

Harpsichord & fortepiano

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"IN SEARCH OF ROSENBERGER"

by Micaela Schmitz

The Tudeley Festival has a new fortepiano after Rosenberger, made by David Winston. I spoke to the commissioner (Dr. Stephen Coles), the maker, and a player (Gary Cooper) about the new instrument.

If ever an instrument had a personality, this is the one! Micaela Schmitz talked to the trio- all by phone and one at a time.

A chat with Stephen Coles, the commissioner

MS: What made it important to have a Rosenberger in the collection?

SC: Originally we were thinking about Mozart and the Mozart year, and realised we had a gap in our collection. We wanted something that would be versatile for concerts. We have a Brodmann [Josef Brodmann was Bösendorfer's teacher]—one of his 1823, late Viennese instruments. We wanted a Rosenberger rather than a Walter. The real piece de resistance is early Beethoven; you can't play Beethoven on a Walter.

MS: How would you describe the new instrument?

SC: The Rosenberger is such a lively instrument, with a bigger dynamic range. The attack and the different colours that you can get out of it! After one year, the top is becoming more lively and opening up.

MS: What are its specifications?

SC: The range is 5½ octaves...and it has a damper knee lever and moderator along its full length. Practically speaking, the instrument is extremely portable.

MS: What is the exact date of the original?

SC: 1800/1805. We're not sure of the date. I believe Dick Burnett (Finchcocks) would say it's 1795.

MS: So this is a fairly unique instrument then?

SC: Virginia Pleasants has a copy by Derek

Adlam. I met her late in my musical life in Bruges, one night when she was having trouble finding her hotel and I stopped to help her.

MS: How did you get plans then?

SC: Dick Burnett, [the founder of Finchcocks where the original is], gave David plans...David felt he wanted to re-do these; he used an endoscope and looked at the original at Finchcocks. David was excited about the soundboard being so lively in its response.

MS: So- what sorts of things have you done with the festival?

SC: Gary Cooper played it a lot. We have had a lot of exciting projects. Also, Lee-Chun Su [a student of Mitzi Meyerson], the Mendelssohn competition winner, will play both our fortepianos at the Festival in July this year. Gary Cooper used the Brodmann with Tom Guthrie and with Rachel Podger, and we had Katherine Manley, our sponsored artist, do an amazing *Frauenliebe und Leben* with Daniel Grimwood.

A chat with David Winston, the maker

MS: So what do you reckon is the date of the Rosenberger?

DW: I think 1798 is the date.

MS: And how did you come to be the one to do this?

DW: I worked at Finchcocks in the workshop, and I had always considered it the star of the collection, the best example of a instrument of that period, from anywhere. I had always wanted to make one and the Tudeley festival caught me at a weak moment!

MS: Why haven't more people done it?

DW: It's an enormous amount of work. I lost a lot of money making it; it was a labour of love —more work than the Brodmann, even though the Brodmann was a larger piano. The

Rosenberger, was in fact a much more complex instrument to make, because by the time the Brodmann came around a lot of constructional details were made simpler. The Rosenberger was to me far more complicated.

MS: What sorts of things did you do to prepare to make it?

DW: I took measurements of the original and looked inside with a special device —an endoscope. This helped a great deal to clarify some constructional details —some quite interesting ones that were not on the original drawing and these are things which I think make the instrument so special. The instrument is surprisingly crude inside, but it did reveal a few secrets that explained how it has a special sound. Don't ask me to tell you what they are....

MS: The awful question I've got to ask: Do you think of it as a copy or...?

DW: Any good maker puts his heart and soul into these things, makes decisions, etc. The original is not what it was when it was first built; it's distorted, which is normal, so 200 years later, in making a copy, I had to try and interpret what the maker's original intentions were.

MS: What did you have from the original that was definitely 'given'?

DW: String gauging —and there were original parts. The hammers are mostly all original—down to their shape and coverings. There were fragments of old strings on the piano when it was originally restored. I had measurements but these could be only a guide; they were too inconsistent to follow exactly. It was also great to have access to the original being so close by. Richard and Katrina Burnett were very accommodating. I had to make many repeat visits to double-check on details.

MS: Where did you have to make choices, then?

DW: A very important detail is the choice of hammer leather, thickness, tension, the way it is put on —all these things can make or break an instrument. You try and try until you arrive at what you think is right and find the voice of the individual instrument. The most interesting thing for me as a maker, is that I believe instruments actually have a soul; violinists will tell you that —and some instruments more than others. You can put two instruments side

by side —both made to exactly the same specifications— and one just will have that something special. It is the magic that makes instrument making so interesting for me. This Rosenberger just hit the ground running...it had life straight away.

MS: What would you say makes the sound of the original special?

DW: The sound is special because it has clarity and support; it has the bright quality of an earlier instrument, and a kind of warmth and support behind that sound. Use a singing voice as an analogy. You can have a soprano who can sing the high C and it's very bright and high but there's no vocal support underneath it; this just has that special quality [of support]. Whatever he [Rosenberger] did, he did it right... It is a real musician's instrument —musicians just drool over it.

MS: Are there other extant Rosenbergers one could copy?

DW: There are others but no others of that exact period. You must try this one —it's different from Derek Adlam's. After all each maker puts something of himself into his instruments.

MS: Are you hoping to make more after this original?

DW: After I have had a good rest and if someone is willing to pay, I can't do this as a labour of love anymore! It's an enormous, very personal effort of time and energy, taking over 4500 hours.

MS: I understand you do restorations. Which are the ones of which you are most proud?

DW: Beethoven's Broadwood from 1817 in Budapest; Chopin's Pleyel of 1846 in the Cobbe Collection at Hatchlands. I am particularly interested in Erard and Pleyel pianos of Chopin's time; it is a very special sound world. Part of my business is selling original restored instruments from 1770 right up to pianos from the art deco period. There are some great instruments which are also exceptional furniture, and this combines a lot of passions for me: furniture design, cabinet making, antiques, music.

And a chat with Gary Cooper, its inaugural player

MS: What were your first thoughts when you heard about it being made?

GC: I had actually played a few previously, including one original in Bern, in Switzerland. The trouble with unrestored instruments is that they seem very attractive, but you think what's the fuss... they've gone beyond their shelf date, and people are too precious with them to want to restore them, or are worrying about changes. I was doing a concert at Finchcocks and was playing the Rosenberger there, which David was going to copy. It had a big crack, but it felt better [to play] than the one in Switzerland. I did have that "sorry feeling" like "This could be so much better." I'm sure it was lovely in its day, but I was playing Beethoven's Pathetique sonata. You can imagine how Beethoven destroyed instruments he played.

MS: So you felt you had to ...hold back?

GC: Yes, It makes you feel sort of, like you want to give it a pat on the back and say "I won't play you much longer."

MS: And when David's instrument arrived?

GC: I was just astounded at the variety and colour and ...power of the instrument. Suddenly it felt like a real instrument, and just a completely different kettle of fish.

MS: Had you played other instruments that were purported copies of the Rosenberger?

GC: I hadn't actually. Makers —once they start making an instrument such as the Walters from 1795 to 1800—they seem to make a whole rung of instruments because they've troubled to take the measurements... they've gotten the order. I can see why they try to push people in a certain direction.

...With David and Stephen's approach, Stephen wanted a special instrument that was slightly different, that hadn't necessarily been copied. He thought of the Rosenberger at Finchcocks and David said "I've always wanted to copy that instrument; I'd just love to do it." It was a challenge for him that he really relished. He lavished a lot of time on it; you can really hear that. It's the best copy of an original piano I've ever played.

MS: So were you were the 'play-in -er'?

GC: Well, I was hoping to, but actually the first time I played it was a concert of Mozart variations in Leicester in Feb - March 2007 I think... I just couldn't stop playing it; it felt like a joy to play [from the first]. I could do everything I wanted to do. It started to tell me how to play —that's the sign of a great instrument. David had taken much care and re-jigged it over the previous months because he knew the concerts were coming.

MS: What about your other experience with original Rosenbergers?

GC: I played an instrument restored by Edwin Beunk in Holland... it had the same feeling as David's, an open and surprisingly bright instrument..but with a very wonderful nutty bass.

MS: Sounds like you are describing a wine or sherry.

GC: It's the best way I can describe the sound of the bass: gravelley and nutty and brown.

MS: How does the Rosenberger compare to instruments you normally play on?

GC: A good comparison is Adlam's Walter, owned by Chris Hogwood, an 1780s instrument, which I used for the Mozart series recordings with Rachel Podger. Bob Levin has used it quite a lot. It's a very different sound. What's interesting is in comparing the two sounds... The Winston [Rosenberger] is so new... it sounds as if the Walter does suit 1790s period music and the Rosenberger is absolutely wild for early Beethoven, so early 1800s. It just feels so right. It's fantastic playing early Beethoven on it, and that doesn't fit so well on the 1780s Walter. The Walter is not an extrovert instrument, but is much more even toned. My own is an 1858 Pleyel grand piano...restored by Edwin Beunk, beautiful but obviously a little bit different.

MS: How was the official first performance?

GC: David came to the official Tudeley Festival launch of the piano, and after I played he said "You really love that piano don't you?" —an interesting comment. I was just trying to draw as much colour out of it as possible. David spent three or four months beyond what it should

have had—it's really paid off. It was a very finished instrument; it already sounded exciting...I should say something about the veneers- it's extremely beautiful work. It was done by Malcolm Fisk who is in the workshop with David. [As for the inside]..the innards are totally chaotic...It almost seemed like it was experimental for Rosenberger — that the instrument was not quite sure where it was going. That's one of the reasons it throws up so many problems for a maker. You have to solve all these problems to make it play like you want it to. Piano makers at this time were really pushing the boundaries...

MS: Improvements— Not to be evolutionary about this, but what was being improved?

GC: Everything- all the time. In Mozart's time, Stein made improvements to sound and action; no endless clatter and bouncing, which is a feature if you ever play Silbermann and Zumpe's. I had played on an anonymous Viennese instrument from 1785 from the same school, and when you see this Rosenberger, you can see the huge difference Rosenberger that made, as he and his colleagues developed in making instruments, the difference in range and power and scope...You can think, how did Mozart play this on such an instrument? How did Beethoven conceive of his *Appassionata* with the 1785 instruments [when the Rosenberger was yet to come]?

MS: You could say these composers had an amazing vision for what could be done with instruments —well before it was achieved.

GC: Yes, that's a good way to put it.

MS: How does this fit with your harpsichord life?

GC: There are other players who come from this direction. You see the evolution of your playing style along with the evolution of the instruments, in the practical changes one makes to one's piano playing. I learned piano, then violin, then organ, then I moved to harpsichord. Moving from organ to harpsichord is a relatively easy transition and something you can immediately relate to. What's interesting about playing early piano music is that you are approaching it from the same point of view as composers such as Mozart and Beethoven. Their heritage and study was all along the clavichord and harpsichord. Mozart and Beethoven had

the same connection —they went to Baron van Swieten's house to play Bach and the old masters, I presume on a harpsichord. They were both renowned in that collection of "old music" aficionados for their playing. Their technique.... Beethoven criticised Mozart's technique on the piano he said Mozart sounded like "a harpsichordist on the piano."

MS: Ouch!

GC: But the interesting thing at this time... there was no piano school. Everyone criticised each other. Hummel, who was Mozart's most lauded pianist pupil, was accused of having claw fingers by another player... which is exactly what the harpsichord technique is, and this was Hummel, the famous performer... Nobody knew – as we do today- that the pedal is the lungs of the instrument. If you look at scores of Beethoven, you notice how few pedal markings there are.

MS: You might say thought that not all players had the same instrument available, and leaving out pedal markings allowed for flexibility.

GC: Well, some of Beethoven's early sonatas were published for either instrument. But they are obviously for the piano.

MS: Yes, it could be a marketing thing too. However, it could be they thought it an insult to tell players every last thing.

GC: Yes, but, also Mendelssohn did the same. I just think, the more I do this, that people were reliant on the very same technique they learned on harpsichord, and used this on the piano. They were used to making finger legato, only exaggerating the effect. Just the same as using legato on the violin, they used the sustain pedal on the piano...

MS: As an effect then?

GC: The use of sustaining pedal is only when it's the same harmony, or a final chord. Because that's the one case where they can't do it with their fingers. [Using fingers to achieve legato is] basic clavichord technique. The clavichord technique is the basic teacher of all keyboard technique.

MS: And the Rosenberger, then, supported your theory?

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GC: With the Rosenberger... I rely on my fingers. The more I play these instruments the more I realise that's the case. Finger legato and looking at scores and autographs and they way people describe other people's playing [at the time]. They weren't sure how to play the piano. Everyone's sound was individual. There was nothing like there is now, like these Russian schools, homogeneity of approach. It was this pioneer period.

MS: Do you think we've lost something?

GC: Yes! There are no personalities anymore. The last century was full of them.

MS: Whom should we listen to more?

GC: We ought to listen more to Moiseiwitsch. (Rachmaninov's pupil) and Paderewski....these two. You've got to take risks, be your own person.

MS: So that's not the way conservatories are going today, is it?

GC: Not the way conservatories are going, or that anything is going! It [society] hates you being an individual.

MS: So on chat shows, we bare our souls and tell the world our problems but we cannot be individuals when we play music...

GC: Yes... [laughs]

MS: What's coming up for you?

GC: With Libby Walfisch I will be playing Beethoven on the Rosenberger— we are starting a series over next few years for a recording.

MS: Thanks very much. I'm sure our readers will find this fascinating.

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