

Harpsichord & fortepiano

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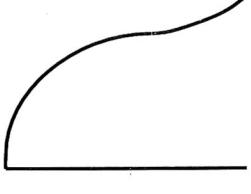
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TAIL ENDS

You are what you wear



The taxman still has difficulty accepting that the knee-levers on the fortepiano wear out my trousers so that I need a clothes allowance for concert giving. The whole subject of clothes for performing in is one that I have been thinking about a great deal lately, and I am sure that many of you have had to consider the same questions at one time or another.

I was at a concert the other day and the subject of the performer's dress came up: it was a harp recital and the young lady performing was wearing the most gorgeous satin gown with big sleeves—a bit hot for the summer, I thought, but nonetheless a wonderful creation. My companion commented that you almost never see a harpsichordist performing in anything like that, and after a moment's reflection I had to agree, but I could not really think why.

For a man, white tie and tails seems somehow wrong, an anachronism: because it is standard concert dress you have to wear it a lot of the time, as the continuo player, for example, but it feels almost as out of place as would a pair of jeans and a tee-shirt. You could try a mock eighteenth-century costume, with wig and a big-sleeved coat, but apart from the fact that the wig is unbearable and keeps threatening to slip over one eye—believe me, I have tried it—the sleeves are a liability. It is far too easy to catch a corner of those huge cuffs on the keys if you make a movement that is a trifle over-vigorous. Was this the real reason for 'early fingering'—the avoidance of any arm movement that might prove not only unseemly but also musically dangerous? At least gentlemen usually removed their swords before playing: just imagine what chaos might otherwise ensue, with your basket-hilt stuck between the floor and the keyboard, or the point jabbing the leg of the violist behind you.

For the fortepiano Melvyn Tan has developed a style of dress that mixes the contemporary with the old: he has a shirt copied from one worn by Weber and wears it with designer jackets and trousers. He is very slim and can carry it off. With the size of my waist (which I am *not* about to reveal) even the most generous designer would have a job fitting me.

The ladies should not have such a problem with dresses—after all, you can copy an old style and look fashionable at the same time. The vogue for top and skirt or—horrors!—trousers can seem peculiar, however, when you are listening to Couperin, which is all flounces and frills. Whilst the dress and the music should perhaps have some kind of correlation, the main problem with dresses is matching the paintwork on the instrument. A good many instruments are decorated with quite bright colours and there is a danger that your dress will clash with the instrument on which you are playing—especially if you are not carting your own harpsichord around with you. One harpsichordist friend of mine overcomes this problem by wearing what she calls her 'old gold'. It looks fabulous up against both a highly decorated Couchet-Taskin and a plain Italian—I mean the instrument, not the Latin gentleman, naturally.

We have thankfully got away from the image of the early muso as a wearer of batik kaftans and peep-toed sandals, but the clothes we wear still give pause for thought. I shall have to go on searching for the perfect concert costume, but in the meantime I shall just go back to practising in my jogging pants and rugby shirt and to hell with it!

JACKSON AMERS

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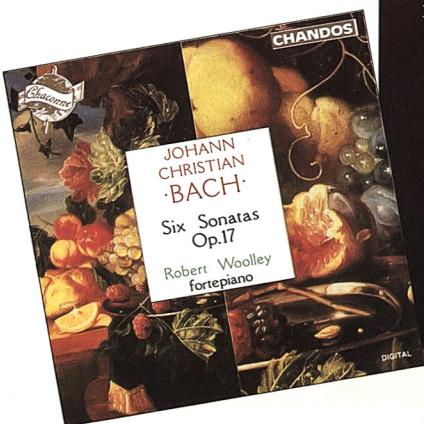
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