

Harpsichord & fortepiano

Vol. 11, No. 2 Spring, 2007

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Musical Instrument Research Catalog
(MIRCat)

**Harpsichordfest 2006, 13-14 October 2006,
Manchester University
Report by Gary Carpenter**

Amongst the general morass of festivals celebrating the Shostakovich centenary, Reich's 70th birthday, Finnissey's 60th, the work of Helmut Lachenmann (no particular reason) and the 250th birthday of Mozart, nestled Pamela Nash's innovative *Harpsichordfest* 2006 (13th – 14th October 2006, Manchester University). It may be that Manchester is too far north of Watford, or that the Festival began on a Friday 13th, or that there was simply too much going on that weekend, but inexplicably, this amazing event passed by unnoticed by most of the nation's journalistic community, and that was a shame.

When putting together a linked event of any kind, it is an assumption that the Artistic Director will have "a concept". This can be visionary to the point of insanity – witness Salzburg's staging of all Mozart's operas, or as when Graz put in place a moratorium on the performance of all Mozart for a year—interestingly perverse. The "concept" behind this second *Harpsichordfest* was simple yet subtle, that in the world of new music for harpsichords it is demonstrably true that to quote Mao Tse Tung "a hundred flowers blossom, a hundred schools of thought contend".

To this end Ms. Nash assembled a varied cast of cembalists ranging from hardcore modernists (e.g. Jane Chapman) to recent converts to the instrument (e.g. Adam Swayne) to traditionalists (e.g. David Francis). These and other distinguished soloists Maggie Cole, Ian Thompson, Gavin Wayte and Pamela Nash herself, were set against small and large ensembles in the first evening concert and in duo plus (occasionally) electronics in the second where astonishingly, five premieres were heard, four of which were written expressly for *Harpsichordfest*. The music itself was unified only by the employment of the harpsichord or harpsichords and the integrity of the composers' intentions.

The first evening concert (conducted by Gavin Wayte) displayed the harpsichord as a *concertante* instrument and included works by Martin Butler (*Back to Ground*), Manuel De Falla (*Concerto*), Stephen Dodgson (*Capriccio Concertante* – with the legendary recorder player John Turner joining Pamela Nash as joint soloist), Walter Leigh (*Concertino*) and Henryk Górecki (*Concerto*). In many ways, it set the tone; the small but appreciative audience contained an appreciable number of composers and composition students both from the University itself and from the neighbouring Royal Northern College of Music.

Commonly, the "tendencies" of individuals from within the compositional world (and especially the world of academia) vary, and opinions by the proponents of differing schools of musical thought can be expressed both volubly and often intemperately. What was particularly notable here was the openhearted acceptance by composers who, under normal circumstances, might be expected to vehemently criticise the fare; most memorably the universal pleasure expressed at the Górecki *Concerto* in Jane Chapman's life enhancing performance.

What neutralised the otherwise controversial juxtaposition of so many different types of music was not just the honesty and sincerity of the composers represented or the enthusiastic and classy solo and ensemble performances (the first rate wind and string players were drawn entirely from the ranks of Manchester University's student body), but also, and particularly, the integral and perspicacious choices Pamela Nash made as curator of the event. This was even more apparent in her radical approach to the second main event which consisted of harpsichords, usually in pairs, coupled with electronics.

Eschewing any idea of fashion as a driver, Ms Nash relied on her considerable experience as performer and commissioner of new works to build a programme that was able to place Steve Reich (*Piano Phase* in a version for two harpsichords) and Graham

Fitkin (*Compress for 2 harpsichords* – premiere) with György Ligeti (*Continuum*) and Sir Peter Maxwell Davies (*Four Lessons For Two Keyboards*) on the one hand (before he became less hardcore), and with Stephen Dodgson (*Carillon for 2 harpsichords*) and the highly individual, not to say eccentric, *Ailís Ní Ríain* (“2 Steep 4 Sheep [some hills are]” for amplified harpsichord and tape) on the other. Nash even took a punt on a relative newcomer, Arthur Rathbone Pullen (*Revolution for 2 harpsichords and tape*).

All of it feels like inspired intuition, but was actually a remarkable demonstration of the power and application of lateral thinking, whereby seemingly unrelated musical creators can be assessed entirely on their own musical terms by virtue of their placement within a fundamentally benign musical setting. Never was this more apparent than with the senior composer on this occasion, Stephen Dodgson, whose expressive approach to the harpsichord would seem to place him at odds with many of the younger composers around him who often exploit the more percussive and astringent aspects of the instrument.

But interestingly, the musical environments which one would think Dodgson himself might find unconducive to a full appreciation of his aesthetic, in fact conspired only to demonstrate the sensitivity of his ear and underpin some surprising connections. For example, his fascinating *Carillon* with its application of bell ringing changes, reinforced the connection in another context to Sir Peter Maxwell Davies's *Stedman Doubles*, the neoclassicism of Dodgson's *Capriccio Concertante* forged an unexpected link with Martin Butler's *Back To Ground*. New works benefited from composers' introductions and here again Mr. Dodgson displayed an endearing erudition. Post-concert discussion also reflected the global perception that here was something rather special that had succeeded in breaking down barriers that are not publicly so obviously perceived, but which never the less often seem to drive an unnecessary

wedge between colleagues who, more often than not, are striving for common aims in different ways.

In addition to the above, the eminent Americans Elaine Funaro (harpsichord) and Kevin Malone (composer and Senior Lecturer, Manchester University) led a wide ranging composition workshop; whilst Mark Wingfield (electric guitar) and the indefatigable Jane Chapman played a Saturday lunchtime gig titled: “Where jazz improvisation meets composition and East meets West”. They are working on a snappier title ... whilst we contemplate a brilliantly devised and brilliantly realised event; for the couple of hundred or so people who were there, this festival was a triumph and it will resonate in memory for a very long time.

Clavichord Symposium, 27-29 October 2006, Russell Collection, University of Edinburgh

Report by Judith Conrad

A celebration was held in the end of October in Edinburgh, partly to honour the acquisition of three important new clavichords which were part of the collection of Dr. Rodger Mirrey. It took the form of a three day Symposium on the Clavichord in St. Cecilia's Hall, Cowgate, with concerts on the clavichords in the collection. There are now nine clavichords in the Museum of Instruments (which is part of the University of Edinburgh), all important and all but one in playable condition. The wonderful thing is that they allow you to play them! I can't stress enough what a marvellous, illuminating and gratifying policy that is, and St. Cecilia's Hall is almost unique in the modern world in following it. It would have been worth coming from afar to visit, even without the 15 or so fine presentations we were treated to on 27 - 29th October 2006.

Dr. Mirrey decided to donate the entire collection, which consists of eleven harpsichords, three miscellaneous plucked instruments, five pianos and three clavichords. The first clavichord is a rather famous triple fretted, early 17th-century instrument formerly known as "*Praetorius*" because of its resemblance to the illustration in "*Syntagma Musicum*" (but renamed "Flemish" (?) in the course of the weekend). This is very possibly the oldest surviving clavichord made north of the Alps. The other two consist of a very charming small (C-d³) unfretted Saxon instrument from about 1740, perhaps made in Dresden; and an unusually large (FF-a³, more than five octaves) late 18th-century instrument with 4' strings added in the bass, thought to be from Rafrut in Saxony.

The opening concert on Friday night however, was given entirely on the 1763 Johann Adolph Hass clavichord from the Russell Collection. First Paul Simmonds played music by two Bach sons and a Bach pupil, then Michael Tsalka gave an elegant programme of four sonatas by Daniel Gottlob Türk, a composer and educator from the time of transition from clavichord to piano, whose full blown sonatas are a source of astonishment to those who only know his teaching pieces.

The lectures began gently on Saturday morning with a discussion by Simon Field of databases for cataloguing early instruments (he is developing one in XML). This was followed by a fact-filled presentation by Neil Coleman on the Friederici dynasty, of which three members were clavichord makers, including Christian Ernst Friederici who was referred to, when Silbermann died in 1753, as the man "best able to console us for his loss." This was followed by a travelogue by Paul Simmonds who led us in the steps of a 19th-century German born but London based organologist and clavichord collector named Carl Engel. Paul was perhaps the hardest working of the presenters; in addition to this lecture and his Friday night recital, he did quite a lot of the tuning for concerts and

also ran a workshop on Sunday morning.

There were two lecture recitals on the topic of playing on clavichord rather than on some other sort of keyboard.

Gratifyingly, both of them were given partially on the small Dresden clavichord from the Mirrey Collection. David Breitman discussed the performance of Haydn, a known clavichordist all his life (he ordered an instrument in 1794, on which he said he composed the oratorio "The Seasons"), whose music is often assumed to have been written for fortepiano. David played the F Minor *Andante con Variazioni* convincingly on the Hass. Micaela Schmitz played 17th-century music by Fischer, Buxtehude and Scheidt, switching back and forth from clavichord to harpsichord and discussing how in some cases she changes the articulation and the fingering with the instrument; she suggested that in such cases both interpretations might be equally valid and might illuminate each other.

John Koster gave a very detailed discussion of clavichord stringing practices in which he argued for a return to lighter tension, based on his calculation of original stringing, derived mainly from the gauge numbers, assumed to be for Nuremberg wire, written next to the wrestpins in many original clavichords. He feels that many modern builders are working well outside the historical parameters. His prime example was the construction of an instrument after the Gerstenberg Pedal Clavichord by Joel Speerstra and John Barnes (former curator of the Edinburgh Collection!) written up in Speerstra's recent book, *Bach and the Pedal Clavichord* (University of Rochester Press 2004). In a recent *Clavichord International* interview, Joel quoted C.P.E. Bach's statement: "In order that the strings be attacked as well as caressed and be capable of expressing purely and clearly all degrees of forte and piano, they must be resilient." Here is a classic confrontation between those who would look at the music and the playing technique and make instruments to facilitate it and those who believe in the indisputa-

bility of numbers. However, C.P.E. Bach left no gauge numbers behind, and his builders did.

Darryl Martin, curator of the collection, presented his findings that the clavichord formerly known as "Praetorius" exhibits traits that make it likely to have been built in Flanders around 1620; after which I attempted to demonstrate the plausibility of this by giving a concert on the instrument entirely devoted to music of Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck. Although this clavichord looks, dare one say it, quite shabby, the sound is quite another thing, as the instrument is clear and responsive. This is the instrument whose picture was on the advance publicity, and it deserves to be a major star.

In the evening it was time for the Hass again, on an all Mozart recital played magnificently by Pierre Goy. The Hass is not the easiest instrument out of which to coax *Sturm und Drang* (I would have liked to have heard the Rafruth instrument in some of those programs), but for this, in his hands it served admirably. There were multiple encores and wild applause (which did not, by the way, diminish the ability of anyone to hear the next encore – that myth of clavichord performance seems to be finally fading).

On Sunday afternoon Andreas Hermert presented his copy of an early clavichord found in a convent in Stary Sacz (Convent of Santa Clara, southeast of Krakow in Poland), which he measured and drew in 2003. Quite similar in some ways to the triple-fretted Flemish(?) c. 1620 clavichord in the Mirrey collection, it is also C/E-c³ but plays at quint pitch. It has a unique key guiding system and a soundboard that passes all the way under the keyboard, and bears a date that Andreas reads as 1630. His elegant copy was not put on display for us to try but was demonstrated in concert by Maria Erdman, who played a number of mostly small 16th- and 17th-century pieces from Poland and surrounding areas. She also presented and played a number of small pieces from a 1768 manuscript found in the same convent, as well as a really

interesting sonata by Christian Wilhelm Podbielski (1740- 1792), who was an organist in Königsberg and the teacher of E.T.A. Hoffmann; this she played on the Hass.

It was a symposium without many of the frills Americans are used to: no communal meals or communal living, no gala receptions, no name tags or lists of addresses and phone numbers of attendees. However, the Friends of St. Cecilia's Hall provided coffee, tea and delicious biscuits at several breaks, and the British Clavichord Society manned the welcome booth with friendliness and graciousness. And before the last concert, the announcement was made that the collection would still be open for us to visit -most satisfying food for the soul! The closing concert was a recital for voice and clavichord by Claire and David Griffel. David mostly used the London Dolmetsch clavichord, but he did use a fortepiano to accompany "Arianna" by Haydn, an extended work clearly written for a professional singer, unlike most of the songs on the programme which were most likely *Hausmusik* for amateurs by Telemann, C.P.E. Bach, J.A.P. Schultz, and J.F. Reichardt (whose setting of "Erlkönig" Goethe was greatly preferred to Schubert's).

David said that gradually as they worked together on the repertoire he realized that he was not inaudible; the timbre of the clavichord was different enough from the voice to cut through it. The secret of performing clavichord with voice, as of a good marriage, he finally concluded, was not really to find a very soft, unassertive singer; rather, it was to find a singer who listened well and with interest to what the clavichordist was doing. It sent us out, back into the cold, largely clavichordless, real world, with warm feelings.