

Harpsichord & *fortepiano*

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INTERPRETATION ON MULTIPLE KEYBOARDS:

From the Performer's Perspective

By Richard Troeger

Most of us grew up taking the piano for granted as a general musical workhorse, used for solo and ensemble repertory, orchestral reductions, choral works, and so on. Keyboards have, of course, served this function from their beginning, and until the sixteenth century were largely dependent upon arrangements for their solo repertory. (Indeed, it is likely that what may be the earliest extant keyboard pieces, in the famous Robertsbridge Fragment, are arrangements of ensemble works.) However, prior to 1800, the stringed keyboard instruments that worked in these multiple roles were themselves quite diverse. In our efforts to approximate the musical experiences of any musical epoch before the nineteenth century, no single early instrument should be taken as an altogether dominant point of reference. I would like to offer a few reflections on the joys of "cross-pollination" in the keyboard realm.

I scarcely need to point out that experience on multiple keyboards seems to have been taken for granted from at least the sixteenth century and probably before. Particularly, players in the Iberian peninsula and in northern Europe often received their earliest training on the clavichord and then branched out to other keyboard instruments while continuing to play the clavichord, whose role was by no means confined to the preliminary stages (a point often overlooked in modern times). From Tomas de Sancta Maria in 1565 through to the early nineteenth century, we find mention or implication of performances using whatever keyboard instrument was at hand: in treatises, descriptions of musical situations, instrumental designations in publications, and illustrations. Obviously the organ was the primary instrument in churches, as was the harpsichord (and, later, fortepiano) in court and secular public performances; the clavichord was known in both domestic and court settings. As late as 1819, Friedrich Conrad Griepenkerl wrote rather condescendingly of the keyboardist who plays only the piano and not the clavichord as well. In the mid-eighteenth century, C.P.E. Bach was hardly revolutionary in his famous dictum that "Every keyboardist should properly have a good harpsichord and also a good

clavichord, so that he can play everything interchangeably on both."¹

For both listener and player seeking historical reconstruction of musical performance, this is a colourful area, and one gaining increasing practical attention.²

In one essential respect, all early keyboard instruments differ from the modern piano in that their general response is far less neutral. The modern piano will accept a very wide range of interpretations without especial "preference" in tonal response. A good, responsive harpsichord or clavichord will often hold considerable dialogue with the player, based largely on the instrument's response to the different musical textures (fundamental for the harpsichordist), its sustaining capabilities in relationship to polyphony (often particularly significant for the clavichordist), and the general nature of the attack, complexity, sustain, decay, and even "after taste" of the tone. (In fact, the more idiosyncratic a particular instrument is, the more specific may be its "participation" in forming an interpretation.) Responsive though both instruments are, playing the harpsichord or fortepiano without playing the clavichord as well is, for much of the repertory, like listening to only one side of a conversation. If one instrument will hold a dialogue with the

player, two or three instruments will offer a full conference. Different instruments can act as a multiple “check” against how various musical factors may have been understood, or handled, by the composer and contemporary players.

As is generally recognized, early stringed keyboard instruments are all highly distinct in their reactions, and yet have points in common. All feature a bright tone, distinct attack (bluntest on the fortepiano), fairly rapid initial drop off in volume, and a residual sustain of varying length that is short enough to prevent unwieldy accumulation of sound. All share, too, a subtle (or pronounced) variation in timbre across the compass. The harpsichord’s essential lack of touch sensitive dynamics is of course the major contrast to the others. As a corollary, this same lack gives the harpsichord great rhythmic incisiveness. The clavichord combines the best characteristics of the fortepiano and harpsichord: infinite dynamic flexibility with great clarity of attack and of overall timbre.

On all of these instruments, the player creates his or her own tone to a degree. Most harpsichordists will know the celebrated comment by Monsieur le Gallois – that Chambonnières’ touch on the harpsichord was so distinct that a single chord, played by him, would sound quite different from the same chord played by another. I have heard this phenomenon myself many times – notably in a master class wherein a celebrated harpsichordist and a participant repeated a single four-note chord, back and forth, on the same instrument (voiced in Delrin, by the way, without even the advantage of bird quill). Whispers ran through the audience over the stark contrast between the two sounds. Naturally, every pianist produces a more or less individual sound, through innate tendencies in voicing the textures. The clavichord’s tendencies are very pronounced in this regard. Beyond such textural/dynamic colouring, the fundamental quality of every player’s basic way of touching the keys emerges with unmistakable individuality.

Obviously, the different instruments require differing technical as well as musical approaches, whether to produce variants of a

single view of the music, or wildly contrasting interpretations. These differences sometimes put off the newcomer, but in the end are enormously stimulating. To offer some admittedly broad generalities: the harpsichord and clavichord or the harpsichord and fortepiano will generally require different technical means to different interpretive ends; the fortepiano and clavichord may use very different techniques for often similar results. In terms of both technical awareness and musical imagination, the experience of working out interpretations on two or three instruments can be invaluable. (It can also remind one of the refiner’s fire.)

When, in my youth, I first approached Bach’s *The Art of Fugue*, I worked with it on the harpsichord. Years later, when I began to work it out on the clavichord, I discovered a new world opening before me. Albert Schweitzer called the clavichord a “string quartet in miniature”, and while I do not know how extensive his experience with clavichords may have been, he epitomized the polyphonic vitality of a good instrument. (In love with the clavichord though I am, I would be the first to say that a poor one, or even a mediocre specimen, is worse than none at all.) The even greater clarity of texture, the dynamic light and shade, the variations in timbre that could be achieved, and the poignancy of certain effects led me to interpretations both brisker and more nuanced than I had before experienced. I often cite, in this context, the new possibilities for Contrapunctus 11, after the third subject in quavers has entered. The harpsichordist cannot do much but accept the buildup of rhythmic energy and textual massiveness, while delineating the parts as clearly as possible. With the clavichord, one can manipulate the dynamics so that the rhythmic surge is not the dominating feature, and both clarify the part writing and more strongly inflect the highly expressive harmonies.

Players with an affinity for later 18th century repertory often find much fascination in the relationship of the clavichord to the fortepiano. Mozart is known to have performed on and possessed clavichords; he

grew up with a clavichord; and his father recommended that if he could find “a good clavichord, such as we have” to borrow in Paris it would suit him better than a harpsichord [*Flügel*] and he would prefer it.³ In Mozart’s famous letter of 17 October 1777, describing Stein’s fortepianos, I have always been struck by his remark that “the last one [Sonata, K. 284] in D sounds exquisite on Stein’s pianoforte,” which suggests, especially in the letter’s context, that it was written as a generic keyboard work and that he found to his delight how well it came off on Stein’s instrument.⁴ This impression is reinforced for me by Mozart’s remark immediately following, suggesting that he was still newly exploring the world of pianos: “The device too which you work with your knee is better on his than on other instruments.”⁵ (Also, a year later his father, quoted above, still seems to think in terms of “harpsichord or clavichord.”) Moving directly from one instrument to another is exemplified in Charles Burney’s account of the “child of eight or nine years old” who performed in a public concert

“...upon a small and not good Piano Forte. The neatness of the child’s execution did not so much surprise me, though uncommon, as her expression. All the pianos and fortes were so judiciously attended to: and there was such shading-off [of] some passages, and force given to others, as nothing but the best teaching, or greatest natural feeling and sensibility could produce.

I enquired of Signor Giorgio, an Italian, who attended her, upon what instrument she usually practiced at home, and was answered “on the clavichord.”⁶

Coming, myself, to the fortepiano in my youth only after having first played the harpsichord and clavichord, I initially found that a Viennese-style five-octave fortepiano reminded me of nothing so much as a strangely enlarged clavichord—a point which has since been echoed to me by other players, who also agreed that the fortepiano was much easier to play! (Needless to say, the many varieties of early piano in themselves offer much input into interpretive possibilities.)

Some of the primary musical differences

between the harpsichord on the one hand, and the clavichord and fortepiano on the other, are outlined in the following considerations.

Articulation (even in the narrower sense of only linking and detaching notes) is in some respects quite different from one to another keyboard, and the differences can give the player much food for thought on how and why effects are made: always, of course, to be considered in terms of a specific musical context. How is a sharp staccato best conveyed on a crisp-toned fretted clavichord, as opposed to a larger, more voluptuous (perhaps unfretted) clavichord, a bright- or dark-timbred fortepiano, or most especially a harpsichord? What varieties of length on such a sharp staccato does each allow? What level of “structured legato” (near-legato) is appropriate to each (and in what acoustics)? How much of an overlegato smear can one make on one or another instrument? The clavichordist can heighten the effect of intense overlegato by slightly increasing the pressure on the keys; even to suggest similar intensity; the other instruments must rely on delicate effects of timing and actual or implied dynamics.

The harpsichord relies heavily on the dynamic effects built into the musical textures. A good instrument responds almost viscerally to every change in textural density: contrasts and gradations of thick versus thin voicing, high range versus low, rapid notes as opposed to slower. The other instruments are to a greater or lesser degree independent of these factors in their dynamic effects, and can mitigate or even override them. (This independence grew with the late 18th-century styles of piano writing.) The harpsichordist is limited to timing and articulatory elements which, used to bring out the textural variations, suggest or partially realise dynamic contrasts and gradations. Dynamic gradations are, of course, natural to the clavichord and fortepiano and can work independently of time and articulation; that is the crux of their difference from the plucked-string instrument. However, in this writer’s experience at least, the clavichord tends to dictate its *tempo giusto* within a much narrower range than the other two instruments, owing to its delicacy in

balancing various expressive elements. In my experience, it sometimes requires a slightly brisker tempo to allow all the parts to sustain fully together.

The harpsichord's sharp attack and basically flat dynamic make it inherently accentual (something the player sometimes strives to overcome), and rhythmically vital and sensitive. The clavichord and fortepiano are not inherently accentual to this degree, because of the migrating dynamic flexibility, but their sharp attacks can be made to emulate the harpsichord's rhythmic authority.

The clavichord particularly forces the player to think of shape and to make fine dynamic proportions, because any disproportion within the instrument's limited actual range can be fatal to the effect of the performance. The harpsichord forces one to think of shape, dynamically and otherwise, because implied or actual dynamic effects on this instrument depend on the projection of imagined dynamics; otherwise, the performance can become a mere succession of plucks. Ironically, the much louder harpsichord is most successful at dynamic illusion on the small, local level; the quiet clavichord can use actual dynamics on both large and small scales, but can suggest larger contrasts than the harpsichord. Only the

abilities of the two instruments add up to a total picture. The fortepiano has each of the other two instruments advantages in this realm. All of them are distinctly contrasting (as well as complementary) interpretive telescopes available to the adventurous musical astronomer.

The final mix of all the interpretive options and ingredients is, of course, complex beyond general analysis. Whereas the *clavichordist* may be able to give a very personal colour to a special turn of phrase or harmony by means of agogic accents, dynamic flex, extra pressure on the keys (to produce a quivering, increased sustain and perhaps slightly raised pitch), and varied vibrato on long notes, with a tempo calculated to allow these elements their best expression, the same player at the *harpsichord* will have to deal with delicate adjustments of touch and articulation to produce a similar effect—or perhaps find that either similar ingredients or very different measures might lead most convincingly to a very different effect. The same landscape will be differently rendered by etching as opposed to oil painting. What will each instrument tell you? Every voice that speaks will tell the story differently, so that long-term understanding is all the richer.⁷

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- ¹ [writer's own translation], C.P.E. Bach. *Versuch Über Die Wahre Art Das Clavier Zu Spielen*, 1. Auflage. (Berlin 1753), Paragraph 15, pp.10-11. (Original text: "Jeder Clavierist soll von Rechtswegen einen guten Flügel und auch ein gutes Clavicord haben, damit er auf beyden allerley Sachen abwechselnd spielen könne.")
 - ² Of course, there is eighteenth-century solo repertory specific to one or another keyboard instrument, such as Bach's *Goldberg Variations* designated for the harpsichord, and works by C.G. Neefe and F.W. Rust for the clavichord. However, the generic use apparent in publications by, for instance, Kuhnau and J.C.F. Fischer, as well as in the circumstances already cited, leave C.P.E. Bach's requirement as the more generally representative approach.
 - ³ Letter of 20 April, 1778. *The Letters of Mozart and his Family*, 2d ed. chronologically arranged, trans. and ed. b Emily Anderson (London: Macmillan; New York: St. Martin's Press, 1966), 529.
 - ⁴ Anderson, 329.
 - ⁵ Anderson, 329.
 - ⁶ Charles Burney, *The Present State of Music in Germany, The Netherlands, and the United Provinces*, (London, 1773), quoted in Raymond Russell, *The Harpsichord and Clavichord*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1959), 26.
 - ⁷ In 1989, I was invited to an early keyboard conference, to be one of a panel of commentators on harpsichord pedagogy. I asked the audience at one point, "How many of you play the harpsichord?" Nearly everyone raised a hand. "Organ?" Many hands. "Fortepiano?" A few. "Clavichord?" One or two hands. Seventeen years later, we are seeing more equable emphasis on the different instruments.