

Harpsichord & fortepiano

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AN OVERVIEW OF PEDAL HARPSICHORD RECORDINGS

By *Mark Ganillin*

The Instrument

The pedal harpsichord, as differentiated from a harpsichord with registration pedals, is an instrument that can produce lower-range notes played by the feet in addition to the normal range of the two manuals. E. Power Biggs described it as combining "harpsichord sparkle and clarity with the bass richness and depth of an organ." The additional lower register notes can be obtained in either of two ways. In the first way (commonly known as the "pull-down" system), rods or cords connect the string-plucking mechanism of the lower manual to an organ-like pedalboard. When pushed down by the feet, the pedalboard keys activate the lower manual strings, producing an independent voice. The second system consists of an independent, pedal-operated harpsichord resting on the floor, or on a stand near the floor, and played in conjunction with a conventional two-manual harpsichord to complete the system. Although the floor harpsichord itself is often referred to as a pedal harpsichord, the term also applies to the combined system of the two-manual and floor harpsichords.

Although no complete instruments of either type have survived from the Baroque era, there is enough historical evidence to make a convincing case that such instruments did exist, most likely as home practice instruments for organists. For example, the cut-out holes used to allow a connection between the jacks and the cords on the "pull-down" system can be seen on some vintage instruments. In addition, several pedal clavichords have survived, and a survey of J.S. Bach's possessions at the time of his death included three "claviers with pedals." It is not clear

whether the pedal harpsichord was an instrument for which music was specifically composed or whether it functioned solely as a substitute for the organ in the home. Several well known works by J.S. Bach (e.g. *Trio Sonatas*, *Passacaglia in C Minor*) specified "two claviers and pedal" and were assumed to be written for the organ but might well have been written, some historians assert, for an instrument like the pedal harpsichord.

Since there are no surviving examples, modern builders have been challenged to use their imaginations, technical skills, and historical references to re-create the originals. In the early 1930's, some European harpsichord manufacturers, such as Ammer, Neupert, and Mandler-Schramm, began to experiment with the production of pedal harpsichords. In the U.S., builders such as John Challis and Eric Herz began producing similar instruments in the early 1960's, contributing their own innovations. The tradition has continued to the present day with several builders (e.g. Hubbard Harpsichords, Colin Booth) producing fine models, usually as special-order items. Fortunately, the enthusiasm of a number of musicians for these instruments has led to a respectable library of recordings which have allowed their unique sounds to be preserved for posterity. For those who are intrigued by the sonic possibilities of the pedal harpsichord, the following overview of recordings may hopefully provide some further avenues of investigation and enjoyment.

The Recordings

The recorded repertoire of the pedal harpsichord has tended to rely heavily on Bach's organ music, chosen to take

advantage of the organ-like range and harpsichord plucking mechanism, providing an alternative sonority to familiar-sounding pieces. The various strands of a contrapuntal fugue, for example, can be heard more clearly on the pedal harpsichord than on an organ, whose echo tends to muddy the lines rather than clarify them. However, several artists have explored other Bach works as well as the music of other composers and musical styles not normally associated with the organ, or even with the harpsichord itself.

Between 1951 and 1955, Austrian keyboardist Isolde Ahlgrimm recorded the Bach Works for Harpsichord series, an astounding collection of about 20 titles on the Philips label encompassing all of the major works for harpsichord as well as some less often performed pieces, works normally associated with the organ, and a few works whose instrumentation is ambiguous. On several of the albums, she utilized her 1941 Ammer pedal harpsichord (in conjunction with either a 1937 or 1941 conventional Ammer two-manual harpsichord), often using the pedalboard notes to add dramatic emphasis to bass lines being played on the manual. This worked particularly well on "Art of the Fugue," the "Toccatas," and several of the preludes and fugues comprising the "Well Tempered Clavier."

Certainly the most enthusiastic praise for the pedal harpsichord was given by E. Power Biggs, the legendary Columbia records organist. Biggs purchased a pedal harpsichord built by John Challis sometime in the early 1960's. He praised the metal-framed instrument for its tuning stability as well as its musical completeness, recommending one to every organist (if they could afford one) for home practice. He replaced his home organ with the pedal harpsichord and, over the next decade, recorded a series of albums that explored a wide range of musical territory. In addition to the usual Bach (organ preludes and fugues, trio sonatas, etc.), he recorded an album of piano standards and even two

albums of Scott Joplin rags, which he adapted to the instrument. While he made no claim that these pieces sounded better on the pedal harpsichord than on the piano, his enthusiasm for experimentation was obvious and infectious, and the albums were very popular. He also recorded six Walther organ concertos on two albums, one album played on the organ and the other on the pedal harpsichord, providing an interesting opportunity for comparison. Toward the end of his career, Biggs recorded Handel's "Aylesford Pieces" as part of an anticipated album of Handel's music for the pedal harpsichord. Unfortunately, that project was never completed and the tracks were issued on a Biggs tribute set after his death in 1977.

Before becoming the New York Philharmonic organist and harpsichordist for two decades beginning in 1955, Bruce Prince-Joseph was apparently the first American to record on the pedal harpsichord. His 1954 Cook recording, which included the Mozart Sonata in C Major, utilized his own custom made Neupert instrument.

In May, 1967, Swiss organist Lionel Rogg recorded an album of Buxtehude organ music at his home using his Wittmayer pedal harpsichord, which provided an innovative perspective to the music of one of Bach's greatest musical influences. Rogg later recorded an album of Bach organ music at the Oryx recording studio, employing their pedal harpsichord, which was manufactured by John Feldberg.

British organist Nicholas Jackson recorded an album consisting of seven Walther organ concertos after Italian masters, with three concertos employing the Oryx Feldberg pedal harpsichord and four played on the organ. This album was recorded in 1969, preceding Biggs' Walther album by about five years.

German organist Stefan Palm's Bach recordings are unique in that his instrument is of the "pull-down" variety, without the independent floor harpsichord. It was made by Martin Sassman to Palm's specifications.

Palm has also included at least one uncommon selection, his own arrangement of the Violin Concerto in E Major.

Most recently, Peter Watchorn has begun an ambitious project of recording all of Bach's harpsichord works, some of which will utilize the pedal harpsichord, in a series which is similar in scope to that of the 1950's Philips recordings of Isolde Ahlgrimm, with whom Dr. Watchorn studied earlier in his career. As of this

writing, only Book I of the Well-Tempered Clavier (which utilizes a pedal harpsichord) has been released, although the series will eventually encompass ten CD's.

Though the pedal harpsichord's expense limits its exposure and popularity (buyers must in essence purchase two harpsichords), the increasing number of new recordings and reissues may provide the impetus for a further revival of this unique historical hybrid. In the meantime,

Pedal Harpsichord Discography

Performer	Title	Label - Number	Year	Instrument Maker
Isolde Ahlgrimm	Bach Complete Works for Harpsichord	Philips – Various (LP) ¹	1951-5	Ammer
Isolde Ahlgrimm	Art of the Fugue	Tudor 06100-1 (LP) ²	1969	Ammer
Douglas Armine	Bach on the Pedal Harpsichord	Priory 523 (CD)	1995	Colin Booth
E. Power Biggs	Bach on the Pedal Harpsichord	Columbia MS6804 (LP)	1965	John Challis
E. Power Biggs	Holiday for Harpsichord	Columbia MS6878 (LP)	1966	John Challis
E. Power Biggs	Plays Scott Joplin on the Pedal Harpsichord	Columbia M32495 (LP) ³	1973	John Challis
E. Power Biggs	Plays Scott Joplin – Volume 2	Columbia M33205 (LP) ⁴	1974	John Challis
E. Power Biggs	Bach Trio Sonatas 1-3, Concerto in G Major	Columbia MS7124 (LP) ⁵	1967	John Challis
E. Power Biggs	Bach Trio Sonatas 4-6, Concerto in A Minor	Columbia MS7125 (LP) ⁶	1967	John Challis
E. Power Biggs	Six Walther Concertos after Italian Masters	Columbia M32878 (LP)	1970	John Challis
E. Power Biggs	Aylesford Pieces by Handel	Columbia M35180 (LP)	1970	John Challis
Nicholas Danby	Introduction to Bach Organ Works	Oryx EXP 3 (LP) ⁷	1968	John Feldberg
Tom Robin Harris	Historical Harpsichord	Augustana Records (No Number) (CD) ⁸	1997	David Macdonald Philip Tyre
Nicholas Jackson	Walther Concertos for Organ	Oryx 1738 (LP)	1969	John Feldberg
Martin Neary	Bach Concertos for Organ	Oryx BACH 1040 (LP) ⁹	1969	John Feldberg
Anthony Newman	Bach on the Pedal Harpsichord and Organ	Columbia MS7309 (LP)	1968	Eric Herz
Anthony Newman	Harpsichord, Organ, Pedal Harpsichord	Columbia 32229 (LP)	1970	Eric Herz
Stefan Palm	Plays Johann Sebastian Bach Concert for Pedal Harpsichord	Project Fries Kunsthaus LC8139 (CD)	1992	Martin Sassman
Stefan Palm	Bach Trio Sonatas	Amphion 19216 (CD)	2001	Martin Sassman
Bruce Prince-Joseph	Forgotten Pedal Harpsichord	Cook 1131 (10" LP) ¹⁰	1954	Hans Neupert
Yves Rechsteiner	Bach – Various Works and Transcriptions	Alpha 27 (CD)	2001	Macheret
Christian Rieger and Anton Steck	Porpora Violin Sonatas	MDG 620 1034-2 (CD)	2000	-
Lionel Rogg	Works of Buxtehude	Oryx 1732 (LP) ¹¹	1967	Wittmayer
Lionel Rogg	Bach Preludes and Fugues	Oryx BACH 1019 (LP) ¹²	1967	John Feldberg
Peter Watchorn	Bach – Das Wohltemperierte Clavier – Book One	Musica Omnia 0201	2006	

readers are encouraged to sample the items on the following discography and to consult the selected bibliography. The author makes no claim as to completeness and requests that titles of recordings that are not included be forwarded to him through the Editor.

A Pedal Harpsichord Bibliography

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 Palmer, Larry, "The Pedal Harpsichord," *Diapason* 65/1 (Dec 1973).
 Rechsteiner, Yves, "Pedal Harpsichord," *Organ Loft* 2001.
 Watchorn, Peter, "Isolde Ahlgrimm," *Harpsichord and Fortepiano* 7/1 (June 1998).

**The Harpsichord* was published 1968-1975 by the International Society of Harpsichord Builders in Denver, Colorado, and the editor was Hal Haney.

Endnotes

- 1 See Peter Watchorn's Isolde Ahlgrimm discography (*Harpsichord and Fortepiano*, June 1998) for a complete listing of the albums in this series. Some titles in this series have been reissued on CD by Baroque Music Club (BACH 726, BACH 727) (www.baroque-music-club.com)
- 2 Reissued on CD as Tudor 7030
- 3 Reissued on CD as Sony SFK89267
- 4 Three tracks from this album reissued on CD as Sony SFK89267
- 5 Reissued without the Ernst Concerto on CD as Sony SBK60290
- 6 Reissued without the Vivaldi Concerto on CD as Sony SBK60290
- 7 Both pedal harpsichord tracks reissued on CD by Baroque Music Club (BACH 727)
- 8 Available from Runstone Bookstore (001-309-794-7541)
- 9 Reissued on CD by Baroque Music Club (BACH 707)
- 10 Available on CD from Smithsonian-Folkways Recordings (001-800-410-9815) (www.folkways.si.edu/cook)
- 11 Reissued on CD by Baroque Music Club (BMC 25)
- 12 Reissued on CD without Prelude and Fugue in G Major by Baroque Music Club (BMC 25)