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Renaissance Harpsichord Renaissance:

Philip Pickett's approach to performance practice and why he commissioned the Trasuntino copy

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In this issue of *H & F*, Nicholas Mitchell puts forward some of the ever-increasing body of evidence for a pan-European system of related pitches which can be traced back to 1400 and dominated Europe until the early 17th century. Before the early years of the 16th century, the common instrumental and vocal ensembles had not been called upon to perform together, and though there seems to have been a relationship between the pitches employed by organs and *haut* and *bas* ensembles it was not absolutely necessary for the pitches used in church music (voices and organ) to be compatible with those used in secular chamber music or ceremonial music. This all changed around 1500, and we begin to see examples of every kind of instrumental and vocal ensemble performing together.

Praetorius' *Syntagma Musicum,* written in 1619, is crucial to our understanding of pitch in the 16th and early 17th centuries, but, Mitchell claims, it has been misunderstood. By telling us that church pitch was one tone lower than chamber pitch, Praetorius has led many scholars to believe that it was set and sounded one tone lower, when in fact, Mitchell believes, it was simply *written* one tone lower in order to compensate for the fact that church pitch (around a=520) was actually a tone higher than chamber pitch (around a=466). The pitch of medieval organs would have been expensive to change, so music for choir and organ was simply *written* a tone lower than that written for chamber or ceremonial ensembles – obviously to suit voice ranges, but also often to facilitate performances with other instruments.

Mitchell's findings were music to Philip Pickett's ears. According to the previously-held interpretation, the a=466 chamber instruments of the period would have been forced to play "in horrible and totally unlikely keys" when performing in church – "F major becomes E flat major, for example, and there was no such thing as an F lute, which might have made life bearable for the pluckers".

"As soon as we recognise that there is actually no real conflict between the written pitch of the music and the instruments which we know performed it, all the old and unfathomable problems of transposition and range disappear. The music of the period can be played on any of the instruments currently available without the need for unlikely transpositions, and, as it happens, modern copies truly modelled on the surviving originals tend to sound much more beautiful because dimensions and tensions are no longer compromised. What's more, the ranges of the instruments fit naturally with those of the voices."

If church organists were (of necessity) stubborn in their adherence to a long-established pitch, chamber musicians were no less so. Instrument makers in the Renaissance were strongly guild-based, and the family dynasties which made instruments and sold them throughout Europe (and the Americas) were few. Their conservatism was enduring: they made the same instruments in the same workshops for hundreds of years, making new instruments to be played with much older ones. They didn't need to change their designs. The Bassano family is a good example: even after moving to England to form Henry VIII's recorder consort, the family continued to make standard-pattern wind instruments and supply customers via their still-operational Venetian base.

In the search for an instrument which would fill the gap where a true 16th-century keyboard ought to be, inspiration for both Pickett and Katzman dawned in the form of two original 16th-century Venetian harpsichords held in private collections in Rotterdam and London, both still in playing order. The fact that they are still playable and sound so beautiful just goes to show, says Katzman, how inspiring originals can be, and how retaining them in playing order is so important for the future of instrument making and historic performance practice. (He doesn't accept that the restoration of historic instruments necessarily leads to loss. Usually, he says, there is no need to do more than replace a few strings; and if these are set at the right tension and pitch there can be no damage to the instrument.)

To make a copy of a 16th-century keyboard of this type, Katzman worked from the drawings and notes available for the 1531 Trasuntino in the Royal College of Music's Museum of Instruments. This instrument has been subject to various changes through time, which tell their own story about changing fashions in pitch, sound and use. It started life strung in iron (at low tension, according to Mitchell and Pickett – around 3 semitones below breaking point!) with an 8' and a 4' register, its keyboard extending from C/E to f^3. The original keyboard was later removed and a new keyboard built, extending from G/B to c^3 - probably around 1600, Pickett thinks, and done to raise the pitch by a fourth from the original a=348 to Praetorius' standard chamber pitch of around a=466. The next alteration (perhaps around 1630-40) was probably the removal of the 4' and replacement by a second 8'. At the same time the instrument might have been restrung in brass, at a higher tension, but the pitch dropped to around a=440 where it remained until after Vivaldi's time.

Although the RCM's Trasuntino is no longer in playing order, the soundboard and 8' bridge survive. Katzman trusted the original "one hundred percent", the only substantial difference between the original and the copy being in the size of the wrest-plank, which Katzman made slightly larger in order to lengthen the keys a little for the comfort of modern players – something in any case found in many slightly later Italian instruments. He has a great respect for the knowledge and techniques of past masters - who, he says, "knew more than we do". Basically, his logic goes, whatever they did, they had a good reason for doing it. For example, following the original, Katzman anchored the 4' hitchpins directly beneath the slab-sawn cypress soundboard with only a drop of glue; to install a 4' hitchpin rail, he says, would have altered the way the soundboard vibrates.

Where there's a quill there's a way

When working from an original which is no longer playable there are bound to be difficulties in achieving the sound of the original, whatever that might have been. Studying the 'lute-like' sound of the 16th-century instruments that had been such an inspiration, Katzman makes no apology for using the lute as his acoustic model. He therefore put a lot of thought into the choice of wood for the soundboard and bridge of his instrument. He was concerned that too rigid a soundboard would result in too much tension, too much 'inertia' or inability to respond; when the energy from the string is unable to flow into the soundboard it is trapped in the string, and the result is a more linear sound than the one he was after — a more rapid decay curve with none of the metallic fizz heard in so many modern Italians. Having made a copy of the same instrument four years earlier, he had found that slab-sawn cypress was successful (strangely enough, given the fact that most Italian originals have exactly that), and therefore chose Italian cypress. The rest of the instrument is made of cedar of Lebanon. The low-tension iron stringing is obviously a further important factor influencing the unique qualities of the Trasuntino's sound and response, as is the quilling. The fine outer box, also based on the RCM original, was made of pine by English builder Huw Saunders.

The answer, my friend, is blowing in the wind

Having commissioned the instrument, been involved with Katzman and Mitchell in all aspects of the design and specification, watched it being built and had it delivered ... how does Philip Pickett think it should be played? With 30 years of experience behind him, both as musical detective, director and wind player, he is remarkably clear and consistent in his ideas on articulation, style and approach.

"During the Renaissance, as at any other time in history, there were clearly defined articulation systems for wind instruments. Essentially, there were different syllables in use for wind tonguing in different countries. In different languages, syllables are strong or weak according to stress.

Tonguing systems mimic language, resulting in a variety in strength of attack, and determining whether the notes of any musical figure are connected or detached."

The various contemporary "articulation" systems employed by the other families of instruments were all broadly related and achieved the same results - the pairing of strong and weak "syllables" would have occurred whether bowing, plucking, fingering or tonguing. The fingerings given in Banchieri (1568-1634) and Diruta (*Il Transilvano* 1593 & 1609) suggest exactly such a strong-weak pairing of 'good' and 'bad' notes.

The wind evidence is, however, the most informative and clearly defined because of the clarity of some of the documents available, which illustrate in detail how the system worked. Rognoni (*Selva de varii passaggi* 1620), in his varied examples, is very clear about where to "connect" syllables (te re le re), and where not to connect (te te te te). We thus discover that Italian Renaissance articulation was often more fluid, more legato than in later times: the general result being, of course, much more vocal.

Thus, for keyboard instruments like the Trasuntino, we must look beyond fingering systems to the wider picture. "By examining all the various articulation systems employed by the different families of Renaissance instruments (and, perhaps more importantly, by studying the vocal music of the period), modern players can compile a series of Renaissance and early-Baroque 'articulation rules' for themselves which will prevent them from simply 'making it up as they go along' on the basis of their 'feelings' – or their experience with later music and later systems."

It takes pluck

In determining a performance practice for a particular historic keyboard instrument, at a particular period, Pickett's approach is, first, to obtain an instrument as close as possible to the original; second, to study the fingering of the music of the period and its relationship to other contemporary articulation systems and language; and third, to develop an awareness of the musical and rhetorical *intention* of the composer(s) - for example, what was the function of the music? What other instruments or sounds might the composer have been intending to emulate, and does the music in any way 'mimic' a style often associated with another instrument or genre? What kind of text was associated with similar musical figures in the vocal music of the period? What might the composer's rhetorical *locus topicus* have been? What emotions might the various musical figures represent? And so on....

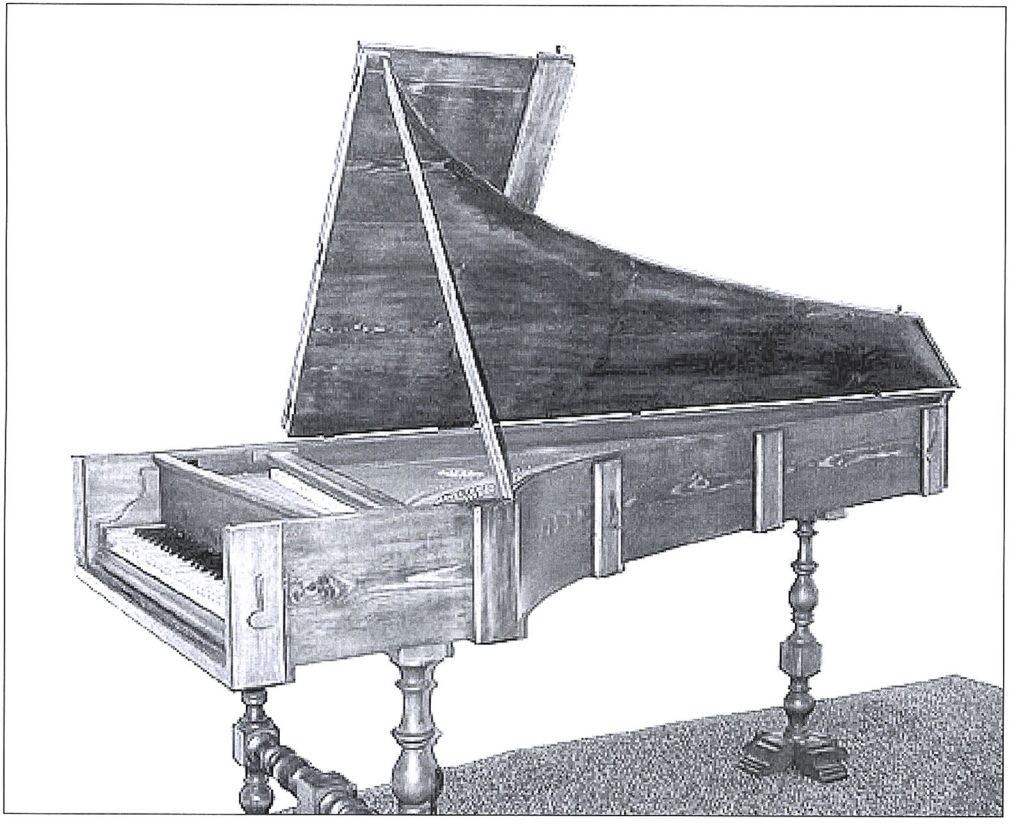
This combination of studies amounts to what is, in effect, a new approach to performance practice. Without a serious study of fingering and all the rest, some keyboard players have, to Pickett's ears, tended to 'make it up as they go along': they often do not choose an appropriate fingering system, nor do they seem to be familiar with how contemporary articulation systems were employed by wind, brass and string players. Although they may read Frescobaldi's notes on how to play his own music, they often approach what might be seen as "emotionally-obvious" musical figures quite differently each time they play, guided only by their own feelings. So, whereas they might often produce the "correct" articulation and Affekt for a given passage "by intuition", they might equally perform the same kind of passage in a manner which a wide range of contemporary evidence would argue against.

The fact that very different articulation systems and styles reigned in different periods can help to explain why an instrument as idiosyncratic and unfamiliar as the Katzman Trasuntino might only truly respond when the music of its own time is being played on it – "and when the performer really knows his stuff and is prepared to listen to what such an instrument tells him." For example, the presently-fashionable approach to Frescobaldi, Picchi, de Maque and other late 16th- and early 17th-century keyboard virtuoso performer/composers, which tends towards "constant and unremitting madness, wildness of imagination — not to mention over-aggressive, over-articulated and even violent playing" does not always extract the most successful response from the Trasuntino. "Virtuosity, foot-tapping rhythms, shocking dissonances, wild chromaticism, passion, eloquence, emotion and drama are all hallmarks of the wonderfully kaleidoscopic, often outrageous and sometimes bizarre pieces written by these men, but often a beautiful and intense lyricism seems to have been the composers' desired effect, not violence; and the instrument itself 'teaches' this in no uncertain terms."

Fingering systems are crucial, of course: they can restrain the performer from gratuitous effects

which are only possible with modern fingering, and, by adhering to period fingering systems, the player begins to gain some insight into how the music should be interpreted. But there is much more to be done. Italian music of 1580-1630 is one of Philip Pickett's main periods of expertise, and he feels that a broader and more open-minded and enquiring outlook is needed, from harpsichord makers, pundits, scholars and players, along with a deeper study and greater understanding of all the available sources of information and comprehensive practical experience of the entire surviving corpus of 16th-century keyboard repertoire – "rather than of a few choice Toccatas by Frescobaldi, Picchi and Rossi."

"As some treatises tended to be conservative, describing practice as it was some 10, 20 or even 30 years before the date of the treatise itself, one often has to look at slightly later sources to discern the direction performance was taking at any given time. Luckily there *is* a large and wide-ranging body of surviving documentary evidence, and many of the remaining gaps in our knowledge and understanding can be filled from a variety of other sources - musical, comparative, organological, didactic, iconographical and literary."



The final touch

With Pickett commissioning this splendid instrument from Katzman, and Pickett's wife, keyboardist Sharona Joshua, putting into practice the views on performance-practice and technique described above, the proof of the pudding is obviously in the eating. Take every opportunity you can to hear the instrument, both in solo recitals and with the New London Consort or Musicians of the Globe, and judge for yourself. I doubt you will remain sitting on the fence. And once we have started to re-examine something as fundamental as this, think of all the other questions that will follow. What next? You tell me.