

Harpsichord & fortepiano

Vol. 7, No. 2 Winter, 1998

© Peacock Press.

Licensed under [CC BY-NC 4.0](#).

You are free to share and adapt the content for non-commercial purposes, provided you give appropriate credit to Peacock Press and indicate if changes were made. Commercial use, redistribution for profit, or uses beyond this license require prior written permission from Peacock Press.

Musical Instrument Research Catalog
(MIRCat)

THE NAKED TRUTH: COMPOSING FOR THE HARPSICHORD

by Kevin Malone

The approach to composing for the harpsichord is not a matter of writing for a keyboard instrument, and then taking into account limitations of its sound production techniques when compared to its more illustrious cousin, the piano. The composer must fully embrace these techniques and celebrate the nature of its sound.

This article focuses on how a composer should live the life of a harpsichordist throughout the music's conception and realisation. The nature of sound production, not just the sound itself, should be ever present in the composer's imagination, just as the nature of playing a violin or the nature of singing is vital if one is to compose convincingly for violin or voice.

The greatest precision is required when composing with harpsichord sound (as opposed to composing for the harpsichordist or the instrument's mechanism). The sound is fixed in all parameters (attack, decay, dynamic and timbre) except for pitch and duration. Therefore, every compositional decision made by the composer is plainly posed by the harpsichord itself, since the performer can only contribute through nuances of note durations.

Rather than providing a list of 'pitfalls' (though I have never considered them as such) to avoid when composing for the harpsichord, I will instead focus on a more positive, embracing approach, one which encourages the composer to let the harpsichord speak its unique voice.

Nature of the Sound: Composition Stripped Bare

The sound of the harpsichord is immutable. It is what it is, and what it is is unmistakable. The composer cannot ask the performer to supply any form of alteration to the instrument's sound; no amount of finger pressure, swaying of elbows or head wagging is going to change the fact. While it may seem that these gestures give rise to expressive nuances possible through pianistic touch, it highlights the absurdity of transferring piano technique to the harpsichord: it won't work. Any attempt to transfer piano material to harpsichord compositions will result in an uncomfortable fit, openly suggesting a questionable suitability of compositional purpose.

In contrast to that of the piano, the harpsichord's attack is immensely brighter than the subsequent sustaining sound. The body of the sound is much softer; the decay is relatively swift and without projection.

It is the attack for which the composer must write. Despite all efforts to provide subsequent interest in the body of the sound, this body will always be considerably weak, truly an echo or afterthought of the attack, and therefore cannot be effectively exploited.¹ This may sound rather harsh, but it helps to keep the composer focused on the nature of the harpsichord sound. It also establishes a prerequisite: composers must get access to a harpsichord when they initially compose works for it in order to get the precise quality of the attack-sound into the ears for *each note composed*, and not just to remember what the harpsichord sounds like.²

It can be seen, now, that the music can only be expressively communicated through two possible sources: rubato and rhythm. Controlling rubato is generally out of the hands of the composer, aside from a linguistic description in the score. Exactly how a composer would precisely notate fractional nuances of tempo in a score is beyond written notational practice and, anyway, wouldn't be tolerated by the vast majority of harpsichordists. Besides, it would also diminish the role of the artist who is sitting at the keyboard, implying that their expertise is not needed with regard to timing matters in order to best project the music through the harpsichord.

We are back to rhythm. How close the attacks are to each other, and the resulting amount of residual

sustain from each, are the only remaining characteristics.

The composer must therefore deal with density of attack and style of detachment. This is where the artistry of the harpsichordist must be called into play, and how the composer must know when to call upon the artist through his writing. If the composer is looking for anything else to compose with, he might as well flog a dead horse. No, make that a mummified horse: he is light-years from bringing it to life. This is the naked truth.³

To summarise thus far: pitch, length and density of attack are all that a composer can choose from. Farewell to sustaining pedals, crescendos and diminuendos and dynamic shaping of melodies ...

Hello, pitch precision, and with it, the composer has only four decisions to make: which pitch; how long to hold it; how to voice the pitch harmonically; where to place the pitch melodically. A pitch, of course, cannot ever be part of a dynamically expressive curve, since all melodic strings of pitches will be at the same volume level. The severity of these truths have to be heard to be believed.

It gave this composer a great shock when, attempting to transfer an original Romantic-style expressive melody from the piano to the harpsichord, I found that it was, in fact, severely lacking in expressivity - the melody, that is. The performance, not the music, contained the expressivity. This melody attempted to open what was to be my first piece for harpsichord.

Arriving at a first indigenous piece

I had been working in a shopping mall selling electronic home organs with boom-chicka-boom beat-boxes and automatic arpeggiators rippling away (with only one extended forefinger on each hand doing it all!). In the shop corner, a few pianos silently looked on. When the store closed late each evening and I stayed behind for a couple of hours to work on my piece, this relentless sonic hard-sell affected my creativity in a strangely supportive way. The lack of expressivity on the manuals of the electric keyboards I was flogging to the public (the image of the horse-mummy comes back to mind ...) gave me a vital clue: the music itself, not the performance, had to contain the expression.

During this period, I was studying composition privately with Morton Feldman, who commented that the music I was writing was "screaming out to be performed"; that is, it needed to be wrenched off the page with all the sweat and blood required of its performance indications to create a performer's drama, not a musical drama. Though the duality of striped-suit salesman by day/Feldman acolyte by night is, admittedly, a bizarre contrast, I found that his insight, as it applied to those uni-volume organ keys in the shopping mall, revealed a hidden truth: musical drama is independent of performance drama. Harpsichordists, above all, know this.

After six drafts of the piece, I finally scrapped everything, keeping only the one phrase that actually sounded like it could work on the harpsichord - *et voila!* my first piece for harpsichord was born.

Example 1

from Sonata for Harpsichord

The salvaged phrase became the opening of a sonata. (See *Example 1*.) The reason it could be salvaged was that it contained a steady three-note motif which immediately undergoes various transformations, all of which I had wanted the listener to hear. Even more so, I wanted the palindromic subdivisions of the 11/16 metre into semiquaver groups of three and two notes to be heard. The harpsichord's light, even action and crisp detached sound capabilities are easily exploited to communicate these groups. Since the phrases only make sense because of the motivic pitches and rhythmic subdivisions - and not because of any pianistic expressivity such as phrase swelling (which would have distorted the motifs) - the music had to contain all the drama and, in a sense, merely be played-out by a harpsichordist (no disrespect intended!).

These rhythmic groupings are explicitly beamed in the score, but some performance considerations

Example 2 [Allegro moderato] $\text{♩} = 88$

Bar 63

between voices on major beats (indicated by Xs in the example) will be slightly offset from each other to keep each voice's motion unique.

Minimal Control, but Maximum Effect

Several years later, I wrote a piece for a harpsichord concert to raise money for the British Heart Foundation. My contribution was, ironically, called *Fast Forward*. Two more pieces followed, *Playback* and *Noise Reduction*, which, with *Fast Forward*, form a set entitled *Minimal Levels*. Influences of minimalism do creep into each of these pieces (which are also related in bearing names of tape recorder controls) but the nuts-and-bolts compositional thrusts are the fixed nature of the sound of the harpsichord and the method of sound production.

Noise Reduction presents a philosophical dilemma: can pitch be noise and vice-versa? The piece plays out, in under four minutes, an exposé of pitch-as-music, pitch-into-noise, noise-as-noise and noise-into-music, until finally keyboard technique is not enough, and the player must resort to using the body of the instrument.

Example 3 from *Noise Reduction*

The harpsichord's noise production capacity is great in scope. Key action, dense clusters, swift irrational or complex cross rhythms, repetitive meaningless pitches in broken patterns, narrow dissonant tremolos and percussive body sounds are all easily available.

Example 3, bar 1 illustrates how the relentlessly even sound level of the harpsichord can be exploited, rendering all pitches expressionless by preventing any notes from sticking out beyond their neighbouring notes. The listener assumes that

this stream of notes must be melodic in nature (pitch-as-music), until it is eventually revealed that they don't really develop into anything, and instead become pitch-as-noise (Ex.3, bar 10). Finally, the

pitches become even less functional as pitches, stacking up into massive chords (*Ex.3*, bar 17), hinting at a noisy six-bar blues progression.

All that remains is to dismantle pitch entirely by slowly switching off the 8' string until all that remains is the sound of the keys striking the keybed (noise-as-noise; *Ex.3*, bars 21-24). The ghost-like clattering sound is then rhythmically structured exactly like the opening pitches, thereby giving musical structure to the wooden noise (noise-as-music; *Ex.3*, bars 25-26). The lower 8' is repeatedly switched on and off while the finger action remains furious on the keys (*Ex.3*, bar 40+), until the player moves to the underside of the harpsichord, executing a knuckle-knock and a finger-roll on the body. Just as colourless as playing the body, the final gesture is a violent two-hand cluster on the extremes of the keys with the 8' switched on; here, pitch is reduced purely to noise.

Noise is that which we've decided to hear as not being music. When our pitch-trained ears are relieved of pitches on the harpsichord, what remains behind is the sound-noise of key action. Since this noise is sounding along with the production of every pitch, it, too, is organised in time. The more a listener chooses to hear noise in this organised manner, the greater the "noise reduction". After all, one man's noise is another man's music.

Playback and Fast Forward

Aside from referencing a button on a tape recorder, the title *Playback* refers to three things: rondo form utilising the *grand couplet*; nostalgia; echoes. A homage to the Couperins, this piece exploits the echo potential of playing the same pitch on two different manuals at nearly the same time.

Example 4

Example 4 shows beamed accelerations on these echoes, a sort of intensifying of reflections, which even develop a scalar tendency by bar 33. Like the ability to disengage strings entirely while playing in *Noise Reduction*, this doubling-up on identical pitches is unique to the harpsichord. The lugubrious *inégale* of the counterpoint encourages spreading of the articulation on major beats, as in the Sonata's fugue (*Example 2*).

Fast Forward relies entirely on the inherently even dynamic of every key each time it is pressed; the lack of variation in attack is a requirement in expressing the obsessive nature of relentless development in a monothematic piece. Played at a fast tempo, the initial one-bar motif is

Example 5

thus, a carefully-paced crescendo is written into the piece. Uniformity and precision in attack and tonal quality are vital in communicating the musical drama in the piece without the intrusion of

mechanically repeated over and over (*Ex.5*, bar 9), until a first variation appears (bar 10). Subsequently, each phrase introduces increasingly complex variants on the one-bar motif (for example, bars 19-20 elaborate, bar 45 inverts, bar 132 elaborates in the RH while the LH has a motivically-truncated hemiola). The density of pitch-attacks, both melodically and harmonically, increases throughout the piece;

shading a scalar run or attempting to balance the voicing between contrapuntal lines. Everything composed *is* to be equally heard, since everything composed *will* be equally heard.

Thrilled with the compositional variety one can achieve with only pitch and duration, I became happy to leave dynamic phrasing behind but add some new colours. The harpsichord then became involved in two further pieces: *Carnival at Wicken Bonhunt* for recorder and harpsichord, and *Child of Mann* for soprano, recorder, cello, harpsichord and DAT or cassette tape player. In combination with other instruments, the harpsichord never gets subsumed in the overall texture; again, the composer is dealing with the strong independent character of its nature. It should be treated like a rhythm section with backing (or fronting!) chords all in one. Baroque composers knew this well, and their writing for harpsichord within an ensemble never varies from this function. In general, it is best to avoid significant melodic material in the harpsichord part, unless the material is doubled by another instrument which will similarly deliver it. Seldom will the listener's ear be attracted away from the full-bodied sustaining sound of bowed or blown instruments (it's the nature of Western ears, not of the harpsichord, which has determined this). The harpsichord sound is not designed to express the human voice in the throes of angst or joyous abandon; it is too pure, incapable of melodrama. And so, we elevate it to the status of the voices of angels, clean and unaffected.

I love composing for the harpsichord. It is like photographing images in black and white, or watching pre-colour cinematic technique. It is two dimensional: the sound is there, or it isn't, just like the presence of light captured on black and white film stock. One then must work with that stark reality with imagination and sensitivity: the focus can be sharp or soft, shadows can be jet-black or grey, white light can be either confrontational or one's salvation. When viewing black and white, the audience continually observes that the images are not natural; therefore, the images themselves must be commenting on reality.

And so it is with the harpsichord: the sound is not real, it is hyper-real. The production by plucking is mechanical, and the sound is fixed. It is so consistent in sound production and re-production note after note, that it is beyond reality. Therefore, to write for harpsichord is to write for a purpose - the composer obviously must be trying to say something special, having chosen the harpsichord. Otherwise, the piece would have been written for the piano, wouldn't it?

Notes:

[1] A vastly important exception to this is the extended opening of Louis Andriessen's *Overture to Orpheus* whereby the body and decay of each sound is held in sharp relief to its attack. This is reinforced through the absence of harmony, and again reinforced through each pitch being repeated in the same register on another manual, highlighting the unique and fixed relationship between attack and body on its sound.

[2] Nearly all transcriptions of harpsichord or virginal music (especially for wind bands) are lamentable. The combination of precise plucked attack and swift decay can never be matched elsewhere; performances of the transcription are invariably leaden. All that has been transcribed are the pitches and their durations (as if that is what makes up a piece of music!); the harpsichord's sonic nature is left miles behind. We hear imprecise attacks of flautists articulating what should be a brisk series of attacks embroidering a melody. We hear the brass section swelling the sound *en masse*. We hear saxophones modulating the tone, and clarinets playing smooth cool legato runs where a spray of ammunition fire peppering/spicing the melodic counter-point should be. What we hear from these transcriptions are the melodies and harmonies; what we don't hear is the music.

[3] I am, of course, ignoring the existence of additional stops beyond the standard 8', and the existence of the buff stop and other wonderful diversions. But it is precisely because they are diversions from the primary resonance of the instrument that their use should be implemented at moments in a piece to highlight a departure from, and therefore an eventual return to, its central sound.

Kevin Malone is Senior Lecturer in Music at Manchester Metropolitan University. A major article on "Noise Reduction" will be published in *Contemporary Music Review* in 1999.