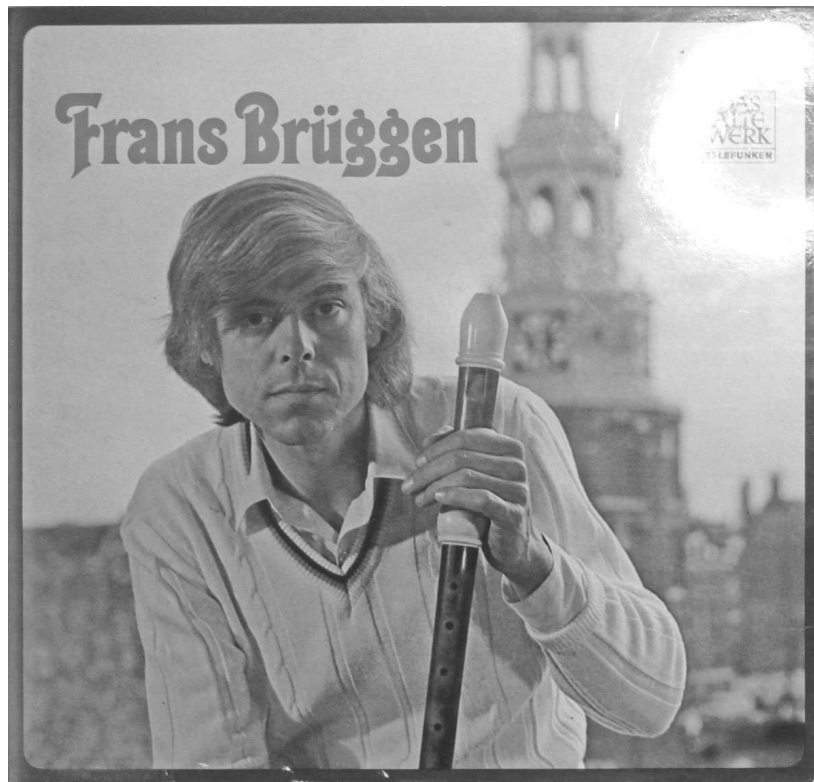


Frans Brüggen, 1934-2014



The first time I heard Frans Brüggen in concert was about 40 years ago in the Doelen in Rotterdam. We expected him to play recorder (and Gustav Leonhardt harpsichord) in the intimate small hall of this building, but we were moved to the great hall: the crowd of listeners (many of them young people) was too big. There he was on the stage, crouched on a chair, his recorder more pointing to the floor or even backwards than to the audience. A typical introvert pose, imitated by several of his pupils of that period (and often disapproved by others). But in his playing was Frans Brüggen just very expressive, even though he mostly played from a score.

The last time I met Frans Brüggen was in 1991, when he lived in a house that was attached to the Amstelkerk, one of the lesser known of the older churches of Amsterdam. I visited him for my research into Dutch woodwind instruments, but at that time he had stopped playing the recorder and his original instruments were kept in a safe in a bank. But I was allowed to see the recorders. In the meantime Brüggen was shuffling around in his house, giving the impression of a rather old and tired man: quite different from his image on the posters where he was depicted as a real pop star. In the last years there were several times rumours of his declining health. But I heard these rumours so often, that I was not too worried and I was really surprised in August when I got the message that Frans Brüggen had died.

Frans Brüggen and his recorders

Before he started his activities as conductor of the The Orchestra of the Eighteenth Century (other people have written about that career), Frans Brüggen was of course at first famous for

the development and acceptance of the recorder as a 'mature' instrument. He played the recorder in a virtuoso way in concert halls all over the world, also performing newly written recorder music. Frans Brüggen played in his early years on recorders made by Hans Coolsma, he was also a 'test pilot' for this firm (now Aafab, in Utrecht). But that changed in 1972 when a gramophone album was published on which Frans Brüggen played seventeen original baroque recorders. That was a landmark in the history of the instrument: since then the interest of recorder players for using copies of historical instruments and original pitches (and fingerings) arose and never went away. But the problems in playing the historical instruments themselves became also clear: Brüggen writes in the companion to the gramophone album that several recorders cracked in his hands during the playing sessions: that occurred with instruments which came from museums, whereas the recorders from private collections (which were played regularly through the years) gave no problems at all. In later years, I have played myself several of the recorders which were used by Frans Brüggen. And I must say that my admiration was growing for what he achieved with these often far from easy instruments. But I must also make a comment: on some of these recorders (which came from the collection of the Haags Gemeentemuseum) I have seen a few irregularities at the fingerholes. For instance: two or three of these holes of the famous soprano recorder by Terton are clearly more strongly and also rather irregularly undercut, and I suspect that this was done to improve the tuning of this instrument and/or to make modern baroque fingering (also called 'Dolmetsch fingering') possible. I have the strong suspicion that this was done in recent times, but by whom? A curator, a befriended recorder maker, or the maestro himself? Whatever happened, I do believe that Brüggen was in the first place interested in performing music and the instruments were the tools for that. But he knew a lot about these tools and in many years he collected several fine historical recorders, such as two altos and two voice flutes by Bressan, instruments by Denner, Thomas Stanesby, Haka, Steenbergen, Wijne and other makers. Many recorder makers were interested to take measurements, which was not so good for the instruments and gave much work for Frans Brüggen himself. That's why he asked Fred Morgan to make drawings with full measurements. These were published in 1981 in Japan by Zen-On.

Frans Brüggen and the traverse

Perhaps not so many people know that Frans Brüggen also sometimes played the flute and its baroque predecessor, the flauto traverso. He was the proud owner of a beautiful original instrument, made by Thomas Stanesby Junior. Most traversos by this woodwind maker are made from ivory, but the instrument of Brüggen was made of African blackwood with thick ivory rings. But this instrument gained some cracks and was sold to Japan. I assume that the traverso had suffered too much when Frans Brüggen played it in preparation to the recording (in 1971/72) of the Bach cantata No. 8: *Liebster Gott, wann werd ich sterben* (Dearest God, when shall I die?). The traverso has to play in the opening choir and the bass aria 'Doch weichet ihr tollten vergeblichen Sorgen!' ('Go away, you foolish, futile anxieties!') the most virtuoso and difficult parts which Bach wrote for this instrument, using the full compass up to a3. But did Frans Brüggen really play his Stanesby traverso in the final recording of this cantata? The text book to the gramophone record says so, but there is also a photo of the recording session with this cantata on which we can see that Brüggen is clearly playing another instrument. Whatever it may be, Brüggen played the flute part in the most brilliant way, with a musicality which is in my opinion unequalled on later records by other and more experienced traverso players.

Apart from the cracks there was perhaps another problem with the Stanesby traverso. Hans Coolsma, well known for his recorders, has made (c.1970) a series of copies of this traverso (using real ivory). I have one of them and a remarkable detail is the 4th fingerhole. This hole has on most baroque traversos the same size as hole 5, but not here: it is more than 1 mm smaller. That has an effect on some tones: a#2 with the fork fingering 1 . 3 is much too flat, which is inconvenient for the Bach cantata, where the opening choir is written in E major, and the bass aria in A major.

Coolsma copied the Stanesby traversos copies very precisely, using a machine designed especially for this project which copied the bore with an accuracy of 0.01 mm. But he made the mouth hole much (0.5 mm) wider, because Frans Brügger told him to do so, to improve the sound (and maybe the pitch). But I am afraid that this alteration was not good for the instrument, the sound and response (attack) becoming a bit vague.



The Stanesby Jr. traverso, copied by Hans Coolsma

I have never seen people using a Coolsma copy in concert. There must be many of these beautifully made traversos hidden in cupboards. For my copy I have made a new upper part with a smaller mouth hole, which makes things better. But it is still not an easy instrument to play. I had a better result with a complete new copy which I made in boxwood, with alterations in the bore profile of the right hand joint. Using measurements of another Stanesby-Jr traverso, the bore was made a bit wider in the upper section of the right hand joint, hole 4 was subsequently bigger, with the result that (for me) the whole instrument was in a better balance.

Many years after his adventures with the Stanesby traverso, Frans Brügger acquired two other historical traversos. These instruments (a twin set) were made by I. H. Rottenburgh, were never played before and were subsequently in pristine condition. One of the instruments was played by Brügger, the other one stayed untouched to avoid any kind of damage. What will happen with these traversos, and the recorder collection of Frans Brügger?