
Production notes: Ken Okiishi's *The Chronicle of A.M. Bach* (2025)

From the first time I saw Jean-Luc Ho play Bach on the harpsichord,¹ and Francois Couperin on the organ, I was convinced that Jean-Luc Ho is something like the Gustav Leonhardt of his generation of harpsichordists. That is, he is in a way the most radical because of what he holds back. The new generation of "historically informed practice" unleashes heterogeneous possibility in close, deconstructive readings of scores that break open normative forms of interpretation; it is a kind of explosive, libidinous liberation from former generations' stodginess in historiography, which often means playing things very fast and percussively, or very slowly. But what Jean-Luc Ho brings to this potentially unpredictable eroticism at the core of the most updated view of the Baroque is also something elegantly rough around the edges, a certain kind of restraint that builds and structures the entanglements. Like Gustav Leonhardt in the first generations of historically informed performance practice (1960s-1990s), Jean-Luc Ho refuses cheap emotionality, and insists on causing the viewer to lean forward, to listen more carefully, to hear all of the subtle differences of color and touch and timing, without having them thrown in their face. When Jean-Luc plays (especially in his singular way of touching the clavichord) music develops like verdant foliage, like watching a plant grow--like watching a vine become ornament.

And so I asked this new Leonhardt, rather naively, if he would play Bach in a film I was making--recalling Gustav Leonhardt's strangely disembodied J.S. Bach in the Straub/Huillet *Chronicle of Anna Magdalena Bach* (1968), a Marxist, period bio-pic based on an early 20th century fantasy autobiography of J.S. Bach's second wife (with whom he had 13 more children, of which 6 survived). The filmmakers Straub and Huillet, like the musicologically-minded musicians of the 1960s, scoured biographical and geographical and textual sources to find the most authentic authenticity possible--a version of authenticity that often felt as cold as it was disalienated. Very quickly, it became clear that Jean-Luc Ho would, in the way that he refuses a biographically-centered reading of the score, refuse to channel or to act, or to play the composer. As he says in *The Chronicle of A.M. Bach*, when asked how he imagines the composer when he is playing: "I don't really imagine him. I can imagine him composing, but not playing. I can imagine...what was on his mind, but am unable to see him at his instrument." I, too, quickly threw away any strict referentiality or pseudo-historical narrative. I thought of a friend from seminars with Catherine Malabou who was on his way towards retiring from being a dancer, who had worked with many great people as a dancer-collaborator, with Anna Teresa de Keersmaecker and Rosas in *Cesena* and *Work/Travail/Arbeid (doubling the piano)*; with Thomas Hauert/ZOO; in other very technically demanding and raw works by Alexandra Bachzetsis, Eleanor Bauer, Robin Jonsson, Doris Stelzer; and in his own wonderfully open Pilates exercises and philosophical dance-speech scores, such as *Moving~Thinking*. What I had never seen him dance was Bach--and I wondered why not, and I wondered what would happen.

My producer, Jeanne Graff, during one of the early shoots with Jean-Luc, had to pump breast milk during breaks, because she was lactating but was away from her children for a few days. This led me to think--"Ah, she has cast herself in the role of

¹ In a ferocious duet with his former classmate Jean Rondeau of Bach's Trio Sonatas arranged for two harpsichords in Chambéry, France at the

Anna Magdalena Bach!" And in this film, casting herself in a role means not casting herself at all, but presenting who you are today--fully, developmentally, and without false coherence. We started filming back in NYC what her world with the children looks like.

The music selection centers on three forms central to J.S. Bach's music, the sarabande, the chaconne and the passacaglia, that have the richest possibilities of thinking--and altering thinking and performance--in current global understandings of the geographies, people, affects, and conflicts of the Baroque eras, particularly in the feedback loops of New World / Old World, Nation building, and internal and external exoticisms. The Aria that forms the core of the *Goldberg Variations* (1741) was originally an isolated sarabande movement in a 1725 notebook of keyboard pieces for Anna Magdalena Bach--a set of details which can radically alter the imaginary of this work, since Bach's most beloved variations are, in fact, a variation on one of baroque music's most erotic forms, the sarabande. And as Jean-Luc Ho says in *The Chronicle of A.M. Bach* of the musical/dance forms chaconne and passacaglia:

"You would dance from street to street in a trance state or very intoxicated. It's the descriptions, the testimonies, that are somehow linked to this form of dance. And later, we see the chaconne and passacaglia in completely ennobled manners at the court of Louis XIV, in the opera, in the higher genres. And so, there is a way that goes from the street to the royal court. There's something dangerous in this genre, I think, that is linked to repetition, recurrence, obstination, trance states, like a history of litany that can take you up in a spiral. And so it's a genre that takes you elsewhere. Whether it is a chaconne or a passacaglia, whether it is from the 15th or the 18th century, these are unique pieces of music. Certain pieces of music can have a spiritual path, but with chaconnes and passacaglie, the path is not spiritual, I think. It's not something I can talk about."

"Is it the body?"

"I don't know. It's the body but also the flight of ideas."

The rejection of influence as bracket or reference or the narrative transmission of biography arrived at a rejection of the diligent but wooden historiography of Straub/Huillet, of the historical-reenactment style of playing music, of a certain constraint to imaging and hearing history. Feeling and performing the relationships between past and present shifted. As any good performance of a musical score, like reading poetry out loud, does--the lyrical present emerges and incites the possibilities of seeing and becoming whatever it is to be alive in whatever is now.

Ken Okiishi, NYC, September 2025

Credits:

The Chronicle of A.M. Bach (2025)
91 minutes
4k video (color, sound)

Directed and edited by Ken Okiishi

Starring:
Jean-Luc Ho
Jeanne Graff

Dance by Gabriel Schenker

Concert recordings, editing and production by Ken Yoshida

Costumes by Inner light

Wig by Courrèges

Page turner, and organ registration assistance by Kamran Mercier

Camera:
Ken Okiishi
Jeanne Graff

With the support of a residency at Cite International des Arts, Paris; Federal Polytechnic School of Lausanne EPFL; Loterie Romande Jura; Ville de Porrentruy; association Womb; Tribunes Baroques; Reena Spaulings



Produced by 186f Kepler Vzzshhzz

Production notes: Ken Okiishi's *Brian at Home* (2020-2025)

Brian at Home (2020-2025) is a kind of sequel to *Vital Behaviors* (2019). We catch up with Brian, who finds himself living in an amenity-excessive megaplex apartment building in Bushwick. It's the cheapest place he can find, if you count the price of gym membership essential to the livelihood of a model/actor/influencer. We learn that that is the main type of person who lives in this 900-unit new-development wellness oasis, and that Brian is feeling less special than he used to. Brian gives us an apartment tour in the style of *Selling Sunset* that gains the gravitas of Virgil's tour through hell as the excess of private public spaces becomes stranger and stranger.² He also reads from Emanuele Coccia's recently translated *Philosophy of the Home: Domestic Space and Happiness*.

The Inferno apartment tour is intercut with filming experiments that Brian and I did during the pandemic, when our film premiere of *Vital Behaviors* was delayed until it became possible to gather in-person again (and, it should be remembered, at certain points it felt like this was likely a delay of infinity).

During the pandemic, the normative social function of human interaction with strangers was suspended long enough for our shared but shielded worlds--filtered entirely through screens--to become an everywhere and all-at-the-same-time, and history opened up, like all histories happening at the same time, and all possibilities, even the worst ones, became not only possible but probable. The horrors made personal space feel more cozy. Brian reads Beckett for the first time, in a surprisingly apt mis-casting as Winnie. He meditates through hyper-ventilation. We start to see a relationship between what happened, or didn't happen, during this suspended Zoom reality, and the version of hell that came after.

Ken Okiishi, NYC, September 2025

Credits:

Brian at Home (2020-2025)
86 minutes
4k video (color, sound)

Directed and edited by: Ken Okiishi

Starring: Brian Altemus

Camera: Ken Okiishi and Brian Altemus

² Thank you to John Kelsey for this *Inferno* comparison. The first time he saw the film, he immediately said, "It is like Virgil giving a tour through hell."

Production notes: Ken Okiishi's *Recording Les Nations* (2025)

Recording Les Nations shows three recording sessions of Francois Couperin's *Les Nations* (1726), in an ensemble instigated by Jean-Luc Ho of French musicians Bérangère Maillard, Simon Pierre, Olivier Riehl, Nima Ben David, Yoann Moulin, and Jean-Luc Ho. Ken Yoshida leads the recording for an album produced by Harmonia Sacra and released (October 2025) by Musica Ficta.

In a note printed as a preface to the score of *Les Nations* (1726), "Confession of the Author to the Public," Francois Couperin wrote: "A few years ago, some of these Trios were composed [...]. The first Sonade in this collection was also the first I composed, and which was composed in France. The story itself is singular. Charmed by those of Signor Corelli, whose works I will love as long as I live, as well as the French works of Monsieur de Lully, I ventured to compose one, which I had performed at the Concert where I had heard Corelli's. Knowing the avidity of the French for foreign novelties in all things and distrusting myself, I did myself a very good service with a little officious lie. I pretended that a relative of mine, indeed, via the King of Sardinia, had sent me a Sonade by a new Italian author. I arranged the letters of my name so that they formed an Italian name, which I put in its place. The Sonade was eagerly devoured, and I will keep my apology silent. This, however, encouraged me. I made others; and my Italianized name attracted me, under the mask, great applause. My Sonades fortunately gained enough favor that the ambiguity did not make me blush. I compared these first Sonades with those I have made since; and did not change or add much to them. I only added large Suites of pieces to which the Sonades serve only as preludes, or as a kind of introduction."³

Each section of *Les Nations* is named after a region of nations-in-formation in the early 1700s, with regions of these pre-nations sounding a bit odd to contemporary ears--a reminder that the concept of nation mutates in history. The nations of *Les Nations* are: La Française, L'Espagnole, L'Impériale and La Piémontaise. Some 20th century musicologists have said that Couperin's *Les Nations* has, in fact, no relationship to nations or nation-building, other than the title. But I think his "Confessions" have a more provocative suggestion: that exoticism and a performative appropriation of otherness was seen as a core aspect of drawing borders and differentiation.

With a running time of 269 minutes, *Recording Les Nations* shows the musicians performing sections of the "SECOND ORDRE : L'Espagnole" and "TROISIÈME ORDRE : L'Impériale" over and over, with some sections re-performed and re-recorded for 60+ takes. What emerges for the viewer, along with watching the musicians develop the techniques and relationships among sounds and feelings that produce the perfectly spontaneous-feeling recording, is watching an almost sadomasochistic feedback loop between external, internal and group criticism. The microphone, via the sound engineer's ears, hears from the point of view of the eternal--and the goal is a performance that sounds alive and fresh with each repeated listening, for generations and generations to come. What these discourses produce, as we watch these musicians working it out for 4+ fascinating hours, is also a testing of multiple approaches to the formation of power and governance, towards the production of a naturally free individual in a unified group.

Ken Okiishi, NYC, September 2025

3 See Marie Demeilliez's "Présentation musicologique" in the liner notes for the album.

Credits:

Recording *Les Nations* (2025)
269 minutes
4k video (color, sound)

Directed and edited by Ken Okiishi

Musicians:

Olivier Riehl, traverso flute
Bérengère Maillard and Simon Pierre, violins
Nima Ben David, viole de gambe
Yoann Moulin and Jean-Luc Ho, épinettes and harpsichords

Recording sessions led by Ken Yoshida, for an album produced by Harmonia Sacra
and released by Musica Ficta

Camera: Nick Mauss and Ken Okiishi
