

# Harpsichord & fortepiano

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# Isolde Ahlgrimm and Vienna's Historic Keyboard Revival

Peter Watchorn re-assesses Ahlgrimm's importance in the early music revival

THE LATE 1980s witnessed the publication of a number of books which attempt to chart the history of the twentieth century early music revival. The movement dedicated to researching and presenting the music and performance practices of previous historical periods is now itself the subject of historical research. Such works as *The Early Music Revival — A History* (Thames & Hudson, London, 1988) by the American critic and writer, Harry Haskell, deal in considerable detail with the story of the revival, from its first stirrings in the early 19th century, through to the latest developments of the 1980s. Haskell's work covers a very wide field: in addition to documenting the major figures involved in all areas of the early music revival, the author attempts a description of its evolution in each of the major countries involved.

Looming large in Haskell's text are the figures of Wanda Landowska and Arnold Dolmetsch, and later, Nikolaus Harnoncourt and Gustav Leonhardt. In the chapter entitled *The Early Music Subculture*, Haskell (rightly, I believe) singles out David Munrow and Gustav Leonhardt as two of the outstanding figures of the post-war early music revival. After this comes a brief description of early music in Japan and recent positive trends in Eastern Europe. With regard to one of Europe's foremost musical capitals, Vienna, we read:

Elsewhere in Europe, post-war trends have been much the same [as Eastern Europe]. Vienna's rise to prominence in the 1950s stemmed largely from the musicologist Josef Mertin<sup>1</sup>, who counted [Nikolaus] Harnoncourt, René Clemencic and Eduard Melkus among his pupils at the Akademie für Musik. As the home of Leonhardt (who taught at the academy in the early fifties), the Concentus Musicus, The Clemencic Consort, Melkus's Capella Accademia and the Wiener Block-flötenensemble, Vienna staked its claim to being a capital of the early music world.<sup>2</sup> Haskell, while giving due credit to a number of famous musicians, scholars and other luminaries, fails to mention the one person, who, earlier, for



Mozart bi-centennial celebration,  
Kunsthistorischesmuseum, Vienna 1956.

longer and more successfully than anyone else, brought Vienna's conservative musical establishment around to an understanding and appreciation of the worth of old music and period instruments. Isolde Ahlgrimm, born in Vienna at the beginning of World War I, could claim among her many achievements a significant role in the establishment and development of a tradition of modern performance based directly on historical sources.

<sup>1</sup> Mertin's book, *Alte Musik: Wege zur Aufführungspraxis*, published in Vienna in 1978 by Verlag Elisabeth Lafite, has recently been made available in an English translation under the title *Early Music: Approaches to Performance Practice* (Da Capo, 1986)

<sup>2</sup> Harry Haskell: *The Early Music Revival — A History*. Thames and Hudson, 1988 p.168.



Ahlgrimm at a fortepiano by Anton Walter,  
Kunsthistorischesmuseum, 1956.

Isolde Ahlgrimm achieved musical prominence in her native city of Vienna despite great adversity, two World Wars, and the enormous resistance to revolutionary musical ideas which a great musical centre with strongly entrenched conservative musical traditions of its own alone could produce. Despite these difficulties, Ahlgrimm managed to forge an important musical career, representing a continuation and development of the revival of interest in old music performance in Europe begun early in the century by Arnold Dolmetsch and Wanda Landowska. Her philosophy, however, was fundamentally different in emphasis from theirs, having more in common with that of the young Arnold Dolmetsch, who produced exact replicas of 18th century clavichords in the 1890s, than with the essentially Romantic musicianship of Landowska, or indeed, the revisionism of Dolmetsch's own later career both as performer and instrument builder. The technical standard of performance which she set for herself was the equal of Landowska's, and reflective of her rigorous training at the Vienna Akademie. After World War II, in her native city, Ahlgrimm, as a professional and scholarly performing musician, complemented the important seminal role of Professor Josef Mertin, who numbered among his performance practice students at the Vienna Akademie many who were later to achieve fame in the field of early music performance. The list of currently important and prominent 'early' musicians who participated in Ahlgrimm's pioneering concert series after the war is evidence of the influence of her activities upon the early careers of Vienna's then younger generation of performers.<sup>3</sup>

From 1922 to 1934, Isolde Ahlgrimm studied piano and related subjects at the Vienna Musikakademie. She was a genuine virtuoso for whom a brilliant future was predicted. She worked with Vienna's most prominent teachers:

Franz Schmidt, Viktor Ebenstein and the incomparable Emil von Sauer, himself a pupil of Liszt and Nikolay Rubinstein. In view of this background, her conversion to the world of baroque and classical music and old instruments was all the more remarkable. That it happened at all was due to a meeting at a chamber music evening in her parents' home with the Viennese musical instrument collector, Dr. Erich Fiala, whom she married in 1938. Ahlgrimm acknowledged that it was Fiala's enthusiasm and persistence in his belief in the use of restored original instruments which ignited her own interest, thereby diverting her forever from the career of piano virtuoso on which she had embarked. By the time the couple founded the *Concerte für Kenner und Liebhaber* in 1937, Ahlgrimm's determination to research and present earlier music with a high degree of historical awareness matched Fiala's own.

Of the first of her 74 concerts in the 20 year *Kenner und Liebhaber* series the Viennese reviewer wrote:

The first concert "for connoisseurs and amateurs" must be emphasised to be something entirely special. It succeeded in moving to enthusiasm the discerning Viennese musical public. Isolde Ahlgrimm, who has already achieved notable success on the modern piano, brought to the hammerklavier great ability and fine musicianship. Her technique, personality and appearance are as though made for this instrument.<sup>4</sup>

When, by 1943, she made her intention to specialize in the study of historical keyboard instruments final and public, the occasion being no less than a 79th birthday concert given in honour of Richard Strauss, attended by the composer and his family, the Viennese press reported:

In respect of the wish of the artist [to henceforth be known as a harpsichordist] she has not taken her decision to part from us lightly.<sup>5</sup>

This excerpt illustrates Ahlgrimm's importance as one of the rising stars of Vienna's musical scene, as well as revealing the likelihood that a decision to concentrate on earlier music would consign an artist to obscurity and result in the pursuit of a peripheral career. However, instead of departing for the expected no-man's land of historical performance, Ahlgrimm succeeded to an unprecedented degree in incorporating her concerts into Vienna's traditional musical life, as well as involving many of Vienna's most prominent musicians in the performance of this earlier music, often on period instruments. Though the *Concerte*

<sup>3</sup> See the next issue of *Harpsichord & Fortepiano* for a list of performers in the *Kenner und Liebhaber* series.

<sup>4</sup> *Wiener Neueste Nachrichten* February 26th, 1937. For this and all subsequent translations the author is indebted to Herr Laszlo Molnar, music critic for the *Salzburger Nachrichten*.

<sup>5</sup> *Wiener Kronenzeitung* 13th June, 1943.

für Kenner und Liebhaber later became a semi-private subscription series, Ahlgrimm's programmes before and during the war were performed in many of Vienna's leading public concert halls.<sup>6</sup>

The review of her first complete harpsichord concert in 1943, which was devoted to Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, indicates that, not only was her transition from pianist to harpsichordist by this time accepted by the public, but also her style of playing differed discernibly from what was then fashionable (insofar as that term could be applied in any sense to the harpsichord):

In the collected serenity of her playing, she is close to the source of those powers of cohesion for which we usually long in vain. It is a great simplicity—a simple greatness, the mark of true intellect and artistry. The young maestro uses the manuals and registers [of the harpsichord] not for vulgar effects, but only to achieve complete clarity. Her freely unfolding virtuosity is without vanity or pretension, deeply humble, and consequently highly noble.<sup>7</sup>

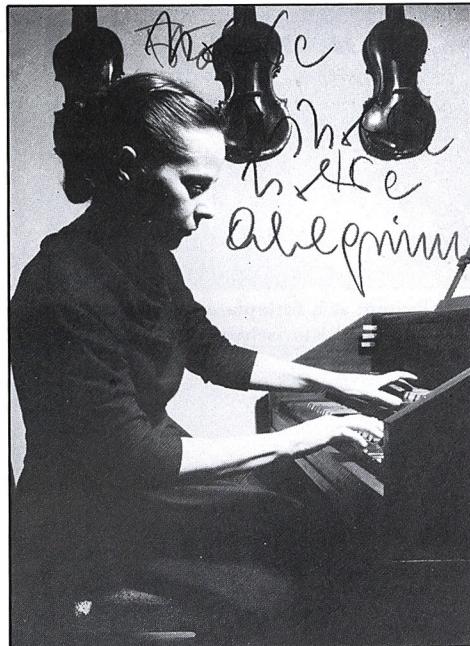
Soon, the transformation of one of Vienna's brightest young pianists into the highly unusual mould of harpsichordist and fortepianist was an accepted fact. As the critic for the *Wiener Kronenzeitung* put it, less than six months later:

Isolde Ahlgrimm, the leading Viennese harpsichordist...<sup>8</sup>

He might have added: and fortepianist, for it was on that even more unusual instrument that Ahlgrimm had begun her career as a performer on historical keyboard instruments, a concentration which makes her unique among early keyboard players of the first half of the century. By 1945, Ahlgrimm's concerts *für Kenner und Liebhaber* were receiving the following response from the Viennese critics:

The concerts *für Kenner und Liebhaber* are an example of musical culture of which Vienna may be truly proud.<sup>9</sup>

Chief among Ahlgrimm's endeavours of the 1930s was the restoration of much unfamiliar music by Viennese composers to public performance using, in the case of 18th century Viennese pianos, literally original instruments. According to Ahlgrimm, during her days as a piano student at the Vienna Akademie in the 1920s and '30s, very little of Mozart's and Haydn's music was considered worthy of attention by pianists at all, let alone the instruments of the period. Isolde Ahlgrimm became one of the first and most persuasive advocates of the use of historic fortepianos for the performance of the works of Mozart, Haydn and Beethoven<sup>10</sup> and was able to own one before she ever possessed a harpsichord.<sup>11</sup> Not only did her very first 'historical' concert feature the fortepiano in both solo and chamber music<sup>12</sup>, but also one of her most notable post-war achievements (unfortunately, unlike her Bach performances not preserved for us on recordings) was the performance in 1951 of all of Mozart's piano sonatas, rondos and fantasias on historic fortepianos. The second programme in the *für Kenner und Liebhaber* series,



Signed publicity photo, Vienna 1951

given in the Kleine Saal of the Musikverein on June 3, 1937 was devoted entirely to the music of Mozart: the string trio in Eb, K. 563; the a minor rondo for piano, K. 511; the D major piano sonata, K. 576 and the Quartet in Eb for piano, violin, viola and cello, K. 493. The piano was once again the 1790 instrument of Michael Rosenberger. The string instruments, all restored to original condition, were from the collection of Erich Fiala.<sup>13</sup>

Isolde Ahlgrimm's next most significant achievement is the first ever virtually complete cycle of performances and recordings of Bach's solo harpsichord music as well as recordings of Bach's

<sup>6</sup> Including the Vienna Konzerthaus, the Brahms-Saal of the Musikverein and Palais Palffy.

<sup>7</sup> *Wiener Neueste Nachrichten* October 4th, 1943.

<sup>8</sup> *Wiener Kronenzeitung* March 30th, 1944.

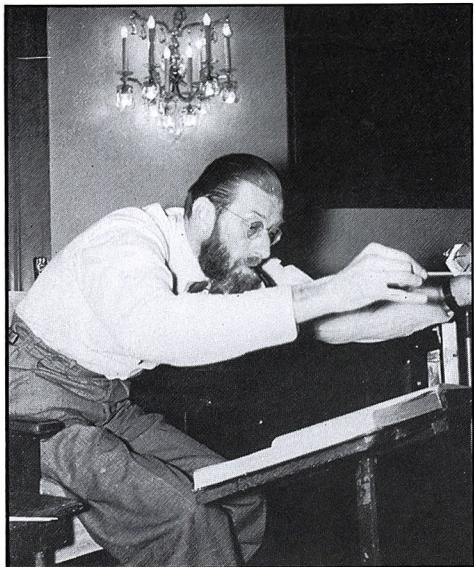
<sup>9</sup> *Wiener Kurier* November 3rd, 1945.

<sup>10</sup> Ralph Kirkpatrick, on the other hand, is quoted as having said that he had given up playing the fortepiano in 1956, in honour of Mozart's 200th birthday.

<sup>11</sup> Isolde Ahlgrimm reports that she and her husband, Erich Fiala, purchased their first fortepiano, by Michael Rosenberger, for twenty Austrian schillings in 1936.

<sup>12</sup> Programme: J.C.F. Bach: Sonata (1789) for fortepiano and cello; D.G. Türk: Sonata in G for piano (from 1777 set of six); Haydn: Sonatas for both piano solo and piano and flute, Trio for piano, flute and cello; Mozart: d minor Phantasie K. 397, Sonata in A for piano K. 331.

<sup>13</sup> The fortepianos were restored by Rudolf Stelzhammer. The string instruments were restored by Josef Krenn and Hans Wittman, two of Vienna's famous violin makers.



Erich Fiala conducting the Amati Orchestra, Vienna 1956.

chamber and concerted music using unaltered or restored historical string instruments at an historical pitch. Included were the Bach harpsichord concertos, sonatas for viola da gamba and harpsichord and the *Musical Offering*.<sup>14</sup> These were recorded in the early 1950s with Rudolf Baumgartner playing baroque violin, and future Concentus Musicus Wien members Nikolaus and Alice Harnoncourt, and Kurt Theiner. The opportunity for Ahlgrimm to record all Bach's solo harpsichord music was a result of the attendance by one of Philips' leading producers, Marius van der Meulen, at one of Ahlgrimm's *Concerfe für Kenner und Liebhaber* devoted to the *Well Tempered Clavier* and performed in commemoration of the Bach bicentenary in 1950. Initially offered a contract to record the six French Suites, Ahlgrimm instead ended up (at the insistence of Erich Fiala) by producing some 30 long-playing records surveying Bach's entire output for solo and obbligato harpsichord. This famous series of recordings for the Dutch company became the largest recording contract ever to be awarded to a solo artist up to that time (at the same time, Anton Heiller was engaged to record the organ works). Later in the cycle, she was joined by an original instrument ensemble, the Amati Orchestra, whose members included Rudolf Baumgartner, Nikolaus and Alice Harnoncourt, Eduard Melkus and Kurt Theiner, and members of the Vienna Konzerthaus Quartet, playing instruments from Erich Fiala's exceptional collection. With these collaborators, Isolde Ahlgrimm produced performances whose sheer professionalism and stylistic conviction come today as a surprise to those

listeners fortunate enough to hear them. Oddly, though historically they rival Landowska's and Kirkpatrick's in importance, Ahlgrimm's recordings are now rarities. It is easy for us to forget, in an era when use of original or at least 'period' instruments has become the norm, when recordings of Bach's solo harpsichord music continue to proliferate, just how hard-won were Isolde Ahlgrimm's victories in these particular fields nearly fifty years ago.

The most obvious feature, unusual for its time, of the instrumental playing preserved on Ahlgrimm's concerto and chamber music recordings is a clear understanding of baroque phrasing, bowing, tempi and articulation. The unforced and transparent string sound is very similar to that which we have come to expect from many later original instrument ensembles. The kinship of the sound of the Amati Orchestra (thus named because all the string instruments were of the Amati school of instrument making) with the early style of Harnoncourt's Concentus Musicus is not surprising given the commonality of many of the personnel.

It may be considered slightly paradoxical that Vienna's reputation as a city of great musical innovation and revolution in the late 19th and early 20th centuries ran parallel to extreme conservatism (some would call it provincialism), a peculiar by-product of which was the preservation of certain aspects of older performing traditions. This conservative streak revealed itself in the use by Vienna's orchestras of gut strings, wooden conical bore flutes and pre-Böhm system clarinets and oboes for longer than anywhere else. Despite the revolutionary and innovative nature of many of its most famous musical identities, from Beethoven to Schönberg, in other ways Vienna, as might be expected from an Imperial capital, was imbued with an intense resistance to change. Early music performance in Vienna combined the conscious reconstitution of lost styles with an unbroken tradition of transparent, light and dance-like performance.<sup>15</sup>

To place them in proper context, it is instructive to compare Ahlgrimm's concerto recordings with those of pioneering groups like the Boyd Neel Orchestra, Munich Bach Orchestra, Stuttgart Chamber Orchestra or the Philomusica of London<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> The first performance of the complete *Musical Offering* took place as part of the *Concerfe für Kenner und Liebhaber* on October 5th, 1944.

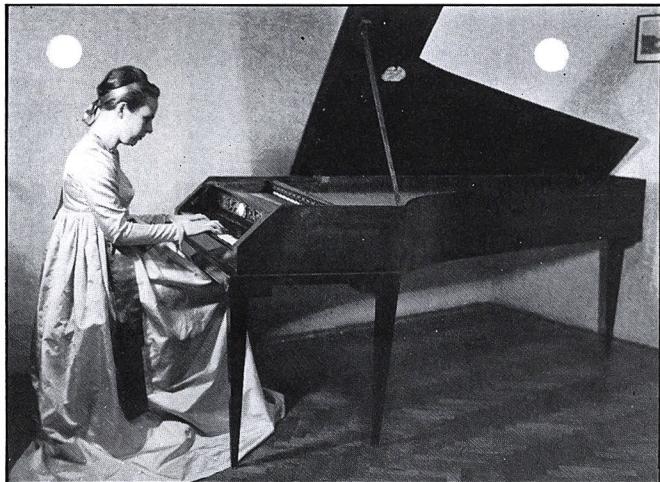
<sup>15</sup> The reader will find instructive a comparison of Ahlgrimm's performances with the legendary and elephantine interpretation of Bach's fifth Brandenburg Concerto directed by Furtwängler, performed at the Salzburg Festival of 1950 (Recital Records 515, Discorcorp, Berkeley, CA). It is difficult to believe that two such opposite approaches to performing the same music could have existed simultaneously in the same vicinity.

<sup>16</sup> None of these excellent orchestras at that time attempted the use of period instruments: it was not until the late 1950s that Thurston Dart introduced to his colleagues of the Jacobean Ensemble so-called 'Corelli' bows.

contemporary with and often considerably later than them. One soon realizes, given the string sound, phrasing, tempi and articulation, just how far ahead of their time Ahlgrimm's ideas were, and how great is the debt of honour which later generations of performers on period instruments owe to her and the crusading zeal of her husband, Dr. Erich Fiala.<sup>17</sup> Fiala's uncompromising attitudes, reflecting his role as an instrument collector rather than a performing musician, contributed in no small measure to the directness of the approach which the couple took to the performance of older music using the resources of its own time, uncomplicated by the prevailing professional notions of 'improving' either the music or the instruments used for its performance. It was, for its time, a unique approach.

The obvious question at this point must be asked: with all of these indisputable achievements, why did not Ahlgrimm become internationally much more famous? Why is she not so well known as Landowska or, latterly, Gustav Leonhardt? Despite her reputation throughout Austria and much of Europe, her many recordings and her numerous published writings, why has she been overlooked in the literature purporting to deal with the revival of historical performance practice? The answer lies, perhaps, mostly in the unique circumstances regarding the historical timing and location of her early career. Ahlgrimm, as a mature artist and regarded as one of the city's leading musicians, remained (with considerable suffering and at tremendous personal cost) in Vienna during the second world war. The older Landowska, one of the large number of refugees fleeing the Nazis (and having been interned in Germany during World War I), was compelled to create for herself a fresh start in the New World — complete with a 'debut' in New York's Town Hall, the famous performance of the *Goldberg Variations* in 1942. America in the 1940s and '50s was obviously far more conducive to launching a career in music than was Nazi-occupied and then post-war Vienna. And of course Gustav Leonhardt, born in 1928, was young enough to emerge from the conflict with his career still ahead of him.

Ahlgrimm's decision to allow the music and the instruments of the past to speak on their own terms to audiences, so different in philosophy from that of the Landowska generation, was perhaps her most significant contribution to the



The first of the *Concerte für Kenner und Liebhaber*, Vienna, 1937. Fortepiano by Michael Rosenberger, Vienna c.1790

history of performance practice. Although successors such as Gustav Leonhardt and others have continued to refine and expand this idea with regard to the harpsichord, the fortepiano has had to wait for many years (since Ahlgrimm's use of it in the 1930s and 40s) for a continuation of its own revival.

In terms of her attitude to both the harpsichord and the fortepiano, Ahlgrimm was perhaps the first performer to accept the resources of the historical instruments on their own terms: a concept since refined and developed by later harpsichordists, but one which initially met with much resistance from certain sections of the harpsichord world, principally those associated with the Landowska school of playing. Ahlgrimm's simple and 'historical' approach to her instrument and its music greatly pleased the Viennese musical critics who first noticed her work, and became accepted throughout Europe in the 1950s due to the familiarity of the musical public with her recordings. However, in 1951 when one of Landowska's American students, Putnam Aldrich, came to review Ahlgrimm's recording of Book 1 of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* as part of a three-way contest with those of Landowska and Rosalyn Tureck, he apparently misunderstood her approach to both instrument and music and instead criticised what he termed Ahlgrimm's essentially "negative" approach, which, he stated, left the

<sup>17</sup> A comparison of Ahlgrimm's recording of Bach's C major double harpsichord concerto (BWV 1061) with Leonhardt's of more than ten years later amply illustrates this fact. Tempos, articulation and phrasing of the outer movements are almost identical.

listener to interpret the music "as best he may"<sup>18</sup>. As a close disciple and devotee of Wanda Landowska, Aldrich was obviously disoriented by hearing the music played without all the 'Landowska' trademarks he had been taught to expect as integral with proper interpretation: the quick registration changes, highly individually conceived articulation and massive *ritardandi*.

The first and most obvious difference which occurred to Aldrich in the few words which he actually devoted to Ahlgrimm's playing was her avoidance of the colourful and constantly changing harpsichord registrations with which he was familiar, but which would have been impossible to achieve on antique instruments. The first harpsichords which Ahlgrimm owned, built by the brothers Ammer in Eisenberg<sup>19</sup> before the war, possessed, as did most of the old harpsichords<sup>20</sup>, handstops rather than pedals to control the registers. This made impossible the kaleidoscopic changes of tone colour which Landowska and her imitators (including Putnam Aldrich) felt to be so crucial to valid and vital performance. The performances of Landowska and her protégés were representative of the 'orchestrated' style of harpsichord playing — involving a virtual transcription of the music, in much the same way as occurred in Stokowski's Bach arrangements of the 1930s with the Philadelphia Orchestra. It is a tradition which survives to this day in the playing of such harpsichordists as Rafael Puyana (a Landowska pupil) and the Czech Zuzana Ruzickova<sup>21</sup>. Ahlgrimm early on rejected this mode of performance as anachronistic and destructive of the structure and rhetoric of the music. The suggestion has often been made<sup>22</sup> that the basic sound of the Pleyel harpsichord was so disagreeable that constant register changes were needed to offset the sheer ugliness of its timbre. It might also be said that, although they were hardly historical copies, the 8' registers of the pre-war Ammers were demonstrably closer to an antique sound than those of the Pleyel (far more so, also, than the post-war Ammers used by Ruzickova in many of her recordings), eliminating the aural necessity for frequent registration changes. Photographs from the 1930s and 1940s of Ahlgrimm in concert show the naturalness of her finger and hand position, derived from the relaxed technique described by 18th-century writers about harpsichord playing, a dramatic contrast with Landowska's extreme and highly-tensed finger positions, which originated with her Russian-style piano training. Perhaps the fact that Ahlgrimm began her early music career on original fortepianos, on which the basic timbre cannot be much varied mechanically (not to mention the smaller and lighter keys present on them) necessitating a greater reliance on touch and articulation, led her naturally towards a more historically authentic

approach to harpsichord sound and technique. She favoured the use of single 8' registers, often for an entire piece. The 16' register<sup>23</sup> (so effectively used by Landowska) was used only sparingly. Registration changes rarely occurred during the course of a movement. This left her much freer to concentrate on the internal structure and rhetorical flow of the music.

Putnam Aldrich's negative review may have contributed to the fact that, after the first part of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* appeared, Columbia Masterworks issued no more of Ahlgrimm's recordings in the USA. Partly as a result of this, Ahlgrimm's playing, already popular throughout Europe as a result of the issue of these same recordings through Philips, had to wait many years until it found widespread acceptance in the United States, which remained dominated by the playing and instruments of the Landowska school, as well as that of Landowska's one-time pupil, Ralph Kirkpatrick. It was in the early 1960s, as a guest teacher at Oberlin Conservatory, that Isolde Ahlgrimm's playing and teaching became well-known in America. Her year at Oberlin produced a number of fine students, including Larry Palmer and David Harris, both well-known performers and teachers throughout the United States.

Ahlgrimm's teaching activities in Europe date back to 1945 when she was asked to form a harpsichord class at the Vienna Akademie. The venture experienced slow progress, and she left in 1949 in order to prepare the keyboard music of J. S. Bach for performance, as part of the bicentennial commemorations of the following year (as well as for the Philips recordings). Ahlgrimm was followed in the position by Anton Heiller, Gustav Leonhardt and Eta Harich-Schneider. From 1958 to 1962 she

<sup>18</sup> Comparing the approach of Ahlgrimm with Landowska, Aldrich states: "There are listeners who like the harpsichord but who feel that its tone should be restrained and more or less uniform than an attempt to imitate a symphony orchestra. They will be pleased by the more or less monochromatic timbre of Ahlgrimm's harpsichord..." This, to Aldrich, was further evidence of Ahlgrimm's 'negativism'. Putnam Aldrich: 'Bach in Three Styles' (Review of Landowska, Ahlgrimm and Tureck's recordings of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, 1951). *Saturday Review of Literature*.

<sup>19</sup> One was acquired in exchange for a Pleyel, whose tone Ahlgrimm greatly disliked, but the elaborate and beautiful veneer of which made it attractive to its new owners: Wien-Film.

<sup>20</sup> Some of the late 18th-century English instruments possessed pedals, but these served a very different purpose from the seven pedals of Landowska's Pleyel. The majority of early harpsichords used handstops to effect registration changes.

<sup>21</sup> For an unusual defence of this school of harpsichord playing, the reader is referred to Ruzickova's article 'The manner of interpretation', *Early Music* April, 1980 (OUP).

<sup>22</sup> By Ralph Kirkpatrick, Frank Hubbard and others.

<sup>23</sup> Not that the 16' register was unknown on early harpsichords. It was, however, a rarity.

taught at the Salzburg Mozarteum (it was as a result of an exchange programme between the Mozarteum and Oberlin Conservatory that she was invited to spend a year teaching in America). In 1962, upon the retirement of Harich-Schneider, Ahlgrimm resumed her teaching activities at the Vienna Hochschule (successor to the Akademie). Isolde Ahlgrimm remained active in the fields of performing, recording and teaching up until her retirement from the Vienna Hochschule in 1984. She served on the juries of the Bruges harpsichord competition in 1968, 1971 and 1977. The talk given by her at the 1977 Bruges Festival was a summation of her views on many aspects of performance practice<sup>24</sup>. It drew a certain amount of fire for what was considered to be a certain conservatism, but her message was welcomed by many who had felt that a lowering of musical, academic and disciplinary standards had become manifest in some aspects of the harpsichord revival. To these people, Ahlgrimm's lecture (and the subsequent publication of the talk as an article) represented a timely warning to a younger generation of enthusiasts which had not had to fight the hard battles waged by Ahlgrimm and her colleagues.

Evaluating Ahlgrimm's contribution to the history of the harpsichord and fortepiano revival, what was unique and new about it was the extent to which she consciously broke free of her own training as a late Romantic pianist, in order to look anew at old music and its instruments without prejudice or preconceived ideas. Just as importantly, she felt no need to re-invent the instrument, as Landowska had done in 1912 when she had collaborated with Pleyel in the production of the instrument on which she concertised and recorded for the rest of her career. For example, when Ahlgrimm wrote in the notes to her 1954 recording of the Bach Flute Sonatas<sup>25</sup> that "the baroque flute cannot be used because its timbre does not appeal to the modern ear", she was not criticising the instrument, but instead commenting on the musical conditions and expectations of her own time. She added "this is the more regrettable since the baroque flute represents a most characteristic type of instrument"<sup>26</sup>. Ahlgrimm was merely admitting that the battle to re-establish the instruments of former times was far from won<sup>27</sup>. For Ahlgrimm, the spirit and the letter of performance were complementary and indistinguishable. It is an approach to music and to history fundamentally different from that of the generation of Landowska and Dolmetsch and one which has subsequently been developed by many other early music specialists since, some of whom, like the Harnoncourts and Leonhardt, were in direct contact with her work in their early days.

Whether or not it is argued that Ahlgrimm's ideas have been refined or in some ways more fully

realised by her younger colleagues, the fact remains that she was one of the important pioneer discoverers of many of the basic tenets of historical performance practice which are now taken for granted among all musicians interested in the subject. With intelligence and a sure aesthetic sense, she observed and appreciated the qualities and possibilities of the old instruments unaltered by later revisionists. Her orchestra used original gut string instruments tuned at an approximation of a common 18th century pitch (A=420). Her harpsichords possessed handstops, not pedals, which committed her to the registration possibilities available on old instruments<sup>28</sup>, and their sound more closely resembled that of the originals than did most of the instruments contemporary with them. When, later in her career, truly accurate copies of antique harpsichords became available, Ahlgrimm lost no time in putting to good use the advance on her pre-war Ammers which she felt they represented<sup>29</sup>.

Ahlgrimm's work must, of course, be assessed as a product of its own time, of her training and background: after all she was a piano student of Ebenstein and von Sauer as well as a dedicatee, friend and interpreter of the music of Richard Strauss<sup>30</sup>. However, it is revealing of her scholarship, artistic originality and foresight that, given the circumstances of her background, she pursued her aim of implementing informed historical performance practice so logically and so surely. Gustav Leonhardt and others have extended her legacy, especially in reviving much repertoire which Ahlgrimm did not play (her specialities were Bach, Mozart, Haydn, Handel and the music of certain Austrian composers), but the development of this directly historical style of playing would not have become possible without the giant step in musical

<sup>24</sup> The text, entitled 'Current Trends in the Performance of Baroque Music', was translated by Howard Schott for *The Diapason*, April 1982.

<sup>25</sup> Philips A 00265 L

<sup>26</sup> In fact a flute from around 1820 was used, in order to compromise between authenticity and the public's 'expectations'.

<sup>27</sup> Ahlgrimm stated (1990) that the reason that Philips never issued her recordings of the Bach Sonatas for Violin and harpsichord (BWV 1014-9) with Rudolf Baumgartner playing a baroque violin from her husband's collection was that the company felt that the public was not yet ready for the very different timbre of the earlier instrument.

<sup>28</sup> Save for the 'Bach' disposition, with the 4' register on the upper manual which these instruments possessed — a serious deficiency in most German harpsichords from the period of the 1930s on, and one of the few not shared by Landowska's Pleyel, which, despite its other faults possessed a basically classical disposition. This is not to say, however, that she used its resources in a classical manner.

<sup>29</sup> Ahlgrimm acquired a harpsichord by David Rubio, based on a Taskin, in 1972.

<sup>30</sup> Strauss composed the *Capriccio Suite* for Harpsichord for her in 1944.



Close-up of Ahlgrimm's technique, derived from a study of eighteenth-century treatises, Vienna, 1943.

philosophy which she took<sup>31</sup>. With her final move in the 1970s to the use of genuine old instruments or good copies, she made a break with the past which others of her generation — Ruggero Gerlin, Isabelle Nef and even Ralph Kirkpatrick — were never quite able to achieve.

Her performing career had taken her throughout continental Europe, the United States the Middle East and Japan. Her art is well represented on records<sup>32</sup>. In addition to the Philips Complete Works for Harpsichord of J.S. Bach (re-issued in 1974) and supplemented with a splendid solo disc of those works omitted in the original cycle — this time recorded on an historically based Rubio harpsichord — she re-recorded much of her Bach repertoire in the 1960s through the 1980s, for the Belvedere and Tudor labels. In addition, most of the keyboard music of Handel was recorded for the German Eterna label in the late 1970s. Unfortunately, the latter concentration of Ahlgrimm's performing and recording activities in the Eastern portion of Europe tended to obscure her achievements, and prevented her from maintaining the prominence enjoyed by Leonhardt and the younger generation of harpsichordists. It also gave her far fewer opportunities for playing (and recording) on really good instruments.

Isolde Ahlgrimm died on October 11, 1995, in

Vienna at the age of eighty-one. Memorial services for her were held at Vienna's Ursulinenkirche and Zentralfriedhof. Her passing represented a great loss not only to Vienna's musical circles, but to the wider world of early music performance. It is to be hoped that Ahlgrimm's departure from the scene may now lead to a re-assessment of her art and importance in the development of the early music revival. Perhaps Philips will see fit to re-issue some of her recordings including, for example, her historically important account of Bach's *Die Kunst der Fuge* (BWV 1080) from the early 1950s: one of the first to present the piece in its original format as a work for solo keyboard. It was, after all, partly his acquaintance with her performances of this work in Vienna in the early 1950s which helped to influence the young Gustav Leonhardt in his own scholarly and persuasive re-assessment of *Die Kunst der Fuge* as a work for harpsichord. Those familiar with his famous and important 1952 essay concerning the piece should read Ahlgrimm's notes to her recording of the work<sup>33</sup>, condensed from a lecture which she gave in 1950. In this she presented many of the arguments in favour of harpsichord performance later taken up by Leonhardt and others. The recordings of the Bach Harpsichord Concertos, made with the Amati Orchestra<sup>34</sup> provide some of the earliest examples of genuinely 'period' orchestral playing. In terms of the quality of the performances there was nothing to compare with them until the Leonhardt-Consort recorded the same works many years later. The attentive listener may notice some remarkable similarities between the performances of many of the movements, when comparing these recordings.

Leonhardt, Harnoncourt, Melkus, Baumgartner and the many others who have an interest in baroque performance, the harpsichord and its music, will continue for a long time to remain heavily in Isolde Ahlgrimm's debt. It may even be that the next edition of Harry Haskell's survey, *The Early Music Revival*, will make good its omission of her contribution to one of the most remarkable chapters in the story of musical performance in the 20th century.

In the next issue of *Harpsichord & Fortepiano* we will publish Peter Watchorn's appendices to this article, which include a full discography and a list of performers in the *Fiir Kenner und Liebhaber* series.

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<sup>31</sup> It is useful to compare Leonhardt's first recording of the *Goldberg Variations*, recorded in Vienna in the early 1950s on an Ammer harpsichord, with Ahlgrimm's recorded at the same time in the same place and on the same type of instrument.

<sup>32</sup> See discography to be published in the next issue of *Harpsichord & Fortepiano*.

<sup>33</sup> Philips A 00242 L

<sup>34</sup> Philips A 02038 L and Fontana 6530 072