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THE CLAVICHORD REVIVAL

A progress report [2012]

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The Dutch Clavichord Society, founded in 1987 and the first such society devoted to the clavichord, is about to celebrate twenty-five years of its existence. During this quarter-century, interest in the clavichord has increased worldwide, reflected in national societies, a biennial international symposium, recordings and concerts. It seems not inappropriate at this stage to step back and have a good look at what has in fact been achieved.

With notable exceptions, few good reproduction clavichords were available in the 1980s, and specialist makers were almost unknown. The situation today is very different, with good specialist builders making clavichords covering the complete gamut of the instrument's history, from the earliest Renaissance clavichords through to the large Swedish instruments of the late eighteenth century.¹ In many established concert series clavichord recitals are now being programmed, albeit occasionally, something very rare in the 1980s. Since 1931, when the first recording of a clavichord was made by Arnold Dolmetsch, over 120 performers have recorded on the instrument, and during the last twenty years in particular a number of superb recordings have appeared. A detailed account of the recorded clavichord has been assembled by Francis Knights in his impressive *Clavichord Discography*, which gives comprehensive details of all recordings known at the time of printing (2009).²

So, is the renaissance of the clavichord and its repertoire complete? Should we be congratulating ourselves on an unqualified success story? Let us allow these questions rhetorical status, and, with the aid of Francis's *Discography*, examine more closely the clavichord on record.

How well is the music being matched by suitable instruments? A number of recordings were made using originals, which is not always a happy choice, as many of the instruments are no longer in optimal playing order. The best recordings are mostly on good modern reproductions; but one problem is that the choice of model is often inappropriate. Francis Knights mentions this in the Introduction to his *Discography* and reminds us that 'C. P. E. Bach for one would doubtless have been bemused at the thought of the many discs of his music on Hass instruments, which he is known to have disliked!' Often a type of clavichord is used that would not have existed at the time of the music's gestation. The fretted clavichord, arguably the only candidate for music prior to 1700, rarely features on recordings, although much of the recorded repertoire is before this date.

What repertoire has been and continues to be recorded? Well, J. S. Bach tops the list, perhaps understandably, with around 130 recordings, followed by C. P. E. Bach (over 80), Mozart and Haydn; otherwise there is a cross-section of music history, from the Buxheimer organ book through Mendelssohn, Debussy and Schoenberg to the present day. The seventeenth-century composers are thinly represented, often recorded on inappropriate instruments, although there seems to be a growing tendency to use early fretted models for this music. The Renaissance is even more scantily represented. This is not necessarily surprising, as most keyboard music written before the eighteenth century had another function, away from the clavichord, as literature for church or court. Given, however, that by the second half of the eighteenth century the clavichord had developed to a point where much of the solo keyboard literature written at the time was conceived with its particular expressive

qualities in mind, it is surprising that so little of this repertoire has been brought to the recording studio. Johann Wilhelm Hässler is listed, with four recordings on clavichord, but one of these is of his Op. 17 (1803), which is a piano composition without even a concordance in one of the clavichord sonatas,³ and another is a radio recording from the 1980s which is unlikely to be readily available. By way of compensation, albeit somewhat perversely, he is represented by one of his finest works, a *Fantasie* – wrongly attributed, however, to Wilhelm Friedemann Bach. Ernst Wilhelm Wolf has one entry, and Daniel Gottlob Türk two.⁴ Friedrich Wilhelm Rust is represented by one recording for radio, although his situation is scheduled to improve with a recording of his sonatas to be released soon.⁵ Johann Gottfried Mützel has fared better, with two CD sets devoted to his complete works, but other composers from this period such as Zinck, Vierling and Witthauer are still waiting for an entry. It does seem somewhat ironic that the one body of music conceived with the clavichord in mind should be so under-represented.

There could be a number of reasons for this, one of which could be the lack of modern editions. A number of editions of music by Wolf, Hässler, Rust, Mützel and Türk were published in the early to mid-twentieth century, but these are now mostly out of print. It is almost certain that, for commercial reasons, pianists were the prime target of these publications: there just weren't the clavichords around to do the music justice. What about the modern piano, I hear you ask. Surely the music is unlikely to suffer that much from being translated from one keyboard instrument to the other? This is indeed true of many musical styles – J.S. Bach's music, for example, translates tolerably, even well, to a number of mediums, as do the Scarlatti Sonatas. I would argue that many of the compositions of the mid- to late eighteenth century do not.

Before owning a clavichord I bought the complete works of Mützel (they were still available then) and after sight-reading through them on the harpsichord, I consigned them to a pile at the top of the cupboard where they gathered dust for the next ten years or so. Resurrecting and working on these pieces on the clavichord was for me a revelation; they exploit its special expressive qualities to such an extent as to make them inseparable from the instrument as a medium. But why? – for many musicians the clavichord presents more problems than solutions. At this point we come to the crux of the issue.

Unfortunately the clavichord is a keyboard instrument (I can hear eyebrows hitting the ceiling). If one plays a stringed instrument such as a violin or cello, one has to work on intonation and control of the bow. For a beginner on the flute producing a note at all can be a challenge, and for oboists and bassoonists, making the sound is inseparable from making reeds. In short, a player is to a great extent responsible for the sound he or she produces. On the piano, organ and harpsichord the notes are a default, and once the key has been activated, there is nothing one can do to influence them further. Consequently, the sight of a keyboard attached to a music instrument seems to activate a mindset: if one presses a key, a sound will be produced. It is true that if one can play the piano reasonably well, the chances are that pieces transferred to the harpsichord or organ are not going to sound incompetent. But the position with the clavichord is different.

I have experienced public clavichord recitals by concert pianists and organists which have been sheer agony to sit through due to key-rattling and blocking (or 'chucking') on just about every note. The players appear to be oblivious to this. The assumption is that if the instrument is producing a foul noise, it is the fault of the instrument, which is inadequate or not working properly, or both, or the maker is no good. This can sometimes indeed be the case, but what is often not realized is that the clavichord has something important in common with the lute, the guitar, indeed most string and wind instruments; namely that the player is largely responsible for the sound it produces. If one has not come to grips with basic tone production on the clavichord, which is represented by a clean controlled sound, free of chucking, key noises and fret rattle, the finest clavichord will sound at best inadequate. Once this basic touch has been

achieved and one can guarantee chuck-free playing, with all fingers, in all areas of the instrument and at all dynamic levels, then, and only then, can one begin to explore the characteristics which set it aside from other keyboard instruments, but which are taken for granted by players of early string and wind instruments.

The most immediately apparent of these techniques is the vibrato, or *Bebung*; less known are the (more) subtle tone manipulations of which the *Tragung der Töne*, or Portato, is one aspect. The *Bebung* technique is described in most if not all keyboard tutors from the late eighteenth century, and there are a number of pieces in the repertoire where it is specifically called for. These pieces are generally of an educational nature, and I believe are intended to demonstrate where the use of vibrato, an ornament, is appropriate. The most obvious example of this is C. P. E. Bach's 'Silbermann Clavichord' rondo, which contains by far the most instances of marked vibrato (indicated by dots over the note with a slur above them), possibly because the student for whom the piece was destined was hard of hearing. Surprisingly I have more than once heard performances of this particular piece by otherwise competent, indeed good, musicians when these indications have been ignored.

Other expressive manipulations of tone are more difficult to tie down, although there are descriptions of *Tragung*, where and how to do it, in the writings of C. P. E. Bach and E. W. Wolf. Otherwise I know of only one tantalizing quotation from a Swedish dictionary which, as it is little known, I cite here:

[The Clavichord] gets its sound from a brass pin, which is placed in the key lever, and which, with the fingers' lighter or harder pressure can bring forth not only a pianoforte [pf] or reverse, but also a pathetic overflowing of the tones of two or three barely noticeable fractions of a semitone.⁶

That the clavichord has this possibility is in itself no proof of its use in musical contexts, I accept, but in a musical world where the human voice and most other instruments were capable of manipulating the tone for expressive purposes, it would be perverse in the extreme if a keyboard player were to ignore what his instrument was capable of. Of course, not all clavichords are, or were, so responsive in this respect, particularly in modern times, where absolute volume, or even ease of transport, were and are issues of overriding concern. A good, historically based instrument is a prerequisite. When I acquired my first good clavichord I was fortunate in having the time to research sources of playing techniques, historic and modern. The Swedish quotation above was included in an article by Steve Barrell in an early issue of *Het Clavichord* (the predecessor to *Clavichord International*), which for me was a stimulating introduction to the expressive possibilities of a good clavichord. This article introduced me to Wolf's *Anleitung*, or Preface, and I was, and still am, fascinated by the following description:

One final aspect of good performance should be mentioned here, and that is the way that, in adagio and cantabile movements, two nuances can be made on a single note: one strikes the key more strongly at first, then relaxes the finger pressure immediately so that the tone goes on resonating more softly.⁷

My clavichord responded well to this technique, although I found it extremely difficult to execute, as an over-relaxation of finger pressure resulted in the tangent buzzing on one of the strings, or premature damping.

What became clear to me while working on these techniques, however, was the concentration on details of tone production and manipulation which are expected of us as players. The very best of tutors can only begin to describe what we should be aiming for. As Wolf puts it:

Just as the performance as a whole presupposes a pure sense of feeling, so also does the realization of the finest nuances, which defy notation. These nuances represent the limit of what composition can prescribe, since it deals in rules for what is fixed and definite, but cannot specify for what is optional or extempore.⁸

The above descriptions of tone manipulation are all from the eighteenth century, a fact which has led many players to the conviction that these expressive devices were a product of the *Empfindsamkeit*, and only applicable to music from the mid-eighteenth century onwards. I would take issue with this. I believe that, as with issues such as rhythmic inequality, they were documented for the benefit of the growing number of amateur musicians who had not, as it were, grown up in the tradition. A good reproduction of a seventeenth-century clavichord is capable of an astonishing range of tonal variants which I think it would be perverse in the extreme to ignore. Interestingly, the older the model, the more difficult it is to produce *Bebung*; I would suggest that all these expressive devices grew in parallel with the development of the instruments which made them possible.

In conclusion I would say that much has been achieved by the revival of the clavichord as an instrument, but that there is still much to learn about its true nature. I have nothing against experiments with, for example, electric clavichords or clavichords made from aluminium: as with the guitar, this could result in new instruments with exciting new musical possibilities. Neither would I take exception to the playing of Schoenberg, Debussy, Bacharach or Lennon-McCartney on the clavichord, although to do so simply because it is *possible* is not the best reason: as with any transcription, the instrument's particular qualities should give the listener, and player, a new insight into the music. First, however, one has to have these particular qualities at one's finger-tips, literally. Otherwise the listener could be left only with an impression of the instrument's inadequacies, and a feeling that the piece would be best on the instrument for which it was intended.

Notes

1. Reproductions of clavichords with pantalon mechanisms are still unknown to me, but I know of builders who are making copies of other 'oddities' such as the six-octave fretted clavichord in the Bad Krozingen collection. This is indeed a welcome enrichment of our musical palette.
2. Francis Knights, *Clavichord Discography*, Midnight Images, Cambridge, 2009.
3. For a thematic catalogue of Hüssler's keyboard works up to 1790, giving concordances with later piano works, see Christopher Hogwood's article "'The inconstant and original Johann Wilhelm Hüssler" - his 1786 autobiography and a thematic catalogue of his keyboard works to 1790', *De Clavicordio III* (Musica Antica a Magnano, 1998), pp. 180-219.
4. A recording has appeared since the publication of the *Discography* with two Sonatas by Türk performed by Michael Tsalka on a historic clavichord (*201 Years of Grace*, Robert Holmin Ljud & Bild, RHL&B 07, reviewed in *British Clavichord Society Newsletter* 47, June 2010).
5. This recording, featuring the original Sauer clavichord in the Händel-Haus museum, Halle, played by Ilton Wjuniski, will be issued by the museum at a date to be announced. The project has received financial support from the British Clavichord Society and the German Clavichord Society. [The recording was issued in 2017 and was reviewed by Garry Broughton in *British Clavichord Society Newsletter* 69, October 2017.]
6. Quoted by Steve Barrell in 'The Empfindsame Clavichord Player's Bag of Tricks', *Het Clavichord*, Year 3, No. 1, April 1990, p. 12.
7. See Christopher Hogwood, 'A Supplement to C. P. E. Bach's *Versuch: E. W. Wolf's Anleitung* of 1785', *C. P. E. Bach Studies*, ed. Stephen L. Clark, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1988, p. 153.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 153.