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LONDON CELLO SOCIETY NEWSLETTER

In Memoriam Anner Bylsma

The London Cello Society marks the passing of our beloved and esteemed Honorary Patron Anner Bylsma with this issue of recollections and remembrances. Over the course of 10 years, Anner gave us three unforgettable events on Boccherini, Bach and Beethoven, bringing the music to life in his extraordinary way, with humour and delight. Fortunately his discography is plentiful and gives us all the opportunity to savour both his solo and ensemble playing in a wide range of repertoire. We miss Anner and are thankful that he shared his musical insights with us.

Guy Johnston

I'm grateful to the London Cello Society for inviting me to write about my memories of studying the Bach Cello Suites with Anner Bylsma. I was fortunate to have been introduced to Anner about six years ago by Steven Isserlis. I felt compelled to make contact having read his wonderfully entertaining book, *Bach, The Fencing Master*, in which he playfully shares his interpretation of the bowings in Anna Magdalena's manuscript. Knowing that I was due to guest lead the cello section of the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, I took the opportunity to make contact while visiting Amsterdam.

On the way to Anner's home just off the Vondelpark (not far from the Concertgebouw), I felt excited yet daunted by the prospect of playing for this musical giant. I remember hearing Anner give a masterclass at the Manchester Cello Festival in the 1990s. I was particularly struck by the inspiring way in which he described musical and physical ideas through anecdotes about life. I couldn't wait to get inside the Bach Suites and to hear his thoughts in person.

I walked down the canal streets after a short tram ride, crossed the road (minding the cyclists along the way!) and, with my cello on my back, gazed up at the leaning houses looking down at me. I was full of anticipation: What would Anner think of my playing?





Working on Bach D minor Suite with Anner

Could I impress him with my newfound knowledge of the Suites inspired by his book? Thankfully, I was put at ease as soon as I stepped through the front door. Bobby, the dog, started barking the moment the bell rang and jumped up to welcome me. Anner's wife, Vera, offered me coffee and cake and, moments later, Anner made his way over to the kitchen table on his Zimmer frame. I was immediately struck by his presence. When we spoke, it was as if I had known him all my life.

This meeting marked the beginning of a special musical friendship. During the last six years of his life, I was lucky to journey through these cherished Suites with him and reach the final two only weeks before he sadly passed away. There's a picture here of Anner and me toasting the Suites at the end of our last meeting. That session was particularly challenging. Anner fired a number of questions at me which left me feeling like I had let him (and Bach) down: "Why don't you play the 5th Suite tuned down? Why do you play the Fugue like a study? Why haven't you come with a five-string cello for the 6th Suite?!" It felt like Anner, who seemed more tired than usual that day, was losing patience with having to repeat himself to novices of the Bach Suites like myself. "You all sing too

much about yourselves these days," he exclaimed, "joining all the notes up and taking no notice of Anna Magdalena's source. The music shouldn't just sing, it should speak! Play that again, I don't hear the words, the meaning. Listen to the notes that aren't there, but which are implied. It is *senza basso*, but we should hear the missing continuo."

Even though Anner was physically unable to play the cello in later life, he continued to relish the opportunity to communicate musical ideas and intricate details in Bach's work, as if the music had only just been created and the ideas had just come to him. Luckily, many of his thoughts have survived, not only in his recordings, but in his inspiring, engaging and often eccentric books—*Bach The Fencing Master*, *Droppings*, *Bach and the Happy Few*, *Grumbler's Bach*.

Through his writings and our in-person sessions, Anner prompted me to reinvestigate the Suites from the perspective of Anna Magdalena's copy. Yet, there was always a sense that there was room for manoeuvre - you could make up your own mind about which notes the slurs are tied to, particularly given the lack of clarity in the manuscript. For example, there are instances when it's hard to interpret a four-note grouping. Is it one separate and three notes together; one separate, two together and one separate; or three together and one separate? Anner would muse over the solutions with a chuckle: "Look how the bowings work out so logically this way. The bow will always come back and isn't it wonderful that not every bar needs to land on a down bow?! Listen to all those inner rhythms along the way and the endless variation. You shouldn't just tie all the notes together mindlessly as if you know better than Bach!"

I think Anner believed that Bach was not only experimenting with a new instrumental language away from the "norm" of repeated bowing patterns, but that he also wished to challenge the player by requiring her/him to remain present in the moment – ensuring the avoidance of automatic, "convenient" bowings (e.g. many notes tied to a slur and the consistent use of down bows at the beginning of bars). There are occasions when long slurs appear in the score (e.g. in the 4th Suite Prelude), but these are rare. Anner would encourage unorthodox solutions. He revelled in the quirks of back to front bowings (e.g. using a down bow on the up-beat of the Gigue in the D minor Suite), going against the grain of "modern" cellists who intuitively use up bows on up-beats and down bows on down-beats.

As a general rule, Anner would only tie two, three or four notes together under a slur (under the hand



Bach considerations with Anner

before it has to move position, rather than connecting notes with a shift during a slur). He often suggested staying in lower positions as much as possible, guiding the bow towards the bridge to emphasise important notes and leaving less important notes behind. "Play this bar as if you're looking over your shoulder" he used to say. "Delight in the varying patterns of slurs during sequences - it keeps us entertained, and alive to the inner musical dialogue."

One of my most treasured memories was working with Anner on the D minor Suite* ahead of a performance at the Weesp Chamber Music Festival just outside Amsterdam. I was to perform the Suite for the first time and was eager to hear his thoughts. Anner's presence was with me throughout the performance. Peeking through the door at the back of the church before entering, I could see a light shining through a stain glass window, reflecting multiple colours on the stage where I was about to play. I was reminded in that moment of Anner's timeless advice: "You should play like a minister preaching from the pulpit. Listen to your audience."

Anner's wisdom remains with me today. His smile, often appearing at special moments when I was able to get to the heart of the music during our sessions, was infectious. My memories of him

continue to live on vividly and I will always be grateful for his patience and wisdom. Writing about the Suites in his book *Bach, The Fencing Master*, Anner captures some of the challenges faced by musicians of the past, present, and no doubt, future when entering the sacred world of the Bach Suites.

"A Sphinx, that's what Bach's solo pieces for the violin and for the cello have become. Three hundred years of opinions of lesser men - always lesser men than Bach - have made it impossible to read what it says

in the wonderfully clear quill-pen texts, of which we all have copies. String music used to be a world of its own, full of idiosyncrasies like up- and down bow, crossing of strings, open string-notes, separate or slurred notes, playing near or far from the bridge, double stops with different lengths and tones with vibrato, with accents, or special diction in the middle.

Nowadays, preconceived ideas of people, who do not even play a string-instrument themselves, often are directing our bow-arms. My books about these works should not be necessary at all for anybody, but at this moment they will be one of the few ways to re-discover some of the lost charm of our sphinxes. When string-playing is left to people who can only play to the tune of a "conductor", the price of a Stradivari will soon be equal to that of a good saxophone."

*If you would like to see some general notes made during sessions on the D minor Suite, you can visit the LCS website www.londoncellos.org/Bylsma for more insight.

All books by Anner Bylsma mentioned in this article can be purchased from: <http://www.bylsmafencing.com/>

Listening for the first time in far too many years to the recording Anner Bylsma made of the C.P.E. Bach concertos I realise how lucky I was to have been playing professionally at that time, particularly in the Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment. Bylsma was one of that wonderful group of musicians, including Gustav Leonhardt, the Kuijken brothers, Frans Brüggen and Nikolaus Harnoncourt, that transformed the way musicians approached baroque music in the second half of the twentieth century.

The recording was conducted by Leonhardt, and two apparently more different characters it would be hard to imagine. Leonhardt was immaculate, restrained in every gesture and spoke English equally immaculately (rather better than those of us born here), while Bylsma was large in every sense - a bit dishevelled, always with a joke up his sleeve and a naughty smile with which to encourage the orchestra. But the recording sessions were a joy. Leonhardt and Bylsma somehow complemented each other in terms of musicianship and obviously held each other in great esteem.

Playing continuo cello when Bylsma was the soloist, as I did in those recordings, was a bit like walking a tightrope. There was always the possibility of falling off, or rather being left behind with egg on your face, while he raced ahead and performed in a delightfully spontaneous way things that he had not thought of in rehearsal. This was mostly great fun and a truly authentic way to play baroque music but I do remember a concert in Bath Abbey where he was what seemed like miles away from me (because the orchestra was squashed into the choir) and I could hardly hear him. He played Vivaldi concertos and was in serious rushing mode so I really could only play hell for leather and hope we finished at roughly the same time!

That concert was also memorable because he brought with him a large box of his just published book, *Bach the Fencing Master*. This book is utterly unique: equally mad and fascinating. It demonstrates as nothing else Bylsma's devotion to Bach and his determination to perform the Cello Suites in a way that reflected Bach's wishes in terms of articulation. A flavour of this book can be illustrated by a quotation from page 44 which I quote exactly as it appears in the book:

"article: Accusation! *There is one accusation that an author, writing about 'bowings in the Cello Suites' will not escape: 'Sir, you twist them to suit your private opinions!'*

As I have no clue how to defend myself against such an accusation - but BOY!, did I try to read what is there! - I will launch a counterattack: 'Sir, you are subjecting Bach to what you learned in school, or to pedantic French orchestral rules, or - for some of you - to the strange wish to fabricate a single line, where there are two or three!'"

Bylsma believed that no modern edition of the Cello Suites could be recommended. Nor could the Kellner manuscript or the other two anonymous 18th-century copies; the only text that can take us close to Bach's intentions is his wife Anna Magdalena's copy. This copy, the bowings in which many of us find extremely hard to decipher, he believes should not be dismissed as a hurried and mistake-laden version of Bach's articulations but an accurate copy of his autograph manuscript. He does not subscribe to the convenient view that parallel figurations of notes should be played with the same bowings. This, in his opinion, is boring and entirely missing the point of Bach's genius when it comes to the "spoken" quality of his music.

If you need an example of this thinking you need go no further than the first four bars of the first Suite in G. Anna Magdalena gives three (or is it four?) different bowings in those four bars. Most of us (me included) decide to play the same bowing for each of those bars. Oh how much easier it is to decide that Bach's wife was snatching time for copying from her life of looking after all those children and was rather sloppy! But Bylsma believes that every mark on the pages copied by Anna Magdalena is a vital instruction to the player and that it is our duty to Bach's genius to follow them to the best of our ability.

Bylsma's own ability of course was huge and he was able to encompass all the seemingly wild bowings that the Suites display with far more ease than some lesser players. To sum up a book that it is impossible to sum up, whether he is right in his assumptions about the validity of the Anna Magdalena manuscript or not, it is wonderful that he was endlessly fascinated and involved in trying to solve the questions that the Suites pose to us all.

I realise that this piece about Bylsma leaves out vastly more than it contains. I can only hope that it will stimulate cellists who know little of his playing to read his book and to listen to his large discography of solo works and chamber music. It all conveys his joy in music and in playing with others. If I had to choose one recording that gives

the flavour of his delightful personality I think it would be the marvellous C.P.E. Bach concerto in A major, a piece often ignored by cellists who play only the modern instrument. Bylsma's deep understanding of the music of that period, inimitably enhanced by his own effervescence, shines through.