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An interview with James Nicolson

"A music of surprise and delight"

DAVE GAYMAN

JAMES NICOLSON is talking about his generation of music students—the New England Conservatory in the early '60s: 'We were enthusiastic, almost zealots. We thoroughly fell in love with early music. The sounds were new, the repertory new—it was an age of discovery.'

If you think back to the moment you first heard a harpsichord, the aural frisson, the clarity of the ictus and the bloom of the sustain, likely you will recapture the wonder and delight that Nicolson is recalling. He has never lost that sense of wonder, bringing it to each of his double virginals concerts. I ask him how he does that: 'If you as the audience are taking that away with you, that's inexplicable. If anything, you're hearing the music and this instrument'—his hand sweeps along his mother-and-child double virginal—'and connecting with the kinetic and dancing spirit of it all.'

A conduit for the music's spirit and drive

It is clear that he sees his artistic rôle much in the same way that many late medieval and early Renaissance artists did: it is not his work, he is merely a conduit for a spirit and drive. He thinks a minute: 'This music satisfies my own inner musical longings. It touches basic human responses and needs with subtlety and elegance, it's unabashedly connected, without sentiment or subterfuge.'

'This music' is Byrd (the divisions on folk songs, the pavanes and galliards, the almans, fantasia, variations on a cantus firmus, the ground basses), Frescobaldi ('just a fraction, the dances, *canzone*, those fourteen remarkable, off-the-wall variations on *La Romanesca*'), Sweelinck (variations on secular songs), Cabezon and de Narvaez, pieces from the 1551 Italian *Tablatura Nova*, Peter Phillips, John Bull ('a smattering: he takes such personal, fiery passion and he always seems to call for unlimited technical virtuosity').

'It's good-time music,' Nicolson says, 'wonderfully healthy. It's singing, dancing—musicologists call these pairings of pavane and galliard "early suites", but many were actually danced, remember. Yet they are also receptacles of serious musical thought; particularly the pavanes,

Herb Snitzer

James Nicolson at his mother-and-child virginal

but you find great moments in so many of the lighter pieces as well.'

Nicolson tours Germany and the Low Countries several months of the year; his schedule in the US is much more limited. 'Nobody knows the music,' he says, 'and I'm not the organizer. I have a very dear friend [Frau Barbara Röntsch] on the Continent who finds these marvellous halls and churches and castles and works tirelessly to bring me into them. I haven't found that kind of resource on this side.'

He begins a typical concert with de Narvaez's variations on *Guárdarme las vacas*. 'What a warm-up piece,' Nicolson says. 'It sets the stage philosophically as well as tonally. To be honest,' he continues, 'my concert starts an hour and a half before yours as I tune and occasionally replace a couple of those soft iron or brass strings. It's a race against time and the temperament won't permit much error.' The temperament is quarter-comma meantone whose pure thirds and lilting scalar passages strike ears used only to equal temperament as wonderfully new. The instrument, he explains, has never been set in anything but quarter-comma meantone.

The instrument was built in 1982 by now-retired instrument-maker Lynette Tsiang, who worked with William Post Ross and Joel Van Lennep before going on her own. The mother is based on a 1620 Ruckers muselaar owned by the New England Conservatory of Music and on view in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. Like the playable original, Nicolson's instrument revels in the round, flutey tone and rich bass characteristic of the muselaar, whose strings are plucked not close to the nut but well toward the centre of the string. Nicolson says, 'We decided at the last moment—the very last possible moment, because Lynette had begun construction of the muselaar—to make it mother-and-child.' Two hours of the solid eight-foot muselaar sound might be too much of a muchness; the four-foot child provides Nicolson with the tonal variety needed to keep ears fresh. 'It's based on a child in a very famous collection within a few hours' drive of Boston. Lynette drove over there and was allowed to examine and measure the instrument, another Ruckers of the same era.'

A child is born

Nicolson plays perhaps thirty minutes on the muselaar, then with great showmanship—and, again, a sense of surprise and wonder—'discovers'

Dave Gayman

Nicolson at home

the child tucked away behind a swing-down panel left of the keyboard. 'I try,' he says impishly, 'to make it a pregnant moment.' As he plays a few pieces on the child, it is clear the timbre is in strong contrast to the mother: it is a much thinner, nasal sound. Nestled atop the mother, however, with the child's keys activated by the upward movement of the mother's jacks, the sound is a gorgeous mix of fundamental and harmonics, *'sattdunkle, charaktervolle Klänge'*, as one German music critic puts it.

NICOLSON'S teachers include Helen Keaney and Daniel Pinkham at the New England Conservatory and he has taken master classes with Igor Kipnis, Kenneth Gilbert, Mark Kroll, Marleen Montgomery and Paul O'Dette. In the last few years he has assimilated early fingerings. 'I was double-teamed at a South-Eastern Historical Keyboard Society concert by John Brock and Edward Parmentier, who were on the programme with me,' Nicolson says. 'Both asked me why I wasn't using the early fingerings. I've been studying with Peter Sykes and what a surprising difference these fingerings make.' A piano player from the age of four, Nicolson has had to invest a great deal of time in the process of relearning scale passages and ornaments. The thumbless, weak-strong alternations give the music a new articulation, rich with rhythmic vitality and clarity.

I also had an opportunity to watch Nicolson approach music new to him. It was one of the longer, more meaty corants from *Elizabeth Rogers hir Virginall Booke,* with some very forward-looking tonalities—number 25, anonymous—and as I handed it to him I remarked the surprising modulations. 'I think you find something surprising in all the virginal music,' he says, nodding.

Touching only three or four keys—as it later turns out, the most evident of the 'bones' of the piece—he put the music under his hands, but an inch off the keyboard: a first reading of the notes to be played. Then he worked out the right hand, playing now, finding the chordal structures and 'the basic bones, the skeleton,' he says. Only then did he move to build the architecture, and he immediately revised the editor's repeats. 'No, you don't start in F and end in D. Here—it's like this,' and out tumbles a piece I had never heard, though I had played these notes many times. From the dance of his hands and the new structure there comes a gracious, dancing movement I had not seen and once again I see the surprise and wonder that Nicolson brings to his art.

Broad-based career

Mention Nicolson in early music circles in the US and you hear the same response: 'Yes, *James*,' they say, and you feel they are referring to a favourite uncle—or nephew. His wit is impish and engaging. His career encompasses far more than performance: Nicolson is on the early music faculty at Longy School of Music in Cambridge, Mass. and the Powers School of Music. He serves on the board of the Boston Early Music Festival, the Pro Musicis Foundation, and the Community Music Center of Boston, and is president and board member of the Cambridge (Mass.) Society for Early Music. He regularly contributes time to the musical instrument collection in the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, most recently in a project to describe and catalogue photos taken and collected by Edwin Ripin during his tenure as assistant curator of the collection of musical instruments at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York).

In addition, many years ago Nicolson commissioned three Dowd harpsichords, two Flemish doubles after Ruckers and a typical Franco-Flemish *grand ravalement*. These have been available for early music throughout New England. Not only have they provided access to good early instruments for performers and groups who otherwise might not have been able to re-create the sounds, they are used for major events as well. 'I maintain them,' he says, and it is clear that means a lot of special care. One Flemish instrument was in its shipping wraps the day I inteviewed Nicolson in his spacious Belmont home, having been on stage a few days before with the Handel and Haydn Society.

'It all began as a sort of a whim,' Nicolson says when I ask him how he came to early music. 'A recorder-playing friend had to part with a barely-started Zuckermann kit, in the early '60s, and I happened to buy it. It was one of those first-generation Zuckermann plywood, straight-sided harpsichords; even the soundboard was plywood. I knew before I finished it that it was inadequate and just then I found Dowd and Hubbard and Herz just down the street, so to speak. Well, there's nothing like having the wrong thing to help you know when you've found the right thing, and that was wonderful!'