AN INTERVIEW WITH SUSAN ALEXANDER-MAX, 2012

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Susan Alexander-Max died on 26 January 2016.

An Interview with Susan Alexander-Max [2012]

by Gregory Crowell

A native of New York City, Susan Alexander-Max is a graduate of the Juilliard School of Music. On completing her studies there, she won a scholarship to study with Ilona Kabos in London, where she now resides. Since then she has performed in festivals, music clubs, museums and galleries, and educational institutions throughout the world. As recording artist, Susan has made two compact discs of chamber music by Hummel, one of which won the BBC recommendation of the month. She has also recorded early piano sonatas of Clementi, and the complete keyboard works Book II of Domenico Zipoli. Her most recent recordings (due for release later this year [2012]) are of the Prussian Sonatas (C.P.E. Bach), which she recorded at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. She has recorded J.C. Bach keyboard concerti and Hummel fortepiano sonatas (recorded at Musée de la Musique in Paris). Her recording of J.C. Bach's Op. 5 keyboard sonatas is her debut recording on clavichord.

In 1996, she founded The Music Collection, a world-renowned chamber ensemble that specializes in the performance of music of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries on historic instruments. With her ensemble, she not only performs and records, but she has developed an educational program to help promote classical music in the secondary school system throughout the UK. For many years, Susan was professor of piano at the Guildhall School of Music & Drama. Since leaving this post, she has dedicated her teaching time to giving lecture-recitals, workshops, and masterclasses on the fortepiano and clavichord, worldwide.

GC: How and why did you end up staying in Europe?

SA-M: Not being the kind of person who decides in advance that I will be married by a certain age, have children by a certain age, become a concert pianist and settle in a country that is 3,000 miles away from home, everything in my life has happened by chance rather than design.

When I was about fourteen, my piano teacher asked my mother if she could work with me towards taking the entrance exam to the Juilliard School of Music. And this was the beginning of the end, the catalyst that began my life in music. I did go to Juilliard, and after completing my BA degree (BS at the time), Ilona Kabos came into my life. She had been "imported" from England to teach at the Juilliard, and she was auditioning at the same time I was searching for a new teacher. She accepted me into her class; she became my teacher, my inspiration, my confidante, my friend. She lived in England—six months in New York, six months in London. She traveled back and forth and she invited me to go with. I love London, and one year I decided to simply stay for the whole year, rather than go back to New York after six months. The rest is history. Married, three children, the whole package! There was no going back.

GC: How did you become interested in the clavichord? When did you first encounter a clavichord?

SA-M: This question unfolds in a similar way to the beginning of my career in music and my settling in London—mostly by chance. I came to the clavichord via the fortepiano and the fortepiano via the modern piano. I traveled back in time. Although I played the modern piano, and I thought my passion lay there, my real interest was in the earlier repertoire (predominantly eighteenth century/early nineteenth century, and at

that particular time, mostly Mozart). To my ears, there was an incongruity that I found dramatically frustrating. Initially, I didn't know what the answer was and so, the search began. By chance (with emphasis on the word chance), someone told me that there was an exhibition in Bruges where all the eminent makers of fortepianos would be. I decided to go. It was my first meeting with a fortepiano, and it changed my life. This was the sound that matched the eighteenth-century repertoire.

All very well and good, I had found the sound, but now I had to find an instrument. This was at the beginning of the 1990s, when instruments and instrument builders were not as plentiful as they are today. But it is amazing what the grapevine can do, and just how small the world can become! One person led me to another, who led me to another, and via this grapevine, I met Derek Adlam and experienced his instruments and his instrument building, and I put my name on his waiting list for a fortepiano. Whilst I waited and waited and waited for my turn to come up, we became good friends. He has a beautiful clavichord, which he demonstrated the day we first met (his copy of the Hass that is in the Russell Collection in Edinburgh). That was my first encounter with a clavichord.

My interest in playing took a little longer to develop. You have to understand that the fortepiano was, for me, a big adjustment and challenge. It opened up a whole new concept. I believe very strongly in understanding what each instrument can bring, can teach the performer about the music of its day. I am not the kind of musician who boasts being able to play all of the keyboard instruments because one keyboard is just like another. Each one is an individual, with individual quirks and nuances that bring out the reasons for the music's being. The fortepiano became the vehicle of discovery for me, and mastering the light touch to obtain the clarity of sound and the colors it offers became my passion. The problem I encountered was that, for me, it precluded being able to play Bach because J.S. Bach on a fortepiano was the equivalent of Mozart on the modern piano, to my ears. So, for quite a while, I was no longer playing Bach, and I missed him. I believe you can probably see where I am going with this.

GC: Indeed!

SA-M: By chance, I attended the very first meeting and concert of the British Clavichord Society (which hadn't yet become the BCS, but was about to) in Oxford, where Derek Adlam was giving a recital to introduce the clavichord. I became one of the founding members of the committee and became more closely associated with the clavichord. My interest grew and grew because I realized that the clavichord was, for me, the answer to my predicament with Bach. I wanted to play the repertoire, but I didn't want to do it on the fortepiano, and I didn't really want to do it on a harpsichord either. Although I am able to play the harpsichord now, the technique is so very different to the fortepiano and clavichord, and this is where my heart really lies. Although the technique of playing the clavichord is also slightly different to that of the fortepiano, the palette of colors of both instruments is very similar. The clavichord is perhaps even more intimate.

GC: Tell us something about your own instruments.

SA-M: As for my own instruments, I have had two clavichords. One was a five-octave unfretted instrument, by Colin Booth (which I have since sold, but which gave me the foundations needed). Now I have just one, made especially for me by Peter Bavington. It is a copy of the Johann Jacob Bodechtel clavichord, Nuremberg around 1785, fretted with compass of BB (one extra note) to f^3. It is a lovely instrument—responsive, with a rich palette and a joy to play.

GC: You have been engaged in a number of recordings, including recent recordings on clavichord of the so-called English Bach, J.C. Bach. What made you become interested in his music? What is his significance?

SA-M: Perhaps by chance? Perhaps a combination of the edicts and errors of record companies along with personal interest? Let me explain.

I wanted to record the complete J.C. Bach sonatas and was contracted to do so for Naxos. I think it is safe to say that Johann Christian helped lay the foundations for the Classical Period. His keyboard sonatas represent a fundamental move away from the Baroque and past the *Empfindsamkeit* style of his half-brother, Carl Philipp Emanuel. In addition, and apart from his musical significance as a composer, he was a pioneer of new instruments that were appearing around this time, more specifically of the Zumpe fortepiano. The Op. 17 sound ideal on the early fortepiano—a splendid example of repertoire and instrument, composer and

instrument builder, working conjointly. When you get this combination right, it comes with the ultimate satisfaction and understanding. For me, it is the only reason for playing these instruments.

However, by chance (again!) I realized that Naxos had allowed someone else to record the Op. 17 on the modern piano (big mistake!) Their error gave me the opportunity to make a change to our original agreement, which was to change from playing on fortepiano to playing on the clavichord.

GC: Why the clavichord?

SA-M: To my mind, the Op. 5 is a completely different ball game to the Op. 17. Although the pieces perfect the *galant* style, the earlier works are perhaps more simplistic. My ears and instincts are my guide for finding the sound that brings out the best in these sonatas (and vice versa) There is some evidence to suggest that the Op. 5 were conceived with the Zumpe fortepiano in mind and, as I state in my notes for the CD, the sound qualities of the two instruments are actually very similar; the clavichord affords the same dynamic range and color required to project the *galant* style of Johann Christian's music. The smaller sound of the clavichord also gives these pieces the stature that they deserve. Instead of sounding small on a big instrument, they sound substantial on a more intimate instrument.

GC: Certainly recent research has shown that the clavichord was not unknown n England at the time. What are your thoughts on the clavichord in the United Kingdom today?

SA-M: Regarding the clavichord in England, I don't pretend to know very much. There are some wonderful historic instruments in private collections. I have played the Hass and the Dolmetsch copy of that Hass at the Russell Collection in Edinburgh as well as the Hofmann clavichord at Hatchlands in Guildford. There are others that I haven't had the opportunity to play. But, generally, I would stress that the scene in England has been greatly enhanced by the formation of the British Clavichord Society. The society has done wonders to make the clavichord accessible, part of everyday culture, and to enhance and encourage the understanding of the instrument—to spread the word, so to speak. There are clavichords popping up in the most unexpected places.

GC: This sounds very encouraging. What, then, are your thoughts on the early keyboard scene today? How have you seen it change? Where do you see it going?

SA-M: Unfortunately, my thoughts on the early keyboard scene today are quite cynical. I was not on the scene at the very beginning. I came to it somewhere in the middle. It began with a very dedicated group of musicians, musicologists and instrument builders in search of the "truth." Perhaps, in their own way, they were initially a bit rigid in their quest for "authenticity;" however, their interest has brought us untold knowledge, as well as the revival of the early instruments. Since the beginning of my time on the scene, the beginning of the 1990s, I have watched the performing scene evolve and change more and more, and, I would say, with very mixed results. On the one hand, you have more and more instruments and more and more players, however, with this kind of growth, as is always the case, you get different levels of dedication, of skill, of understanding and of competence from both performer, maker and audience. The world is so much bigger in the twenty-first century than it was in the eighteenth or even in the twentieth century, so the differences and the divides grow. There are those who are still looking for the satisfaction of simply understanding how the music and the instruments work together and what they can learn about style and interpretation. And there are those who simply play the instruments because it is fashionable to do so in order to enhance their careers. Unfortunately, I believe that, as a result, we have still not truly succeeded in educating our audiences.

Performers are still taking pre-conceived ideas of the music to historic instruments and imposing their will, regardless of whether or not the instruments can handle it. What is the point? Most people today would rather hear Mozart on a modern piano and do not understand what is to be gained from historic performances. Sadly, this is almost full circle from the beginning of the early music scene, where we are now trying to make the small, intimate sounds of clavichord (and fortepiano) bigger and more "up to date."

Perhaps we will come to understand that to play Bach on a modern instrument could be construed as a transcription and appreciate it as such. For the moment, however, we should be learning from our ancestors—the ultimate vehicles for the understanding of the repertoire, but we still need to learn to listen with eighteenth-century ears.

GC: How can this be achieved?

SA-M: To convey it to the general public, those who are performing are the ones who need to listen more carefully and work with the instrument, instead of imposing modern ideas on it. The instrument is, of course, the vehicle for understanding, as I said previously. The clavichord and, for me, the fortepiano as well, are without doubt the means to achieve or to accomplish this knowledge. The secrets are there to be unfolded.

Unfortunately, the public is no more discerning than the performer, but if the performer cannot or does not inform the audience, how can they be discerning? And of course there are those who think they are doing it, but aren't. There are critics who accept a multitude of misconceptions in performance, who publish their findings and rave about those who are able to achieve a “modern” sound on an early instrument, thus pleasing his audience. As performers, we have to be strong enough to fight that sort of misconception, misinformation and misdirection—to not give in to public demand, but to train the audience's ears to the lightness of touch, the gentle sound, the clarity that shouldn't be covered by over pedaling (in the case of a fortepiano). Lecture-recitals are often helpful, where one can talk the audience through these ideas so that they become receptive to a softer sound, and “tune in,” thus taking the first step towards appreciation of what a clavichord, for example, can really do to bring out the inner soul of the music in a way that represents the music's true style and purpose.

So, to sum up, in order to assist the public, we have to know ourselves, as performers, what is fitting for a clavichord. By talking to the audience and guiding them through a process of listening, they become much more involved and, in turn, receptive to the idea of music and instrument working together, thus bringing out the best of both.

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