

Harpsichord & *fortepiano*

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THE ONCE AND FUTURE HARPSICHORD: THE ALIÉNOR COMPETITION FOR COMPOSITION

by Barbara Norton

Like the organ, the harpsichord's origins reach back to the Middle Ages. Yet unlike the organ, the harpsichord repertoire has remained limited primarily to whatever survives from the sixteenth through to the eighteenth centuries. Virtually ignored by composers in the nineteenth century, it began to resurface in the twentieth with works by such composers as Manuel de Falla, Francis Poulenc, and Elliott Carter. Today one of the most important currents of new harpsichord music is represented by Aliénor, whose slogan, "Harpsichord Music for Today and Tomorrow," leaves no doubt as to its purpose.

The mission of *Aliénor*—the name is an allusion to Eleanor of Aquitaine, a powerful 12th-century queen, the granddaughter of renowned troubadour Duke William IX of Aquitaine, and an influential patron of the arts—has from its inception been to stimulate the creation of a repertoire of new harpsichord music (the historicity of its namesake notwithstanding). Aliénor was founded in 1980, concurrently with the Southeastern Historical Keyboard Society (SEHKS), by historical keyboard performer and teacher George Lucktenberg. He believed his legacy to be a modern harpsichord literature consisting both of major works (with the scale, artistic merit, and influence of, for instance, the Prokofiev sonatas), and consisting of works like Bartók's *Mikrokosmos*, which transcend their pedagogical purpose to give players (and not only young students, but professional and experienced musicians as well) the opportunity to learn not merely studies, but *music*.

Lucktenberg was also quite specific when it came to the harpsichord's timbre, insisting that construction should be based on the classical instrument (his model was the French double) which featured neither the sixteen-foot register nor pedals.

It was Dorothy Freeman who helped turn Lucktenberg's vision into reality. An early and generous financial supporter, Freeman saw that it was crucial to the harpsichord's future for amateur musicians and music

lovers to have a serious repertoire that was both listenable and playable—attractive and not overwhelmingly difficult.

In 2000 Freeman transferred the day-to-day oversight of Aliénor to harpsichordist Elaine Funaro. One of Funaro's first actions as Executive Director was to build on and expand Lucktenberg and Freeman's foundations by registering the organisation as a non-profit institution. She has since worked tirelessly to publicise and expand Aliénor's repertoire and activities.

One of the most important of those activities, and the heart of its mission, is the Aliénor Harpsichord Composition Competition, an international event held every four years concurrently with a SEHKS annual meeting. The competition is intended to encourage composers to write modern works for this historical instrument, and it's been a resounding success: since the first competition in 1982 more than 500 scores have been submitted. In recent years, chamber music (for either modern or baroque instruments) has been added to the solo works, with an eye towards expanding the contemporary harpsichord repertoire still further.

Each time a different type of chamber ensemble is highlighted: in 2004 it was quartets (two treble instruments, bass, and harpsichord), and in 2008, duos. Aliénor's most recent competition, held on 6–8 March 2008 in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, was the seventh in its 26-year history and the first to reflect Funaro's innovations. Funaro decided to organise it a bit differently by providing composers with a focus for the solo submissions: a set of at least three preludes inspired by François Couperin's *L'art de toucher le clavecin*. Yet the musical language of the works was emphatically to be modern, neither nostalgic nor imitative of French baroque style.

Aliénor's criterion of "player friendliness" is not a particularly difficult one to satisfy—all musicians can and do, as a matter of course, evaluate the technical difficulties of works

they play and teach. But what about figuring out which works deserve the elusive label of “audience friendliness”? Aliénor has come up with an obvious yet novel solution: ask the audience. A panel of three judges combs through all the scores submitted; the finalists are selected from among these and their works performed at a concert given at the SEHKS meeting. Prizes are awarded by the judges to the composers of the top six solo and the top three chamber works, and then the top three in each category are ranked by audience vote and receive additional prize money. This two-stage process ensures high musical standards, on the one hand, and accessibility, on the other.

Aliénor’s involvement with competition winners doesn’t end when the auditorium lights are turned off. The organisation commissioned *Arias and Dances*, a piece for baroque or modern oboe, flute, cello, and harpsichord that was premiered at the 2008 Competition, from 1986 finalist Dan Locklair. Funaro herself has commissioned music by Jackson Berkey (honorable mention, 2008), John Mayrose (finalist, 2008), Edwin McLean (finalist, 1994), Paul Whetstone (finalist, 2004), and Stephen Yates (finalist, 2004) for Duo d’Amore, with Geoffrey Burgess on baroque oboe and oboe d’amore, as well as a vocal composition by James Dorsa, the 2008 winner, to be premiered in Italy in the autumn of 2008. In addition, Funaro culled movements from ten of the finalist sets from the 2008 competition to create a book of preludes that she plans to record in the near future.

The idea behind holding the competition in conjunction with the SEHKS conference and featuring a plethora of performers is to “seed” players and listeners from other cities with the contemporary harpsichord music they hear at the competition —works they will then programme, perform, and teach when they return home —and hopefully to inspire still more submissions. Funaro also organises soirées featuring contemporary repertoire in the homes of harpsichord aficionados. A major area of Funaro’s work for Aliénor, therefore, now involves securing the crucial funding for the travel expenses required to bring top-flight performers to the competition, and for the soirées as well. It has paid off: soirées have been held in several U.S. cities (Durham and Chapel Hill, North Carolina; Hilton Head, South Carolina; Santa Fé and Albuquerque, New Mexico; and San Diego and Los Angeles, California), and the Aliénor repertoire was played at the HarpsichordFest in Manchester, England, by the invitation of Pamela Nash. Aliénor works will be featured at an upcoming

meeting of the Associazione Clavicembalistica Bolognese, sharing the stage with performances by Diadorim Saviola of Bologna and Annelie de Man of Amsterdam. Aliénor will be running an event at next summer’s Boston Early Music Festival and is planning something for the future in New York City.

Under Lucktenberg, Freeman, and Funaro, what started as a pebble tossed into the still waters of harpsichord repertoire has grown to ever-expanding circles of composition, performance, and audience gratification.

Aliénor notes with sadness the unexpected death of Don Angle on 27 July 2008 at the age of 65. An extraordinary arranger, composer, and performer of his own unique body of work based on popular, folk, and jazz idioms, he had twice been a judge for the composition competition, most recently in 2008. The enthusiasm and joy he brought to the instrument were infectious, and he played a number of times for SEHKS meetings. His singular approach to harpsichord writing resulted in works that will be an important and challenging resource for generations of harpsichordists to come; according to Elaine Funaro, director of Aliénor, Angle’s music was sometimes “technically fiendish . . . but he could pull it off with aplomb.” He will be greatly missed.