

Harpsichord & fortepiano

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A Performance Practice for the 21st Century

Pamela Nash interviews the harpsichordist Jane Chapman
Part Two

In Part One of the interview, Jane Chapman illuminated the new performance practice, presenting the case for using the baroque harpsichord and its technique in playing contemporary music. Drawing upon her experience of baroque performance in approaching contemporary music is an esoteric yet logical process, but Jane also points up a more surprising musical correlation between harpsichord playing and jazz singing. "They have in common a kind of imagination: a flexibility in performance. It helps to have a sense of improvisation in playing the harpsichord, so that the music sounds as if it is springing from the player."

Jazz has always been a subject dear to her heart, as well as a means of subsistence; she sang professionally in the clubs of Amsterdam to help finance her harpsichord lessons with Ton Koopman. However, she is realistic about the problems associated with standard jazz performance. "When I look back at the way I improvised with the voice in those days, it was terribly clichéd. The form and style can be very limiting unless you branch out into something else. It's terribly hard to find your own voice in something that is so stylised, and you can so easily sound like a second rate Ella Fitzgerald or a very bad Billie Holliday."

In her collaborations with jazz artists like Django Bates and Martin France, Jane has broken away from these stylised

clichés. Bates included some interesting pieces in his set for voice/harpsichord, horn/keyboards and percussion which they performed together at the ICA in London, and which "somehow seemed to satisfy and stimulate musically without moving too far away from the essence of jazz."

Her observations on the constrictions of stylised performance throw an interesting light on the whole authenticity question.

"Sometimes I wonder if it's a problem of recording. If we could hear how Froberger or Chambonnières played, there would no doubt be that same sense of awe as on hearing a great jazz pianist such as Bill Evans. The desire to imitate and do the 'right thing' could take away from your own sense of creativity and we would be forever comparing ourselves with the 'greats'. We also couldn't argue any more about authenticity as it would all be on disc! The lack of information about some music - and therefore its ambiguity - is what makes it a challenge to play.

"In some ways however, both jazz and baroque music have a set of resonances and associations before you even begin to listen or play. Contemporary music does too, but there is such a diversity of styles and range of possibilities, the sense of exploration is endless and you never know where you are going to end up. So, in a funny sort of way there are

more avenues for expressing yourself doing contemporary music on the harpsichord."

Indeed, one of the most exciting aspects of Jane's performance practice is her role in the actual composition of the music she plays: enlightening composers on the possibilities of the instrument and interacting with them, often at the inception of a piece. Although continuously learning new commissions, she will also consider unsolicited scores, but warns: "A score with 'for harpsichord or piano' written on it goes straight back in the post! I am only interested in music which has something to say about the harpsichord, which brings it to life whilst challenging me as a musician at the same time."

When working with a new composer, Jane first leaves them alone with the harpsichord to develop a familiarity with the properties of the sound and mechanism. We both agree that one of

the most fundamental things composers must do is to relearn the concept of 'dynamics', and to understand the textural and implied dynamics that the instrument is capable of. They must also find out what the harpsichord is like to play, and how long it takes to change the registration or to move from one manual to the other.

She hopes that this hands-on approach will produce idiomatic writing, and not the sort of compositional gaffes she has encountered for the harpsichord: "very long sustained notes, or dynamics such as a *pp* where there are six notes in the left hand on the lowest part of the keyboard!" Then there is the problem of sparseness in harpsichord writing where the composer has created too much space for the ear to retain the thread of the music. "It mustn't be too static; in certain acoustics, the piece can get lost - unless it's amplified, in which case static sound can actually be a positive thing!" Jane also laments that

Composer John Palmer with Jane Chapman working with the electronic equipment and harpsichord at the University of Hertfordshire



there is too often a lack of diversity within a piece and feels that composers could explore texture more. "On the other hand, the exploiting of a single idea or texture can also work wonderfully well on the harpsichord, if we look at classics of the repertoire like Ligeti's *Continuum* and Louis Andriessen's *Overture to Orpheus*."

Gaining a tactile sense of the instrument is undoubtedly essential in developing harpsichord style, but shouldn't the composer also come to a basic understanding of its compositional history? "Not necessarily. I feel that on the whole, the composer should come to the instrument fresh, and be even somewhat wary of the past. You can so easily fall into pastiche, where, for instance, something like the unmeasured prelude style can sound like a cliché."

Jane is intrigued by the notion that an instrument with such a light sound mass can be exploited for its sonic power. The Californian electronics composer, Alan Strange, described the harpsichord as having "the sonic potential of a sub-machine gun". Although he was referring to the instrument in its electroacoustic capacity, Jane likens the comparison to the effect you sometimes find in baroque writing - pieces like Royer's *Marche des Scythes* or Handel's *Vo far Guerra*, where textural density transforms the sound with an explosive, almost amplified quality.

She is very open to sound processing techniques which "transform the identity of the harpsichord", and the possibilities with amplification fire her enthusiasm most of all. "Because of the attack on the harpsichord note - in the clarity of the way it repeats and also in the density of massed sound - it can be

very exciting if you are playing vast swodges of notes together. Amplification can take the pure acoustic sound property and create a revelation; the actual decay of the harpsichord sound can be a whole new experience, and the duration of a single note can be fascinating."

Jane will sometimes use amplification even for standard repertoire. She is aware of the harpsichord's particular susceptibility to the acoustics of large halls which can mean the loss of both its intimate quality and its power. "As soon as you put it on the stage, it loses something of its identity. Subtle amplification can project the intimacy of the sound without changing it and without being noticed." But isn't this cheating, or at the very least, unauthentic? "It may be challenging convention, but it's just another kind of enhancement, in the same way that a singer will use a favourable acoustic in a church to help the voice, or a recording engineer adds reverb in the studio. It's part of making the whole concert experience more theatrical and atmospheric."

We have so far talked about new aspects of harpsichord performance and the music of 'here and now' - from the baroque perspective and on the baroque instrument. But there is that area of 20th century repertoire far removed from the authentic harpsichord approach. Frances Bedford's mammoth book *Harpsichord and Clavichord Music of the 20th Century* - the only comprehensive catalogue of works to date - reveals the huge amount of music that was written in the post-Landowska years of the 'revival' pedal harpsichord. Although largely neglected by harpsichordists today, Jane feels that the pedal instrument and its repertoire

is yet valuable from a musical and historical point of view - that there is in fact a kind of performance practice with regard to the music of Elliott Carter and others. "It was designed around the pedal harpsichord's tone colour possibilities, which were as many as 36 on some instruments. It's like a 'reverse authenticity', where the pedal harpsichord becomes the historically correct instrument!"

Within this context, transferring pieces from the pedal harpsichord repertoire onto the historical instrument is a contentious exercise - and yet it could be seen as a fresh way of 'reviving' the major works of the genre. A case in point is Carter's *Sonata for Flute, Oboe, Cello and Harpsichord* where it is just possible for the player to rework the pedal-conceived registration on some reproduction instruments. I describe how I once played this for a Carter festival in the presence of the composer who had expected a 1950s, Challis-type harpsichord with full pedal regalia. To my mind the experience of pulling it off instead on a superb Flemish double was both a compromise and a coup, but the irony of Carter's perspective was reflected in his remark after the performance: "What a shame you didn't have a proper harpsichord!"

My challenge to Jane is whether or not such compromises are 'unauthentic' in the same way that playing 18th century music on say, a Neupert, is unauthentic? Perhaps we are justified in superseding the more synthetic sound of the pedal harpsichord in pursuit of our ideal? Her response is again typically pragmatic. "On the whole I don't think we are justified, even though I would like to say otherwise! On the other hand, pedal instruments are going out of circulation

and composers do want their pieces, which might otherwise be forgotten, to be played! The bottom line is that we make a mistake in comparing both harpsichords in the first place - they have to be seen as two separate instruments with different repertoires and different possibilities for the composer.

"There are still some devotees who retain an affection for the pedal harpsichord - perhaps for its longer sound decay or for a certain mellowness they perceive in the sound." One such devotee writing music for the pedal harpsichord is Xenakis. In a recent encounter, Jane challenged the composer's allegiance to the Neupert-type pedal harpsichord. However, she now concedes: "Xenakis' music would need to be reworked for the reproduction harpsichord. They would be different pieces then and impossible to play. He creates dynamics and accents with the use of the pedals; for instance, putting the 4' on for a fraction of a semiquaver - the only way you can do tonal accents on the harpsichord. This music is the new tradition of pedal harpsichord performance practice".

Despite coming from a very different tradition herself, Jane gives much credence to those performers whose artistry has come from the pedal harpsichord in its various forms: Landowska and the Pleyel (what Jane calls the 'plucked piano'), Violet Gordon Woodhouse and the Dolmetsch, Sylvia Marlowe and the Challis, and now, Chojnacka and the Neupert. Jane has a philosophical perspective on individual style; when challenged on Landowska for instance - how her playing contradicts our present-day notions of interpretation - she is more interested

in the musical personality behind the style and the instrument. "Landowska was a pioneer and yet a product of her time. You can admire someone's playing because it has character, energy and conviction even if you don't like it. It's like with Chojnacka; she does certain things that I think are marvellous, even though not my style."

Interestingly, contemporary harpsichord performance in the 20th century has been an almost entirely female domain. In the post-war years, Sylvia Marlowe and Antoinette Vischer began commissioning major composers to write for the 'new' medium, just as Jane herself is doing now. "I'm not sure why the field continues to be led by women, but perhaps Elizabeth Chojnacka has provided a role model for the new generation - despite being one of the few pedal harpsichord practitioners around today!" Indeed, whilst editing the harpsichord issue of *Contemporary Music Review*, Jane noted that there were more

contributions from women than the journal has ever had on a non-gender-related subject!

A new crop of women composers for the harpsichord has also been springing up and Jane has a growing number of their works in her repertoire. Included in recent concerts were five of these works: two world premieres - *Yay Be* by Hilda Parades and *Instrumentum Magnum* by Caroline Wilkins - *Pictorial Piece 1* by Kazuko Narita, *Close* by Evelyn Ficarra, and that classic of the electroacoustic field, *Jardin Secret* by Kaija Saariaho. Among her commissions for 1998 is a piece for herself and the Smith Quartet by Sally Beamish to be performed in the 'Rainbow over Bath' concert series on 18th February.

Another commission awaited with bated breath is a work for meantone tuning by Richard Barrett. Jane points out that composers are becoming increasingly open to the possibilities of



Composer John Palmer with Jane Chapman working with the electronic equipment and harpsichord at the University of Hertfordshire

experimenting with different tunings, and cites Ligeti's *Passacaglia ungherese*, which is transformed when played in meantone as the composer conceived it. Such occasions would demand a second specially-tuned instrument, but what is Jane's general approach to tuning her harpsichord for concerts? Does she attach the same importance to equal temperament for 20th century music as to unequal for early music? "Definitely not. I play a lot of 20th century music in unequal temperament, and if I am doing a mixed programme I use unequal throughout: not simply because of the hassle of detuning, but because it's more interesting! The only time it doesn't work too well is when you have jazzy chords - sevenths and ninths etc - which sound a bit sour. The whole tuning question is less relevant for atonal music, because without the predominance of consonant intervals I don't think one notices temperament - unless it's meantone!"

Finally, I ask Jane about her ambitions for the next millennium, and am left in no doubt that she will achieve them. As throughout our interview, she doesn't hesitate in forming her reply. "I want to commission as many works as I can, both for solo harpsichord and for my work with different ensembles. I also want to continue making more baroque recordings and doing further research into early music."

She regrets that performers of contemporary music rarely get the chance to play the same concert twice. "The ultimate experience for me would be to do a concert tour with a single programme. It would enable me to give each piece an ongoing life, and to bring the excitement of new music and the harpsichord to a greater audience.

"It may be a long time coming, but I would like to see in Britain the sort of specialisation found in Holland, where they take the new experimental harpsichord culture very seriously. The 1995 Ijsbreker Festival devoted a whole week to the harpsichord with three concerts a day, mostly of contemporary music."

With the bold strides that Jane is making for the contemporary harpsichord, this may not be such a long time coming.

Bibliography:

Frances Bedford, *Harpsichord and Clavichord Music of the Twentieth Century*, Berkeley, CA: Fallen Leaf Press, 1993.

A Note on Recordings:

Jane Chapman's recordings include a three-volume CD series of 17th century music from the Bauyn Manuscript on Collins Classics; *The Lady's Banquet* - harpsichord and spinet music of the 18th century, also on Collins; *Crosscurrents* on a CD of electroacoustic works for NMC; *World in chaos* by Django Bates for Argo; and *Vision* for Sargasso.

Pamela Nash
is an award-winning harpsichordist
with an interest in baroque and
contemporary music.
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Chapman appeared in the last issue
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