

# Harpsichord & *fortepiano*

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Musical Instrument Research Catalog  
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# Monteverdi on the road

*An account, from the point of view of keyboard technician **Simon Neal**, of a recent tour in Italy and Austria with John Eliot Gardiner performing Monteverdi's opera *L'Incoronazione di Poppea* and the *Vespers of 1610*, with the English Baroque Soloists and Monteverdi Choir.*

THE tour was planned to coincide with the celebration of the 350th anniversary of Monteverdi's death in November 1643: the schedule consisted of a week of rehearsals in London, then performances in Cremona, Milan, Rome and Vienna, followed by two further performances in London which were to be recorded live. Four chamber organs (two large instruments with four stops and two with one stop), one harpsichord (a copy of a 1665 Rodolfi) and a virginals were required, transported and tuned by Robin Jennings and myself.

Our first problem was that as the orchestra was flying to Italy and we were driving we had to leave London a day before they finished rehearsing in order to get there in time. To cover this last day we had to find a substitute set of instruments and another tuner. We had also thought of putting a temporary logo on the side of our hired van to advertise the tour, but the large, bright red 'Dartford Motors' prevented the idea. Nevertheless this sight outside Italian theatres and cathedrals occasionally raised cheers of recognition from the orchestra's bus.

It was snowing in London during the rehearsal week and the journey before us involved crossing the Alps twice. So a shovel, spade, bucket of sand and snow-chains went into the back of the van along with the organs. Of course, the only time we needed any of these was getting out of the rehearsal venue in London! We crossed the Channel to Calais during the evening. Down came the fog. It was thick and



**Simon Neal (left) and Robin Jennings with harpsichord, virginals and one of the organs**

freezing and lasted until well south of Dijon. As we drove, huge wads of ice formed on the wing-mirrors, the radiator and up the length of the aerial. The fog cleared as we got near the Mont Blanc tunnel, but came down again as soon as we were past the mountains in Italy. We eventually found the theatre in Cremona after one complete circuit of the town's narrow streets.

After a quick lunch we returned to the theatre to start tuning. It was just above freezing outside, but the theatre was very well heated. In a few minutes my thermo-hygrometer gave unsettling readings of 70°F and 28% humidity. Temperature has a direct effect on the pitch of organs as does humidity on harpsichords. The best humidity for keeping instruments in good health is 50–60%, so we knew we were in for a busy time with the tuning. We had a chat with a man backstage—in poor French, our only common language—but although he wanted to be helpful he could not change these awful conditions. As soon as we started to tune an electrician turned up to reposition the stage lights. We tuned; his ladder squeaked noisily; the pitch changed; we tuned again. . . . Luckily we had brought a supply of new wire to replace several harpsichord strings lost during this exercise.

Having finally got the instruments to hover at about the right pitch we received a message that the orchestra had been delayed by two hours because of the fog at Milan airport. We waited some more and tuned some more. They eventually turned up and after they had started rehearsing we went off to find some supper.

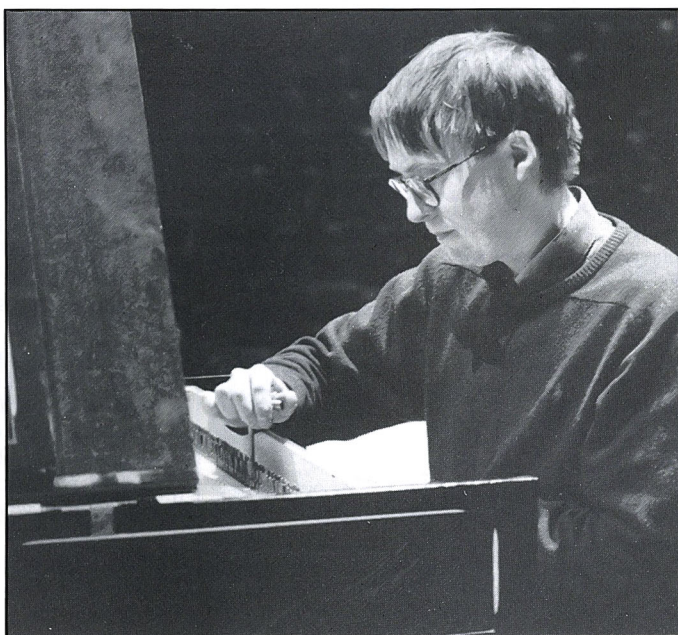
The hotel recommended a family-run restaurant nearby: it was friendly and the food was good, so we ended up having every meal there over the next few days, along with most of the orchestra and cast. The staff even asked for our schedule so that they could adjust their opening times to our rehearsals.

**A**T eight the next morning we returned to the theatre to find a fleet of hoovers cleaning the auditorium. After some pointing to watches and ears we negotiated some quiet tuning-time. We needed a lot of time as the organs, harpsichord and virginals were by now all at different pitches and we were only just ready for the rehearsal to begin. The cast of *Poppea*, twelve soloists who were performing the opera semi-staged, were of different nationalities so the rehearsals took place using a mixture of English, Italian, French and German. To add to this, two of the cast were appearing in another production in Amsterdam so were having to commute between Cremona and Amsterdam for alternate nights.

That afternoon was free, so we used the time to deliver the two 'Vespers-only' organs to the cathedral ready for rehearsals there the following day. The theatre asked us to take "a few music stands and rostra" with us—there were so many of these that we had to make two trips in the van and had to rush back to the theatre to start tuning for the evening show. As the pitches of the harpsichord and organs would move in different directions during the performance, owing to the heat of the lights and the audience, we had to estimate this change and tune them so that they all coincided roughly halfway through the concert. We made an educated guess and, using  $1/4$ -comma meantone, actually set the four instruments at slightly different pitches, making sure that we told the six theorbos and archlutes, cittern, baroque guitar and two harps what we were planning. To our amazement, at the interval all the keyboards were at the same correct pitch—much mental back-slapping ensued.

At the end of the performance at 11.30 p.m. our day was not yet over. The next day (Sunday) we were rehearsing the Vespers in the cathedral. There were only two three-hour rehearsals but because of the many services this gave us only quarter of an hour to set up and tune the harpsichord and four organs before each slot. To get round this we got permission to take all the instruments to the cathedral at half-past midnight, after the opera performance, and be locked in there to tune them—along with a mysterious man who would wait to let us out when we were finished. The next problem to deal with was, as usual, the temperature.

**I**N the theatre it had reached 78°F but here it was only 54°F. We were assured that the heating was on and that it would be a little warmer the next day. Taking into account this wide temperature difference and guessing at a nominal rise overnight we calculated a pitch at which to set everything that evening. As the organs got used to the cold their pitches changed dramatically even as we were tuning them. At 3 a.m. we were too cold and tired to do any more, so started to pack up and hide the instruments behind various pillars. Just as we thought our day was over we heard footsteps and "Hi, guys!" as John Eliot and the management team—Jim, Heather and Kathy—strode up the aisle,



Simon sets the temperament

having been out to celebrate the beginning of Monteverdi's anniversary, and we all spent the next twenty minutes assessing the various places for the soloists and seeing how many players could be squeezed into the pulpit. A request from one of the keyboard players to borrow the virginals so that he could practise in his hotel room meant that at 3.30 all six of us left the cathedral in a dubious procession, Robin and I carrying the virginals on our shoulders as if it were a coffin.

We crept back into the cathedral at the end of the last mass the following afternoon to start setting up quietly, although this meant dodging the man who kept coming to take a collection from us. As soon as the mass ended chaos ensued as we spent fifteen minutes carrying organs to different parts of the building and re-tuning the harpsichord. Of course the heating was *still* not on, so the final pitch of the organs was not what it should have been, but as the players were so cold it did not bother them too

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*We left the cathedral in a dubious procession, carrying the virginals on our shoulders as if it were a coffin*

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much. Further promises of heat came from the promoter, so we lived in slight hope. After the first rehearsal John Eliot, Jim, Robin and I grabbed a torch and went on a tour of the passages and stairways concealed in the west front of the cathedral, where, after finding ourselves on dangerously unguarded balconies at the top of towers and pinnacles, we eventually found suitable places from which some of the echo-music could be sung. Then we repaired to the nearest café to plan the choreography of the players and singers for the performance. There were not enough organs or organists for some parts, so the virginals were recommissioned—another street procession!—and I was volunteered to deputise for a verse of *Ave maris stella*, since the two organists were stuck in pulpits without time to reach the correct instrument. The second rehearsal was a little more organized, although the by-now familiar “Sorry, guys!” meant we had to swap over organs between pulpits and try to smother one to make it quieter.

Unsurprisingly, at the performance the next day the heating was still not on. Again Robin and I were locked in over lunchtime to get the six instruments tuned. All the electricity had

been switched off by the sacristan but luckily we had done our homework and knew where the switches were hidden. The rehearsal and performance went well considering the cold and it was a powerful experience to hear the Vespers performed in front of 1,600 people in a building so similar to that for which it was conceived.

We loaded up and departed for the Basilica S. Marco in Milan at 7.30 the following morning. During the get-in we discovered that it was physically impossible to fit the organs into some the nooks, crannies and pulpits in the way that John Eliot had imagined: it was actually a relief to have everything on ground level for a change. Perhaps predictably, however, when John Eliot and Jim arrived they decided to alter the whole position of the performing area to get a better acoustical result so we spent over an hour moving the various rostra, repositioning the instruments and putting up the lighting. Jim was sent to the top of the dome to find echo places for the soloists. Our efforts were not unrewarded—courtesy of John Eliot we consumed a much-appreciated, and quickly drunk, bottle of champagne, for services “beyond the call of duty”. There was a short evening rehearsal and when we discovered that the church possessed a large electric organ that could play very quietly this was also put to use. Now there were seven keyboards involved and we wondered if the tally would ever stop rising!

TUNING the next day was somewhat easier as the organs had grown used to the low temperature. After the Vespers performance midnight saw us loading up the van again then grabbing supper and two hours' sleep before setting off for Rome. By this time the fog in Milan was so thick that we were easily lost and had to stop at each corner to peer up at the road-signs. We arrived in Rome at midday and we eventually found the theatre without much more than a light brush with the kamikaze Fiat drivers. Again things were not easy on the tuning front as after two days in cold churches the instruments had to get used to another hot, dry theatre. To add to this, the electrician's lunch-break did not finish until 5 p.m. so there were no good lights until the very last minute, which meant an intensive hour of tuning between rehearsal and performance, with Robin and me having to work simultaneously on either side of the orchestra. We had to depart for Vienna straight after the concert, so to try to catch up on sleep we kipped down in the

quietest place in the theatre, which happened to be John Eliot's dressing room—much to the consternation of the theatre staff.

We quickly learned that at 2 a.m. finding the way out of Rome meant not following the road signs, as a lot of them actually pointed the wrong way. The "When in Rome"—rule applied here and along with everyone else we ignored traffic lights and made prohibited turns, as this seemed the only way of getting anywhere near the desired road. The long drive through Italy remained uneventful and we reached the Austrian border at about 11 a.m. Here came another problem when Customs had to process the paperwork for the instruments to be allowed in, as Austria is not yet in the EC. The Italian Customs officer had no idea how to do this so a lot of gesticulation, pointing and stamping were needed; the Austrians however were friendly and efficient, and surprised us by knowing of our orchestra and asking us what music we were performing.

The welcome organized in Vienna was a considerable contrast to the Italian ones: four huge men waited to help us unload and there is a lift up to the Konzerthaus auditorium. This was the largest venue we had yet been in for *Poppea*. The temperature was yet again on the high side and the humidity a frighteningly low 25%. Altering these conditions was a serious problem because the whole building, including two other concert halls, is run on a single system.

**W**E were in early the next morning, to find that the instruments had dried out quite well—there was only one broken harpsichord string to replace. The regal stop on one of the organs was beginning to moan a little as small cracks in the soundboard began to

open up. We were grateful that this was the last concert. An organist was rehearsing that afternoon (nothing to do with us) and the huge five-manual organ was next to the stage. "We could use that," commented John Eliot on his arrival—his tongue *was* in his cheek, surely?

The organ rehearsal gave Robin and me our only opportunity for sightseeing in the tour, and as if we had not seen enough instruments already we visited the famous musical museum in the city. An hour and a half to tune for the evening performance was inevitably cut short by the removal of the organ console on a hydraulic jack and further distraction was provided by the banging of nails as stairways were fastened down for our performance. To add to our worries, if that were possible, Austrian Radio had turned up to broadcast the concert live so there were technicians all over the stage, poking microphones into the instruments under our noses. The Viennese audience gave the opera a rapturous reception and a standing ovation: it was a long time before we could get onto the stage to pack everything up at the end.

**I**T was only on the twenty-four-hour drive back to London that the van at last started complaining about its load, and we had to stop to pump up a rather flat tyre. The Customs gave us the usual run-around, prolonged this time because it was a Sunday and they were not ready for processing freight documents, but we did eventually find the right official, chain-smoking in his dingy office. Our dull drive home was enlivened only by a few disagreements between ourselves about the right route and we were thankful to sail back into Dover at five the next morning. Then we could relax: there was nothing else to do before the recording sessions.

Except, that is, get to London, set up and tune . .

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