A Conversation with Barthold Kuijken: On C. P. E. Bach

Barthold Kuijken (b. 1949) is a baroque flutist and conductor. He studied at the Brussels and The Hague Royal Conservatories, and later became a professor at those same institutions. He has performed all over the world: solo; with his brothers Sigiswald and Wieland; with the harpsichordists Gustav Leonhardt, Robert Kohnen, and Ewald Demeyere; and with various orchestras. His extensive recording activity, with repertoire from Lully to Debussy, has won him numerous awards. He has made critical editions of flute works by J. S. and C. P. E. Bach, Telemann, and Devienne.

Laura Buch is an editor of *Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach: The Complete Works*, in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

The following transcription has been adapted from the original interview conducted via Zoom on September 27, 2021.

Buch: You have edited two volumes of the C. P. E. Bach Complete Works edition, but your friendship with CPEB began much earlier. When did you first encounter him? And what flute were you playing at the time?

Kuijken: It's pretty simple. As a teenager, I had good luck because I had two older brothers who were musicians already, and as a kind of Christmas or birthday present they would give me a book of music. It was something you could play with, like a toy. And I remember that one of those things was a volume of two C. P. E. Bach sonatas, for flute and basso continuo. The old Hortus Musicus edition, probably made in the 1930s, with the E minor and G major sonatas, Wq 123 and 124, early sonatas. I had no idea what it was, but I already had the habit of playing things just for myself, things that I didn't need to play in flute lessons—I had my own repertoire at home for when I just wanted to have some fun, something totally detached from the music school. I was playing obviously a normal metal flute. I had great fun with it. And then, when I was in the first year at the Conservatory in Brussels a couple of years later, I went to the library. It was perhaps even in the preface of that Hortus Musicus edition where I read that the originals were in Brussels. So I asked at the Conservatory library if I could please see them. Then I got this nice volume of the C. P. E. Bach sonatas in my hands, and I thought: "Wow, what is this…? There are not just those two, there are actually many more." And in those days, there was a photocopy machine. Each page cost 5 francs, I remember. (That was not much, but if you don't have it it's a lot.) So, you could just take a book, bend it open on the glass plate, put in 5 francs, and a sheet would come out on that thin photocopy paper that is now almost completely gray. Suddenly, I had all those sonatas. I didn't know yet about Bach's copyists Hopf or Michel; I thought since this was a manuscript it must be Carl Philipp's. But I could notice that there were quite a number of differences between those old manuscripts and the modern edition, and I noticed, of course, that the basso continuo wasn't written out. So that was the beginning of looking

at things from the other end of the tunnel: instead of looking from the modern edition downward to the composer, it was looking from the other end.

Buch: That was not how most people first meet C. P. E. Bach, as a flutist!

Kuijken: I was so happy to study there in Brussels, because the library was so rich; there were many things you could discover there. I looked at music and I was copying music until the librarian protested that I was copying all of his library. He didn't notice that there was a slight difference between my brother Sigiswald and me, and it happened to be that Sigiswald had been copying all morning, and I was copying all afternoon. But it looked like it was just one person! It was a very good beginning. And of course, once you have that one little thread, you start pulling, and you find out that you have the trio sonatas, and the concertos, and other works, and you go on to other composers. It never stops.

Buch: So, you really began with C. P. E. Bach…

Kuijken: It was the beginning for me. That and the French music (Lully, Marais, Couperin, Hotteterre, Rameau), which was totally new for us, and felt completely foreign in a certain way, completely different from what you learn at conservatory, and I think the combination of both has been very beneficial. Seeing that left and right from the golden middle road, as we say, there is *another* street, and there are many things to read and to try out. I was reading C. P. E. Bach's harpsichord treatise, of course, together with the Quantz treatise, and noticing that they are pretty much the same, but not quite. And then it starts, because you want to find out why they are different.

Buch: So what is it that C. P. E. Bach, a great keyboard virtuoso, can teach us about playing the eighteenth-century flute?

Kuijken: Of course, at the beginning I was as completely naive as a teenager can be, and not even knowing that C. P. E. Bach was a keyboard virtuoso, of course not. In your music history lessons, you learned about Johann Sebastian and that he had a couple of sons. But soon enough, looking through the old Wotquenne catalogue, for instance, I noticed that, "Wow! There are many more harpsichord pieces than flute pieces," and soon enough I was reading those, and trying to figure out how similar or different they were. And in some of those sonatas, for instance, there were a lot of articulation and dynamic indications—whereas there are so few in the flute sonatas. And I couldn't imagine that flutists were doing without.

Buch: And then Quantz had a few things to say about it.

Kuijken: Yes, then you read Quantz and he says similar things—but each looks from his own instrument. And sometimes they might mean the same things, but use different words. You feel the parallels with Carl Philipp. Another link for me between the flute and Carl Philipp was seeing that there was no

other instrument besides keyboard for which he wrote so much as for the flute. I felt astonished, because most decent composers would write violin sonatas.

Buch: So, when you come back to these old friends, these pieces that you first met long ago, how does your view change over time?

Kuijken: You grow older, and your friends grow older. They don't stay the same. You know each other, but each time you meet you're different. Each time I play or meet one of those Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach sonatas, or quartets or trio sonatas, or concertos, I feel like I'm meeting an old friend. But he has changed also. So it always feels like a very fresh meeting. He's one of those composers I can play again and again, without getting bored by it.

Buch: How does he change between the times you see him?

Kuijken: I think he gets more and more different sides, more and more inner dynamics, somehow. Less and less polished, maybe. More and more surprising. I'm always surprised when I play his pieces. I can't tell you how often I play the A minor solo sonata, and each time, it feels like "Wow, what's he doing *here*?"

Buch: When did you first come upon that sonata?

Kuijken: In the same period, from 18 to 20 years old.

Buch: Because that's one of the first pieces most flutists who come upon C. P. E. Bach more recently find in their lessons.

Kuijken: It was not common to speak about this sonata in lessons. Since then it has changed. And I remember even showing it to my flute teacher; he had never seen it. That was 1967. He was totally uninterested by it.

Buch: Because it was too foreign for him?

Kuijken: He didn't understand what it was, and I showed him a photocopy of the old print in Brussels—where it was under his nose!—and I showed him also the old Ary van Leeuwen edition, Zimmermann, where the order of the movements is changed and many passages have been rewritten. I presented these two things to him with a question mark: "What the hell? What should I do with it?" He kind-of said "Just forget about it." Anyway, even J. S. Bach was counted among the études you had to play. You played the allemande double-tonguing it, as fast as possible…

Buch: Coming upon these pieces fresh in the library was a real piece of luck, to open fresh eyes.

Kuijken: It was incredible luck. At the same time, I also had the luck that the Brussels Conservatory not only had the library, but also had the instrument museum, and they had free entrance. I could go to

the attics of the museum and play all the instruments up there in the reserve. I could later take measurements of whatever I wanted, and compare with some copies I had. It's a situation that's totally impossible today, of course.

Buch: This museum now has been moved to a different place.

Kuijken: Yes, it's not linked anymore to the Conservatory, but it's still the same museum.

Buch: This was about as close to studying directly with C. P. E. Bach as you could get. He was there all except in person. You had the manuscripts that were written by his copyist, and you had the instruments that were at least in his milieu…

Kuijken: Exactly, there was no intermediary. And you could see that some of the instruments suit this music well, and others not at all. You could see that the French instrument for that German music is maybe not ideal. So learning about the music and about the instruments went hand-in-hand, and experiencing these instruments first-hand was great luck.

Buch: What kind of advice would you give a flutist coming up now, who plays traverso or silver flute—what could you advise that person in approaching the music of C. P. E. Bach?

Kuijken: Start with his harpsichord music, not with the flute music. Learn what a clavichord is, what it can do and cannot do, and its expressive means, discover his language through his own medium, his own instruments. And then see how he speaks the same language for another instrument.

Buch: So, studying first the keyboard music gives you his more innate view?

Kuijken: Yes, it's about his language, and you see how it changes from his own early compositions onward. You feel the changes happening under your own hands, basically. You see much better how he's treating harmony. As flutists, most of us are still educated like *prima donnas*, with no real ideas about harmony. So if you approach Bach from the bass line to the top, you discover a language. It's like learning German—that would be another recommendation I could give students who want to play Carl Philipp: please learn German. You learn his syntax, and also the clarity of enunciation and pronunciation. The end of a syllable has a meaning. Whether you have "Dem" with an "m," or "Den" with an "n," it makes a huge difference. You need to see the end of a word and place it at an appropriate moment. So I think the keyboard technique of C. P. E. Bach has a lot to do with that. Not everything is linked together, à la Couperin. There's much more *détaché* in his keyboard music. Just know when it is time to stop a note.

Buch: And then you can apply it to the flute music.

Kuijken: It's the same language. So, trying to do that—reading his treatise again and again, comparing with Quantz who does the same thing, playing German vocal music and "singing" the words with your flute, with the accents on the right place. Know what the words mean, why they are positioned at that

particular place, etc. This is an approach that gets into the heart of the matter. If my profession were playing Chinese music, I would feel ashamed to not speak the Chinese language…

We need to have seen the end of the word to fully understand it. Is it plural or singular, dative or accusative? And similarly, we have to see the end of the sentence in order to know what we talk about. So, the sense of grammar and of syntax, both of them, is so essential. And then you see how notes are accented or not, just like in language.

Buch: It's a kind of speaking with your lips closed…

Kuijken: It's like speaking, it's not much more difficult.

Buch: Did you have the Quantz treatise early on when you first had the Rottenburgh flute, your first traverso?

Kuijken: I had the treatise when I was 13. The old edition with the old German print. I learned German and to read that old Gothic print with Quantz. He was a good teacher. That was another birthday present, in fact.

Buch: For learning how to improvise in Bach's style, what would you advise?

Kuijken: First play the examples he gives. And maybe have a look at other pieces. Have a look at some of Johann Sebastian Bach's Fantasias, etc., see how they are different from the French *Préludes non mesurés*, or how close they are at some points, see what are his favorite tricks in working with it. And of course, improvising on the flute is a completely different matter because you don't have that immediate harmonic possibility. With the keyboard, he just can put a couple of "wrong notes" in the left hand, and there you go. With the flute, it's so much more complicated to get that feeling. So, I don't believe that this kind of free improvisation, as in Carl Philipp's harpsichord improvisations, can be as successful on such a melodic instrument as a flute, because you lack that one dimension.

When I hear people play most cadenzas for C. P. E. Bach's concertos, for instance, it usually sounds like mid-19th century études. I would say forget about that, and try to follow Quantz's advice: play a cadenza in one breath. That limits the amount of nonsense one can put in them. So, you won't be tempted so much to quote the initial theme, because you have no breath to develop it and to put it in minor, etc. So you're bound to connect with other ideas, but in a short space, in a short time. That's an interesting point: seeing Bach's own cadenzas for the keyboard. I could almost play those in one breath on the flute, except for a couple of them.

Buch: So, they're kind of short comments, short one-liners.

Kuijken: The last "bon mot," as Quantz says, the last unexpected "wow," basically to convey the same expression but in a kind of unexpected way. One more surprise in the same mood, if you can, without repeating too many things.

Buch: You've worn multiple hats in dealing with C. P. E. Bach. In addition to all that you've described, you also worked as an editor for us. In the Complete Works edition, you've edited the six flute concertos. I know you found a variety of styles in the C. P. E. Bach concertos, but would you say something about how you assess these concertos? Are they good works for the flute? How do you see his compositional style in them, compared to all we've been talking about?

Kuijken: In the beginning when I was looking at them and when I was practicing the concertos, the D major concerto was not yet found. And the D minor was always debated: "Is it C. P. E. Bach, or not?" I knew best the four that are in copies in Brussels, of course: A minor, A major, B-flat major, G major—gorgeous slow movements that fit the flute very well, but also with some strange passages. And then in the fast movements, I remember feeling in the beginning that the *tuttis* are way more interesting than the solos. I found the *tutti* bits and orchestral bits full of force and invention and energy, and then when the flute comes in I found it less interesting. It could be virtuosic, but that's not interesting in itself. So, I had to learn to look more closely. And so, in doing the edition and seeing the cello originals in some cases, and seeing the harpsichord transcriptions and what he did to those, I started to understand the solo parts better. Still, I had the same feeling that in the fast movements it's mainly the orchestral bits that I loved the most. In the slow movements, it's different. It's a dream for any flutist to play.

Another aspect that I always found, and noticed very much while working on the edition, is that the transcription C. P. E. Bach made from cello or from organ to flute in four of the concertos is not necessarily the most obvious one. I have been tempted very often to change it and to imagine how would I have transcribed this or that cello passage or organ passage. To me, it often seems like he did a rather quick job. He was probably commissioned by some amateur: "Look, you have a couple of cello concertos—wouldn't you make them into flute concertos?" And why not? But I find much more engaged writing in the D major and D minor concertos, which I think were originally made for the flute. Whereas the D major is not particularly virtuosic—it's a piece you can almost sight-read if you're a good reader—the D minor is far more difficult, but kind-of fits. And there are very few places in those two concertos where you feel there is an illogical leap, avoiding, for instance, a low C-sharp or a high F, that lie outside of the baroque flute's standard tessitura. So here I feel in the two concertos in D that the imagination probably started with a flute in mind. And in the others I feel the flute is a kind of secondary choice. Whenever I hear the first three concertos on the cello, that sounds much more convincing to me. And then the G major is so strange: almost no organist plays it. They have, of course, so many organ pieces to choose from. There is just a bit too much mechanical passagework in the G major in the fast movement. In the A minor also: it's just over-the-top for me. I have the same feeling in lots of the Quantz concertos. I don't know all 300 of them, but often I have the feeling that the solos are kind of interchangeable from one concerto to another. You could take them out of one A minor concerto and put them into another concerto, and hardly anybody would notice. As if the link between the solo and *tutti* sections is not always strong enough.

So this is how I feel about C. P. E. Bach's flute concertos. It's still tempting for me to imagine the cello and organ transcriptions and say: "Well, how would I have done it?" I know there are a couple of passages where I have a so-called "better solution." That is, of course, something we cannot do in an edition, and I would absolutely refuse to do that even in a practical edition, because this is the domain of the individual musician who decides to do something. I can do it in a concert, but not in an edition. It's the same when I have made transcriptions of some other pieces not by C. P. E. Bach, and I refuse to make an edition of those. If anybody wants to do that, they can make a transcription for themselves.

Buch: So we come to the line between a critical edition and performance.

Kuijken: A critical edition should give the student or performer basically all the information there currently is about that piece. My opinion is not information. When I perform it in another way, I perform my opinion. This is why I insisted that the edition of the concertos include a rather extended discussion of performance practice: so that this might teach a little bit how to read the information. It might show people that while it looks like this is a definitive edition, you know very well it is not. For me, an edition like the C. P. E. Bach Complete Works should be the beginning of a study for any performer, not the end. The use of any critical edition is the start of my study, and the moment I play an Urtext edition, literally, in concert, I know that I'm wrong.

Buch: It's like reading it silently instead of speaking it aloud.

Kuijken: It's a very good comparison. Then, I see it so often: people playing Bach or Mozart from the Urtext edition and not daring to do anything that's not written, because this is the holy Urtext. They take the edition as the end of the adventure, and not as the beginning.

Buch: So, the edition is to supply the performer with the tools.

Kuijken: And in the edition's performance practice commentary, I try to supply them with the surrounding tools that are not always directly documented for C. P. E. Bach himself but for his surroundings, and the world around him, where one could imagine that this would be common knowledge for people, who would all make their own choices.

Buch: So, to lead the user of the edition to the doorway, basically.

Kuijken: To the exit!

Buch: In your book, *The Notation is Not the Music*, you have this wonderful epigraph from the 17th-century poet Basho: "Do not try to find the footprints of the ancestors, search for what they were searching for." So, what was C. P. E. Bach searching for?

Kuijken: I think he was searching for a very personal expression of his feelings, his sense of literature, of poetry, of diversity, and he tried to do that in a way where all aspects of music—harmony, melody, rhythm, and structure—were very much varied, and rather individual. He must have had a look at all the aspects of music, including composition, counterpoint, etc. And he must have asked himself a lot of questions: "What do I want with this, what does it mean for me?" He could have followed in the footsteps of his father, very well I think, but at the same moment he decided: "No, Dad, that's not what I'm going to do." He would need some courage to do that.

Buch: Indeed, especially with a dad like that.

Kuijken: He did it very successfully, and in a kind of methodical way. The fact that he wrote a treatise but his older brother didn't is quite stunning. He had a very strong intelligence next to his sensitivity. There is always an analytical aspect and choices about structure. Invention and structure, not always following or choosing the easiest path. He knows so very well how to appear emotionally free, or direct, or improvisatory. He must have had a very thorough training in theory with his father: you feel that it's still there underneath everything, but he uses it in a completely different way, and he makes his own system out of that. For me, this is still like learning his language. It's a very strongly constructed language, every aspect has been thought out cleverly and methodically.

Buch: We had this wonderful discovery in 1999 in Kiev of the treasure trove from the Sing-Akademie. What if we could uncover one item in an archive from CPEB? What would you most wish it were?

Kuijken: We have so many keyboard works from him. And so many religious vocal works that are half by him and half not (and sometimes way more than half not!). It would be *very* astonishing to have an opera. Written for the Berlin Opera House, with great singers and a great orchestra, and with his orchestral writing that is always terribly difficult. He writes so badly for strings. His symphonies are really no fun to play—but marvelous music! Compare them to those of his brother Johann Christian, where the writing lies well on the violin, it sounds well, and with Carl Philipp Emanuel it's often so awkward and so difficult.

I come back to Basho's idea: "Don't look for the footprints of your ancestors, try to search for what they were searching for." I was so amazed when I found that little text. And this is basically what I've been doing. We know very well that we cannot copy what had been done by Carl Philipp, by Johann Sebastian, by Couperin, by whomever. The past is past, gone is gone. I would be the first to be totally astonished if we were actually to hear them! But we can try to imagine what they were looking for, what they tried to do—and then put it into practice, into today's reality. I have to realize that Carl Philipp never had a Steinway piano, and had never heard one. He might have loved the instrument very much. But then he would have written pieces for that, using its complete range from the lowest to the highest note. This is the limitation that we have with the old instruments. In the eighteenth century, they were built-in, in everybody's mind. They were not felt as limitations: they were what they were. Just as today, any violinist

knows that he can't play a low F. It stops at G, and that's it. If people today see all those early instruments and performance practices as limitations, again you look from the wrong end of the tunnel. If you could see them from the composer's end… If he heard the word "flute," for instance, he must have had one idea pop into his mind, and that's what he would have written for. He wouldn't have written it for the modern flute. It's so strange: people laugh when you have these anachronistic things in one direction. If you imagined playing a Tchaikovsky concerto on the clavichord, everybody would laugh. But nobody laughs if you play Carl Philipp on the modern piano. I think it's unfair. So, if people often tell me in a discussion "Oh, if Bach would have known the modern piano," I always answer "Oh, if Debussy would have known the traverso." So, it's not about copying the old things, because you cannot. It's more about understanding them.