

Harpsichord & fortepiano

Vol. 5, No. 3 October, 1995

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Musical Instrument Research Catalog
(MIRCat)

Soundboard Painting

The Traditional Touch

Mary Mobbs responds to Jenny Haylett's article on egg tempera painting in the last issue of H&F

I WAS very interested in Jenny Haylett's lively article "Take six eggs . . ." in the April 1995 issue of *H&F*. Her photographed paintings are very attractive and it is a pity that they could not have been in colour, illustrating the 'jewel-like brilliance' which she claims as one of the main reasons for using egg tempera on harpsichord soundboards. Nevertheless, the medium used on original instruments has been found to be water-soluble and therefore is quite definitely not egg tempera. I refer to the findings of Ann and Peter Mactaggart: 'Tempera and decorated keyboard instruments'.¹ To use egg tempera nowadays for this purpose seems to me inappropriate, especially as having spent so much care, patience and no doubt much time in making it up, we find that 'the paint only keeps for one day at the most'. Indeed, what exactly is meant by egg tempera—the white only ('glair'), the yolk only, or the whole egg?

The playful tone of Ms Haylett's article seems to aim at beginners in the art of soundboard decoration, but I should have thought that the complicated recipe, full of warnings, would be enough to put off even quite competent painters—which would be a pity. The art and tradition of soundboard decoration are a wide and fascinating subject and I should not like to dampen the ardour of someone about to enter this intriguing world of flowers, fruit, birds and arabesques. To make life easier, more relaxed and more enjoyable, why not use the medium used by the original painters of soundboards, namely gum arabic, a substance which can now be obtained at any art shop already made up into a fluid which does not readily gather mould?

The pigments chosen by Ms Haylett are excellent. They are actually the modern equivalent of some of those that the old harpsichord painters used—cf. Grant O'Brien's impressive tome *Ruckers*.² All the apparatus suggested for making up egg tempera—apart of course from the half dozen eggs—is also useful for making water-soluble paint, but really all that is necessary are good quality pigments, a slab of marble or ground glass, a palette knife, gum arabic and water.

My method is as follows. Add drops of water to a small heap of pigment, mixing until it is of the consistency of a fairly thick cream, then add two drops of gum arabic liquid and mix again. Never allow the mixture to become as thick as toothpaste. If you are able to obtain the rare smalt for traditional blue borders this may need a little grinding with a müller as you mix. It is worth persevering in making your own paint and if you have been in the habit of using a commercially made gouache—an easy-to-use alternative not to be sneered at—you will now discover the advantages of being able to control your painting by adding either gum or water when applying it to the soundboard. There is nothing like experimentation on spare pieces of wood or hardboard.

In discussing sizing the surface, Ms Haylett once again mentions the method of earlier soundboard painters and then turns her back on it, this time without giving a reason. She says the authentic base is egg-white yet recommends a modern sealer instead, as though eggs were no longer available. Grant O'Brien suggests that the original size may alternatively have been thinned shellac.³ I have been provided with all kinds of sealed surfaces to paint on—and some make pretty good skating rinks for the paint. I have found egg-white, strained and evenly applied, to be about the best, if a size has to be used. The bare wood can be even better provided that it is extremely fine-grained and smooth: a planed surface rather than a sanded one. If there are patches where you suspect the paint will tend to bleed into the wood an initial application of slightly diluted gum, dried before painting, will cure this.

WHEN a harpsichord builder has worked meticulously to copy an existing original instrument and the original soundboard is in a good state and available—even if only in photographs—it seems to me that a direct copy of that soundboard is appropriate. I have learned a tremendous amount about the method of the Taskin painter—and very likely other 18th-century French painters—through several times copying the 1769 instrument in the Russell Collection,

Edinburgh. In cleaning the soundboard of this famous instrument it had been found that many flowers and leaves were composed of several layers of paint of different shades⁴ and it was fascinating to find that my using this method did in fact produce the same effect as that on the original.

I suggest that even if an exact copy is not being attempted, the style of painting should suit the type of instrument made, but I would not for instance add a continuous border to a copy of the 1716 Hamburg Fleischer as Ms Haylett described, for the original painter has already provided long, flowing stems of flowers rolling between the bridges and copying this style would seem to be enough. There is no need to gild the lily. I agree that a large Taskin needs something much bolder and this is where the 'deep, heavy heads of the cabbage type [of rose]' come in. I really could not, for example, mix a singing bird symbolically sitting on a sprouting dead tree, beloved of 18th-century French painters, with a group of monkeys as occasionally seen on an early Flemish soundboard. There is nothing so helpful as visiting museums in the UK or on the Continent when on holiday to see the styles of harpsichord soundboard-painting employed over the centuries in various countries. Only then, I feel, can one begin to paint in a style in keeping with the style of the instrument. The best authority on this subject is Sheridan Germann, who has contributed excellent articles to *The Journal of the American Musical Instrument Society*⁵ and *Early Music*.⁶

Ms Haylett says, 'On completion, the surface should be sealed.' Should it? True, water soluble paint might suffer should anyone cough or sneeze into the instrument, but nevertheless I am unhappy about many modern varnishes and so I believe are a good many harpsichord builders: in the words of an expert painter that I know, a varnished soundboard may lose some of its 'ping'. We do not yet know whether Windsor & Newton's acrylic varnish will yellow or not: it is many decades too early for such a judgement. Why too does Ms Haylett insist at all on varnishing over egg tempera, which is not water-soluble and therefore proof against coughers or sneezers? For that matter, does acrylic varnish expand and contract with the wood? But we are getting deeper and deeper into this sensitive subject.

I sometimes wonder why we take so much trouble when our paintings will eventually be partly obscured by strings and pins. By the way,

am I alone in having been asked to decorate a soundboard with the strings already in place?

Notes

¹ Ann and Peter Mactaggart. 'Tempera and decorated keyboard instruments', *Galpin Society Journal* XXXIII (1979), pp. 59–65.

² C G O'Brien. *Ruckers: A harpsichord and virginal building tradition*, Cambridge, p. 158.

³ Op. cit.

⁴ Ann and Peter Mactaggart. 'Some problems in cleaning two harpsichord soundboards', *Studies in Conservation* 22 (1977), p. 78.

⁵ Sheridan Germann. 'Regional schools of harpsichord decoration', *Journal of the American Musical Instrument Society* vol. IV (1978), pp. 54–105.

⁶ _____. 'Monsieur Doublet and his confrères: the harpsichord decorators of Paris', *Early Music* Oct. 1980, pp. 435–53 and Apr. 1981, pp. 192–207.

Mary Mobbs, née Randall, is a keyboard- and bassoon-player who in more recent times has been employed as a harpsichord soundboard decorator. She has painted for Andrea and Anthony Goble, Milan Misina, Paul Starling, David Evans and William Mitchell among others. She and her husband, Kenneth, have over the last twenty years formed the Mobbs Keyboard Collection in Bristol.

(Photo: J. V. Moore)



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