

Harpsichord & fortepiano

Vol. 6, No. 1 May, 1997

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Musical Instrument Research Catalog
(MIRCat)

Egarr, to please

ALISON HOLLOWAY

Richard Egarr, for five years harpsichordist with London Baroque, has now left the group for pastures new. His final two recordings with the group, both of music by the Bach family, feature important parts for both the harpsichord and the fortepiano. I met up with Richard in London last October to talk about these two discs, his career to date and his plans for the future.

RICHARD EGARR describes himself as a product of the 'chorister-organ scholar' route of musical training. He was born in Lincoln and lived in Lincolnshire until the age of eight, when he became a chorister at York Minster. To this experience he attributes the foundation of his keyboard, especially continuo, playing: it provided him with an excellent training in harmony, listening as he did for three or four hours a day to a wide variety of music. This early development of his knowledge and understanding of harmony was followed by six years at Chetham's, where he studied piano and flute. He subsequently took up the organ which 'became' his priority: he was 'pushed' in the direction of an Oxbridge future, and to that end spent his last two years at Chetham's as an organ scholar at Manchester. Once at Clare College, Cambridge, he spent three years as an organ scholar and one studying for his MusB.

After such careful cultivation as an organist it was at Cambridge that Richard began his involvement with early music. There happened to be a harpsichord in Clare College Chapel and in an environment in which experimentation flourished, talented musicians were thrown together and venues not unplentiful, Richard became part of what was, for him, 'a great place for student music'.

At Cambridge he began playing with Andrew Manze (violin), Robert Ehrlich (recorder) and Mark Levy (gamba); they called themselves 'Cambridge Musick' and still occasionally work together, sometimes as a group and sometimes in other ensembles. It was at Cambridge that Richard and friends were heard by Marie Leonhardt, who encouraged them and suggested that they go to Holland to study. However Richard moved to the Guildhall for a year and studied under David Roblou, a 'butch' player exceptional amongst the musicians of his generation in believing that the harpsichord should have an impact, 'make a noise'.

Marie Leonhardt's advice had not gone unheeded, however, and in 1987 Cambridge Musick — the whole group — set off for Holland for a year's study. For Richard this meant both individual tuition with Gustav Leonhardt, and group tuition with the other members of Cambridge Musick, also under Leonhardt.

On his return to England in 1988 Richard went to Bryanston School in Dorset to teach the organ. During the two years that he worked there he did not break his links with Holland; he continued to play there, and in 1990 married the baroque violinist Mimi Mitchell, an American who had also settled there. It was in the following year that he began his fruitful association with London Baroque which ends with their two most recent discs.

London Baroque and the Bach family

LONDON BAROQUE have had a long association with the family of J.S. Bach, searching out little-known works by his sons and grandsons as far down the line as W.F.E. Bach, a contemporary of Beethoven, who died in 1841. In fact the discovery of 'new' music and the preparation of their own editions might easily be mistaken for London Baroque's *raison d'être*. Before they made their own editions of the three harpsichord concertos by J.S. Bach's eldest son, Wilhelm Friedemann, which they subsequently recorded, their director and cellist Charles Medlam first searched out the unpublished manuscripts and then transferred them onto computer. Charles similarly acquired microfilm copies of trio sonatas by one of J.S. Bach's younger sons, Johann Christoph Friedrich, which violinist Richard Gwilt made into computer scores. In the sonata in G major for cello and piano, which could only be found in a 1905 edition in the key of D, they used the computer to instantly transpose the available score both up a fifth (to A) and down a fifth (to G) before settling on the latter. The tessitura on the keyboard 'felt right' in G, whereas the key of A



posed fingering difficulties for both the cello and piano. It was clear that in the 1905 edition the original key had been raised, according to the taste of the day, in order to show off the cello at the top of the fingerboard: the 'Tchaikovsky sound'.

'Crazy but brilliant'

WILHELM FRIEDEMANN was trained as a keyboard player by his father, who wrote 'The 48' for him. His great ability as a performer cannot be doubted; Johann Sebastian's organ trios, which were also written for Wilhelm Friedemann, are still amongst the most difficult works for keyboard, and Richard Egarr suspects that Johann Sebastian's big d minor concerto was also written to show off his son's talent. Richard can only conclude that Johann Sebastian 'must have been a fantastic teacher'. I asked him whether he could see Wilhelm Friedemann's intimacy with the keyboard, as a performer, reflected in his writing for the instrument, and he answered without

hesitation that Wilhelm Friedemann was for him 'a very special composer... very different'. His keyboard parts are always full of energy and he was clearly fond of display: bits that sound easy — often runs of semiquavers — involve a lot of crossing which is very visual, very 'show-off'. This, Richard feels, is Wilhelm Friedemann's character: 'a rogue... crazy but brilliant', with whom he connects on some level. As a performer he recognises the concertos as 'top quality music'.

Like those by his father, Wilhelm Friedemann's concertos almost certainly included another continuo instrument as well as the solo harpsichord part. Surviving letters tell us that the father and son — who were very fond of each other — often played together on two harpsichords, reinforced by two lutes. In Wilhelm Friedemann's concerto in D major, which has been compared to his father's, the interplay between the viola and the keyboard in the first movement certainly gives the keyboard a place in the limelight. The links between the two composers are close; whereas his younger brothers, J.C. Bach and C.P.E. Bach, discovered their own voice, Wilhelm Friedemann's musical style remains closer to their father's although hints of C.P.E. Bach's *fantasia* style, with its sudden effects, can still be found.

'Go with what it has to offer'

THE TRIO SONATAS by Johann Christoph Friedrich are, by contrast, early classical in style. I asked Richard why London Baroque had chosen to record this particular member of the Bach family, who is receiving rather poor press in musicological literature at the moment. He told me that while he has played some 'dreadful music' by J.C.F. Bach — 'lightweight' — these sonatas stood out as very good amongst pieces of the same style that were 'very bad'. He described how they 'hang together beautifully... light style... nice colours'. Of the sonatas on the present disc, three are performed with harpsichord and two with fortepiano. The latter are late works, in a late style, and seemed to demand a Stein-like instrument; London Baroque chose to perform it with a very early Nanette Streicher (Stein's daughter) of about 1795–1800, a little later in date than the sonatas but of a design that was very old-fashioned for its time. The instrument was thus chosen to suit

the repertoire and to create the gradation of tone and colour that the composer would have expected to hear from it.

Primarily a harpsichordist thus far in his career, is the transition to the fortepiano a different experience for him than it might be, say, for a modern pianist? Richard told me that he has never, in fact, stopped playing the piano; he plays several historic instruments and now owns a Pleyel of 1848 which is being restored. The technique is the same for different keyboard instruments, and good keyboard technique is always transferable. However he believes that it is important to be sensitive to the instrument one is playing — to 'go with what it has to offer' — and experience of the harpsichord is very useful in developing this sensitivity, particularly on original instruments which tend to be more lively and responsive than modern copies.

'Disciplined chaos'

STYLE, ON THE other hand, can be very different indeed. As J.C.F. Bach moved from the harpsichord to the fortepiano he wrote out the keyboard part in full, rather than leaving it to the player to improvise as Richard Egarr is so used to doing. Continuo parts were never completely fixed and performers were expected to improvise their own cadenzas, as Richard does in the first movement of W.F. Bach's concerto in F major. Not that the continuo simply provided a background for other parts: on the contrary, the baroque view was that the continuo was the soul of the ensemble, certainly as important as the other instruments and perhaps even more so, both providing support and making a positive contribution. As Richard says, 'the treble is dispensable but the bass never is'.

Richard particularly enjoys continuo playing and the opportunities for creativity which it provides. With knowledge of harmony as the starting point, the player is faced with the different characters of different composers who leave clues in their music — in the way the hands work, the interest in sonorities — about how the continuo part might have been envisaged. There is opportunity for dialogue with the other parts, even antagonism, as in the 17th century Italian repertoire where the harpsichord maintains a separate voice. Similarly, in the Handel sonatas for *flauto e cembalo* there is certainly no latitude for the recorder to take over. With a wholly figured bass and no score it can be — as Richard

exuberantly describes his recent experience of performing Vivaldi's *Four Seasons* with Simon Rattle — 'disciplined chaos'.

Going solo

RICHARD HAS plenty of opportunity for disciplined chaos as well as solo work. Apart from his recordings with London Baroque, Richard has made several discs with the Dutch label Globe which was formed in the late 1980s. Between 1992 and 1994 he recorded the complete keyboard works of Froberger, played on two harpsichords and a 17th-century organ at Cuijk in the Netherlands (8 discs). Other recent recordings include the Handel sonatas with Cambridge Musick, Louis Couperin and English 17th-century composers such as Blow, Locke and Purcell. Most recently he has worked on a recording of early Bach pieces (Globe) and on 'popular' Bach including the Italian Concerto, the 3rd French Suite and Partita (EMI). Future plans include the complete Mozart sonatas (Globe) performed on the clavichord and a variety of other keyboard instruments. Richard himself owns a copy of a double-manual Ruckers harpsichord made by the American Joel Katzman, who is also based in Amsterdam, and a single-manual Italian style harpsichord after Giusti (8' + 4'), by Titus Crijnen, which was made for the Froberger project.

Richard left London Baroque in early 1996. It was a time of change in the group: Ingrid Seifert, violinist, was also leaving in order to look after her children. He, too, had begun to feel the strain of a demanding performance schedule which entailed 60-70 concerts a year including a major concert tour in either Japan or the USA. Nevertheless he describes his time with the group as 'a very privileged life', devoted as it was to playing chamber music with 'great people'. Now, with a little more time for home life in Amsterdam, Richard spreads himself between Holland, Germany and Britain performing both chamber music and solo work on the harpsichord, fortepiano and organ.

Having talked with Richard and heard him several times in concert I am left with the impression that, whatever music comes his way, Richard will leave upon it the mark of his own unquenchable wit, charm and intelligence.

London Baroque's recent recordings of works by W.F. and J.C.F. Bach are reviewed in this issue.