

Harpsichord & fortepiano

Vol. 12, No. 2 Spring, 2008

© Peacock Press.

Licensed under [CC BY-NC 4.0](#).

You are free to share and adapt the content for non-commercial purposes, provided you give appropriate credit to Peacock Press and indicate if changes were made. Commercial use, redistribution for profit, or uses beyond this license require prior written permission from Peacock Press.

Musical Instrument Research Catalog
(MIRCat)

LE CLAVECIN EN FRANCE

by Kasia Tomczak-Feltrin

I have always been impressed with the position of the harpsichord in the French music education system. According to the association Clavecin-en France there are about 135 Music Schools in France that offer harpsichord tuition! No wonder there are so many harpsichord soloists bred on French soil. If we look at the history of the Bruges Harpsichord Competition -considered as the most important one in this field we can count at least 10 French players who were among top prize winners, including three 1st prize winners: Christophe Rousset in 1983, Beatrice Martin in 1998 and Benjamin Alard in 2004 (the last one was only 19 years old on the day of his victory!). It is difficult to count all the other foreign harpsichordists educated in France who succeeded in this and other competitions. Yes, the French harpsichord school is very strong and only the Dutch school can probably compete with it.

Let's look at this phenomenon a bit more closely. There are a few factors that distinguish France in this field.

The Music Education System

Most children and adults have access to specialist music schools or conservatoires, which are very numerous in all regions of France. One has to pass an audition to secure a place but once accepted the tuition is not expensive (only about €150 per academic year) and in addition to one-to-one instrumental lessons, pupils have aural classes (solfège) chamber music, choir or orchestra.

The education programme (leading to the end of secondary school) is divided into three cycles (each one lasts three to four years) and these correspond more or less with beginning, intermediate and advanced levels. Each cycle ends with an examination. The third year has two pathways for a final Diploma -amateur or professional, the latter which opens the way to a *conservatoire supérieure* (Lyon or Paris) which is intended to educate professionals in Music.

Pupils have regular opportunities for performance during various auditions and school concerts which are always open to the local public. The school environment encourages healthy competition and facilitates chamber music making, which is unfortunately not always the case in the English Associated Board/private tuition system.

Harpsichord classes are open for all ages and are often integrated into small early music departments together with other baroque instruments like the recorder, viola da gamba, traverso, and lute. All this is possible because of the still quite generous cultural policies in France; music schools are subsidised by the Ministry of Culture or local authorities and they are not afraid to offer harpsichord classes.

Recruitment

How can we attract young pupils to this old instrument?

"The proper age at which children should begin is from six to seven years; not that that need exclude persons of a more advanced age, but naturally, in order to mould and form the hands for playing the harpsichord, the earlier the better"

François Couperin,
L'Art de toucher Le Clavecin...

This is still the case nowadays. Once while preparing for the French teaching qualification Diploma (CA) I visited conservatoires in Lille and Calais and saw seven to eight year old children at the harpsichord with a little stool underneath their feet. I felt jealous thinking that if they carry on learning, their harpsichord touch will never be spoilt by piano technique...

There is something very natural about the attitude to harpsichord in France; it's as if the tradition has never died since Versailles. The harpsichord is not something old or exclusive such that very few musicians can access and often only at the academic level. With a large number of harpsichord classes and decent numbers of instruments in conservatoires, harpsichord is a familiar object for young adepts.

So who is learning this beautiful instrument?

Because the various concerts organised by conservatoires are open to local communities, the harpsichord is not a strange, exotic sight and parents more and more know that, because of its

delicate touch, it's a good instrument for children to start. Of course it happens that pupils who are not accepted into the piano class because of lack of space are advised to join the harpsichord class, but it's not always negative, as they often stay happy with the instrument. The other group of pupils are pianists and organists who have harpsichord as a second instrument and this is complemented by basso continuo tuition.

Most music schools organise two-to-three day long "atelier d'instruments" –discovery days when children can have taster lessons and choose their instrument. During these days there are concerts played by older pupils, teachers' demonstrations, and instrument presentations—all to help young people to choose their instrument.

Instruments

Once one is accepted into the harpsichord class, there is a big question of access to the instrument... Elisabeth Joye, Professor of Harpsichord at the Conservatoire of 7eme Arrondissement in Paris says:" I'm lucky because I teach in a wealthy area and I manage to persuade parents to buy a spinet from the very beginning of their children's tuition. I tell them also that if they buy a decent small instrument there won't be a problem with selling it for almost the same price in case the child doesn't want to continue learning. I can't imagine working on the touch without a child having access to a proper instrument at home. Basic work is very important. I think there is a lot of potential for harpsichord makers in this field."

This is the ideal situation of course, but there are other solutions for beginners in less privileged areas. For example the Music School in Calais now has three instruments (two singles and one new double manual recently purchased from Atelier Ducornet)—very impressive when we think that it is a city maybe just a bit bigger than Dover. Pupils manage to practise at school with carefully organised schedules. Unfortunately there are not enough bursaries or funds to help towards the purchase of instruments. Only the Conservatoire Supérieure in Paris has some bursaries towards this goal.

Alternatively, the second hand harpsichord market is quite important and there are quite a lot of advertisements about instruments for sale in the music schools and on websites related to the topic.

Repertoire

Perhaps one of the secrets of the flourishing French harpsichord school is that its vast repertoire is so closely related to French culture, history and taste. I see a much more soloistic approach to the harpsichord in France than in other countries. The proof is that there are many more solo harpsichord recitals in France than in the UK, for example. Basso continuo is treated very seriously too and taught from the early stages (Lessons start usually towards the end of the first cycle, which means after three years of tuition. It corresponds more or less to 12 year old pupils). Various methods, both historical and modern, are in use, such as Dandrieu, Christensen, and Michel Laizé (*Basse continue pour Petits et Grands*), among others.

Improvisation is also an important element in the curriculum. Some schools even include it in the programme for examination. It starts from learning to improvise simple passamezzos, proceeding to more elaborated forms in later years such as lamentos, chaconnes or unmeasured preludes. The ability to read facsimiles is vital and obligatory and teachers use facsimiles from the early stages of learning (Fuzreau provides very good pedagogical publications of this kind for all levels on different baroque instruments).

There is an abundance of teaching resources, such as the Cité de la Musique / Ministère de Culture publication '*10 ans avec le clavecin*'. This series exists for all instruments and lists progressive repertoire suitable for every year of instrumental learning. Each year is divided into different sections; in the case of the harpsichord we find exercises and methods, collections, music of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, contemporary repertoire, chamber music and pieces for two harpsichords or four hands.

One cannot ignore the fact that such a big number of harpsichord classes results in a high degree of competition for work in the music field. It is not easy to obtain a harpsichord teaching position as first one must pass the official examinations validated by the Ministère de Culture in order to obtain the so called "*Diplôme d'Etat*" or "*Certificat d'Aptitude*." This means it is almost impossible to encounter a pianist or an organist also teaching harpsichord as it sometimes happens in other countries. There is real specialization in this field...

Future

There is no reason why harpsichord learning should be less common in the UK than in France, especially because England as well as France also has its own wonderful early keyboard heritage – i.e., in Tudor repertoire. This should inspire and encourage teachers and performers for developing education in this field.

What needs to be changed then?

Well, firstly the attitudes to historical performance practice need to change. It can't be reserved only for academics and passionate specialists. There must be a way of attracting young pupils and their parents to harpsichord learning. This is achieved through friendly, accessible teaching methods supported by the wise choice of repertoire suitable for children and through a greater presence of early keyboards in concert venues, radio and television.

Secondly, harpsichords have to become more affordable so that parents and schools are able to provide instruments for young adepts. There is a lot of scope for all instrument makers here which will eventually encourage a second hand market of small, inexpensive instruments for beginners. Francois Couperin in the earlier quoted treatise says: *"For the very young, only a spinet, or a single keyboard of the harpsichord should be used at first, and the one or the other should be very lightly quilled, this being a point of infinite importance: for dexterity in execution depends much more on suppleness and great freedom of fingers than force."*

Last but not least, there needs to be more exchange between teachers, performers and harpsichord makers in order to find solutions for a harpsichord teaching revival. Here again I will give an example of our French colleagues who through the association *Clavecin en France* meet a

few times a year in different cities to discuss teaching methods and resources, visit collections of instruments, or simply catch up and find inspired for their musical and pedagogical activities.

I believe that all "*barricades mysterieuses*" to making harpsichord playing more accessible can be broken down with a bit of patience and perseverance from early keyboard enthusiasts, *n'est-ce pas?*

Useful links, publications and sources:

www.clavecin-en-france.org

Fuzeau Editions, facsimiles for teaching:
www.editions-classique.com/catalogue-classique,fac-similes,fac-similes-enseignement,1,5.html

Françoise Lengelle, Francoise Marmin, Laure Morabito, and Aline Zylberajch, *10 ans avec le clavecin* (Cité de la Musique).
www.cite-musique.fr/francais/services/boutique/notice.asp?Id=93

Michel Laizé, *La Basse Continue pour Petits et Grands*. (Les Cahiers du Tourdion 111, grand rue 67000 Strasbourg).