

The British Clavichord Society at Haslemere: the work of Arnold Dolmetsch

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'*Plus fait Douceur que Violence*' (Gentleness achieves more than Violence) is the motto to be found on Arnold Dolmetsch's personally signed instruments. The phrase could equally be applied to his son Carl's gracious hosting of the British Clavichord Society at Haslemere on September 2nd, 1995 and the moving musical illustrations played by Ruth Dyson

Dr Carl Dolmetsch, a very active 84-year-old, gave a most interesting and informative lecture on the work of his father, with special reference to his advocacy of the clavichord. Speaking from a prepared script, nevertheless he could not resist interspersing anecdotes and asides into the talk, and these all helped to give a vivid picture of life with such a multifaceted father, with whom he shared the first 29 years of his life ('It seemed much longer - that is meant in the best sense'). He sketched how the tradition of clavichord playing just spanned the 19th century before being rekindled with such practical enthusiasm and energy. Arnold's grandfather (Friedrich, b. 1782) founded a music school in Zurich, and his aunts had remembered as children practising along with fellow-pupils on clavichords in different corners of the same room, without hearing one another. Dr Carl described his feelings of joy and astonishment when, in 1947, he found that he had been staying by chance in the old school, by then converted into a hotel.

Arnold trained in woodcraft in his father's workshop, had violin lessons from Vieuxtemps, and piano lessons from an unsympathetic bandmaster who had been at Waterloo. When he came to England he entered the Royal College of Music in the year it opened (1883), and played in its first seven concerts. He was 'playing Corelli, Purcell and Vivaldi - not Brahms etc.', and when the Principal, Sir George Grove, questioned him on whether he was meaning to forego a career on modern instruments, the young man's eyes flashed as he answered 'Yes'. In 1894 his first clavichord was built (it is now in the Bate Collection, Oxford), and the second was purchased by Grove himself (this is now in the RCM museum). It was at this time that George Bernard Shaw was converted to the instrument's capabilities and wrote: 'I therefore estimate the birth of this modern instrument to be forty thousand times more important than the Handel Festival' (*The World*, 3rd July 1894).

The second batch of clavichords dates from 1897 and we had in front of us No. 8. (The reader is also referred to *FoMRHI Quarterly* no. 58, Jan. 1990, for a detailed [report by John Barnes](#) on restoration work carried out on Dolmetsch no. 6 in Edinburgh.) Because he owned the originals, Arnold had begun by copying early masters such as Hass and Hoffmann, but he felt this 'could only lead to stagnation and mediocrity if he did this for ever, therefore he made his own designs'. For twenty years he had made these five-octave instruments, but as they were cumbersome for transporting in and out of taxis he designed a smaller one of four octaves and two notes, which he said was suitable for all of Bach - although he later had to modify that statement. It was this model which was copied by Herbert Lambert, Tom Goff, Robert Goble, John Challis and others in the twenties and thirties.

Arnold wanted everything genuine: he preferred solid wood, and English walnut grain with a linseed oil finish was his favourite. He felt veneer was a form of fake, although he slackened his rules later. Carl remembers his mother, Mabel, grinding colours on glass and beating egg-white with a whisk to form the tempera paint for her soundboard decoration. One could identify the time of year the painting was done by the flowers she had picked from the garden for her models. We have a wonderful anecdote describing Lord Berners turning up in his chauffeured Rolls, and proudly displaying the green velvet compartment under the driver's seat especially made for the clavichord. (One trusts that it was far enough away from the heat of the engine!)

Carl said that the performances Arnold gave were hypnotic. His father positioned himself in the centre of the room; he asked his audience to make sure they were sitting comfortably, told them not to fidget with their programmes, and admonished them when they applauded. As he knew all his repertoire by heart he had the lights turned low. His psychological method was to improvise a few soft chords by way of prelude, so that eventually when he really commenced 'the loud chords made people jump in their seats'.

Arnold always tuned his own clavichords, and never re-tuned during a performance. His approach was practical; he always felt that 'Well-Tempered' meant 'equally well if not perfectly in tune in every key'.

In tuning equal temperament he employed fourths rather than fifths when setting the scale; he felt the former were 'more elastic and could be stretched more before sounding harsh – and this appeared to be a survival of 19th-century practice'. He was fully aware of the richness of mean-tone temperament as long as the music was restricted to the six major and three minor keys. With a small exception (in the thirties) all his clavichords were fret-free and double-strung. He believed that if two strings had too perfect a unison they 'killed' one another and the tone was rather dull; he therefore tuned the second string a fraction above the first, the minute amount adding lustre and volume. The two eight-foot strings of a harpsichord were similarly tuned – but never enough to be heard as such. Referring to the elasticity of touch available in the *Bebung*, he felt that it had both expressive potential and the facility to correct minor discrepancies in the chords. In addition, a common mistake is for players to press harder after the note is struck, whereas some pressure should be released (the same obtains with a violin or 'cello bow).

Part of Arnold Dolmetsch's performance of Bach's Chromatic Fantasia was played. (This recording, along with some also made by Rudolph Dolmetsch, has recently been transferred from the old 78 rpm records on to modern cassette and LP record [and is now available on CD from the [Dolmetsch Foundation](#)].)

After a short interval, it was then Ruth Dyson's turn to demonstrate the capabilities of no less than four Dolmetsch clavichords, namely:

1. 1897, no. 8, four and a half octaves, $C-f^3$, pentagonal shape in outer case, with 1899 painting on the left by Helen Fry.
2. 1912, five octaves, $FF-f^3$, oak, three bridges, made in the Gaveau workshops in France.
3. 1938, four octaves and two notes, $C-d^3$, cherrywood, owned by Dr Carl Dolmetsch.
4. 1975, five octaves, $FF-f^3$, rosewood.

Miss Dyson showed herself to be a witty and lively speaker in her introductions, and a brilliant interpreter of the very varied music in the programme that she played. The full programme, with instruments used, was as follows:

1938 instrument

Anon – *La Doune cella* (demoiselle) (Mulliner Book, c. 1730–75).

J. S. Bach – Prelude and Fugue in D minor and Prelude and Fugue in B flat major (Book 1, '48', 1722).

1912 instrument

C. P. E. Bach – Fantasia in C minor ('Hamlet'), 1753, Fantasia in G minor, 1775.

1897 instrument

D. G. Türk – two pieces from *Kleine Handstücke*, 1769, *Sehr feuerlich*; *Der moderne Sanger*

1975 instrument

Haydn – Menuet al rovescio (from Sonata in A, Hob. XVI/26, 1773).

Herbert Howells – Dyson's Delight (*Howells' Clavichord*, 1951–61) and Hughes' Ballet (*Lambert's Clavichord*, 1926–7).

On behalf of the members, Peter Bavington warmly thanked both speaker and performer for their parts in what had been a fascinating afternoon. It was a privilege to have been present.

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