

Harpsichord & fortepiano

Vol. 10, No. 2 Spring, 2006

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Musical Instrument Research Catalog
(MIRCat)

KEYBOARD INSTRUMENTS & QUOTATION

Using a Quotation from C.P. E. Bach

by Penelope Cave

Quotations and their influence and application

If we are to play and listen in an informed way, we all need to have some relevant quotations at our fingertips from contemporary composers and writers of musical treatises in order to apply their words of wisdom to our own performance. Some may be practical instructions on how to execute a certain ornament or advice on rhythmic alteration and still others may address more emotional and philosophical aspects. To this end, I have a growing collection in a card index box although some are more dog-eared than others.

Understandably, beginners often want to play the great pieces that they hear most, regardless of what is required in the preparation and performance of these major works, so to start this occasional series, I am choosing one that may encourage some consolidation of techniques as well as some new discoveries.

The following quotation comes from C. P. E. Bach's *Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments*, chapter on Performance (Chapter 3 of Part I) and consists of the last sentence in the 13th section but I have then tagged on the end of the previous sentence. It is found on Page 153 in the hardback Norton edition of the *Versuch*, Berlin 1753, translated and edited by William J. Mitchell, 1949.

C. P. E. Bach said:

"Good performance can, in fact, improve and gain praise for even an average composition... and the composer will learn to his astonishment that there is more in his music than he had ever known or believed."

In other words, it takes a musician with a real understanding of the instrument to play an average work. We will each have our own list of those we define as lesser composers whose composition is but average, and a good source might be the economical "Easier Piano Pieces" published by the Associated Board including composers such as Alcock or Hook. I once set Hurlebusch for a class and it was interesting to tease out all we could from this "unknown" composer and then

experiment with the means to express it in the most persuasive way upon the harpsichord. The same can apply to contemporary works that may not always be ideally suited to the instrument; they require one to work that bit harder in order to make the instrument sing so convincingly that the music speaks. The quotation made me think seriously about what constitutes "good performance." In CPE Bach's *Essay on the True Art of Playing Keyboard Instruments*, he reminds us that "a musician cannot move others unless he, too, is moved".

For example:

In practice, accompaniment figures such as an overlong Alberti bass figure or thin unimaginative textures may need real understanding of the chosen keyboard's sonority and the use of over-holding to discourage the left hand obtruding above the melody, which in itself will require articulation and possibly ornamentation to enhance its character. Too much repetition in the composition will exercise the player's imagination in order to hold the interest of the listener.

Questions to ask oneself may include: What "affect" was the composer trying to convey? How can a light piece be imbued with charm and humour? What extra ornamentation might help refresh a

repetition? Would a contrast of tone or touch be advisable? How can a change of harmony or rhythm be revealed to guide the listener through the most interesting points? Can subtlety of dynamics, phrasing and rubato or spreading of chords disguise a lack of subtlety in composition? Is there clumsy part writing and would moving the notes from one hand to the other improve the flow of the music?

Having gathered the necessary techniques required for a skilful performance, (all of which will gain praise in great works too) we could then remember the words of two other dedicated teachers.

Marpurg in his *Der Critische musicus* of 1749 states, "All musical expression has an affect or emotion for its foundation, demanding the utmost sensibility and the most felicitous powers of intuition... The musician must therefore play a thousand different roles; he must assume a thousand different characters as dictated by the composer." François Couperin, too, warned against thinking skilful technique sufficient in itself, in the preface of the 1717 edition of his *L'Art de Toucher*, he said, "I am more pleased with what moves me than what astonishes me"!

Win a Prize

We'd like to encourage submissions of *Letters* (or responses to them) and quotations for "Learning Early Keyboard Instruments" (like Penelope Cave's short note in this edition) to be submitted for discussion. A free copy of Douglas Hollick's CD, *Revolution* will be awarded to the best *Letters* for October's edition.

Decision made by Editor.