Anachronism's Foe:

A CONVERSATION *with* JAAP SCHROEDER

At 81, the Dutch violinist Jaap Schroeder keeps up the pace of a fully active professional half his age. In the fall of 2006, for instance, he stopped to visit colleagues in Cambridge, Massachusetts, on his way from Amsterdam to Los Angeles, where he gave a lecture on comparative performance styles of Mozart's D-minor string quartet, K. 421, at the meeting of the American Musicological Society. From L.A., he flew to Ann Arbor, Michigan, to meet up with fortepianist Penelope Crawford and cellist Enid Sutherland, his colleagues in the Atlantis Trio. With violist Daniel Foster, the Atlantis has been working on the piano quartets by Mendelssohn (part of a project to record all of the composer's chamber music with fortepiano for Omnia Records in time for the Mendelssohn bicentennial in 2009).

A lifelong chamber musician, Schroeder has also been a conductor and soloist. But he is best known as an influential proponent of historically informed performance practice—a foe of anachronisms. During his seventeen years (1952–69) with the Netherlands String Quartet, he began to simultaneously explore Baroque music with the Quadro Amsterdam, an ensemble that—aside from the harpsichordist—performed on modern instruments. New ground was broken in 1975 with the founding of the Esterházy Quartet, which specialized in playing Classical works on period instruments. Schroeder also co-founded the Washington, DC-based Smithson Quartet in the 1980s, and lately has been performing Classical repertoire with the Iceland-based Skálholt Quartet (Schroeder and Rut Ingólfsdóttir violins; Svava Bernharðsdóttir, viola; and Sigurður Halldórsson, cello).

Chamber Music *magazine caught up with Jaap Schroeder in Ann Arbor this past November. The interview was conducted by Celeste Headlee.*

Chamber Music: *What was your path from modern chamber music back toward the Baroque—and how did you come to question the modern style of playing Baroque and Classical works?*

Jaap Schroeder: I had, with my father, so often heard the French string quartets and ensembles that came to Holland—the Calvet Quartet and especially those three brothers, the Pasquier Trio. [The violinist] fascinated me. I wanted to study with him. They had a very special technique that was quite a bit unlike the American or Russian schools'.

After four years of conservatory, I went to Paris for two years—to the École Jacques Thibaud—and was immersed in the French violin school. The French bowing technique has a great deal of flexibility and is indispensable for chamber music. Developing a big tone is fine for concertos, but in string quartets, big tone is not what you need.

When I came back [to Holland in the 1950s], I took a job as concertmaster of the Radio Chamber Orchestra. But I pursued my ideal of playing string quartets and fortunately I was asked to be second violin in a string quartet [the Netherlands String Quartet]. They were older gentlemen and well established in Holland. That was wonderful, and a great school of string quartet playing. I learned the whole repertoire.

But a little after I returned, I was also coming back to my love of Baroque music. In Holland at the time, there were a few friends—specifically Gustav Leonhardt on harpsichord, Frans Brueggen on flute, and Anner Bylsma as a cellist. We started playing Baroque quartets in an ensemble [the Quadro Amsterdam] that lasted six or seven years. We made some recordings of Telemann and Couperin that are still in shops, now as CDs.

Also at that time, playing the six Bach duo sonatas for violin and harpsichord, wonderful pieces, with the modern violin, as I used to do, didn't satisfy me. To meld the sound together, I needed an old violin. I got an instrument from the violin dealer and started out to find out the techniques. That was the instrument—the beginning of the Baroque violin to me forty years ago.

Meanwhile, I played with the Netherlands String Quartet for 17 years, until 1969, when—for all sorts of reasons—the quartet fell apart. Then I still had the Baroque music to play with Frans Vester, a fantastic flute player and the first in Holland to play a Baroque flute.

I decided that I wanted to do next was indeed to continue exploring Mozart and Haydn with the sound *they* may have known. I wanted to see what sound Mozart had in *his* ears. That was not yet done.

Jaap Schroeder

Of course, Mozart only knew what came before him. He did not know Brahms! He knew Haydn and (later in his life) Bach. Going to Mozart through Boccherini and Haydn is the logical way to do it. So we started with the new group (The Esterhazy Quartet) to work on Mozart string quartets—and this time *I* was the older one. We were going into the Classical repertoire, but [using Baroque music as the point of departure].

I feel—and this is true for every composer—that we should tend to look for the sound he knew in *his* ears. There are lots of discoveries to be made. And what you discover influences the whole interpretation and ensemble sound.

For Mozart's younger quartets, we used Baroque violins, but with later [but still antique] bows. We discovered that, for instance, when we play Mozart this way, the whole score is completely transparent. That is different from what the modern string quartet wants to do. An old bow articulates much better than a modern bow, [so] you hear all the different voices of Mozart. If you did not know the composition, you could take out some music paper and write out the viola part. . . .

Chamber Music: *What else changed as you moved from the Baroque to Mozart?*

JS: The Baroque violin is very clear and bright—much more so than the 18th-century violins made by Guarnerius or Guadagnini. [With them], the sound gets darker.

When you get to the mid-eighteenth century, that is the time when all the Baroque violins were being changed into classical violins. There were special studios in Paris and Torino—all the good instruments were brought there to get a different neck and different bass bars so that they would sustain more tension. (You hear Isaac Stern or Perlman play a Stradivarius—a wonderful Stradivarius! But Stradivarius would never recognize it as his instrument, which was a Baroque violin originally.)

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When reading the texts of the [Baroque], you use low positions and open strings to get that clear sound. When you use stopped notes, you cannot—you *should* not—vibrate too much. I don't say *no* vibrato. But not all the time, and not too wide. And in Baroque music, it is very important to play pure intonation; the pure thirds are wonderful, and the violin resonates more.

So when we tackled Mozart, it was as a *consequence* of Baroque music. You still should not use too much vibrato and you should use the later bow, which is a little bit longer and with a little bit more hair already, because it is able to make longer sounds. The real Baroque bow is fairly short; even if you bow very slowly, you

still have a kind of *diminuendo*. In the early Mozart quartets, you can still apply it; but then you discover that Mozart in his later quartets changes. Longer lines, so longer bow. And also the intonation changes: with longer lines, you need notes that are a little sharp, leading to resolution.

I am now busy with Schumann and the [Mendelssohn] trios here. I certainly hope to get to Brahms, who is a consequence of Schumann. The important thing is to follow musical history and develop your techniques accordingly. If I play Mozart, I play Bach or I play Schumann, I try—as much as possible—to be in the skin of the composer.

Chamber Music: *How do you make due diligence to make sure you're staying the closest to Mozart's intent?*

JS: Last week at the American Musicological Society in Los Angeles, there was a wonderful paper by Bob Levin, the fortepianist. He talked about Mozart's cadenzas and improvisations. He [Mozart] himself most likely improvised them. If a theme comes back, he always makes it a little different.

Levin also showed us manuscript pages of Mozart where you see, for instance, runs, runs, runs written down for six bars, and then just a low note and a high note. [Levin told us that Rudolf] Serkin, his teacher, not knowing what to do, played what was written—just the low note and high note. But Mozart was just indicating the lowest and highest point in each bar. He improvised mostly. He wrote down a lot of things in detail for his sister, who could not do that.

Most of the time Mozart improvised his cadenzas, and they were not so long—modern cadenzas are far too long. It's wonderful to do, like being on ice and doing all sorts of pirouettes.

Schroeder as second violinist with the Netherlands String Quartet. While playing standard repertoire with this ensemble from 1952 to 1969, Schroeder also launched the Quadro Amsterdam to play Baroque works.

Chamber Music: *Many people think that switching from Mozart to, say, Schubert or Mendelssohn, involves a gigantic leap—and they suddenly add all this emotion and passion. Is it accurate to perform, say, the Mendelssohn Violin Concerto and let loose with a lot of emotion?*

JS: Exterior passion has to do with the modern practice. Passion *then* meant freedom and improvisation, but it was more controlled than what you hear nowadays. Of course, Mendelssohn did not have the big orchestras and did not play on the modern strings. I do not say that you *can't* do Mendelssohn with a modern orchestra—that would be ridiculous. But it is an absolutely wonderful education to make a compromise and avoid things that are too anachronistic.

Mendelssohn is the most classicist of the modern composers. His own writing in his youth took the Baroque as examples; he wrote chorales and was very much reverent of the Baroque repertoire, and of course of Mozart also.

We [the Atlantis Trio] are now preparing [Mendelssohn's] piano quartets, complemented by the early violin sonata in F Minor. But the whole style is so Mozartian! Mendelssohn was really steeped in the old traditions.

Chamber Music: *What about pitch?*

JS: For Baroque music, I really prefer A=415, because the violin has more resonance. That's where pure intonation comes in. When you play a pure third, the violin resonates much more than with the modern third, which is too large. Modern students play at 440, [but I might say to them] "You might want to take a copy of a Baroque bow. That will teach you a lot of things. If you want to go on after that, try a gut string—not so cold, and less tense. Lower the pitch if you want to get closer."

Continued on page 56

Continued from page 30

Chamber Music: *You have written that "it's not the knowledge of the past but the ever-changing conception of taste that is the severest judge." What did you mean by that?*

JS: What I meant is that you can study and know all the treatises by heart and it doesn't mean you are a good performer. My friend Frans Vester says, "I prefer music without style to style without music." I prefer something that is not in the style, and to be touched by what you do, rather than have somebody follow all the rules and have no inspiration.

The Italian Corelli was quite astonished when he heard a German violinist, because it was very different. That is quite normal. There is no uniform way of dealing. The big danger in the beginning, in the '60s, was when some people became fanatical. "You have to do this. You cannot use that." That, of course, provoked resistance.

Schroeder was a co-founder of the Smithson Quartet based at the Smithsonian Institution in the 1980s. The ensemble performed on instruments from the museum's collections. With Schroeder are Marilyn McDonald, Judson Griffin, and Kenneth Slowik.

Chamber Music: *How do you choose your tempi for the pre-metronomic age? In your recording of the Bach Chaconne, you take a much quicker tempo than many others have.*

JS: Yet an even slower tempo than some others! I was talking the other day with my friend Ray Erickson—he is a Bach scholar teaching at Queens College—and he wrote an article about the Chaconne. And he is pleading, "Let's keep a link with the dance." Because it was a dance, of course. The French composers, Couperin and Lully, wrote chaconnes in their ballets. He [Erickson] asks for a tempo that is even faster. But I feel that if it is too fast—first of all, there are variations with lots of 32nd notes [that can] run away with too much "automatism." But it should be faster than what modern people usually do. The modern instrument being more tense, the bow being much longer and heavier, leads to slower tempi.

In any case, we know that the tempi *had* to have been faster, because with the shorter bow you cannot play it [slowly]. The sound itself is also not straight, but is always flexible and diminishing—that is unavoidable.

Modern violinists can say, "But I don't like it." Fine, fine! We all have our own priorities.

Chamber Music: *Tell me about the evolution of the balance between the violin and, say, the harpsichord or the piano from Bach through the Romantic age . . .*

JS: In the six Bach sonatas for violin and harpsichord, for instance, the balance has to be perfect, because they are to a great [extent] trio sonatas for two upper voices and a bass. And so the right hand of the harpsichord is one upper voice, the violin is the other upper voice, and the left hand is the bass. So the two upper voices have to be in balance in order to understand the composition and to appreciate what is going on. With the modern violin that's not possible, because the modern violin violates the balance with the right hand of the harpsichord.

In later sonatas there is a much more equal partnership, as in the last sonatas of Mozart—even though the piano makes more noise. It happens with the modern Steinway that the piano is dominant, which is very wrong. Personally I don't like to play with the modern Steinway. For Mozart I have played with all kinds of different early pianos—from the first piano, the Cristofori that sounds almost like a harpsichord. With Mozart you can trace the history of the piano. For every decade of musical history, there is a piano you can hear, in existence somewhere, so you can really hear how the piano has developed.

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The big break is in the middle of the 19th century, when they get a metal frame—and that is different from all that came before.

Chamber Music: *You did a recording of Schubert's Piano Trio in B-flat, op. 99, with the Atlantis Trio, using a Graf piano. How did you choose this instrument?*

JS: It had been stored for generations in the attic of a Swedish Castle and was in perfect condition. A Swedish American, Edward Swenson, who was restoring and dealing, found the instrument and brought it back to a fair in Boston. Penny [Penelope Crawford, of the Atlantis Trio] saw it there and was able to secure it.

This instrument, the Graf, is Vienna 1835—so if you are absolutely very picky, you'd say Schubert was dead by that time, but you cannot be *that* picky! It is a wonderful instrument for the Schubert trios.

Chamber Music: *What is the sound that you hear from this piano?*

JS: Transparent. Again, the word "transparent" is so important here. And there are different colors. It has a soft register which is so expressive, which you cannot possibly get on a modern piano. There is the slow *Notturno* for trio, in which this instrument sounds magic. Then of course with cello and violin, you can match this sound. We have all kinds of possibilities with our bows and gut strings. It was the perfect fit.

Chamber Music: *The Romantic Period has so many different composers and stretches out for so long, you certainly cannot have only one type of sound.*

JS: We have done Schubert. When we started the Atlantis Trio, we first did lots of Haydn and Beethoven—not with this Graf, but on a Mozart-type piano. Then we went to Schubert trios and, later, Beethoven; and we followed the history [of the instruments as well]—and after the Schubert comes Mendelssohn. The style is different; you discover that you want to do things differently.

Chamber Music: *What changes from Beethoven to Schubert?*

JS: The bow. The bow is almost more important than the violin. Like a pen writing. For a calligraphist it is awfully important to have the right pen for this and for that. By Mendelssohn's time, [you have] the modern, Tourte-type bow, a longer bow with a little more hair—and also it is closed at the frog: it has got a metal ferrule that holds the hair together. That means you can make more accents. The classical and Baroque bow are open; the hair is held together higher up, so you cannot make really accents.

The [instruments] changed according to the wishes of composers. It's not that the bow changed first. When Haydn started to have all kinds of surprises with *sforzandi* and so on (much more than Mozart) and then Beethoven, of course, they needed a different kind of bow. And then François Tourte in France invented the type of bow which is still used—only it has become heavier nowadays. I think that today, the important people would not want to play with a *real* Tourte bow—it is too light.

For Mendelssohn and beyond, articulation is not as prominent as it is in Mozart. The bow becomes not heavier but longer. [The big change] started with Wagner, who of course had strong ideas. Wagner had his orchestra, which he trained to play his music. These people were used to playing Mozart and Beethoven. They wanted to play rather articulated, so he had to fight against them. I don't know where I read it, maybe somewhere in his letters, where he said: "No!—drawn out, *gesamtklang*!" That starts in the first half of the 19th century. That is not Mendelssohn. But already of course in Schumann trios you have much more of that—and Wagner is the ultimate of that tendency. You need the long bow and something else new. In the very early 19th century, in his violin methods, [Giuseppe] Cambini shows in his fingerings the *portamento*—that's the new thing, not vibrato so much—added to the music as a means to make expression.

In an AMS lecture in Los Angeles this month, I chose Mozart's Quartet in D Minor, 421. I had our own recording by the Smithson Quartet, the Guarneri Quartet, and early twentieth-century quartet, the Flonzaley—a European group that was named for a rich banker who gave money for them to work together. We with our Smithson Quartet were trying to get articulated sound with the old material. The Guarneri Quartet was the massive approach—like Wagner—and the Flonzaley was very flexible in tempi, and with lots of *portamento* [sings with exaggerated portamento]. Typical early 20th century.

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Chamber Music: *Does a musician need to specialize in one period or another?*

JS: I don't specialize. It is much more interesting to see what the development was in musical performance and technique, and to try to conform with each period. I think it's more interesting to try to diversify your techniques than to cover everything with the same sauce.

Chamber Music: *Your liner notes for your recording of the Bach sonatas in the early 1980s say: "We've become accustomed to18th-century music being performed on 19th-century instruments using 20th-century techniques." Is that still true?*

JS: I think the early music movement has made some inroads. The fact that Harnoncourt has been conducting the Concertgebouw is important. When I was starting in the early '60s, there was an absolute screen between the two worlds—there was nothing in common. My friends in the Concertgebouw would say, "Are you still playing that Baroque violin?" There were some reasons, too. Often at that time there were [some performers] who were not too talented, not able to play Brahms, so the reputation was that the Baroque world is for the less talented. That has disappeared completely.

How much they [today's musicians] want to accept the elements is another matter. Lots of modern violinists say: "That's very nice— but it's not for me." Okay, okay. We are not fanatical. And certainly we are not saying that unless you have a Baroque

instrument and a Baroque bow, you cannot play Bach. Something that is absolutely unwarranted is the use of the word "authentic." We cannot know: We can read the treatise, we have the instruments to try out and you can feel the difference. We can look at paintings and engravings. But inevitably, then we have to play it, and that means your own personality, which is not 18th-century. It means a compromise in any case.

I like to work with modern players who are interested. If you are playing a Bach solo sonata, at least you could try to use an older bow. Not doing a heavy sound. Not what the music critics call "the luscious sound." [The Baroque instrument] speaks, dances, has rhythms—the bow dances. "How beautiful is my tone?"—that has no place in Baroque music.

Many first-rate quartets and marvelous ensembles don't have either the time or the inclination to change. They do some, of course. It's better than it used to be. But once you have a career and you have success and play 120 concerts a year, you have no time to go into that kind of detail anymore…. The Esterházy in Amsterdam had money and time to work. We could afford to come together in the evening for a whole year, just to try to find out what Mozart quartets were about.

The Atlantis Trio—Schroeder, Enid Sutherland, and Penelope Crawford, formed in 1991, is the core of the larger Atlantis Ensemble. The trio performs the music of Classical and Romantic composers, on instruments appropriate to the period.

Chamber Music: *What about audiences? The Detroit Orchestra recently did up a Mozart symphony as authentically as they could—with a much smaller orchestra and very little vibrato. The critic liked it, but said he thought it would be shocking to the ears of the modern audience.*

JS: This is a funny thing. When the Esterházy Quartet started playing Mozart and Haydn as we thought it should be done, we were playing in quartet series throughout Holland. Then, every town had its quartet series, six in a year. The Amadeus and famous French quartets [would play]—and then *we* came. Often after the concert, people would say, "Before the interval, you sounded tentative—but after intermission you were good." It wasn't us. It was their *ears*. They were expecting Mozart to have a much more modern, muscular sound. They needed time to adjust—and after intermission they were adjusted to it.

There is much more acceptance of what we are doing than there used to be in the 1970s. When we were playing Haydn with Esterhazy Quartet, there were the people who said, "Ah, yes, that is wonderful—but of course you can't do that for *Mozart!*" Years later, when we did Beethoven's Opus 18, there were people who said, "Ah, yes, that is wonderful! But for *Schubert*, you cannot do *that!*" So people are following us, gradually accepting.

Chamber Music: *Has our more informed knowledge of the past changed the way we approach the music of today?*

JS: I don't know. But you *can* say that the Early Music Movement and the second Vienna School of Schoenberg and Berg were both reacting against hyper-Romanticism and Mahler. So they had something in common: minimal music and soberness. In fact the root with the early music movement is not with Harnoncourt, but with Isolde Ahlgrimm. She was in Vienna, and her husband had a collection of old instruments. She was the pioneer in early music performance—and that was contemporary with Alban Berg! That was a common thread: Away with all that dreadful noise!

Chamber Music: *What will you be working on next?*

JS: I now have a string quartet [The Skálholt Quartet] in Iceland for six years—I am very much in Iceland now. They are wonderful musicians there, and the whole island has a population of only a quarter-million. We are going to play Schubert, Schumann, and we do still lots of Haydn. I would love to go on to Brahms—but my way is not the massive approach, not the *Gesamtklang*. I had played Brahms [in the modern way] with Netherlands String Quartet, but now we do it *my* way. Brahms loved Bach and Baroque music. The kind of playing I know from the modern recordings of Brahms did not exist. I would apply more portamento than what people do now because it is my taste—as in Mendelssohn, but the sound would not be so *pushing*, so aggressive.

And there's one other piece I would love to play: the Bruckner String Quintet. In the two or three recordings I know, there's too much sound. It is a majestic slow movement. He was pure in regard to sound. [The performers in these recordings] *trouble* the sound. That's the piece I would love to do with my quartet.

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