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A Performance Practice for the 21st Century

Pamela Nash interviews harpsichordist Jane Chapman
Part One

AS WE MOVE towards the millennium, a growing number of players and composers throughout the world are pioneering more and more new contexts for harpsichord performance. Jane Chapman is one of the champions of the genre; her progressive spirit and comprehensive technique have inspired composers to forge new parameters and sound worlds for the harpsichord with works of unprecedented musical and technological scope. She is passionate about the harpsichord's contemporary capacities, and about the need to subvert the typecasting of its conventional image.

Some may see her rôle as the antithesis of the authenticity movement, but she holds that essential harpsichord traditions are alive and well in everything she does. Raised in formal piano and harpsichord disciplines as well as jazz idioms, Jane believes that diverse musical elements are interconnective and complementary and that they can fuse together to form one artistic identity. She demonstrates this, not just through contemporary works, but in her mixed programmes where she juxtaposes the baroque and the avant-garde, exploring the parallels between them.

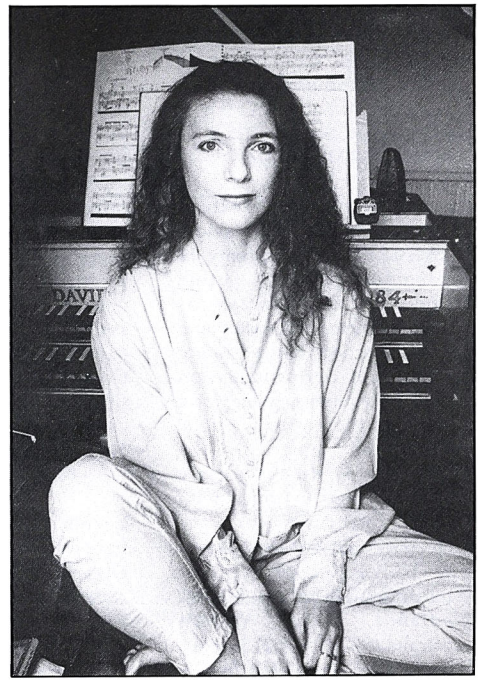
In my interview with Jane I find out more about her philosophy and discover the qualities that have helped establish her, not only on the harpsichord map but on the contemporary music stage as well.

Making the harpsichord come alive

We arrange to meet one Spring afternoon at Jane's home in west London. Brimming with life and bonhomie and looking rather theatrical in a cloak of flowered silk, she plies me with hot cross buns before settling cross-legged on her studio floor. Jane's Rubio harpsichord and square piano nestle among the oriental rugs and artifacts and the room seems to reflect her eclectic spirit.

She talks as one completely absorbed in her subject but with a no-nonsense directness. The main thrust of her musical thinking soon becomes clear. "To make the harpsichord come alive" is an expression she returns to again and again as she describes her calling to open people's minds to the harpsichord and to contemporary music. She is quick to point out that she is not flying in the face of baroque tradition. Indeed, there is now a fashion of harpsichordists like herself playing new music on the historical instrument and who are coming from the baroque perspective. "The great significance of our performance practice lies in how much baroque training has influenced it: how one learns to make the harpsichord come to life, and how the historical instrument itself *makes* you play, regardless of musical style."

We return to this later, but I first wanted to know what it's like to be Britain's only 'full-



time' contemporary harpsichordist. Is there perhaps a danger of being seen simply as a maverick — flying some sort of flag for the cause of new music on old instruments — rather than as a musician like anyone else, playing the music she loves on her chosen instrument? "Perhaps, but I don't see it like that because I don't think of the harpsichord as an old instrument: it's simply an instrument! And I see myself not so much as a harpsichordist but as a musician. I also see it as a duty to bring the harpsichord to the public in new ways. I want to break down the preconceptions, and dissolve the straitjackets!

"It's so easy to pigeon-hole contemporary music especially on an instrument such as the harpsichord which is still seen as rather one-dimensional and lacking in expression. People assume that contemporary music all sounds the same and that it's just one big cliché — the old 'squeaky gate' syndrome. But there are as many different styles as there are in mainstream repertoire, and composers today are able to enjoy an incredible diversity and variety of approaches to their art."

She is also determined to open people's ears to baroque music in different ways. "I like to challenge expectations. It's sometimes good to avoid the standard repertoire by choosing pieces which are a bit fantastical: for instance, Royer's *Marche des Scythes* or *Vertigo* or the Handel transcription *Vo far guerra* from *Rinaldo.* These pieces also reveal the harpsichord in ways that people aren't used to. I once had a review which said of the Handel piece that the harpsichord sounded like a bellowing monster; although it was intended as a criticism, I thought it was great because it should sound like that sometimes!"

Two worlds

Does she feel caught between two worlds: sometimes operating outside the tradition of harpsichord performance practice, and other times within it? She claims with disarming confidence that she never finds it conflicting to switch back and forth — but adds that there is sometimes a problem with audience. "It's very rare to find people who are interested in both fields. Followers of baroque music are aficionados — they know what they're going to hear, while contemporary audiences are often hearing music for the first time.

"It also depends where you are playing. At the ICA for instance, you know they are all going to be on the edge of their seats raring to go, whereas in the more rarefied atmosphere of a Contemporary Music Festival there's a more hard-core political element. Audiences often feel passionately about a particular contemporary style and can see you the performer as selling out or betraying the cause by choosing to play a work by someone of a different camp. This also brings to mind a friend of mine who adores anything up to J.S. Bach, but as soon as the 18th century French repertoire is mentioned, he cringes with horror!"

She relishes the challenge of mixing old and new repertoire together, but cites the prejudice factor again. "People assume they aren't going to like the contemporary side, while others are only there to hear the new stuff. I remember one particular concert I gave where the first half was baroque and the second half contemporary. The front row were the contemporary crowd — practically asleep in the first half and bouncing up and down in the second."

Playing with expectations

I suggest that by casting it against type, one is making the harpsichord more accepted into the mainstream for the contemporary audience — you're not just these funny people trying to renovate the past! More significantly, modern harpsichord music is often a complete revelation to the ordinary listener — there are always new converts who will want to know more about the music and the instrument. Jane describes how successful radio is in this respect, having recorded several mixed programmes for broadcast. Her recent Radio 3 recital of both 18th and 20th century music received great acclaim, inspiring letters from listeners who were particularly enthusiastic about the most off-the-wall pieces in the programme. She believes that the surprise factor is the key; "the radio audience has less preconception when taken unawares and tends to be more receptive".

Another Radio 3 spot, *Intersections,* was broadcast in May. "I was asked to put together a programme of new and baroque works with tangible, though not overt connections. I chose pieces which had some formal relationship or similar sort of energy: the Scarlatti *Sonata in a minor K175* and *Conga* by Maurice Ohana, which both use crush chords; *Prélude à l'Imitation de M Froberger* by Louis Couperin and Simon Emmerson's *Points of Departure,* which takes its musical and notational inspiration from the unmeasured prelude genre; Rossi's chromatic and dissonant *Toccata No.7* and Mike Vaughan's toccata-like *Tiento* which plays virtuosically on chromaticism and baroque techniques like ornamentation."

Jane delights in finding those combinations and juxtapositions that will most excite the audience's imagination. She likes to create a sense of theatre — to relax the audience in one way, wind them up in another, and to play with their expectations. "When I do a contemporary recital, I want to bring new influences to people and juxtapose a lot of different styles." With a wry smile she again draws the bottom line: "You have to make the harpsichord come alive to the audience, and that's a way of doing it — although a lot of new music purists may not like it!

"I also see the electro-acoustic field as a way of extending the instrument's range and of bringing it to life in different ways, even doing solo acoustic pieces with very slight amplification. It's quite nice to start with a piece which explores a certain acoustic aspect of the instrument, and then gradually open up its sound through the different material; that way of structuring a programme is very interesting."

Jane's recent Purcell Room concert exemplified this approach. She used all the sound possibilities of the harpsichord: acoustic, electro-acoustic, and live electronics both with and without tape. New sound elements were created, such as playing chimes together with the harpsichord. She also contrasted very soft and delicate pieces with new complexity works which she describes as "sheer unbridled power and energy".

The here and now

This eclectic approach to the harpsichord has grown out of the diverse influences of her early years. Both her father and grandfather were clarinettists and she gained a wide experience of repertoire as well as early professional exposure as her father's accompanist. The family were also interested in jazz and Indian music and she later went on to study sitar, jazz and harpsichord at Dartington — "the sort of place where nothing was pigeon-holed" — before her most formative studies with Ton Koopman. "The great thing about learning with Koopman was that he never imposed his style on you, whereas some great players turn out people who are watered-down versions of themselves, because of the way they teach." She subsidised her harpsichord lessons by singing jazz in the clubs and bars of Amsterdam; indeed, she finds a kind of correlation between singing and harpsichord-playing — "in imagination and in flexibility of performance". Always stimulated by the 'here and now' in music, Jane began investigating the music of her contemporaries, encouraged initially by people like Mike Vaughan and Jim Fulkerson. Ruth Dyson and Robert Woolley — Jane's teachers at the RCM — were also "extremely supportive". Her involvement deepened with her first commission in Nottingham University's New Music Series, and now, ten years later, she has several commissions on her hands at any one time.

But although this development of her musical personality has taken an unusual route, setting her apart from the harpsichord norm, it doesn't explain why more performers haven't explored the new repertoire. And despite the current shift toward a more permissive atmosphere in the musical world, the idea of using baroque instruments for modern music is still viewed as a kind of hybridized form of music-making. She observes: "There are more and more 'authentic' performers adding contemporary pieces to their baroque programmes, but I suspect they are playing it safe — dabbling in it rather than wholly embracing it."

Different sort of concentration

Until recently the early music movement has essentially been polarised from the contemporary aesthetic. I point out that in the 1970s there was more elitism but fewer virtuosos, and still fewer doing modern repertoire. Is there perhaps a correlation here, in that the technical factor of 20th century music has alienated players from the start? "Perhaps. The biggest misunderstanding is when people assume that it's unapproachable. It's not! This may come as a surprise, but I honestly don't think contemporary music *per se* is harder to do! Yes, there are more pieces in the baroque repertoire which may not be so technically demanding, but there are also some which are mindbogglingly formidable. I would be more scared in one way of playing an extended fugue or a particular Scarlatti sonata than of doing a new complexity piece; it requires a different sort of concentration and precision, coupled with the exposed nature of the harpsichord itself."

I put it to her that there's another side to this question. With contemporary music, the player has to be open to anything; to embrace the composer's style and agenda which has no direct relationship to the past. I argue that it doesn't necessarily allow for the fundamentals of harpsichord technique, or the same kinds of artistic freedoms as early music does — freedom with time for instance: with the measure, noteholding, inégale and rubato etc. "It's very interesting, because I count those things as basic

to any playing of any music — the way of making the harpsichord sing, the way of giving direction to a phrase, the way of making the music move. If you put a pianist onto the harpsichord they might have wonderful piano skills but it would be stagnant — those notions don't exist for them so they have to make the music work in another way. So I think there is a parallel approach to contemporary repertoire, and I try to bring my baroque musicianship to everything I do. Also, some composers do give you that flexibility in their writing."

But what about those composers who don't — those pieces which, whether by design or accident, are not idiomatic or characteristic in their treatment of the harpsichord and which seem to require more of a generic keyboard approach as opposed to harpsichord technique? I ask Jane what she can bring to the interpretation of this music that a pianist can't? For example, with new complexity pieces such as *Birl* by James Dillon or Ferneyhough's music where it's very fast or very complex, is there really any time to think about the control or release of the key, or about nuance of phrasing?

"Again I would say that you use harpsichord technique in those pieces too. Yes, the notes do go by too fast sometimes, but even if I'm playing a new complexity piece, I try to give it shape and form and dynamics — to generate some kind of energy. Those shapings are what you create *through* harpsichord touch. You know how to make the instrument speak in order to make the composer's ideas successful. Even with Ferneyhough, in spite of his method of notation which looks terribly exacting, it still needs nuance and lightness of touch. And with Birl, although it's electrically fast, deftness and lightness of touch are absolutely essential. It's impossible to play it pianistically — with a lot of armweight for instance — as you lose the vivacity and the 'flight' of it."

Ligeti himself implies a weightless technique when he writes of *Continuum*: "The potential of the harpsichord for playing even faster than the piano is considerable — extreme velocity, extreme lightness of touch, a rapidity that makes the notes blend together so that a *prestissimo* dash is transformed into stasis. Everything, as it were, lies in the fingers. I composed the notes so they would sort of come out of the fingers."

It is also of interest to note here that Ligeti, who is of course originally of the 'revival' pedal harpsichord age, has recently endorsed the use of a traditional Franco-Flemish five-octave Double for *Continuum* which may be played without any change of registration.

Looking beyond the notation

When approaching a new score, there is often a need to look 'beyond' the notation of the music in order to make it work on the harpsichord. Elizabeth Chojnacka writes on this subject in the harpsichord issue of *Contemporary Music Review*. She rethinks the way a composer has phrased the music for example, mainly because the standard 19th century piano way of notating and conceiving phrase lengths simply doesn't work on the harpsichord. Chojnacka cites *Hungarian Rock* as an example to show that you actually don't follow the long lines that Ligeti uses to depict certain phrases, and that you break it up considerably to put across the composer's intentions.

I ask Jane about her own approach to the notation. She explains how she looks at patterns and shapes in the music to try to create an overall phrase or structure; dividing it up to make it interesting, and thinking always about punctuation and breath. "It involves very careful use of different kinds of articulation to do this, and to create an illusion of dynamics or sense of direction. You are constantly analysing the music to those ends."

Jane also reveals how she learns a particularly difficult new score: "You often find that something which might look extremely difficult isn't necessarily so. With the new complexity stuff, for example, I think in terms of gestures so I can capture it in my mind, then break it down and practise it very slowly. You must be absolutely sure of your fingerings. For something that's incredibly difficult, you have to have aiming points; you concentrate more on those things which will stand out to the listener."

I suggest that because of its sheer scale and pace, this kind of learning must in some way change one's playing. "It can change your playing of *other* keyboard genres — make it almost lazy in some ways, because you are aiming for the notes all the time, as opposed to, say, a Bach piece where you know you are definitely going to get them! You have to balance your learning by going back to early repertoire, otherwise your playing would inevitably lose a kind of precision, and precision is what the harpsichord is all about, enabling it to be a truly expressive instrument."

***Pamela Nash** is an award-winning harpsichordist with an interest in baroque and contemporary music.* *Part Two of her interview with Jane Chapman will appear in the next issue of Harpsichord & Fortepiano.*