. But if I am not convinced by their ideas, I still do it my way; and they accept that.

One such case, which I remember particularly well, was in the final chorus of Cantata 63, where we had a debate about a tempo change in the middle of the

movement. There's a chromatic passage, for which there is no tempo indication. The chorus begins with an "allegro", and there's a short "adagio" passage; but I believe that the allegro should return after the B part, even though there's no "a tempo" indication. It's true that normally, in Baroque music, chromatic music was performed slowly. But I didn't think this was the case here. The text of this passage was "let the devil not torment us", but the text as a whole is celebratory, and there is clearly no sense of danger or threat. In 18<sup>th</sup> century musical thought, when the text only hints at danger, you can use a musical device which is normally associated with a very sad text – but you use it in a different way; and I think that's what Bach did here. So I thought that we should perform this passage quickly – in the same "allegro" tempo as most of the movement – but in the beginning most of the players and singers didn't agree with me, and we had a big musical and theological discussion about this. In the concerts, we tried it both ways, and I only became more convinced that it should be done at a quick tempo. The experiment also convinced more than half of the musicians that I might be right. In the church, we recorded it in both tempi and listened to both versions; and by then only very few musicians still thought that I made a mistake. But we decided to include the faster version on the CD.

Then the CD came out. At the time, I still gave every musician a free copy. As often happened, most people came to listen to the CDs rather late. I asked the two people who insisted on the slower tempo – and one of them was a key member of the orchestra – if they had listened. "Yeah, it's nice". Slowly I came to that particular cantata. "And tempi?" – "Fine". "First movement?" – "fine". "Last movement?" – "Yes, excellent". They'd forgotten the argument completely. So in general I feel that the conductor should listen to the musicians, should try to incorporate their ideas – but in the end you should not be afraid to make a mistake, to do it your way.

When I work with a modern orchestra it's just me making the decision, there's no discussion. A baroque orchestra works in a different way. They play with you because they like you, they enjoy playing with you; you're normally friends with each other. So that's another way of making music, a way I prefer.

When I work with a modern orchestra, there is also something of a didactic element. In the 1960s, I and other people were complaining about modern

orchestras performing the *Matthäus-Passion* with 300 people in the choir and double woodwinds; we said this is a shame, you should not do it like that. These days many orchestras are reduce their size when they perform this music. Last year, I did the *Johannes-Passion* with the Wiener Symphoniker, and I could do it with six first violins – we could really reduce the ensemble. In general, I believe there is now much more openness from both sides, and that it's important that specialists go to modern orchestras and try to teach them how to perform this music. Of course, you are there to make music with them – not just to be a professor; but you should share your thoughts and your knowledge about this music with them. I do this quite often, and I enjoy the experience. But when you work with your own orchestra, you don't have to explain everything. Many of the things are clear, both to you and to them; and when you have played with people for a long time – some musicians have been playing with me for 30 years – they understand with very few words what you want them to do; you can then focus on the finer points and make the performance more beautiful, more special. These musicians have also learned to anticipate me: they know that I like trills, they know that I like hemiolas, and so they will add them before I ask them to. With a modern orchestra you have to ask for every trill.

In many of your performances, I get the impression that you encourage your players to be creative and improvisatory in their phrasing and ornamentation.

Sometimes I ask them for very specific things. In this sense I remain something of a teacher, even with my own orchestra. I try to get people to discover these things for themselves, but if they don't come up with the idea of their own accord, I say "Why not do this?" or "please do that". I think that's one of the advantages of making recordings – they give you more time to work on these things and refine them. And in my case, since I have worked for 30 years with the same recording team – with my wife Tini Mathot as the producer and Adriaan Verstijnen as the technician – it's very easy. When they edit my recordings, they look for such moments, and if they find them they will edit them in, because they know I like that and they like it themselves as well. So, just as Harnoncourt's and Leonhardt's cantata recordings bear the clear signature of those conductors, my own personal signature is very clear on my CDs.

Generally, how would you compare the experience of making recordings to the experience of performing live?

Oh, I like both. In the concert you have to go for it. There's no way to do it again, so if you make a mistake, you go on and you don't worry about it. And I think, as an audience member, you should not sit down with a red pencil in your hand. You should enjoy. It's important that both musicians and listeners appreciate that making music means taking risks. It's true that these risks don't always pay off so well, but sometimes they pay off fantastically.

Of course, these risks are greater in concerts. When you make a recording, you still take risks but you also know that, in the end, it should be perfect as well, or reasonably perfect. Fortunately for Bach, he did not have to make recordings himself; some of his music is very difficult to record. When Harnoncourt and Leonhardt made their recordings – and I remember this as I sometimes played on those LPs back in the beginning – it sometimes took 3 or 4 hours to record just one aria. I remember some occasions where a little boy sang an aria and finally, after several hours, it was done – and then the producer said, “no, the German was not good enough”, and it had to be done all over again.

These days, no record company would pay for so many sessions and takes, and there might be a good side to this as well. We do try, in our own recordings, to keep the element of life, to make sure that the recording, as it comes out, does not sound like something that was patched together with too many edits. Still, my wife controls the sessions very firmly; if at some point I become lazy and I say, “I want you to edit this in”, she'd say, “no, I don't like it, it's not good enough yet”.

When recording large-scale cantatas, do you record solo movements and choruses separately?

Unfortunately, we cannot record large-scale works in sequence. We always record the cantatas after performing them in live concerts, so by the time we come to the studio we know the piece well and it is easier to achieve a sense of continuity, even when recording the movements separately. It's very important for me to achieve this – it's very bad if a cantata ends up sounding like a collection of disjointed movements. But it's too expensive to record in sequence. Even Gardiner did not do this – of course, he recorded his concerts live, but I understand that these were sometimes supplemented by patching sessions. As far as I know, my former student Masaaki Suzuki does not record in sequence either. No record company would pay for that. There's a practical element: it's too expensive to have the

soloists waiting around while I'm doing a choir session, or vice versa. Still, we do our best to achieve continuity, between movements and also within movements. Whenever possible, we use longer takes.

The radio in Holland also recorded our performances of the cantatas – in live concerts – and it might be interesting for musicologists compare the two versions. Sometimes there are very different tempi, because I'm like that; I don't calculate all my tempi or stick to them strictly. My feelings about the music and its pacing could change from one day to the next. Sometimes, having tried it one way in several concerts, I come to the recording session and decide to try another approach. I think such flexibility is good for the spirit of the music. So, alongside the fun of making them, concerts also give you time for reflection, for preparation towards the recording; and in the recording itself you can create an interpretation and fix it for some time. The recording of the Bach cantatas is a document, it tells you something about performance practice of Bach's music by a certain group of musicians at a specific time. I see our recording of the cantatas as the product of developments in Bach performance between 1990 and 2000 – they constitute a document in the same way that the Harnoncourt-Leonhardt series is a document for its own time; and there will be similar documents by other people as well.

In my case, it is a document, not just of an attempt to understand Bach's performance practice, but also of an attempt to understand his compositional practice. When we recorded incomplete cantatas, I completed the missing portions myself. I had a conversation about this with Robert Levin, who prepared similar completions for Gardiner. We discussed one particular cantata – where most scholars believe that one obbligato part is missing – and he asked: "What did you do?" and I told him I added **two** parts. He argued with that, saying that it would clearly be more clever to do it this way, but there is no mention of two parts missing in the literature; but I argued, and still do, that if you look at the music, it's very clear that two parts are missing. Writing two parts also allows you to give a pause to each of the parts, once in a while, and that's definitely an advantage: it's better for a wind instrument not to play continuously from beginning to end – and in Levin's version, that's what the oboe is required to do. I'm still convinced that my own solution worked well. Similarly, in Cantata 192: I didn't hear what anybody else did in that work, as I did not happen to talk about it with anyone; but I do know that

several musicians and scholars agree that there's at least one part missing. It cannot be a trumpet part, because it's too high; so instead I wrote two horn parts, which are also extremely high. That's how we performed and recorded it.

I think the experience of preparing such parts gives a new insight into Bach's compositional technique; it makes you understand, for instance, the challenge that Bach faced in composing for "natural" instruments, and appreciate how cleverly he works his way around the few notes available on these instruments. So this is a new element, which I enjoyed a lot, and which took much more time than just preparing the cantatas for performance.

You do seem more willing than many of your colleagues to take these compositional risks – adding music where it missing, mixing your own compositional efforts with Bach's music.

When I went to conservatory in Holland, I wanted to study composition as well, but I always composed in 17<sup>th</sup> or 18<sup>th</sup> century style. The teacher at the conservatory felt that I should change, that I should write in a modern style. I said to him, "but I'm not interested in doing that", and he replied, "then I'm not interested in teaching you". So occasions like the ones I just described – and others like composing cadenzas for soloists – are welcome opportunities for me to write my own compositions (or just additions) in a style I like, without feeling guilty about it. A good example is my reconstruction of the Markus Passion, where I composed the missing recitatives; and at the moment I am working on a similar project, reconstructing Cantata BWV 205a – my first version is ready. We're going to perform that in Dresden, it's not for a recording. There are major problems, nothing is 100% clear. Musicologists have made suggestions on how things should go; but BWV 205a is lost, and I think it is impossible to reconstruct it as Bach performed it. Some of the arias and the choruses have survived, but you have to find other solutions for the missing arias. I like to tackle these problems with a fresh view, trying to find my own solutions, and so I did. I mean, it's a puzzle to find out how at some point the text will fit. How practical was Bach with his parodies? We still know too little about this.

In BWV 205a I had to compose the recitatives – this goes quicker and quicker now, as I've done quite a bit of this by now. All such projects add to the joy of working on the Bach cantatas, and give me the opportunity to feel, in several ways, like a student of Bach's.

Do you listen to other peoples' recordings?

Not really. In the beginning, I did exchange CDs with Masaaki, and I got one CD of Gardiner's Pilgrimage as a present. But I think that, in the end, you should do what you think, and it doesn't help to compare yourself to others, and do something just because nobody else did it. It's good to know what colleagues are doing, because sometimes there could be fantastic new ideas as well; but you should be careful – you should understand why they did what they did, and decide for yourself whether their ideas are convincing.

Take the issue of how to perform fermatas in the chorales – should the note under the fermata be held longer? For a long time the conventional view was not to hold these notes; and then Harnoncourt started to extend them. For years, everybody followed him in **not** extending the fermatas, and then he reverted to the previous practice. And now everybody is following him again! Nobody is thinking **why** it's being done. So with these things, I do my own research, and I'm very independent. In the case of the fermatas, I think the earlier practice is the right one – they should not be held. I see no reason to do that. David Schildkret wrote an article about this in the Riemenschneider Bach journal in 1989; after examining many chorale books, he concluded quite clearly that the fermata is just an indication of the transition from one line of the chorale to the next. There's also another indication that you should not slow down at a fermata – and you should be an organist to know that: in the *Orgelbüchlein*, there are lots of fermatas at the end of individual lines of the chorale melody, but there are semiquavers still going on in one of the other parts. You can see something similar in some of the early cantatas – the part with the chorale has a fermata, while at the same time the violin obbligato part is still going on, without a pause. So I think nobody can honestly maintain, after having done research, that you should keep the fermatas. Yes, the fermata does mark a cadenza in some arias. But if you want to make cadenzas at those points in the chorales, you should recall that there's one text about Bach's organ playing, where one of his students – I don't remember who it is, I think it was Agricola but I'm not certain – said that Bach didn't like organists who introduced runs and ornaments at the end of chorale lines. So you have corroborating evidence, from several sides, proving that you should not hold fermatas in chorales.

Sometimes it's interesting check to see what other people do with, for example, the transpositions in the early cantatas. I heard the rumour that Gardiner, for instance, performed the early cantatas in 415 and had to transpose the string parts, which is a different thing from having instruments tuned to 465, and woodwinds playing at other pitches. In another case, I noticed that Suzuki, in his performance of Cantata no. 4, transposed the wind parts – correctly – but used an 16-foot violone, which Bach didn't have at that time; it should have been an 8-foot violone. So it's interesting for me to know what people do, and whether they have come up with new information.

This is also the positive side of my debate with Joshua Rifkin and Andrew Parrott on the size of Bach's choir. As you know, I do not accept their view that Bach's choir normally consisted of just one singer per vocal line, that Bach's vocal parts were not shared. I recently discovered one more source that supports my views: in one of Telemann's letters, he advises someone that, when he prepares the parts, the copyist should remember that the parts are to be shared – and make sure that someone with good eyes and someone with bad eyes could both read the music from the same part. I think that's a very nice source. So we go on with the debate – because I think the debate itself is important, and it's good that it takes place. Nobody ever thought about some of those issues before Rifkin raised them, and although I disagree with him, although I think he's wrong, I also think it made people think again and research again and survey again the information they have – that's the positive side of this discussion. The bad thing in the Early Music world today is when somebody does something, and other people take it for granted and do the same unquestioningly. You should do your own research, you should find out why somebody comes up with an idea, and why it's right or wrong – or maybe a bit right and a bit wrong.

It's also interesting to see that nobody uses boy sopranos or boy altos anymore. When I started my recording of the cantatas, I was criticised for not using a mixed choir and female soloists, but I think that today this is no longer possible to use boys and get good musical results. Bach's boy sopranos and trebles were much older than the little angelic voices which we know in England or in Germany today. Bach's boys only entered the choir when they were 12 years old or older. If a boy were to enter a choir at that age today, he would have to leave half a year later. We

don't know the precise reason for this – maybe something to do with the diet – but the fact is that, today, boys' voices break much earlier than they did in Bach's lifetime. When we check the records, we can see that Bach was writing for 17- or 18-year-old sopranos – he even had a 19-year-old soprano once; these were mature boys. And one thing that's certain is that Bach's tenors and basses, if they were students from the Thomasschule, were very young tenors and basses. Presumably, Bach had some help from students in the university, and some teachers at the school; otherwise his problem was not with the sopranos and altos but with the tenors and basses.

You might be familiar with the idea that what is usually described as historical performance is actually a reflection of 20<sup>th</sup> century aesthetics, with historical research only playing a small part. This view was especially promoted by Richard Taruskin [*Text and Act*, Cambridge University Press, 1995], who argues that historical performers should actually take pride in this – that being a representative of your own time is better, indeed more authentic, than being an archaeologist.

Nobody likes the word “authentic” anymore, and I agree with that; when you claim to be “authentic”, it sounds as if you are trying to prove yourself right by claiming that others are wrong. But I'm convinced that research is very important. I wouldn't be the musician I am now if I hadn't done that, and I'm still reading as much as I can. I cannot deny that I am Ton Koopman; my own personality affects how I perform music, but then the same was true of Baroque musicians. If Handel were to play one of Bach's pieces, or vice versa, perhaps their performances of each other's music would not have been entirely “authentic”. The best we can hope for, today, is try to be like students of these composers. This does not mean giving up your own personality. Bach's own students were not all the same. There were real antipodes among them – think of M $\ddot{u}$ thel and Johann Christian Bach, or Kirnberger and Wilhelm Friedemann Bach. But they all knew the language of the time, and they were all recognisably students of Bach. When I consider this, I think we have a chance to play more authentically than people sometimes dare to believe: we can learn the language of the time. Of course, we cannot escape the influences of our own time as well: I'm certain that pop and jazz music have had some influence on the way we shape Baroque rhythms – even in my case. I don't like pop music, but I have heard it; and my father was a jazz musician, so that has certainly influenced me. But our desire to make these rhythms lively is historically informed. Everybody

danced in the 18<sup>th</sup> century as well. I'm not actually certain, given the Lutheran atmosphere he grew up in, whether Bach himself has ever danced; and although I danced a few times, I never enjoyed it. But dance and its rhythms are still very central to Bach's music, and it's an element I enjoy, and which like to bring out.

Whatever the modern influences on us, I still believe that we can learn the language of the music, the syntax – I mean, once you studied a language properly, you are not going to doubt how a verb like “to be” is conjugated, that's not something you need to discuss. I think in Baroque music there are many things that are so clear that there's no need to discuss them. On the other hand, we also know that, in Italy or in France, the same elements were sometimes translated a little bit different. So you should be aware of that. And you also need to accept, as a modern musician, that you might be a better student of Bach than of Françoise Couperin or Louis Couperin, or Vivaldi, and you have to live with that.

But I think you should really care about this – you should try to study these things for yourself; I am really critical of those students who get their information too easily, information that their teachers found with difficulty. Research into Renaissance and Baroque music can only go on if it's done by the new generation. I'm certain we made mistakes, especially in unresolved problems like rubato, where we have very few sources to go on. I hope the next generation will discover new sources, and reveal new answers in them. I'm convinced rubato existed, but I'm not convinced that it was used quite as much as some people use it today. I personally don't believe in Mannerism, but I know that in art history, Mannerism exists. But I would love to be with Caravaggio, not with the Mannerism after that. And in this sense, I would love to be with Bach himself, and not with his students.

For me, it's very important to create a mixture between what I know and what I feel. I'm convinced that Bach's own music contains the most perfect balance between intellectual, mathematical power – and emotional power. This combination is vital for me: I try to perform Bach's music without being too sentimental, but with emotional depth and sincerity. I think some musicians make the mistake of assuming that, if there's no emotion in the performance, that's better. When I studied musicology, my professor said, “the best interpretation is no interpretation – just read the music”. I didn't agree with him, even then. I think it's the job of a musician to interpret, to take risks, and maybe, at some point, to be found wrong. If

I'm found wrong by somebody, I should honestly admit my mistake; and if I still believe that I am right, I should be able to defend my position, both musically and intellectually.

As an interpreter, you should also try to understand the music of the time as best you can, and understand it as part of a larger culture – against the background of the visual arts of the time, the literature, the philosophy. After all, the same people who enjoyed the music also enjoyed these other elements of the mind. Years ago, I noticed that, while I very much enjoy Baroque music and Renaissance painting, especially from Italy, I did not like 18<sup>th</sup> century paintings so much; I found them too superficial, and some of them seemed more decoration than anything else. But I also believed that, if you have such a reaction, you should try and understand where it comes from. You should go and sit in a church of that time – not a church that was restored in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but a pure Baroque church or house. I used to visit such churches, and I tried to imagine the music that sounded there, and think: “what’s wrong with me, that I like the music and don’t like the art from the same period?”. I mean, the conventional opinion in Holland is that poetry from the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, while good, is already showing signs of decadence, and anything after that is just nonsense. I don’t think you should just accept such opinions. Read the poetry for yourself! But read it, not just as a curiosity; read the poems and try to place your mind in the spirit of that time – and then you will understand them. It’s the same with literature in general. And that’s one challenge for the new generation – to do that a lot more than my generation did.

So far, you talked about what the performers should know and understand. But what about the audience? One of the arguments against historically-informed performance is that we don’t listen in the same way that Bach’s audience did. Their social, cultural, artistic and musical background is different from ours. So do you think it’s also important for audiences to learn more? Do you think it’s important for you, as a historical performer, to try and bring today’s audience in contact with the spirit of Bach’s time, or at least bring them to better understanding of that spirit?

I think it’s always good to try and bring the audience closer to the spirit of that time; and perhaps it’s not done often enough. This sort of argument – that the audiences have changed, that modern listeners cannot listen with Baroque ears – is used all too often as an excuse for not making the effort. Modern staging of Baroque operas is a good example: people don’t dare to go for an authentic staging, with designs and movements like those in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, because they

say that it cannot work for a modern audience. But they rarely honestly try to do it so well that an audience is convinced. I'm certain that a convincing performance could make such a staging comprehensible and enjoyable for today's audiences. Perhaps, though, the performance cannot do this on its own. The musicians must be able to convince the audience; they have to be communicative. They should probably talk to their audience about it – in interviews, in articles and program notes, in pre-concert talks, even during the concert. They should tell the audience something about the music and about the way it is being presented. I do this myself very often. Not all concerts allow you to do this – you cannot talk in the middle of the *Art of Fugue*, for instance – but I often do it when the program allows; I like that, and I think many people in the audience enjoy it when a musician can also speak, not only play.

So obviously we have an educational task. But Baroque music has the advantage that it can be understood in many ways, and this makes it easier for listeners to approach it. When you just start listening to contrapuntal music, it is difficult to hear it on the level of the deepest counterpoint analysis and compositional secrets; it is easier, at first, to focus on attractive melodies and sheer musical beauty. But even at that stage, Bach is the right person to turn to: you can enjoy his music in so many different ways. I know people who went to hear the *Matthäus-Passion* just because of “Erbarme dich” and the opening chorus, and who are now starting to fall in love with the chorales and their harmonies. Or they say that the way Bach treats the Evangelist – his way of telling a story that they already know – makes them listen. People might start listening to this music because of the beautiful melodies – but then they realise that there is much more to it than that. Of course, people should take the time and find the energy and concentration to listen again and again; the music then becomes very fine, more eloquent.

For me, as a concert performer, it seems that many people are indeed making the effort. Baroque music in general has a good audience. When we started to perform the cantatas in the Netherlands, the idea did not go down well with the managers of the concert halls there. They didn't believe that many people would come to the concerts. But now, the Concertgebouw is full – 2,000 people come to listen to cantatas. This means that, if you dare to bring something to an audience, if you are persistent, and if you defend and promote it well – people will come.

And promotion can be done in so many ways. Christoph Wolff and myself, together with various scholars, published three books about Bach's cantatas, discussing various relevant and related issues – theology, performance practice, etc. I think it helps to bring this background information to the audience. The audiences themselves are very interested in this: these days I see more and more people disappointed by insufficient background information in CD booklets. That's a good sign! Or think about the film about Marin Marais (*Tout le Matins de Monde*), for which my friend Jordi Savall prepared the musical soundtrack. Personally I cannot stand it when you can clearly see that the actor on the film is not really playing a viola da gamba; but still, many people discovered French music and started taking an interest in it thanks to that film. So it's good to make propaganda for music you believe in, even in unusual ways – as long as you bring the music to the audience. Happily, the audience for early music is still a young audience, unlike many of the symphonic concerts, where the audience is growing older and older. I think that's a positive feature of early music.

It is typical that the interview ended on this positive note. Throughout our conversation, I could sense Koopman's infectious enthusiasm for the music and for his ideas. This enthusiasm and active pleasure was communicated as vividly in his speech as in his music-making, accompanied by a sense of inter-connectedness, both in the form and in the content of his speech. His associative "jumps" from one topic to the next were the perfect foil for his beliefs – in the relation between art and music; in the unity of the sacred and the secular, the dramatic and the contemplative, in Bach's music; in the possibility of being both an individual musician and a faithful student of the great masters. In the interview, he said that a performer should be an orator; and in some ways, one can certainly sense this in his speech and in his interpretations. But if "oration" means speaking down to an audience, from an exalted position of strength, then perhaps this is not the best word to characterise his approach. Koopman does not preach at his audience; he reaches out to them, makes the joy of the music palpable, and

almost invites participation. This made interviewing him especially pleasurable, and is also one of the main attractions of his performances, both live and on record.

## **Discography**

### **Introduction**

In one sense, the following selection represents a rather narrow view of Koopman's discography. Given the focus of my interview, I thought it would be appropriate to focus on Koopman's Bach recordings; but Koopman's discography also includes highly-acclaimed performances of works by Schütz, Biber, Buxtehude, Handel and Mozart – among others. On the other hand, I did attempt to represent the full gamut of Koopman's activities: he appears here as conductor and player, harpsichordist and organist, chamber musician and soloist – and indeed as a part-time composer. The overall picture is of a scholar-performer who aspires to emulate Bach – as performer, improviser and composer.

The one activity I did not represent here is Koopman the “mere” continuo player. Anyone familiar with his recordings in that role (for example, as one of the “accompanists” in Montserrat Figueras's recording of Monteverdi arias and laments, or in Jordi Savall's recordings of Marin Marais's *Pieces de violes*) will know that, even there, his strong musical personality could be clearly detected.

For Koopman, there is nothing restrictive about historically-informed performance. On the contrary: improvisatory freedom and individual flair are part-and-parcel of a faithful, ‘authentic’ performance. When appearing with other musician – be it as accompanist, partner or conductor – he encourages a sense of co-operation and dialogue; the results sound very much like a team-effort, a harmony between individuals. I have emphasised this aspect in my discussion of his partnership with Jordi Savall; but it should be kept in mind in all the reviews below.

## **Bach: The Complete Cantatas, vol. 1**

Cantatas nos. 21, 131, 106, 196, 71, 150, 31 185, 4

Barbara Schlick (soprano), Kai Wessel (alto), Guy de Mey (tenor), Klaus Mertens (bass), The Amsterdam Baroque Orchestra & Choir

Challenge Classics/Antoine Marchand CC72201. 3 CDs. rec. 1995. re-issued 2003. 198 mins.

Five stars

### **Critic's Choice**

This volume inaugurated Koopman's cycle of the cantatas, and remains one of its finest achievements.

In his notes, Koopman writes that the cantatas reveal "a Bach who was by turns austere, moving, and ebullient". The works here, and Koopman's performances, are indeed highly expressive and frequently ebullient – but rarely austere. In the more profound, tragic movements, Koopman achieves an emotional depth not always matched in later volumes. Other movements are, in turn, brilliantly virtuosic, gently dance-like and joyously serene – qualities which also characterise the remainder of the series, not least the volumes dedicated to the "secular" cantatas.

Given his opposition to the one-per-part hypothesis, it is ironic to see Koopman making a strong case for it here. Most of the performances here feature the Amsterdam Baroque Choir in its full complement (just under 20 singers). In cantatas 196 and 150, however, the choruses are sung by a group of excellent soloists, drawn from the choir. The effect is anything but austere: Koopman's rendition of Cantata 150, in particular, has a combination of flexibility, intimacy and dramatic immediacy which might not have been achieved so convincingly with choral forces. Excellent though Koopman's choir is, I sometimes wish he had tried the soloistic experiment more often.

This set is a superb introduction to Bach's cantatas and to Koopman's approach to them. It is a pleasure to be able to welcome it back into the catalogue, in this Antoine Marchand re-issue – alongside the newly-released Vol. 13, which is

reviewed separately in this magazine. I look forward to the completion of this valuable series.

**J. S. Bach (reconstructed: Ton Koopman): *Markus-Passion***

Christoph Prégardien (Evangelist), Peter Kooy (Christus)

Sibylla Rubens (soprano), Bernhard Landauer (alto), Paul Agnew (tenor), Klaus Mertens (bass)/ Boys of the Breda Sacrament Choir/ The Amsterdam Baroque Choir & Orchestra/ Ton Koopman.

Erato 8573-80221-2. 2000. 2 CDs. 118:23 mins.

Four stars

Koopman reconstruction of Bach's lost *Markus-Passion* combines Bach's own music – selected from both sacred and secular cantatas to fit the surviving libretto – with Koopman's setting of the New Testament narrative. He describes this as an attempt to emulate Bach – to become one of Bach's students.

The result is only partly successful. Koopman's recitatives are convincingly Baroque, and could be viewed as the work of a competent student; but they are no match for the expressive eloquence of the recitatives in Bach's authentic passions. His choice of models from Bach's existing music, on the other hand, is usually effective – a few moments of awkward declamation notwithstanding.

His *turba* scenes are particularly interesting; through his choice of music for the crowd calling for Jesus' crucifixion, Koopman reveals latent violence in unexpected places. Elsewhere, he reveals that Bach's secular cantatas contain some profoundly moving music, utterly appropriate for the Passion. Throughout, he finds arias and choruses within Bach's lesser-known cantatas that could compete with the best that the authentic Passions can offer.

The performance is very convincing. The superb Evangelist (Christoph Prégardien) and Christus (Peter Kooy) make the most of Koopman's recitatives, and Koopman directs an insightful, expressive and flexible rendering of Bach's music.

**J. S. Bach: The Sonatas for Viola da gamba and Harpsichord, BWV 1027-1029; Trio Sonata for organ, BWV 529 (arr. Savall and Koopman)**

Jordi Savall (viola da gamba), Ton Koopman (harpsichord).

Alia Vox AV 9812. 2000. 58:40 mins.

Five stars

This recording celebrates Koopman's long and fruitful collaboration (and friendship) with Jordi Savall. It was made for Savall's record company, Alia Vox, and its booklet contains glowing mutual tributes. This is a true chamber-music partnership between genuine, charismatic soloists: both musicians can project themselves firmly into the foreground – but they also know when to retreat into the background and allow their partner to shine.

These are bold performances, full of contrasts and extremes. The adagios and andantes are intensely introverted; their slow tempi, smooth articulation and absence of strong rhythmic gestures acquire, gradually, a hypnotic, mesmerising quality. The faster movements, on the other hand, are often highly exuberant and energetic – almost brash at times.

Such strongly characterised renditions would not be to all tastes; for example, Koopman's creative ornamentations, which for me are among the strengths of this disc, might prove intrusive for other listeners. I have my own reservations – some movements sound too harsh and strained; but I would strongly recommend the disc on the strength of the poetic slow movements alone, and there is an attractive geniality and flexibility to many of the fast movements.

**J. S. Bach: Complete Organ works, vol. 2.**

**6 Schübler Chorales, BWV 645-650; 18 Leipzig Chorales, BWV 651-668.**

With sung chorales. The Amsterdam Baroque Choir/ Ton Koopman (organ).

Teldec Das Alte Werk 4509-99459-2. 1995. 2 CDs. 142:30 mins.

Five stars

This album links two of Koopman's Bach projects – the complete organ works, and the complete cantatas. The organ chorales are, of course, based on

Lutheran church hymns, and were intended for the church services; some are direct arrangements of movements from sacred cantata. Koopman has therefore decided to alternate his performances of these works with Bach's "simple" harmonisations of the same melodies, sung with great refinement and sensitivity by his Amsterdam Baroque Choir.

Koopman's performances of the organ chorales are mostly on the contemplative side, with moderate-to-slow tempi, rounded phrasing and a preference for mellow registration. In some cases, I would have preferred a more vigorous approach; but for the most part, Koopman's interpretations are highly effective. His gentle approach matches the lyrical tranquillity of some of these works, as well as the emotional profundity of others. In some cases, Koopman does depart from this introverted style – for example, in the imposing majesty of "Fantasia super: Komm, heiliger Geist" (BWV 652) and "Nun danket alle Got" (BWV 657), where he employs the organ's sharper, strident registers to convincingly dramatic effect. Throughout, there is good textural clarity; the chorale melody is over-prominent at times, but even in these passages, the other parts are clearly audible.

### **Appendix: Review of Volume 13**

Cantatas nos. 1, 62, 96, 38, 93, 33, 133, 122, 92

Deborah York (soprano), Franziska Gottwald (alto), Paul Agnew (tenor), Klaus Mertens (bass)

The Amsterdam Baroque Orchestra & Choir/ Ton Koopman.

Challenge Classics/Antoine Marchand. CC72213. recorded 2000, released 2003.

Rating: Four stars

This long-awaited volume marks the renewal of Koopman's series of the complete Bach cantatas. Here, he directs cantatas from Bach's second annual cycle (1723/4). The performances are warm, gentle and sensitive. Some seem too genteel: the duet in Cantata 93, for example, would have benefited from a more incisive approach; the storm aria in cantata 92 could have been stormier. Elsewhere,

however (for example, in the opening choruses of Cantatas 33 and 133), there is considerable thrust and vigour; and the gentle approach often proves moving and rewarding. I particularly enjoyed cantatas 62, 122 and 92, where Koopman insures textural clarity and a sense of momentum and purpose without sacrificing warmth of sound and expression. A similar approach in Cantata 96, however, is marred by the speed of the opening chorus. Christoph Wolff, in his typically informative yet perfunctory notes, writes that this movement's "length and rich sonorities" give it "unusual weight"; but Koopman's rushed performance renders it lightweight.

There are some controversial moments in Koopman's scoring; his alternation of chorus (on chorale-derived lines) and soloists (on non-chorale materials) is not always convincing. The solo singing itself, however, is excellent (notwithstanding a few harsh phrases from Deborah York), and all four soloists display a keen understanding of the texts. I especially enjoyed Paul Agnew's subtly-controlled and expressively-rich singing. The palpable sense of wonder in his Cantata 62 aria, "Bewundert, o Menschen", was revelatory. Another highlight is Franziska Gottwald's contemplative and touching rendition of "Wie furchtsam wankten meine Schritte" (in Cantata 33).

Despite my reservations, then, I strongly recommend this set. More could have been made of Bach's drama, but the performances are often insightful and deeply-felt.

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