

Harpsichord & *fortepiano*

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AT THE PICCOLA ACCADEMIA DI MONTISI

INTERVIEW WITH ALAN CURTIS AND BRUCE KENNEDY

by Giulia Nuti

Located in a hilltop medieval village in southern Tuscany, the Piccola Accademia di Montisi has been founded to provide a centre of inspiration for musicians worldwide who have an interest in the harpsichord, its repertoire and its history.

Piccola Accademia is committed to providing access to exceptional instruments, teaching and recording facilities; not only will there be the possibility for students to study and be taught on beautiful instruments, originals as well as copies, from the main European schools of harpsichord building; there will be also a library which focuses on original manuscripts available in digital formats for on-site and remote use, and state of the art recording facilities.

In all the beauty of Florence in June I spoke to Alan Curtis, Artistic Advisor, and Bruce Kennedy, Executive Director of this exciting and encompassing project.

GN: Alan Curtis, would you set out why it is so important for a harpsichordist to gain knowledge and familiarity with different styles of harpsichord building, which depend, as we know, on the date and country of origin of the harpsichord? how do these instrumental differences affect the style of composition, and of performance?

AC: Instruments are just that: the instrument, i.e. the means to the end, not the end itself. But having said, that I would add that the further back we go in the past, the more original instruments can teach us. Composers of the past had a connection with the "instrument" that was much more personal and intimate than a connection between an electronic composer and his computer can be. One cannot possibly begin to understand a composer like Froberger without a knowledge of the harpsichord, and to understand the difference between his Italianate compositions and those in the French style, one needs to hear and play and feel and fall in love with both kinds of (very different!) instruments. The music of the so-called virginalists needs to be heard on an authentic instrument to be properly appreciated. Just as the piano used to distort the music of Byrd, for instance, and the harpsichord could make it almost automatically more interesting, so we need to explore the instruments of his period – the clavichord, for instance, to take things a step further.



Alan Curtis, photo by Laurence Heym, licensed to Virgin Classics.

GN: Bruce Kennedy, bearing all this in mind, which instruments then will be in the collection; in particular, which original instruments?

BK: The first antique that we are hoping to purchase is a 1658 de Zentis Italian harpsichord in private ownership. The intention is to get our hands on any antique we can find and suits the needs of the Accademia; unfortunately there are not 50 antiques on the market for us to choose

from, but if one comes up certainly we will consider it. The ideal would be for the Accademia's collection to be made of original instruments in playing condition, but this is not realistic as there are not so many originals around.

Up to 25 years ago there were very few "modern" instruments that came close to what the antiques do; now there are makers that really do come close, and professionals who are conscious of the differences are very satisfied. There must be 500 makers working worldwide, which does not mean that all are working at very high standards, but a handful of these are certainly now capable of making very fine instruments. The quality of copies is always better.

So far the commissions for the collection are: A German double with 16' foot by Keith Hill (U.S.), a Theeuwes single manual by Malcolm Rose (UK), a mother and child virginal by Andreas Kilström (Sweden), and a Flemish double-manual by Bruce Kennedy. These will be delivered next year.

This summer there will be a temporary collection while the above instruments are being built. The temporary collection will include an original 1652 harpsichord by Cornelius Hagaerts from the private collection of Yannick Guillou; two different model Italian instruments, one being a single strung Italian after 17th-century models by me, and the other a copy of a Giusti instrument by Tony Chinnery; there will be a muselar virginal by Martin Skowronek; also a double manual Mietke and a Flemish double manual, both my own instruments. The collection will continue to expand with new commissions over the next few years.

GN: Piccola Accademia opens in July; who are the harpsichordists that will be coming to give the first masterclasses?

AC: There will be 5 courses, some of which are already full; the tutors are Knut Johannessen, Menno van Delft, Jesper B. Christensen, Skip Sempé and Zvi Meniker. All the courses are tuition fee free, and each course concentrates on a particular aspect of performance, or a specific composer; full details are given on the website.

GN: At what levels will the teaching be pitched?

BK: All students are either presently enrolled at a university level music conservatory or recently

graduated.

GN: What performance opportunities are there for students, both within the programme and in the wider professional musical context?

BK: At the end of each week the students and their professor will give a public concert, free of charge, at the chapel Santa Flora e Santa Lucilla, in Montisi.

GN: Alan Curtis, one of the highlights of the Festival, other than Leonhardt's performance, will be your performance of Domenico Scarlatti's 1711 opera *Tolomeo e Alessandro*. Could you tell us about the manuscript and libretto, and how you came to reunite the first Act with Acts Two and Three?

AC: It seems to *me* that the highlight will be the opening with Gustav Leonhardt, miraculously recovered from his illness and playing better than ever at the age of 79! But certainly *Toleale*, as we have taken to calling it for short, will be an important event. Years ago, in a private collection in Milan, I saw the first act, and the owner kindly allowed me to make a copy. The manuscript can no longer be traced. I must confess that, perhaps under the influence of Ralph Kirkpatrick, an old friend of mine, who knew a lot about Domenico Scarlatti but scorned the vocal music, I never bothered to look closely at that first act until recently, when I was preparing concerts and a recording of Handel's *Tolomeo* which uses the very same libretto Capece wrote for Scarlatti.

Marveling at how different and at the same time how closely related the two composer's styles were, I became curious, and when I discovered that the complete opera had meanwhile turned up in a country house in England, I set about getting a photocopy and making an edition of the complete opera. It turns out to be a major masterpiece, certainly the finest of his preserved operas, a rich and varied score full of delights, though very different from the kind we know and love in his sonatas.

BK: Certainly the Piccola Accademia wouldn't exist without the work of Gustav Leonhardt; he has been instrumental in the drive to perform harpsichord music as it was conceived, and for this reason it is a particular honour for us that he will be coming to give the initial concert.

GN: How does the Piccola Accademia teaching and performing programme relate to and integrate with existing Accademias, teaching institutions and Festivals in Tuscany, and indeed

in Italy in general?

AC: The obvious parallel is the Accademia in Siena, where early music in Tuscany got its start, thanks to Conte Chigi. However it is now under the direction of Aldo Bennici, famous for his interest in contemporary music, and as long as he is director, music from earlier periods will suffer. But the public and its interest is there, and the Piccola Accademia will fill that need. Eventually I suspect that there will be close collaboration between the two institutions. And I expect that harpsichordists and others interested in early music all over the country (as well as foreigners) will want to take advantage of having so many useful things – instruments, library, recording studios, beautiful spaces, made

available to them.

All further details regarding the courses, the collection, the Festival can be found on the website www.piccolaaccademia.org

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