

Harpsichord & fortepiano

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BOOK REVIEW

Harpsichord in America
A Twentieth-Century Revival
 Larry Palmer
 xiv + 202pp
 Indiana 1989
 ISBN 0-253-32710-5

BALBASTRE'S confident prediction in the late 1780s that the 'majestic clavecin' would never be replaced by the 'upstart' piano was sadly misplaced—and the take-over happened sooner than anyone could have imagined. Yet vestiges of interest in the harpsichord remained and in our own century it has enjoyed a significant revival. Larry Palmer's book, which charts the story of this revival with considerable knowledge and enthusiasm, is a delight. He writes informatively about the history of the harpsichord's progress in the States (there is no mention of S America here) from its earliest reappearance in Europe through to 1960.

Even in the first chapter one is regaled with fascinating snippets of information about the harpsichord's survival as a domestic instrument in the nineteenth century and of its rare appearances as a concert instrument: Moscheles' concerts in 1837 on a 1771 Shudi are well documented. Also from the nineteenth century come the first attacks on the musical quality of the harpsichord, and Palmer relishes in particular George Bernard Shaw's vitriolic comments on hearing the overture to *Die Zauberflöte* played—hacked around seems to have been a fairer description—by Diémer in the late 1860s. The first US interest began with Morris Steinert, an importer who was also interested

HOW THE WEST WAS WON

in restoring old instruments that he brought over from Europe. The instrument collection of the Smithsonian Institution was recognized in 1879 and Palmer charts its subsequent progress through bequests and gifts from the likes of Hugo Worch. Much of the value of the book comes from informal catalogues of this kind and whilst there may be occasional omissions and idiosyncrasies—Palmer does not pretend to completeness—the lists are remarkably comprehensive.

Throughout the book, the author wears his vast knowledge lightly and the tone is pleasing: informative and entertaining at the same time. Much of the information is conveyed using original source material, giving us a fascinating glimpse of attitudes of the day. What comes across clearly is the excitement and pioneering spirit of the early advocates of the harpsichord. Obvious giants such as Dolmetsch and Landowska get a major proportion of the book. Later, the contribution of Kirkpatrick and others is treated with equal consideration. Yet Palmer is not always eulogistic: this would be dishonest. Landowska in particular is subjected to rigorous examination and Palmer presents the views of both her admirers and her detractors. What emerges in the end, although perhaps wisely the author refrains from spelling this out, is a picture of an emotional self-made woman,

jealously preserving her privacy under a façade of hardness and *hauteur*.

One of the most fascinating chapters of the book is devoted to American instruments. Dowd and Hubbard are well known, but there are detailed portraits of makers whose work has long been regarded as out-of-date, misguided or even downright weird. Challis's aluminium harpsichords, made entirely of metal in order to overcome the problems associated with changes of temperature and humidity, are a case in point. There is a wonderful story of one, in transit to a concert, which fell into a river, was fished out, allowed to dry and then played—and still remained in tune. The sound of the instrument was presumably as hideous as the instrument was indestructible, and thank goodness that we have moved on from there!

The final chapter is entitled, 'Kits, records and all that jazz' and describes a few of the by-ways of the instrument in more recent years. Palmer sticks fairly firmly to his cut-off point of 1960, so the huge explosion of interest of the last few decades goes unmentioned. That he feels this is appropriate is perhaps an indication that the harpsichord has now come of age and is accepted by the public as a real musical instrument rather than being seen as a short-lived aberration of the conservationists and historicists. Can we be assured, echoing the words of Balbastre with which the tale began, that the 'majestic clavecin' will never again be displaced from our musical culture?

AMY FOSTER

DISC REVIEWS

Aufs Lautenwerck

Kim Heindel (lute-hpd)

Timing: 74'32

Dorian Discovery DIS 80126

The lute-harpsichord, or Lautenwerck, is the most curious hybrid with perhaps the most cajoling sound of all keyboard instruments. In construction, it differs essentially from the ordinary harpsichord by the use of gut strings, a thinner case and soundboard, and much reduced damping. In sound, there is a concentration on the initial pluck of the string with little sustaining power beyond two or three notes. As an instrument, however, with two keyboards, three sets of strings and four sets of jacks—two of which pluck the shorter eight-foot strings at different points, there is the potential for a great variety of tone-colours. J S Bach is known to have owned two lute-harpsichords. Indeed, since there is no account of his having been able to play the lute, it is most likely that the six fairly substantial lute compositions by, or—in one case—attributed to him were written for the Lautenwerck.

This CD contains three suites as well as the Prelude, Fugue and Allegro and a transcription of the fugue from the first sonata for unaccompanied violin. All of them were composed by Bach, with the possible exception of the Suite in C minor BWV 997 and the fugue from the G minor unaccompanied violin sonata, which was transcribed by one of his pupils. Kim Heindel plays with a combination of rhythmic poise and subtle phrasing I have seldom heard on record, but I do have a few reservations. His typically moderate tempo, so effective in most cases, makes the Fuga from the C minor Suite drag and does not allow enough weight for the climactic pedal-points. Also, in the Fugue from the G minor unaccompanied violin sonata, one misses the dramatic double-stopping in the original. Finally, I am curious about the choice of Werckmeister III tuning, which is in my opinion least effective in the flat keys of a number

of pieces on the disc.

For me, the high points are the Suite in E minor BWV 996 and Bach's own transcription of the popular E major unaccompanied violin sonata (BWV 1006a). In the former I have never heard such lyrical pathos in the *Allemanda*, nor such grandeur in the *Sarabande*. In the latter, Mr Heindel shows all the nuances of dynamic and tone-colour unique to the Lautenwerck.

The recording is intimately close with no intrusive action noise. The booklet notes too, with a sensitive commentary by Nigel North and plenty of information about the instrument, are outstanding. In summary, this CD is a must for anyone interested in Bach's keyboard music. It certainly has given me as a harpsichordist new insights into possibilities in articulation even on the more typical instrument. It is not a disc to use as background music but one for careful, and for me increasingly enjoyable, listening.

JOHN HENRY

English Harpsichord Music of the 18th Century

Christine Sartoretti (hpd)

Timing: 56'20

Doron Music DRC 5002

This is a wonderful disc, full of playing that is fresh and bright, often elegant or virtuosic, never dull. The disc includes sonatas by Thomas Arne and Samuel Arnold: it is charmingly diverting music, by no means attempting profundity but having a kind of relaxed melodicness that is very appealing on first listening. It is a mark of the composers' success that it tends to remain so on repeated hearings. What is difficult about this music is to play it with enough grace without overburdening it with either mannerism or forced expression—indeed it requires an 18th-century sense of 'taste'. Sartoretti manages this seemingly effortlessly. Arne perhaps comes off slightly

better in this recording: the music, taken from his '8 Sonatas or Lessons for Harpsichord' of 1756, works wonderfully, with textures that suit the instrument perfectly.

Arnold's op. 10 sonatas date from 1775 and are from a collection entitled 'Sonatas for Harpsichord or pianoforte'. These are already more dramatic works, demanding the broader range of colour offered by instruments of the latter half of the century. Sartoretti responds to this with some effective choices of registration, for example in the 'Gracioso' from Sonata I in G major. This sonata's first movement ends with some extraordinary chromatic effects. The sonatas are much longer than those of Arne and reveal a clearly developed Classical structure. They are better suited to the fortepiano than the harpsichord in many ways—the left-hand octaves, the frequent changes of dynamics and texture—but Sartoretti's performance is nonetheless convincing and to hear the music on the harpsichord makes very clear the way composers changed their style to match the evolution of keyboard instruments at this time.

SÉBASTIEN DÉDIS

For two to play

Davitt Moroney and Olivier Baumont (hpd)

Timing: 64'02

Virgin Veritas VC 5 45019 2

Davitt Moroney and Olivier Baumont expound the delights of this deeply satisfying genre, using a harpsichord by Benoist Stehlin of 1750 and a copy by John Phillips of a Couchet virginal. Their recital comprises pieces by Tomkins, Nicholas Carleton, J C Bach, Samuel Wesley, Mozart and John Marsh, including his Handel transcriptions.

The playing is mostly facile and unmannered and there is a prevailing sense of space and narrative, which is important for textural clarity in this medium. The technical balance between the players is however sometimes uncomfortable and there are inconsistencies in phrasing, articulation and arpeggiation which result in a weakening of the musical gesture. Olivier Baumont does not quite match the eloquence and

precision of Davitt Moroney and there is a curious tendency in fast passages to slacken the pulse, as in the Duet no. 6 by Wesley, where stodgy finger-work breaks up the momentum. I also feel that the fast movements of the Bach *Duetti* are a shade too slow for there to be any sustainable buoyancy and sparkle.

The brilliance of the Stehlin harpsichord is thrilling in the two Handel transcriptions. 'The Grand Coronation Anthem' (*Zadok the Priest*) and 'The Grand Halleluiah [sic] in the Messiah' are given grandeur and weight, marred only slightly by momentary lapses of pace. The highlight of the recording for me is the early English music, played on the muselar virginals. Moroney's expressiveness comes to the fore here and there is an altogether happier ensemble. Tomkins's superb *A Fancy* 'for the vyalls' and *Fancy for two to play* are given just the right gravity and the echo effects in the latter are cleanly articulated. The first-rate recording quality is crisp and immediate yet warm.

PAMELA NASH

Per Cembalo Pleno

Douglas Amrine (pedal hpd)

Timing: 63'21

Priory PRCD 523

Pedal harpsichords and clavichords crop up with some frequency in documents from the 18th century: in North Germany they appear to have been domestic instruments, used for organ practice, and we know few details since no such original instruments survive. In recent years there have been several attempts to construct pedal harpsichords, and the one used in this recording is an instrument built by Colin Booth. It has a twenty-seven note pedal board, C–e' and foot 'stops' giving 16' and two 8' registers. The manual instrument placed on top is a copy of a Mietke also by Booth. The sound is bright and the pedal instrument is forthright—it adds depth and volume to the sound and of course it creates a much fuller texture than is possible with just two hands. As with the instruments themselves, no repertoire specifically intended for the pedal harpsichord exists, with the possible exception of Bach's C

minor Passacaglia, which in an unauthenticated 19th-century edition is marked for 'Cembalo ossia Organo': if this is the composer's own indication—which is doubtful—it would imply that the pedal harpsichord was in fact his first choice and the organ only secondary. Amrine here plays works by Bach originally for organ, and does not try making transcriptions of other harpsichord works. Some of the results are more successful than others. Curiously enough, the preludes and fugues which one might have supposed would be most appropriate do not really come off: they become bombastic and the busy pedal part when played on plucked strings seems to confuse rather than clarify the texture of the music.

Amrine is an organist as well as a harpsichordist, so the foot-work required is obviously well within his capabilities, yet the effect is disappointing. One of the problems is the noise generated by the pedals, which in fast music is most distracting. A pedal trill is a truly frightening experience. In slower tempi the noise is considerably reduced and the sound can then be exciting, as in the opening of the 'Dorian' Toccata and Fugue BWV 538. The instrument is recorded far too close so that every tap and bang comes across with disturbing clarity. I found myself longing for the passages without pedals in the 'St Anne' Fugue, so that there was some relief from the noise.

Amrine has apparently deliberately opted for fast tempi in order to overcome the problems of sustained pedal notes—a superb effect on the organ, and one of the ways Bach tested the 'lungs' of the instruments at his disposal, but one which does not transfer well to the pedal harpsichord. There are other ways of coping with this than playing the music faster, and perhaps Amrine would have been better advised to allow the pedal notes to speak for themselves at a more sedate tempo in order to save our nerves.

It should be a great experience to hear this all-too-rare instrument and I had hoped it would reveal new insights into the pieces performed: this recording however is a considerable disappointment. Buy it for curiosity-value only.

DECLAN DEUCHAR

Reissues 'From the Vault': Boston Skyline records

J S Bach: Partitas vols. 1 and 2

Ralph Kirkpatrick (hpd)

Timing vol. 1: 75'01; timing vol. 2: 74'25

Boston Skyline BSD 130 and BSD 132

J S Bach: The Goldberg Variations Seymour Hayden (hpd)

Timing: 47'35

Boston Skyline BSD 126

Scarlatti by Hayden:

13 Sonatas by D Scarlatti

Seymour Hayden (hpd)

Timing: 58'57

Boston Skyline BSD 112

A MERICAN record company Boston Skyline have begun the reissue of some of the most important recordings of the Early Music years. The catalogue is eclectic and there are some gems among the discs. These two by Seymour Hayden were very highly regarded when they appeared in the seventies and now reappear on CD, well remastered. Hayden started as a Mathematics professor before switching to music full-time in 1979. The Bach recording appeared in 1977 whilst he was still holding down two jobs: harpsichordist in what time he had spare from lecturing at Clark University or City College of New York.

It is a run of the Goldberg Variations entirely without repeats, which make for a rather short CD. The playing is generally confident—Var. 10 is certainly fast and furious—but there are too many occasions of technical insecurity for these to be satisfying versions of the piece: slight rushing or unevenness mars some of the faster variations and in particular nos. 26 and 28 suffer badly at times. Paradoxically, perhaps, more space would have helped the rhythmic effect and would have allowed the music time to breathe.

It is only in the slower variations that Hayden seems at ease. Var. 13 is played effectively and the melodic line on a bright 8' against buff for the accompaniment is given expressive shaping. I long for greater care with Bach's indications

of articulation since Hayden's unrelieved legato is rather tiring to the ear. Var. 25 is taken at an immensely slow pace, but fortunately the instrument can take it.

The registration is sometimes extraordinary. In var. 7 the right-hand part is played on a 4' stop and the left-hand on an 8'—which sounds mighty peculiar. The instrument, by Eric Herz, comes over very well: sweet-toned and even, with an excellent balance between the manuals. It copes even with the registration of this variation.

The Scarlatti recording received rave reviews when it first appeared in America: it is hard now to see quite why. Hayden studied with Kirkpatrick: his playing is clean and for the most part unmannered, but he takes few risks—his leaps are given a lot of time for safety—and there is a degree of predictability about much of the playing.

The sonatas are chosen well, with a wide range of moods and keys, without any attempt to impose an unnatural formality or spurious logic to the selection. It covers sonatas from both ends of the Kirkpatrick catalogue, ranging from no. 1 in D minor to no. 551 in B flat. K. 208 in A is given some very bizarre registration using both lute and buff stops and the buff in particular is recorded very close, giving an unrealistic tonal picture and allowing us to hear too much noise from the release of each note. This sonata is also played very slowly, which gives the music a haunting quality. Indeed, here as in the Bach, Hayden is at his best in slower music, which he performs with a relaxed tempo and a fluid sense of pulse. I am occasionally worried by his articulation, however—in some passages it is disturbing in its inconsistency, especially noticeable in octaves or sixths, where the degree of overlap in the legato is different in the two parts.

The final impression from both these discs is of a worthy but dull performance, enlivened by Hayden's at times idiosyncratic registration. In each case the booklet is brief and contains one or two inaccuracies—the first Partita is not in B major, for example, but B flat

major—which, though a minor irritation, are surely unnecessary in a reissue.

THE extraordinary and, as is of course now realized, inauthentic disposition of the so-called 'Bach' harpsichord with 8' and 16' on the lower manual and lighter 8' and 4' on the upper leads to some decidedly odd registrations, and the voicing of the instrument gives a strange effect to our ears nearly forty years after these recordings were made. Modern listeners are likely also to find equal temperament at $a' = 440$ sounds rather foreign. Despite these things, Ralph Kirkpatrick's 1958 recordings of the Partitas are classics of their kind, and continue to delight because of the quality of the playing.

Kirkpatrick advocated few changes of registration, which he restricted to the main structural points of each piece, and exploited differences of articulation instead to bring out the expressive qualities of the music. His fast movements are relaxed-sounding and the slower ones full of light and shade, even when using a big tone with 8' and 4'. He has a thoroughly reliable control in what is often technically demanding music. The clarity of thought behind the playing is what truly counts. Listen for example to the first movement of the C minor Partita on the second disc—in the second of the movement's three sections, Kirkpatrick's unfussy approach is perfectly illustrated: the tempo is just so, the instrument handled sensitively, the few ornaments are delicate and well placed.

In the Allemande of the G major on the first disc, Kirkpatrick does not even out the rhythm from dotted semiquaver-demisemiquaver to a triplet pattern, even where the two rhythms are simultaneous: this gives the music a strange jerkiness and is the only place where I feel uneasy with his playing in these works. The Gigue from this same Partita is however the highlight of the disc: Kirkpatrick plays with a refinement of rhythm from which many of today's players could learn a great deal.

AMY FOSTER

Plus que Tango

Elisabeth Chojnacka (hpd); Per Arne Glorvigen (bandoneon)

Timing: 59'22

Auvidis Valois V 4721

If a player decides to play one kind of music on an instrument for which it was not conceived (s)he must expect the results to be variable. In this disc the success of the translation is indifferent—in some cases there is a surprising and exciting match between the style and the instrument and in others it fails signally.

Tangos by Piazzolla and others played on the harpsichord have a relevance that is rather inspiring. The instrument by Anthony Sidey compares well with the bandoneon (a button accordion found frequently in S America): the contrast is good and in this recording at least they are well balanced.

Astor Piazzolla (1921–1992) is probably the greatest composer to have devoted himself to the tango. His music is certainly the highlight of the disc. These are arrangements: the remaining works are newly composed. Georges Beytelmann's *In Memoriam* uses the vigorous pulse of S American dance, overlaid with complex rhythms and harmonies. Yves Prin, who arranged Piazzolla's *La Mufa*, has contributed a 19½-minute work, also using bandoneon, called *Tango Fusion* which the booklet describes as encompassing 'wild cavalcades through infernal pampas, which suddenly give way to the familiar harmonic descents and landscapes we know'. The structure is very clearly articulated and the music ranges widely. The harpsichord texture is effective, often using single notes or two-part writing to contrast with thicker chords. The piece has a powerfully haunting quality.

Of the remaining pieces, by Maurice Ohana, Michael Nyman and Jean Wiener it is last that captures the imagination most keenly. Entitled *Tango du coiffeur*, it lasts only 1'42 and is charming and teasing as a kiss-curl.

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