

Harpsichord & *fortepiano*

Vol. 7, No. 1 June, 1998

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Musical Instrument Research Catalog
(MIRCat)

An interview with RONALD BRAUTIGAM

Alison Holloway

Last year Ronald Brautigam completed an ambitious project — the recording, on the fortepiano, of the complete Mozart piano sonatas. I met him last October to ask him how he came to undertake such a task, and to see what other schemes he had up his sleeve.

Ronald Brautigam is an accomplished player of the modern piano. He trained — in Amsterdam, England and the USA — on the instrument, and still does about three-quarters of his work on it. Still, when I asked him how he came to record the Mozart piano sonatas, I didn't expect to be asking how he came to the fortepiano in the first place; that was to be my second question. For Ronald, the answer to the eternal riddle — which came first, the fortepiano or the Mozart sonatas? — would have to be: the sonatas.

Ronald had always loved the sonatas but felt they didn't sound right on the modern piano: the voice was too big, too loud, not intimate enough. He likens it to the effect of "a Wagnerian singer singing a lullaby". So it was in search of the instrument to fit the music that he found himself in the workshop of Paul McNulty in Amsterdam, tried a fortepiano and ordered one on the spot. Here was the clarity he had been looking for — the drama without the aggression.

How did he find the transition from the modern piano to the fortepiano? The short answer is: long. There is a different

technique to the fortepiano which it has taken him years to get used to, both by trial and error and by listening to others. So little weight is needed on the fortepiano in contrast to the muscle-power demanded by the modern piano, particularly when playing with an orchestra. As a result he finds he needs a period of adjustment when moving from one instrument to the other, and will work exclusively with the fortepiano for two to three months in order to "really get into it".

A question of style

Now he feels he couldn't play any Mozart — except the concertos — on the modern piano. The fortepiano allows a better balance between the two hands; by separating the notes a clarity and lightness can be achieved, "like a puppet on a string". At the modern piano the temptation is to play everything *legato*; you are, by comparison, "sitting firmly on a stool". Only the concertos, he feels, can survive relatively unscathed; these are written differently from the other works, and there is nothing that could become a "clumsy" left-hand accompaniment.

On the question of style, how did he go about choosing a single instrument on which to play a series of works composed over a period of nearly 15 years? All of the sonatas are recorded on a copy of a Walter fortepiano of about 1795. Although the first sonatas are certainly much earlier — and indeed

were probably also played on the harpsichord — he feels that all the sonatas have a *galant* style which particularly suits the Walter, and that there is not in fact a great deal of difference between this instrument and slightly earlier Walters.

Preparing the recording

Having acquired the instrument Ronald spent two years learning it. He played the sonatas every day and became very fond of them — so much so that he now misses them when he's away! He

performed a couple of series in concert before deciding to embark on the recording. Six discs were recorded on eight evenings, and when I asked him whether there were any problems in working so quickly, he cited the sonatas themselves as the culprits: he enjoys playing them so much, always finds something new in them and something to experiment with, that it is frustrating to record them only once: "you always want to do it differently next time". But he adds: "sometimes it's good to have pressure."

photo: Marco Borggreve



Child's play

So where has it all taken him? Since completing the sonatas he has gone on to record Mozart's other keyboard works, including the variations, which he feels have given him a greater insight into the composer and, therefore, into the sonatas. Mozart's piano music does, however, pose what he calls the "child" problem: the fact that many of these pieces, such as the Turkish Rondo, are so familiar as teaching pieces that adults can find it hard to "drop the baggage" and "hear them with open ears". At least the fortepiano, forcing as it does a fresh approach, helps to combat this.

After Mozart, Ronald has moved on to Schubert, Chopin and Brahms, and also early

Beethoven and Haydn. His coming projects include a recording of the complete Haydn piano works — on 10-15 discs — and a Beethoven sonata cycle, which he will also be performing in concert. He takes a slightly different approach to a piece of music when in concert than when recording. On a CD there is very little improvisation; he avoids it because, whether you like it or not, it becomes part of the composition and is, therefore, no longer spontaneous. In concert, on the other hand, he will improvise in the slow movements, the character of which becomes dependent on his mood.

The imaginary piano

There can be no doubt that, in playing an instrument similar to the one a particular composer would have used, you can get closer to understanding that composer and his intentions. But what about the interesting case of Mr Beethoven and his Later Sonatas? For

these Ronald has ordered a 6-octave Walter — the piano "Walter would have built if he'd lived". Of course, Walter built in only 5 and 5½ octaves, but Beethoven was writing in 6 — and by this time he was deaf. Could the Walter being built by McNulty ("who has built so many Walters he has become Walter") be the one that Beethoven imagined? It's an interesting concept in the authenticity debate: why stop at matching an instrument with the documented experience of a composer when you can go one step further and match it with his imagination?

Towards the year 2000

Although based in Amsterdam, 1998 will see Ronald back in London for a Mozart concerto with Frans Bruggen's Orchestra of the Age of the Enlightenment (October at the South Bank). Various other concert engagements take him towards Japan in the year 2000, where he will be performing the Mozart sonatas on the fortepiano. Although no longer teaching at the Amsterdam Conservatory he continues to give masterclasses, which he enjoys. Other plans for the future include tackling Martinu with Christopher Hogwood — on modern piano and orchestra, of course. With a puppet on a string, who knows what will happen next?

Mozart:

*The Complete Piano Sonatas are
available in six volumes
(BIS CD 835-840).*

*These discs will be reviewed
in the next issue of
Harpichord & Fortepiano.*