

Harpsichord & *fortepiano*

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Musical Instrument Research Catalog
(MIRCAt)

Underground Movement

ALISON HOLLOWAY

1997 saw the launch of a musicians-in-residence appointment at the Harley Gallery in Nottinghamshire. Susan Alexander-Max, fortepianist and director of The Music Collection, teamed up with Derek Adlam at Welbeck to reunite the muse of music with her sisters at the Castalian spring, as it were. Since then similar residencies have been established at other galleries in Britain, each one tailored to a particular setting. I went to Welbeck to see how the unique partnership created there works in practice, and to learn something of the theory — or theories — behind it.

There can be no doubt that the setting of the Harley Gallery is unique. Situated in the grounds of Welbeck Abbey, a stately home built in Sherwood Forest on the site of a medieval monastery, the building is an award-winning conversion of a private gasworks constructed in the 1860s by an eccentric duke. The fifth Duke of Portland was so reclusive that his carriageway to the nearby town of Worksop was built underground, as was a whole series of rooms and passageways, and it was for these that extensive gas-lighting was required. The converted gasworks combines exhibition and concert space, which is complemented outdoors by an ingenious water/sculpture-garden incorporating the circular sunken beds where gas tanks once stood. There can only be one of these in the world.

The Gallery is run by the Harley Foundation, a charitable trust formed in 1977 by Ivy, wife of the 7th duke, for "the encouragement of excellence in the arts and the crafts". The trustees include her daughter, Lady Anne Bentinck, present owner of the Portland Estate. The foundation is named after Robert Harley, the great bibliophile whose collection came to Welbeck in the early 18th century through his son, husband of the heiress to the estate; her great-grandfather, William Cavendish, had made Welbeck a focus for music and the arts a century earlier, prior to the disruption of the English Civil War. The Foundation thus revives a tradition at Welbeck which dates back — if interrupted — well over 300 years.

To say that music had been missing in the Harley Foundation until The Music Collection came along would not be quite correct. The main work of the Foundation in its first twenty years has been the establishment of a series of workshops for the arts and crafts, including instrument-making. Enter Derek Adlam, one of the best-known builders and restorers of early keyboards from his previous workshop at Finchcocks in Kent. The workshops at Welbeck, which now number 14, include two other builders of early keyboards, Bernd Fischer and Malcolm Fisk, and organ-builders and -restorers Martin Goetze, Dominic Gwynne and

Edward Bennett. Although the Gallery, opened in 1994, provides an exhibition space for some of the other artists and craftspeople — including textiles, ceramics and watchmaking — the aim of the Foundation remains to enable individuals to get on with their work, whatever it is, out of the public eye.

Happy accident

After eight years at Finchcocks and the closure of his workshop there, Derek found out about Welbeck by accident. "Accident is the most important thing in life — preferably happy accident. Without it nothing happens." A year later he moved in. Although continuing to build and restore instruments he became increasingly involved in the running of the Foundation, at first helping the then Administrator and now taking on most of that role himself as Consultant. He describes himself as "interested in too many things — a born butterfly" — he just can't help hopping from one thing to another. He is also very active in the British Clavichord Society and has recently started playing in public again.

Perhaps it was "happy accident" that brought Susan Alexander-Max to Welbeck, too. Her period instrument ensemble, The Music Collection, created in 1994, evolved out of the experience of chamber work and an

interest in art. Named after the musical instrument gallery at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York — where, as in any gallery, the instruments stand in relation to the works of art around them — the inspiration of the ensemble is the confluence of music and the other arts, so apparent in *Sturm und Drang* for example, but nowadays all too often separated into ever-diverging streams. The attempt to relate different forms of art to each other is, Susan feels, simply a reminder that all artists are doing the same thing, just in different ways: "art is human life, however you express it."

A passion for Mozart



The instrument gallery at the Met is clearly a place of fond memory for Susan. After studying the piano at the Juilliard School of Music she followed her teacher, Ilona Kabos, to London — en route, or so she planned, to Paris. However she liked London and stayed. In 1993 she began to explore the fortepiano and

immediately became hooked. She had been searching for the right sound for the repertoire she loved — she has a passion for Mozart — and knew when she had found it.

A passion for Mozart thus led to a passion for the fortepiano, and now Susan feels she couldn't go back to performing on the modern piano. Whereas the aim of traditional piano training is to get more sound, to

project, with the fortepiano you have to “stop thinking big — think small.” It demands lightness of touch, purely because any heaviness stops the sound, producing a dead, flat, wooden quality — the instrument just “won’t sing”. The clarity of the fortepiano also gives you nothing to hide behind: you are forced to articulate, to express the phrasing in a certain way. The keyboard brings out an extremity of sound, for example in early Beethoven, which just doesn’t come across on the modern piano — nor do the pedal markings seem to make sense. The instrument therefore teaches you a lot about style. You have to adjust your thinking even more, of course, for the clavichord — because it has an even smaller sound it demands even more from the player.

What about the harpsichord, then? Susan stresses the importance of getting to know an instrument — of taking the time to learn how to make it sing — and for this reason is reluctant to perform on the harpsichord. She believes you have to recognise and respect the difference between instruments, not expect to switch “just like that”. Whereas the fortepiano and the clavichord are in fact closely related, the harpsichord is something different altogether.

By this time I could restrain myself no longer from asking the most obvious question, when you meet Susan, which is: how does she manage with such small hands? I had long cherished the belief that the reason I had not taken to the piano was that my hands were too small, yet Susan’s are almost childlike. She admitted that it did have its problems;

small hands are more “at risk” from damage such as pulled tendons. However she long ago learned to compensate for this by developing her own technique, relying on speed and flexibility in the place of impossible stretches.

Theory into practice

Once The Music Collection had been formed, the challenge was to put its ethos into practice. It was Susan’s idea to bring their performances into art galleries — not into separate concert chambers but into the exhibition spaces themselves. She came to Derek with the idea and it was obvious that it could work both ways: the music audience is brought to the gallery and the art audience to the music. As well as choosing a programme to suit the surroundings, Susan also introduces the music by relating it to the works of art around them — which can be particularly challenging when, as in their debut performance at the Harley Gallery (reviewed in the last issue of *H&F*), the walls were hung with contemporary textiles! On that occasion she drew a meaningful comparison between the layering of the exhibition piece and of the Mozart and Beethoven trios in the evening’s programme, but they are also keen on commissioning new works for the ensemble to relate to contemporary artworks.

The Music Collection — a variable feast, depending on the programme, with Susan as constant — thus increases awareness of the Harley Gallery as a cultural venue, while the Gallery provides them with a platform for performance in the East Midlands. As Susan says, “it has

endless potential". Their residency at the Gallery includes a regular series of concerts, plus special events and openings on summer Sundays. Similar residencies established elsewhere, for example at the National Gallery in Cardiff, include educational activities such as workshops and masterclasses as an important component.

A philosophy for the future

The Music Collection's latest residency will start in late 1998 at the City Museum & Mappin Art Gallery, Sheffield, to tie in with a Turner exhibition. This follows a tour to the US in October, where they will be appearing in the Festival Miami and in North and South Carolina where trio concerts will be interspersed with

s o l o
clavichord
recitals and
fortepiano
masterclasses.
This year will
also see their
d e b u t
recording, a
disc of
key b o a r d
works of J C
B a c h .
Somehow
Susan also
finds time to
c o n t i n u e
teaching, on
p i a n o ,
fortepiano,
clavichord
and 18th-

century performance practice.

Meanwhile, back at the Harley Foundation, plans are underway to radically expand the development of workshops which is at the core of their philosophy. From an international competition funded by the Arts Council, the Foundation selected a design which "is profoundly simple but has architectural panache": bold and simple, and very practical, but with something of the "odd romantic subterranean quality" of the works of the fifth duke. The Foundation thus continues to promote a model for small enterprise in which intensive activities are allowed to develop, building up a reservoir of practical skills for the future. "We are in a state of industrial transition." The reclusive aristocrat might have said the same thing.



The Harley Gallery is about five miles south of Worksop on the A60 to Mansfield, telephone (0)1909-501700. The Music Collection is London-based, telephone (0)171-328-9347 / fax 4689.