

Harpsichord & fortepiano

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INTERVIEW WITH DEREK ADLAM

by Paula Woods

PW: Derek, you're something of a legend in early music circles. You're known as a performer and recording artist, as well as being a distinguished instrument maker and scholar. So to start, I'd like to ask whether you come from a musical family.

DA: Well, not really. I did have two musical grandfathers, but they were not professional musicians, and certainly there was no music in my own home as a child. I didn't start any kind of serious musical study until I was about ten. That really is far too late, and I strongly believe that children must be brought up with access to music from the earliest possible age – as the child learns to speak. It needn't be very intensive, but the ability to learn a musical language is confirmed as a child learns to speak and to manipulate language itself. The "brain wiring" is established at a very early age, I think. Because I came to it late, I've always felt that for me music is not an entirely natural thing.

PW: Did you hear much music as a child?

DA: Very little. I was aware that such things as pianos existed, and there was a certain amount of music at my school, but on the whole it was not taken seriously there. I resented the kind of trivial percussion exercises we were made to do. It wasn't *real music*. I was always drawn to keyboards, and I always had the most instinctive response to old keyboards, long before I knew what they were.

.... My music master at school suggested the Guildhall and I was offered a place at the interview, for which I am eternally grateful. I did the three-year course, and stayed on for another year, because by then I had taken up the harpsichord. I was extraordinarily fortunate to be taught there by Frank Lafitte, an immensely talented man, who had been trained by Marmaduke Barton, whose own teacher had studied with Liszt and Clara Schumann —a much more continental approach to playing than one got from distinguished English teachers of the time. He was noted as an interpreter of Schumann and Debussy, and gave the first performance in England of Rachmaninov's Second Piano Concerto.

PW: So there was a very strong inclination towards lyricism?

DA: Absolutely, and also a very strong, classic technique...It was highly disciplined, and based on a very simple finger technique. You learned how to play chords without undue exertion, and above all encouraged to listen carefully to the tone one was producing – balance the chords, and make a clear musical line. I'm emphasising this because later it was so helpful when I came to play the harpsichord and clavichord. It gave a method of working that enabled one to approach any instrument and get the best out of it. We were also encouraged to develop a strong work ethic, so that one was happy to spend hours sitting at a keyboard, working these things up...

I was also lucky to meet Harold Dexter, the organist of Southwark Cathedral. I took organ lessons with him, and he was very familiar with the Continental tradition, and Continental organs...From him I learned a good deal about early articulation and phrasing.

PW: It sounds as though the Guildhall was the right place at the right time?

DA: Absolutely. And another presence was Celia Bizony, who taught some early music as part of the history of music course...It's interesting that both Frank and Celia were not actually English. Both felt that they were outside the establishment, and believed that this had held them back in their careers...

Until this time, early music had really been dominated by Dolmetsch, although of course Arnold Dolmetsch was dead by then, and the tradition was carried on by his daughters... The really important people in the nineteenth century were the instrument collectors – Carl Engel and Moritz Steinert for example...Steinert was a deeply musical violinist and cellist, as well as a devotee of the clavichord. He didn't much care for the modern piano – and it was he who found the Hass harpsichord in an attic in Vienna. It's now in the Yale Collection. He designed a new piano action, and was interested – like Dolmetsch – in developing the mechanisms of



Derek Adlam

instruments...His aim in developing the mechanism of the harpsichord was to produce an expressive instrument, which would allow dynamic variation. He also admired the *Bebung* of the clavichord, and designed a device to emulate that on the harpsichord.

PW: It does not sound like a very promising context in which to begin a career in early keyboards.

DA: It wasn't. We had modern harpsichords, without tuning stability, and while they were very loud at the keyboard, the sound didn't carry... Then Tom Goff tried out instruments with amplification, and loudspeakers carefully decorated with cross-banding, to match the finish of the harpsichord. Good instruments weren't available.

But there were discoveries. We were taken to Fenton House by my French master, who owned a Hodson spinet, which I had seen and was very impressed by, even if it did go out of tune easily. This was my first exposure to real harpsichords, and I have never forgotten the sheer sense of excitement, as well as a sense of familiarity and recognition; of a piece of a jigsaw falling into the slot ready to receive it...

But to return to the 50's: there were a number of movements going on. A small group of brilliant, insightful, well-informed people were establishing a proper context outside the establishment, who would become very important. Colin Tilney ..already had an 18th- century harpsichord, which he played professionally – a very fine instrument. Christopher Hogwood was about to begin his career at the time when I was working on my first instruments. And of course there was David Munrow, who despite his early death made a tremendous impression. They formed the nucleus of the movement...

PW: And the study of design and construction techniques was proving fruitful?

DA: Yes – there were one or two historically informed makers in this country, and we mustn't forget people like William Dowd and Kenneth Gilbert. The first Dowd instrument that I'm aware of was brought here by Kenneth Gilbert, so that he could have a good instrument to play when he wanted to give a recital here. He played this grey painted harpsichord for his debut – at the Purcell Room I believe, and it was a sensation. David Rubio – equally well known as a luthier, made a number of harpsichords... David based his work on the originals.

Leonhardt played one, and this influenced others who were to become distinguished makers — Michael Johnson for instance.

So we had a group of intensely gifted individuals giving momentum to the early music movement. Information was being shared and research published, and performers such as Paul Badura-Skoda and Jörg Demus were also internationally known. England was a good place for instrument making to be established... The creation of small workshops is very much an English thing, and also a perfectly sound and efficient way to make harpsichords...it was all very much a matter of being in the right place at the right time...

PW: What was the first direction that you took on leaving the Guildhall?

DA: I had been very fortunate to acquire a harpsichord...At that stage I did some performing, but didn't make a career for myself as a performer...And then I had a turning point. I had always been interested in architecture, and interior design, and always bought *House and Garden* magazine. One month there was an article about a Mr Colt, who collected keyboard instruments. It said that he had a large collection at his home in England, and so I wrote to him... When I knew him he had about 150 instruments. Captain Lane, who was an influential collector, had a Joseph Kirckman harpsichord which was very probably the last one to be built in England. It's usually said that the latest was dated 1809, but I believe this to be a misreading of the label on this instrument of 1800. Colt bought this for £250 – Capt. Lane was much more interested in his Ruckers.

It was in this way that he was able to build up one of the premier collections in private hands in this country. When we finally met, he and I got on quite well, and I offered to give him a hand with tuning and cataloguing the instruments. Gradually I did more and more, including some restoration work, and gradually turned into the curator-restorer. By the time I left, there were 35 or 40 instruments in playing order.

PW: Were you essentially self-taught?

DA: Oh absolutely. I wanted to learn to make musical instruments because I was repertoire led, and there was a compulsion to play the music on the correct instrument. But I was also lucky to have contact with some really good craftspeople, and looked over their shoulders to see how they did things.

PW: And you discovered an innate talent; an inclination towards making?

DA: Yes, I suppose there was. There has to be some innate ability. Colt's was particularly valuable because the instruments remained in the collection once they had been restored. For example, the collection was important in having a sequence of early Broadwood grand pianos...The earliest was 1787, the year before Broadwood redesigned the instrument, and divided the bridge, and the sequence ran from 1787, through 1794 – the year Haydn was in London - and went up to about 1818. A very important period, when composers were appreciating the potential of the instruments, and the instruments themselves were undergoing a rapid evolution. One not only had to work out ways of restoring them mechanically, but also to take into account the evolution of the sound picture. The changes had to be gradual, and not abrupt.

During this time I got to know Dick Burnett as a client. He had begun to collect at that time, and acquired some wonderful instruments. Then of course came the years at Finchcocks. I went into partnership with Dick and Katrina, and the museum got set up, and of course we established our instrument making workshop there.

PW: What was the first instrument you made?

DA: Oh, it was a close copy – not a precise one I fear – of the 1611 Ruckers Muselar in the Vleeshuis. I saw the original at a meeting of the Ruckers Genootschap, which gave me the chance to measure them. I heard on that occasion the first public performance on the 1640 Couchet, which had been restored by Hubert Bedard. Leonhardt played the harpsichord as both a solo and continuo instrument, for which it proved remarkably successful. When I got home, I started making – with a few alterations – an instrument based on the 1611. The compass I changed to C- c³, with short and broken bass. And I kept that as a principle when later, at Finchcocks, we were making instruments after Ruckers. It gave them a little more flexibility. The harpsichords went from GG, with short and broken octave – an extremely practical and useful compass, and achieved without changing the dimensions of the keywell, or the structure of the soundboard.

PW: As your instrument making developed, did you keep to the Flemish models?

DA: We made muselars, based on the 1611, and harpsichords based on the 1638 Ruckers instrument in Edinburgh. For a 5-octave harpsichord we took as a model the big 1730 Nicolas Blanchet, which had been used by Bill Dowd. For pianos, we chose a 5-octave one made by a pupil of Stein, and a really beautiful 5 1/2 octave Michael Rosenberger (c. 1800) from the Finchcocks collection. And also a Nanette Streicher piano – an extraordinarily innovative and interesting instrument, on which there was a lot of information available, since it had been studied by Bill Jurgenson.

We stuck as closely as possible to the original models, and one thing I very emphatically did *not* want to do was to go down the path of making “general purpose” models. One wanted to play Scarlatti, or Duphly for example, as the new editions came out, but there are specific instruments for specific repertoire, and I firmly believe no “general purpose instrument” will do for everything. I was quite fixed on that.

PW: Had you at that time not got involved with clavichords?

DA: Oh I’d always been completely bewitched by the clavichord. My first contact with them was at Fenton House, and I remember seeing a notice on the Rackwitz: *“Only play this if you must.”* My first contact with a really serious clavichord was when Colin Tilney bought one of the first series of Dolmetsch clavichords after Hass, and asked me to restore it

By then the V&A [Victoria and Albert Museum] instruments were on display. And that reminds me of something that happened just after I left the Guildhall...I went to see the V&A instruments in store. I saw them in an unfortunate condition, and wrote a letter, which ended up with the then Keeper of Woodwork and Furniture. I met Peter Thornton, who was then his assistant. Later on we did restoration work for the V&A at Finchcocks, including the Vaudry harpsichord, the Marco Jadra, the Kirckman and the White virginal.

PW: Your own collection of instruments is varied, and you have spoken about being very much led by repertoire. Which areas of repertoire have you come to associate with particular instruments?

DA: Well, it’s a complex question. For example, I’ve always been very drawn to the keyboard music of Haydn, and it’s relatively easy to find a

clavichord which will realise that repertoire well. I’ve always chosen to play an instrument after Hass. First of all, because they happen to be extremely well built and well designed instruments. And also because there were a number of instruments available to provide the information about their structure. So there was little speculation required in working out how one might make a close copy. I should mention here a very important person whom I haven’t spoken of, and who joined us at Finchcocks. That was Bill Debenham, who developed methods of x-raying instruments, in order to calculate the dimensions of internal members... This led to the production of highly accurate drawings.

PW: I recall you giving a Haydn recital at St Cecilia’s Hall, which made a great impression on me, because the clavichord seemed to reveal so much about the music that I had not heard before.

DA: We know that Haydn composed at the clavichord, so many of his musical textures seem to have been worked out in terms of that kind of sound, and that kind of density of sound. Certainly an instrument of that kind – the 1763 Hass on which I based my own clavichord here at home – is capable of a very wide dynamic range and a very wide range of tone colour. That reflects the drama inherent in so much of Haydn’s keyboard music.

I’ve always felt that he was using his keyboard writing as a kind of laboratory or workshop, for the elaboration of his larger symphonic forms... I think it quite likely that many of his large orchestral structures probably owed much to his improvisation at the clavichord, and the working out of formal designs in the sonatas. There is an evolution of form in the sonatas, where you get an increasing creative freedom. None of that would have come about if they had not had keyboard improvisation as their starting point. The listener is aware of the sense of a dramatic *scena*, with its creative tensions, and their resolution.

When it comes to the harpsichord, the repertoire is gigantic, and one can’t do everything, but I have never lost an utter fascination with Bach. Even when I was still at school, I recall buying my first harpsichord recording: Wanda Landowska’s *Goldberg Variations*. I was not disappointed in the musical quality, but I was desperately disappointed in the sound of the Pleyel harpsichord. Soon after, I bought the

historically informed recordings of Ralph Kirkpatrick, playing the *English Suites*. I listened to them again and again. The fascination with Bach continues, and for me it was important to find a harpsichord that will do Bach adequately...it is exasperating that we cannot be certain what kinds of instruments he favoured himself.

Recently I acquired a harpsichord by Bernd Fischer, who used to work at Finchcocks, and later here at Welbeck, sharing a workshop with me when I moved here twenty-five years ago... He makes wonderful instruments, and mine is a close copy of the Colmar Ruckers. And although I've said that there's no such thing as a "general purpose" harpsichord, this particular model is as near a general purpose instrument as one can get!

PW: In the last few years you've become closely associated with the clavichord.

DA: Yes, I do perform on the clavichord a little, and hope to continue doing so. I've recently come back from giving some concerts in

Switzerland – a very enjoyable trip. I work part time as Curator for the Cavendish-Bentinck family, who have been here at Welbeck for four hundred years, and have kept most of the objects they acquired over the centuries.

PW: And one last question. If you had the chance to travel in a time machine, back to any historical event, is there any moment in history that you would like to experience?

DA: As a musician, I would love to go back and ask very specific questions about interpretation and accuracy of notes...I should love to have seen the garden of the Villa d'Este when it was new. But I have never experienced nostalgia for a Golden Age...The past in terms of instruction is invaluable; the necessary foundation on which we build our work in the early music field and in conservation. But I have never wished to live in the past, with its lack of modern medicine and dentistry, and the appalling diet. No, I'm nostalgic for the present.