Harpsichord & fortepiano

Vol. 5, No. 1 October, 1994

Musical Instrument Research Catalog
(MIRCat)

Interpretation with respect

An interview with Christophe Rousset

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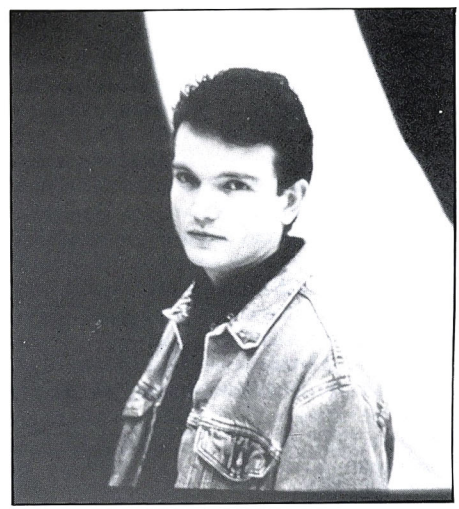
Respect is a word which crops up frequently in conversation with young French harpsichordist Christophe Rousset. It is applied to many things: listening, teaching and making instruments as well as playing.

WE MET in London, over lunch, just after Rousset had completed the second volume of Bach concertos which he is recording with the Academy of Ancient Music and Christopher Hogwood for Decca and began by discussing his recently released recording of Couperin's *Quatrième Livre de Pièces de Clavecin*. Did he take a particular line in the performance of Couperin? I suggested that he had a particular association and affinity with French music and that his performance of the *Quatrième Livre* was rather restrained.

"Restrained? Some people say exactly the opposite and *I* would say I am just in between. Couperin is very strict and he says do not add anything and do not take any ornaments away. If you want to respect this music and if you want to play it well, play it as written with as much feeling as possible; but he also says, 'I prefer what touches me and not what surprises me'." This implies special dedication to the letter of the score as well as to its spirit: "You have to be exact and that is what I try to do: not to be too extravagant."

Melancholy, and a very intimate quality, are surely evident in Rousset's playing of this particular Livre? "In this book there are not so many showy pieces. There are in the third book and there are in the second book. The last book is more a testament, like a will. He is dying and he knows it: he is old and he is tired and he is composing his last pieces. He explained this in the preface. It is true that they have a very special atmosphere."

IN his recording of the Bach Partitas Rousset demonstrates a similarly respectful attitude towards the composer's markings and he scarcely ornaments the music at all, even though it is certain that the music was not left so bare by contemporary performers.



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"I do ornament Bach, but it has to be spontaneous. If you do that on a record it is boring: you always have the same ornamentation, when it should be different every time. So it is even better to leave the music as written on the score and improvise in concert. If you over-interpret music on recordings it is always a little disturbing and makes me feel tired. I don't think it is necessary to ornament too much. Often ornamentation is *cache-brisé*, as we say in French, which means that you hide the lack of interpretation with ornaments, which is not exactly the same thing." Rousset explains that nowadays we know how important it was to ornament music in the eighteenth century, but says that nobody now does it in anything like the same way. He points out that if one looks at the written-out ornamentations by Corelli or Benda that have survived, they appear to us to be extreme: "If you do that now, everyone would call you mad." Rousset certainly does not ever go this far. Nor could it ever be said of his playing that he ignores what the composer called for: Couperin himself could not have complained, as he did of certain of his contemporaries, about "une négligence qui n'est pas pardonnable" (preface to the *Troisième Livre*).

How does this apply to other aspects of interpretation, such as phrasing: is this left to the

moment of performance as well? "Well, yes and no. You have to understand the meaning of the music and I don't think that you can change the meaning so much. Interpretation of course changes, but the general meaning and the curve and the phrasing are always more or less the same." He laughs as he adds, perhaps with a slight dig in the direction of one or two of his own less than precise contemporaries, "Articulation is fixed for ever." He repents immediately—it was not meant to seem unkind. "I don't know: maybe the tempo changes and maybe the rubato changes."

We discussed the question of early fingering for Couperin: Rousset has tried it but thinks that its effect can be imitated very well. "The technique is different in Rameau; it is a different school. In Couperin you still have to walk with the fingers, but Rameau has a 'Scarlatti' technique—international, like Handel. I'm sure they had the same way of approaching the harpsichord—Handel, Scarlatti and Rameau—the same essentially Italian approach. It applies to the way of writing the music for the harpsichord also, the way they make the harpsichord sound."

He laughs as he adds, perhaps with a slight dig at one or two of his less than precise contemporaries, "Articulation is fixed for ever."

Rousset chooses the instruments on which he plays with immense care. Several of his recordings use original instruments in preference to copies and he is particularly enthusiastic about a 1751 Hemsch, which may once have belonged to Rameau's patron La Poupelinière, and which Rousset has used in recordings several times.

"The Hemsch is one of the most beautiful instruments I have played. The action and the sound are exceptional. I have tried several different Hemschs in my life, and that is the best one. It is in a private collection in Castres. There are two more in France: one in Paris and one in Normandy. This one is completely original—even the lute stop is original."

As for modern copies Rousset favours the makers Anthony Sidey and David Ley. One is British, the other American, and both work in Paris. "It is like the eighteenth century—foreigners coming to Paris and making harpsichords, like Hemsch, and the Goermans." The word respect comes up again and Rousset relates instrument-making to the firmly held principles of interpretation that he has already discussed. "These makers are trying to respect what comes from the 18th century or the 17th century. They don't pretend to do things better than they were before. The problem with interpretation in music is that people think they know better than in the 18th century: that is wrong. One should respect what comes from the 18th century and try to understand exactly what was meant."

"One of the good things about harpsichord playing is that you do play in very nice places. The first place I played was in Venice, in a palace on the Isola S. Giorgio. And in France often I play in Versailles. The place is one thing, the audience is another. You have to feel a response, especially when you are a solo instrumentalist: it is kind of conversation." Is a French audience the most appreciative in that case? "No, I don't think so. But I like playing in France—I know I can communicate very well. But I can do that also in Brazil where the audience is very different."

It is hard to believe that Rousset ever has a problem with communicating: his English is fluent and often colourful; he is articulate, quick to define his interests, and has a lively sense of humour. What areas of the repertoire is he not interested in? "English virginal music. I did it at one time but others can play it better than I can. I do not think I really give anything to this music so I just avoid it." He has not recorded any Scarlatti, he says, because of a sense of awe—respect—for the complete recording of the sonatas by Scott Ross. "I love Scarlatti . . . I do play Scarlatti in concerts, but to record them: not yet. It is a great deal of work and I don't think I want to do it yet."

ROUSSET does not feel that there have been any overriding influences on his playing. As we talked, however, it became clear that in fact he has always been keenly aware of the work of other players and especially his own teachers, Huguette Dreyfus, Kenneth Gilbert and Bob van Asperen. "Maybe it is a kind of arrogance, but when I started the harpsichord I listened to many harpsichord players and always I felt that, well, that was not the way I would do it. I have a different personality and a different feeling about music." Kenneth Gilbert gave him a understanding of Italian toccatas, Frescobaldi, and early French suites by composers such as D'Anglebert. Bob van Asperen was deeply concerned with problems of articulation and inspired

Rousset in the matter of making music a serious profession. "He often says [one's playing] is not musical enough. It does not mean that you are not a musician: only that you should play with more line or more intention, to let the music speak more or reach further. He is a very difficult teacher: he is not like a father, he is simply a teacher. You have to be very determined about what you want in your life, and as a musician you have to be very strong because the profession is so difficult. People are not often . . . *bienveillant*. Nobody comes to you and says, 'You are so great, you must play for us.' It is never that way: you have to fight.

"I played for Bill Christie for five or six years. I learned a lot as a continuo player with him. You always learn from opera: Lully, Charpentier, Rameau. That was a great experience. Bill has a special gift. It made me more interested in opera and in the voice and working with singers. I love exploring lesser known opera; I have just completed recording *Armida abbandonata* of Jomelli [*with his group Les Talens Lyriques*] and I am doing Handel's *Ricardo II* in May 1995 then *Mitridate* of Mozart in July. Jomelli is unknown now but he was the most highly considered composer of the century, much more so than Mozart or even Haydn. He was in Vienna, he was in Naples, in Rome, in Venice, in Stuttgart. *Armida* is a very virtuoso work!"

So will he give up the harpsichord for conducting? Rousset supplies the answer for himself before I can even ask the question: "Absolutely not!"

Christophe Rousset *was born in 1961 in Avignon and transferred from the piano to the harpsichord at thirteen. He studied at the Schola Cantorum in Paris before going to the Royal Conservatoire in the Hague. He won the first prize at the Bruges International Harpsichord Competition in 1983, which launched his international career. He founded the chamber group* Les Talens Lyriques *in 1992 and with them he has been exploring some wider repertoire. He has recorded for both Decca and Harmonia Mundi.*