

# Harpsichord & fortepiano

Vol. 11, No. 1 Autumn, 2006

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Musical Instrument Research Catalog  
(MIRCat)

# INTERVIEW WITH TON KOOPMAN

By Kathryn Cok

*Renowned early music specialist Ton Koopman is known as a soloist on the organ and harpsichord, as an accompanist, conductor, musicologist and teacher. With the Amsterdam Orchestra and Choir he recently finished recording the complete cantatas of J.S. Bach. He recently created his own record label: Antoine Marchand with which he will publish future recordings. I spoke with Ton Koopman via the telephone from his home in the Netherlands.*

**KC:** I recently had the pleasure of listening to your new recording of the harpsichord works of Dietrich Buxtehude.<sup>1</sup> How did this come about?

**TK:** During the cantata recording project I was also recording all the organ works of Bach, and although Erato had asked me to record the partitas, there was simply no time to prepare everything. Erato then collapsed and I started my own label Antoine Marchand, so when the Bach cantata recording project was completed, we started thinking about what to do next.

I had started recording for Novalis in the early 1980's with one organ recording CD of Buxtehude works, so it was always in the back of my mind to record the complete works of Buxtehude. I thought it would be nice to start the Buxtehude project and finish the Bach project at the same moment. The harpsichord disc seemed the best option at that time.

It is nice to sit down and play the harpsichord again. Of course I am always playing, but a big part of my work is more and more as a conductor, with the Amsterdam Baroque Orchestra and Choir, but also as a guest conductor with other orchestras. I don't know why, but it is easier to stay an organist than a harpsichord player.

**KC:** When will the next harpsichord disc of Buxtehude be released?

**TK:** I think I will record in March, and it

should be released in the Buxtehude year (2007). In October I will be doing two discs with organ works, and then we will have begun everything except the chamber music. So then we can show all the aspects of Buxtehude during the year. I hope to finish at the end of 2008 or 2009, depending on funding.

**KC:** This recording was made using instruments by Willem Kroesbergen<sup>2</sup>. I know that he is your favourite living harpsichord builder. Why him in particular?

**TK:** Because I've known Willem for more than 35 years, and he knows what I like in a harpsichord, and his instruments allow me to do what I think is important on a harpsichord. We spoke a lot many years ago about dynamics, sound quality, about copying historical instruments. The good thing about his instruments is not only that they are strong, meaning you can really hear them, but they are extremely colourful and enormously dynamic. It takes a different attitude, a different technique to play on them. I think the technique that you use on an historic instrument and what you use on a Kroesbergen is literally the same. Too many harpsichord students now and young colleagues as well are getting used to playing on instruments that are too light with a shallow key depth, and in my opinion that is wrong.

**KC:** That leads then to an interesting question. A lot of builders now are claiming that they are copying historical instruments.

Do you think that this means that instruments that were restored years ago were not restored historically enough?

**TK:** In fact very few instrument makers are making copies at all. They say that they do it, but in the end copy very little of it. But as Willem Kroesbergen always said, it is not only important to have a design, but to listen to an historic harpsichord, and to listen to how the tone is made. Even with historic instruments that are in bad condition you can learn something. Try to analyse and try to imitate. I remember I once had my beautiful Ruckers next to an original and it was really like the younger brother. You hear the patina of the older instrument which is beautiful, but also the macho sound of the newer one.

**KC:** Are there any young builders that are up and coming now that you think have the potential to create an instrument with such a sound?

**TK:** There are some young makers who particularly studied the instruments of Kroesbergen, so I am hopeful that they in the end will not only make copies of his but even go further. I am convinced this will happen, because I know many makers who make an instrument with a nice treble register, but know very few who make a bass that makes you go "wow". Very few ever take the risk to go to an instrument that is unknown. I can imagine that in the collection of Kenneth Gilbert there must be many wonderful instruments, but I don't see any copies of them around.

**KC:** What then are your feelings on the current state of harpsichord pedagogy?

**TK:** I think it depends. As you know there are, in the harpsichord world, different schools. I personally feel that reading historical treatises is an important thing, and the other thing is using your ears. Your ears will tell you that even on a bad harpsichord it is important to tune it well. If you tune an

old Neupert in meantone it sounds already a little bit better than in equal temperament. The same is true with overlegato, with early fingering and with using trills, not as ornaments only but as a dynamic device. I see the current situation with harpsichord teaching as becoming much, much better, but how many teachers are speaking about overlegato?

Even people of the Leonhardt school or as I would like to say, even of the Koopman school, disagree about overlegato. If you use your ears there is no discussion to the fact that it sounds so much better. It is the same with early fingering. You can say that it is possible to imitate it with modern fingering, but this is not true. It takes time to acquire the ability to have a great variety in your ornamentation and your diminutions. One does it without thinking; the other has to practice it. But nobody is asking you about the result.

**KC:** You have quite an outspoken own style of continuo playing. How did this come to develop?

**TK:** The same way. In the continuo world there are basically two schools, Basel and the Hague, as I would put it very politely, and we know each other very well while we disagree quite completely. We both would say that we are using historical sources for our ideas, but then, you see, in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries there were as well many different schools. I think that one style of continuo playing works well for Bach, but might not work well for Cima or for Francois Couperin. Variety is extremely important. By experience and by reading you come to a way of playing continuo which is outspoken, because as you know, I believe you should dare to make harmony more colourful and that you should dare to be the percussionist of a bigger ensemble, so give lots of rhythm, give lots of dynamics, be the instigator of a group, but on the other hand never try to drown someone out, but create a lovely

background which gives inspiration to the other players. This will of course fit better in one type of music than in the other. You can never write out a continuo; the continuo part of a good player should be something that is improvised. Take the risk.

If I speak with my colleague from Basel about Heinichen<sup>3</sup>, he reads it completely differently. Maybe with many books you can prove more than one thing. I think for any harpsichord player at this moment, if you are not a good continuo player, than forget your career. Continuo is an essential part of the work of any harpsichord player, so it is worth the time to give a lot of thought to it. Nobody is asking you if you have practiced all the difficult figures for hours or if you can sightread well; the result is what people want.

**KC:** You are known as an organist, harpsichordist, conductor and musicologist. Is there a particular reason that you haven't made the fortepiano your own as well?

**TK:** Basically because I don't like the instrument! No, that's not one hundred percent true...I would play the piano only for Mozart, because that is music that I miss. I love the Mozart piano concertos. I like to conduct them but I don't like to play them on the piano. I try to make the maximum dynamic on the harpsichord and I think the harpsichord was perfect before the fortepiano came into existence. It became the dominant solo instrument not because it was forte, since it was softer than many harpsichords, but on it one had the opportunity to play crescendo and diminuendo in a way you never do on the

harpsichord. If I hear someone playing beautifully on the fortepiano then I say "Yes!", but I am not eager to do it myself.

**KC:** I understand there is something in your collection you would like the readers to have a look at. Could you explain a bit what that is about?

**TK:** Oh yes, the *ex libris*<sup>4</sup> with the depiction of the virginal. I am very curious to know what it is. If I look at it I see a virginal type such as that by Sebastian Virdung Agricola, dating from 1520-30. It presents a view of many different kinds of instruments, from the noble to the rustic such as bagpipes. I think it must have been an *ex libris*, and if so, one of the very earliest in existence with musical instruments. I am very interested to see if anyone comes across some information about it. I bought it from an auction in Berlin, and there they thought it was German. There are people who say, "No, it is not German at all, it is French," but they can't say why it is French, and some think it is English. I was so lucky to get it, and now I would like to know where it comes from.

**KC:** As a great collector is there any one dream item you are still looking for?

**TK:** There are many. I am looking for an original edition of the fourth book of Francois Couperin *Pieces de Clavecin* and *L'Art de Toucher le Clavecin*. I have the first three, but never could find the fourth book and never *L'Art de Toucher*, I am also keeping my eye out for a first edition or a very early edition of Frescobaldi *Toccatas*.

<sup>1</sup> Ton Koopman, Dietrich Buxtehude *Opera Omnia I*, Harpsichord Works I. Antoine Marchand, Challenge Records: CC72240, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Flemish, after Ruckers; Italian, after Giusti.

<sup>3</sup> Johann David Heinichen, *Der General-Bass in der Composition*.

<sup>4</sup> An *ex libris* is a paper that was often pasted into the front of a book, showing ownership of the item, often through a coat of arms or other symbols.