

*This is the continuation of an interview published in the Summer 2016 American Recorder. You may also listen to this interview, in English, at [www.americanrecorder.org](http://www.americanrecorder.org).*



**Karel van Steenhoven talks with Gustavo de Francisco About the Amsterdam Loeki Stardust Quartet**

**The beginning**

*GdF: You touched on a subject that I would like to ask you about—the professional music scene, your work with Loeki Stardust Quartet. You told me that you became*

*well-known because of this quartet. I would like you to share some experiences, or goals that you had at the beginning with the group—why you started playing together. It's up to you, what you want to share with us. I believe that our readers would like to know a little more from behind the scenes of this important group and of your career.*

KvS: Of course. More than 30 years of playing together is really a lot to tell and it is very difficult to choose. But I can tell you a few things, and you decide what you want to publish.

We started because we were all students in Amsterdam at the same music university. Our teachers were Walter van Hauwe and Kees Boeke. Our main teacher was Kees Boeke, and he wanted to have a six-part consort to teach. He simply picked six players at random. He said we had to play together and prepare the music for the next month, because we only had one lesson every month. He said, next month you have to play this six-part English music.

We began rehearsing the music, and at the first rehearsal, of the six members only four showed up, a quartet [Karel van Steenhoven, Paul Leenhouts, Daniël Brüngen, Bertho Driever]. We waited a long time and no one else came, so we started to improvise together and do silly things.

At the next rehearsal, five came, the four of us and one more. But there was still one of us missing, so we could not rehearse for our lesson. In the third week, again only the four of us were at the rehearsal, but this time we were prepared. One of us had brought four-part music, so we played for a few hours, but again we started to fool around and improvise.

We decided that we should prepare for our lesson and play only four-part music. So we dismissed the other two who did not appear to rehearse and would not let them participate in the next lesson, because we wanted that lesson.

In fact that is how the group started. We found each other in the six-part consort, and two were thrown out. Somehow, a magical spark happened. We all felt attracted to the sound of the four of us playing together. We had so much fun improvising and laughing together, and so we decided we wanted to go on.

Kees told us, “No, you must play six-part again,” and he chose two others for the group. We told him, “Okay, we’ll do the six-part for the lessons, but we will continue the quartet for our own fun.”

This was how the group started, and the name came next. We had to introduce ourselves during the first concert evening for recorder class, to present the group when we played. It was very important that it was a stupid name, had to be sort of funny, had to be very long because we wanted a name longer than the Academy of St. Martin in the Fields [*much laughter*].

We thought, at some point in the future, if we were on a poster for the same event or festival where the Academy of St. Martin in the Fields was playing, the name should be really long. Amsterdam Loeki Stardust Quartet was the chosen name.

The Loeki was a fun piece that we played at that time, a Dutch commercial...

*You played for a TV commercial or something, right?*

Yes! You saw it on our DVD? There was a little lion ...

*He played the recorder, or something—very funny!*

Yes, we played what the lion played during the commercial.

That's how we started playing together. We kept on improvising, so all our rehearsals began with one hour of improvising—not only with recorders, but also on the elec-



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tronic piano, guitar, we also invented sounds using vacuum cleaners.

In fact, the vacuum cleaner had a permanent place in our group. We made all kinds of strange tubes, coming out of the vacuum cleaner to adapt to all kinds of recorders. The vacuum cleaner—on one side it sucks the air and on the other it blows. We had a lot of ways to adapt recorders to the vacuum cleaner where it blows out, creating many sounds.

This was our world, doing strange things and having fun together. We did more and more things together, until we practiced like that two days a week, starting at 8 in the morning to 8 p.m. in the evening ...

*Seriously, two days a week, the entire day for each rehearsal?*

Yes, we were together all day rehearsing. We ate together, and often after the rehearsal, we also went out to the cinema, or the theater. We were like a family.

*I can speak a little of our experience ... at the beginning of Quinta Essentia, we rehearsed two times a week—one of them very long, and the other not so long. Nowadays we rehearse three times per week with four hours or so each time. All of us teach and we have other jobs, so it's really difficult to keep—but keeping our rehearsal time is "sacred."*

This is very important because without regular rehearsals, you never get to the professional level.

*We believe that too. There are many groups that rehearse a few times before a concert, only when there is scheduled concert. We think that does not work.*

No, that's not possible. Thinking about professional level, a group that has three rehearsals and then says it will play a concert—on a professional level, I don't think that it is possible for a recorder quartet.

*We believe that too.*

It is possible for a group that has done this for many years,

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with many rehearsals and many concerts. If the group decides, this is it: you do not want to develop anything new, you just want to play the old repertoire, with

only your old recorders ... in this case, you can say, "Okay, we know each other, know how to react, and we have nothing new to create or develop anymore." Then you can just rehearse for the concerts, but that would be boring, and the audience would be bored very soon too. It would not be a good choice for any professional group, because as a professional group you must always surprise the audience, always bring new ideas. Even if it's on a very tiny level, you should surprise them, be on the edge of possibilities. This is very important. Another thing that was very important for us was the question of historical performance...



### **The old music**

*This is also a very important issue for Quinta Essentia, and is related to what you said before—about the old and Modern instruments.*

Especially when we started this whole Early Music movement, the fact that non-musicians—I mean music theorists or musicologists—were interested in the musical performance practice in older times: this was something new in the 20th century.

Before that, no one was interested in musical performance practice of older times, but just how we play music now. No musician of the Baroque period would play an instrument of the Renaissance, he would play on a Baroque instrument. Going further, a French recorder player would play only on French recorders; they never would use Italian recorders, because they needed a certain sound quality, so they used their own instruments.

At that time, the French court was really famous, so many people then made French music, began to eat like the French. The French style was promoted throughout Europe—except in England, which was still much more impressed with the Italian music.

So in all times, people were interested in their own instruments and their own style, but in the 20th century there was this movement of playing music of former periods. How did they really do it? Frans Brüggen and some other



great players and composers of this time began the “Nutcracker Operation”—you know something about it?

*Yes, I’ve read about this. [On November 17, 1969, a group of composers disrupted a Concertgebouw Orchestra performance. They were protesting the orchestra’s lack of contemporary music programming. While some considered this as a strike for the avant-garde, it also helped historical performance. Both movements had political goals and appealed to a counterculture, especially that of the younger musicians. Reforms made in the Dutch arts subsidy system, and the state-funded music schools and conservatories in the 1970s, also benefitted the Dutch Early Music movement—providing access, through the 1980s-1990s, to recording companies and other mainstream outlets.]*

The main idea Brüggem said was: “Every note that the Amsterdam Concertgebouw Orchestra plays is a lie,” and what he meant is that the orchestra did not play according to how the music very probably would sound in former times; they just played the way they liked at this time.

For historical performance practice, the musicians read old books, really looked at old paintings and pictures, tried to remake old instruments—how do you play or articulate on them? Then a whole new world emerged. Many musicians—also musicologists—worked together to find out how the music was, in former times.

This is all, on the one hand, very interesting—but on the other, as a musician, you are placed very much in a sort of museum. If you, as a musician, perform exactly according to the rules described in the books or in the opinion of musicologists or theorists, where are you as a human being? Where is your musical feeling? This is a very strange way to act.

Also speaking on this issue, for example, in our quartet, we did extensive research with musicologists on Spanish music composed around the year 1500-1600. We recorded a CD with this repertoire, on a very deep musicological level.

But when you as a musician work intensely researching ideas for six years—you know so much about a certain subject, yet you cannot expect the audience to know as much as you do, so you bring your music to this audience that is abso-

lutely [innocent about this music]. They have not read all the books you read; they cannot understand the depth of your actions. You create a big gap between yourself, as the musician, and your audience. You understand what I’m saying?

*Yes, of course! I agree with you.*

This is the problem of this sort of “museum art.” The more you know and can do, the deeper, the more delicate, intelligent and sophisticated you play the music, the harder it will be for the public to understand what you are doing. It’s another time.

For our group, this was somewhat of a problem. When you really go deep into the music, the public doesn’t understand it. So our challenge was always trying to find a balance—to bring these musical ideas to a large audience, because we did not want to play for only two people who have read all the books. We wanted to play and to please a lot of people with our music. We thought that we should not just do something with the written ideas, but also it’s the impact on our audience that we had to analyze.

For someone like Ganassi or the Bassanos, if they played with their family on their recorders or gambas, what was the impact at that time on that audience? We tried to transpose this same impact to the audience of this time, to find out how we could add to the historical practice some elements that stimulate or offer something extra, so that people are amazed again with this old music.

Imagine if someone tells an old joke: everyone knows the joke, so no one laughs at that joke. This is a little bit the case with early music. You should add something new to that old joke that no one thought of. Or tell the joke in a completely unexpected way; or even don’t tell that joke at all, tell something totally different with the impact of that old joke.

*This subject is very interesting. We think almost the same as you have talked about—we have guidelines in Baroque performance, or rules to follow about early music, because we need these guidelines to help in the creative process. We try to use the correct tools according to the period, but we don’t need be so attached to the old books and all these rules, playing just the way the books tell us. But I think, in our case, there is something different, because we live in Brazil and not in Europe. We are far from this culture, we have a kind of freedom of poetic license to play according to our own interpretation. I think it is the same when a European plays Brazilian music: a person will play in a different way from how a Brazilian would play it. It’s OK.*

It’s a little bit like food. If you go to Italy, you will eat really great Italian food, which is delicious. But if an Italian chef comes to Germany, and he wants many Germans to eat his food, he has to add something German to his Italian style. Italian food in Germany does not taste the same as the

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*For someone like Ganassi or the Bassanos, if they played with their family on their recorders or gambas, what was the impact at time on that audience? We tried to transpose this same impact to the audience of this time.*

Italian food in Italy. People have a little different sort of taste, but they want to have the feeling of eating Italian food.

I think it works the same way with music. If you take music from one country to another, you are allowed to make it a slightly different music. If you take music from one time to your own period, you are free to make it a slightly different music. And if you do not, if you are very strict—maybe a Chinese cook who comes here and offers exactly the same food offered in China—that cook will certainly have an empty restaurant. No one is interested in real Chinese food. They are interested in the *idea* of real Chinese food. The same is true in music—no one is interested in the reality, everyone is interested in the idea of the reality.

### ***Real or Fantasy?***

*I think it has to do with a kind of fantasy, I think this is the right word. When we play a concert, we offer the audience a fantasy about a repertoire or a time.*

Yes, you are correct. That's one of the very important elements—to give music and to play music, as well. The word “play” describes what I have been saying: you are playful, you are fanciful. There are even many pieces where the whole pieces are fantasies. What you are doing with the audience is to create a fantasy and give this audience the opportunity to use this fantasy.

This is one of the main things we tried to do with the quartet. You can play music like a book, or you can play music like a movie. In a movie, you see things so clearly—you see characters, the way they act. Your own fantasy is downgraded. But if you read a book, the descriptions are not always so clear; then your own fantasy is on a much higher level. You can create your own characters, reading a book.

This is one of the things we tried to do in our quartet, playing in such a manner that the audience can be creative for themselves, to use their own fantasy to bring the music alive.

A rule for us was, “Don't be too exact, don't be too descriptive.” Always make a countermove. Even in body language—we always looked at each other, watched video of the quartet in concert to see how we moved. The moment we



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saw that two people had the same movements, like crossing their legs the same, or sitting to the same side to play, it was forbidden. If one made gestures like this, another would make his gestures like that. We had to have a large vocabulary of movements on stage, not just one.

Imagine, if you close your fist and hit the table, saying, "This is ight." [*Thumps table, frowning*] Everything is pointing in exactly the same direction—my accent, my words, my action. In doing so, there is no escape for the audience; they must believe what is said. But instead, if you make another gesture, or perhaps use another tone of voice, saying "This is what I'm talking about"—moving in another direction, maybe your voice goes down. Then the ideas will start to float around and the audience will have to combine the contrasting elements to get the message. That was what we were always looking for in our concerts.

*This is a wonderful idea! And it has deep connections with what we talked about already, about the artist's communication*

*with the public on the stage, and how to behave on stage.*

*With Quinta Essentia, we have discussed this a lot: what do we want? Just to play together? Or must each of us have the freedom to make our own music, or to make our own musical intentions? These questions we ask ourselves every day, because if you do not ask every day, every moment, it is very easy to lose it [and start making music automatically].*

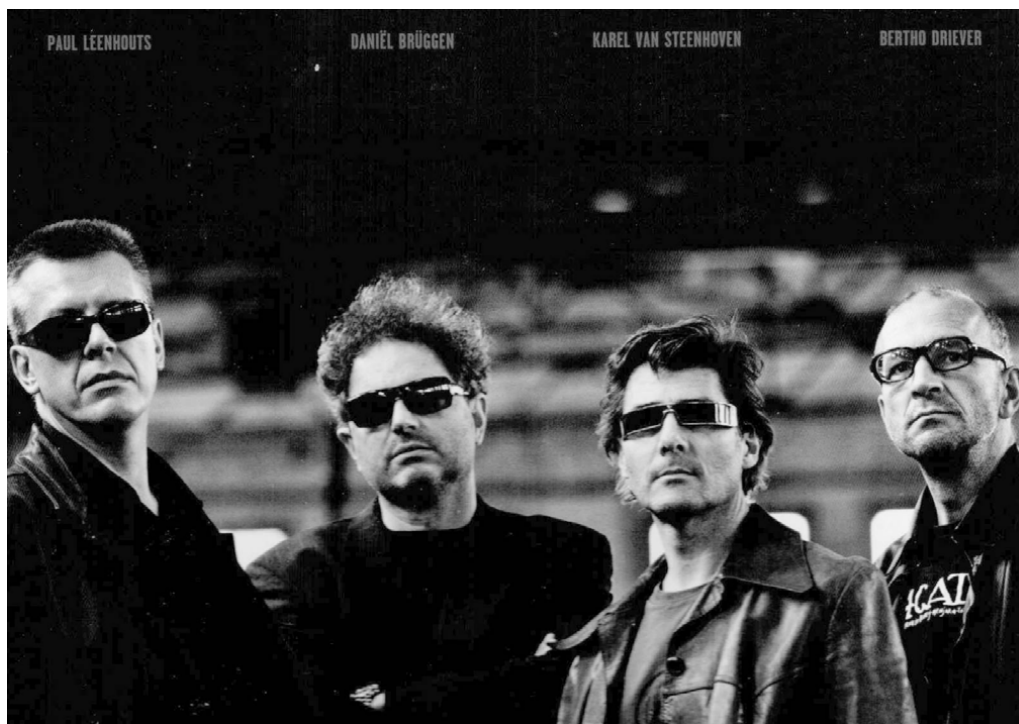
You said yourself, you have a rule—but every time you notice something, you must go back and get rid of it so that it does not happen again.

When you play together, especially when you play with the same people for a longer time, all of us have the tendency to imitate each other. This is normal and good. We were always making fun of it: now I will play like Daniël, now I will play like Paul [*laughs*]. We often imitated and exchanged roles, just for fun.

This is very important—but on the other hand, you have to be very careful, because you take away a bit of freedom from another person. Maybe at a concert you hear a great ornament in a certain piece of music, and think

how beautiful this ornament is; and the next concert you play this ornament and with that you take away the freedom of someone else to play this ornament [*more laughter*]. Or if you both play the ornament, there will be two identical ornaments. We need to give room to each other for colleagues to create their own ideas. Imitation is very important. If I steal the idea of an ornament from another player during a concert, then this other player is encouraged to be more inventive and create something even newer.

*I think this kind of challenge makes us play better and better! Challenges are very important in this way, but sometimes, if we are challenged to an extreme, you may give up. There must be balance. Exactly, you need to have some winning experiences, as well—it's important to realize that it's all worth it!*



*The Amsterdam Loeki Stardust Quartet existed from 1978 to November 2007, when the group had its farewell concert. You may listen to ALSQ playing at [www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com) (a number of selections come up if you type in the group's name); especially hear and see videos posted by Gustavo de Francisco, such as the one at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hwKy3ZTg7\\_Q](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hwKy3ZTg7_Q).*

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