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An American in Paris

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One fresh winter day last December I descended into the restaurant beneath the Wigmore Hall to meet the harpsichordist Kenneth Weiss, late of Les Arts Florissants and here in London to give a performance of Bach's Goldberg Variations *that same evening. In the couple of hours before his afternoon rehearsal I asked him about his career: how he came to play the harpsichord in the first place, why he had moved to France, and his solo and chamber work after leaving Les Arts Florissants.*

KENNETH WEISS grew up in New York and from the age of thirteen he attended the High School of Performing Arts. Here he studied the piano, as his first instrument, and the cello, as his second. Anyone who has seen the film *Fame*, which features the school, may not realise that they have already seen Kenneth Weiss as a cellist in the school orchestra! He was, however, primarily a student of the piano, and it was a curiosity in the 'predecessors' of that instrument which first awoke his interest in the harpsichord while he was still at school. In New York in the late 1970s the early music movement had not yet become established and musical taste was still largely dominated by the cultural influence of Europeans who had emigrated there in the 19th and 20th centuries; thus Kenneth did not have access to a harpsichord and only began to become aware of the repertoire through his piano teacher, who introduced him to the works of Bach.

It was a growing interest in the harpsichord — perhaps fuelled, as he describes, by an 'air of rebellion' against his piano teacher — which led Kenneth to enrol at the Oberlin Conservatory of Music, Ohio, in 1980. Here, as a harpsichord minor in the large Early Music Department, he discovered some of the keyboard music which had been composed up to two centuries before Bach. At first it was the repertoire which fascinated him rather than the instrument: it was as if, he says, 'you had grown up with nothing before Rachmaninov and suddenly discovered Bach to Chopin'. With the repertoire as his inspiration he took the time, both in practice and in listening, that was necessary to learn the instrument. Oberlin also provided opportunities for chamber music playing. His teacher, at that time, was the harpsichord itself: its sonority, its capability. Kenneth switched his major to the harpsichord and gained his diploma in 1985.

On leaving Oberlin, Kenneth won a scholarship to study in Holland with Gustav Leonhardt and Tom Koopman. Here he stayed for two and a half years. Leonhardt took the minimum number of students — four — and was therefore generous with his time, giving two-and-a-half to three hour lessons on a one-to-one basis, as well as masterclasses.

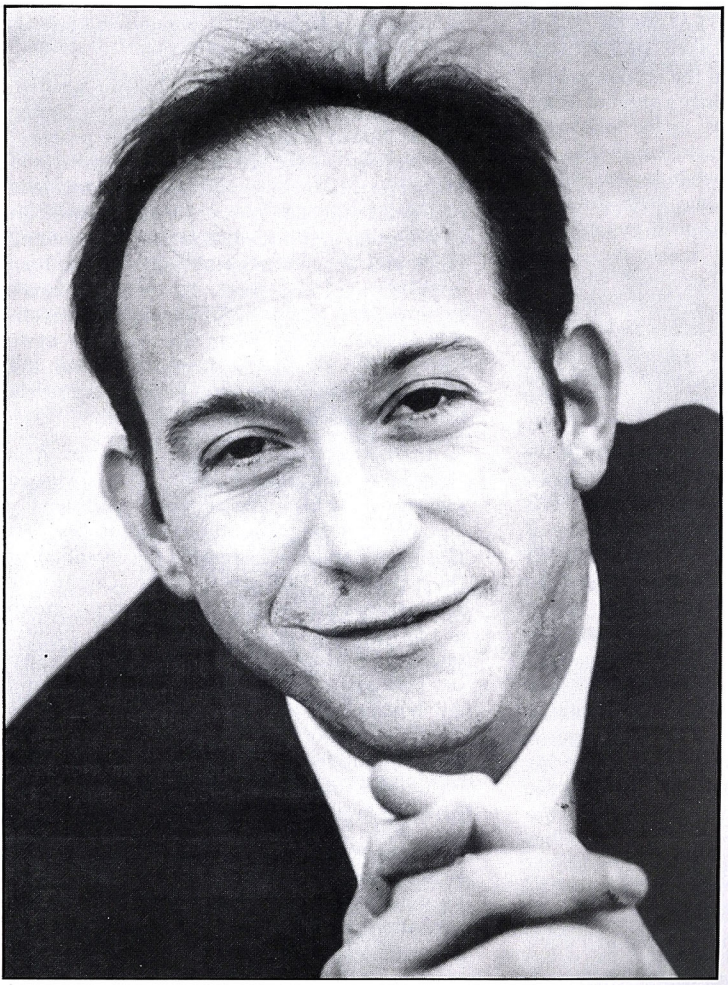
After finishing his studies in Holland Kenneth had a choice: should he return to the United States? Take a degree in performance practice? Go to music college? He felt that the pursuit of further qualifications would not necessarily lead him in the direction of a professional career as a performer, and it seemed to him that nothing much was happening in the States at that time in the world of early music. By 1987 early music in Europe was, by comparison, very well-established, although correspondingly more competitive. He had relatives in France and decided to move there for a year, learn French, give piano lessons... and 'just stayed'.

Kenneth's first performance with Les Arts Florissants took place in 1987. As a keyboard player making his living in Paris he occasionally accompanied singers auditioning for Les Arts Florissants and thus came to the attention of their director, William Christie. Christophe Rousset was the harpsichordist with the group at the time and, on an occasion when he was unable to perform, Kenneth was asked to step in. Two years later he was asked back and subsequently worked with the group continuously for the next three or four years. They made several recordings together, including Rameau's *Castor et Pollux* — Kenneth's personal favourite.

Working with Les Arts Florissants provided Kenneth with his first real experience of continuo playing, in which he had received no real education previously. As the harpsichord had been his teacher in the solo repertoire, so he was guided by his knowledge and

understanding of the instrument in working with the figured bass. He believes the only way to really learn how to play continuo is by experience and imagination; the player should be liberated by the absence of notation rather than confused by it, should feel the instrument as an extension of the self. Because of this it is difficult to teach. Style, of course, depends on the type of music being played, and on the ornamentation characteristic of the period to which it belongs, for which information about realisation is available. But, in the end, providing harmonic support for others relies on maturity with the instrument, selflessness, and the willingness to leave your options open, "probably as 17th- and 18th-century players did". In order to retain that essential spontaneity Kenneth never writes down his accompaniment, except in recordings where a greater degree of predictability is necessary. When he feels he has worked on and arrived at 'the way' with a piece, he will probably stick to it, but no performance will ever be exactly like another: especially in recitative, where so much depends on the individual singer. Kenneth finds this freedom particularly satisfying.

Since his work with Les Arts Florissants Kenneth has developed his interest in the historic piano, with particular reference to the French Regency salon of the 19th century. He has carried out research into the salon of the 1830s and 1840s, in which concerts for elite gatherings combined highbrow works by Austrian composers with light entertainment in the form of 'romances'. Pieces by contemporary composers such as Meyerbeer and Cherubino were performed alongside interpretations of works by 17th- and 18th-century composers such as Durante and Steffani, in which the figured bass was realised in the taste of the early 19th century. The work of earlier periods was thus republished expressly for salon use. It was the first time in France that music had looked back upon itself and, by adapting earlier works to the taste of the time, musicians 'put a spin on what's authentic'. Programmes were long — often two or three hours — and very mixed, featuring the likes of Lully together with Rossini and Beethoven, virtuoso players with child prodigies.



Kenneth now plays the piano in his own ensemble, Le Salon, of which he is director: he chooses from a Parisian Erard of the 1830s, a Pleyel, and a Viennese instrument of the 1820s by Angst. He has found

it a stimulating experience. The piano has been through so many more changes, and more quickly, than the harpsichord — in terms of action, mechanisms to produce greater velocity, improved sound production, more notes, bigger cases — that it can be difficult to stay on top of the differences between all the instruments that may have been in use in a particular composer's lifetime. Thus in looking to the instrument as teacher, which is Kenneth's way, it can be a challenge to find the one that holds the key to the method of sound production intended by the composer. When he does, he can take what he has learned from it and apply it to another instrument. In this respect his approach to the harpsichord and to the piano is the same.

While he makes use of several different historical instruments for performance and recording, Kenneth's own instruments are a copy of a Coenen/Ruckers type harpsichord by the American maker Bruce Kennedy, and a modern piano. He has yet to settle on a historical piano of his own and at the moment is inclining in the direction of the Viennese sound, with its distinctive action and suitability for a large repertoire. On the question of surviving original instruments he feels that it is important to cherish a few for study: to use them for practice would be 'unfair', but they should be made available for players to learn from them. He is adamant that a good performance, whether on an original instrument or not, must be historically aware. By this he means that the style of playing should be both enhanced by the knowledge which only an original instrument can give, and guided by the same intention as that of the 'original' player: in other words, the desire to give a good performance.

To the *Goldberg Variations*, which Kenneth was preparing to perform at the Wigmore Hall that evening, he brings a personal approach. Performing the *Variations* in public is a unique experience, coloured as its reception must be by the received listenings of historic interpretations by performers such as Glenn Gould. It is the one part of the solo repertoire that nearly every listener can claim to know how it 'should' sound. Comments such as: "It was fine apart from Variation 6, which you got wrong", and "I checked your Variation 14 with the Glenn Gould recording, and yes, you took it too fast" are possible here where they are not for many other works. In making his own recording of the *Variations* in 1995, his first solo recording, Kenneth avoided being influenced by the interpretations of others; further, he describes it as a work of such magnitude that it is impossible for one player to imitate another: 'you're on your own with it — on the line'. Playing the *Variations* is, for him, a joy and a liberating experience.

So, I asked him, after the *Goldberg Variations* at the Wigmore Hall, what next? He continues to work with Le Salon, with whom he would like to record, and to tour with the Trisha Brown Company performing M.O., a modern ballet on Bach's *Musical Offering* of which he is musical director. When he is not performing he teaches at the Paris Conservatoire and abroad. Giving masterclasses to musicians in places which are relatively isolated from Europe, such as Norway and Israel, he has been struck by their love and appreciation of early music. He has found it exciting to meet young talented musicians, to be "exposed to passionate people".

After talking to Kenneth Weiss, I could say the same.

The Goldberg Variations *by Kenneth Weiss is available on Empreinte Digitale distributed by Harmonia Mundi (ED13065 HMCD90).*