

# Harpsichord & *fortepiano*

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# PAINTING HARPSICHORD SOUNDBOARDS – MY MEMORIES

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by Mary Mobbs

*How does a person embark upon a career of soundboard decoration? Mary Mobbs, together with her performer and organologist husband, Kenneth Mobbs, recounts her unusual path.*

## First Steps

Skills I had developed during childhood, namely drawing and painting, continued though dormant through all my adult years, while I concentrated on music as my main spare-time occupation; then suddenly they awoke again in the shape of harpsichord soundboard decoration when I took early retirement in my late forties. This is how it happened:

One dull day in the late autumn of 1987 we were expecting visitors, and in order to decorate the house, I went out into the garden and picked the few flowers still blooming, and arranged them in a jug. Loath to lose this memory of summer, I got out my neglected paints and recorded the day in a “still life”. We decided to have the picture framed, as Kenneth was impressed with it.

Shortly afterwards, we were admiring an unfinished harpsichord that was being built by a friend. The soundboard was bare, and Kenneth asked if he were thinking of painting the soundboard, or having it painted. His reply was that he didn’t think he would bother, but remembering my new-found skill, Kenneth immediately said “Mary will paint it for you!”

From our visits to museums we had noticed some of the conventions that had been followed by the old painters, but our knowledge at that time was rather superficial. It so happened just then that the curator of the Edinburgh University Collection, John Barnes, and his wife Sheila came to see our early piano collection. Sheila was a soundboard painter and revealed that she had written a manual entitled “Soundboard painting in an Early Flemish style.”<sup>1</sup> She kindly lent me a copy of this book.

I had recently been on a bassoon course at Canterbury, and while there had noticed a newly-made harpsichord with the soundboard decorated with British wild flowers and birds. This gave me the idea that I could try something

similar. After all, my humble painting of British wild flowers had started the whole process for me. Crying out also to be incorporated was the maker’s name, Starling, a bird much associated with the British countryside.

Metaphorically devouring Sheila’s manual avidly, I decided my medium should be gouache, a water-based paint which apparently was traditional. This showed up nicely on the wood. I made a design using English wild flowers as my subject, surrounded the soundboard hole (or “rose”) with flowers as a “wreath” and copied both the quaint “arabesques” (improvised, generally triangular symmetrical shapes) and the “scallops” (the borders of the whole design), all according to the directions in Sheila’s book. The starling took pride of place where a bird should always go: in an appropriate position before the eyes of the player. Even though it was rather a “bastard” design with its wild rather than cultivated flowers, it taught me a lot about painting on wood, which I had not previously experienced. The owner was apparently pleased with what I had done.

It was a steep learning curve for me at that time, for in addition to Sheila’s work, several articles by the American painter and historian, Sheridan Germann, had been published only a few years before. In particular, an important one on European regional styles of decoration (including lids and casework) had appeared in the *Journal of the American Musical Instrument Society* in 1978.<sup>2</sup> Others, concentrating on Parisian 18<sup>th</sup>-century painters, had appeared in *Early Music*,<sup>3</sup> so there was a wealth of information to digest. Since then, at least two further important books have appeared.<sup>4</sup>

## The Ruckers Family Style

Let us now consider features of this style in more detail, referring to some of my later harpsichords. (See Cover illus. 1-2.)

Painters in this tradition included all sorts of insects, butterflies, birds and, to a lesser extent, animals on their soundboards. Colourful birds like parrots, parakeets and finches abound. I was not in the habit of painting parrots, so

Kenneth and I visited the museum in Bristol, where he photographed some specimens of real (but stuffed) perching parrots of the yellow and blue variety along with goldfinches, and there I had my models! On original instruments I have even found hoopoes, (*Cover illus. 1 top centre*), unfamiliar in the U.K., and prawns (*Cover illus 1, bottom middle*). I practised drawing prawns until the examples we had bought especially from the fishmongers became too smelly for future use. We even occasionally see monkeys playing musical instruments: (*see Cover illus 1, bottom left; and Cover illus. 2*), here I have rather indulged my fancy by portraying one monkey three-handedly playing a flute whilst the other dances to the music on a branch of the tree.

(Referring back to *Cover illus.1*) Another feature appearing on soundboards is fruit, notably strawberries (*centre*) which I have seen several times in the same identical group; cherries, usually in groups of two (*right*); plums, and a single apple and pear (*right centre*). The only vegetables I can remember painting were peas in the pod. Flowers, though, outnumbered all these by far. Following the time of "tulipomania" in the middle of the seventeenth century, the earliest soundboard painters often included tulips (*Cover illus., centre and in the wreath*) as well as roses (*bottom left and in the wreath*), carnations, narcissi, irises, anemones, honeysuckle to lead the eye forward (*near bottom left*), even the snakeshead fritillary (*top left*) and many other old varieties whose names I do not know, but which I copied nevertheless. Painters took some of their ideas from printed copy books, or *florilegia*, which were available then to artists of all kinds, and similar designs can be found also on china, curtains and upholstery of the period.

Incidentally, in choosing subjects for inclusion in their soundboards, painters were symbolically considering the five senses, namely sight (the decoration), touch (the feel of the keyboard), taste (the fruit and seafood) and smell (the flowers).

As I continued to receive commissions for "Ruckers" instruments, I developed a routine of asking the client to make his/her own choice from my list of possible flora and fauna – a sort of "pick and mix" arrangement which seemed to work very well. I could also then add smaller features possibly to cover blemishes in the wood, such as a blue nymph dragonfly, a butterfly, or a "snowflake" painted like the arabesques in blue smalt (which has a raised surface with something of the character of dessicated sugar) (*see Cover illus. 1 again*).

## A Fortuitous Accident Leading to a Very Big Challenge

Now reverting back in time again to the first months of my newly-found occupation, the next chapter starts with a near-disaster. Our cat leaped joyfully onto the closed lid of our Southwell Upright Square; with a crash the front board fell to the floor, and we found that the oil painting now had a crack across it. However, we managed to get it expertly restored and the person we chose at an Early Makers' Exhibition was Ann Mactaggart, who, by chance, was also known for her beautiful soundboard paintings. Thus it happened that within just a few months we had two of the best painters of this kind in our house.



Illus. 4: Mary Mobbs and Andrea Goble, November 1991

I was just then experimenting with commercial paint for my second harpsichord soundboard, and Ann saw what I was doing and was immediately interested. Not only this, but she and Peter invited Kenneth and myself to their home for what turned out to be quite detailed lessons in the special skill of soundboard decoration. I aired the possibility of painting still more soundboards, and told the Mactaggarts that I thought of writing to several harpsichord builders in the hope of getting further orders. Ann recommended that I shouldn't do this immediately, and I soon realised why: she was getting inundated with requests, and planned to pass some of them on



to me! Very soon I had a telephone call from Andrea Goble, (*See illus. 4*), one of the foremost harpsichord builders, asking if I could paint the soundboard of a double-manual Dulcken harpsichord. I was delighted, but quickly discovered that this, at eight feet long, was one of the largest varieties ever made. To get it into the basement where I always worked, it had to be gently carried over a steep rockery and carefully prised in through the window! Six months later I was amazed and indeed honoured to see it exhibited by Andrea at the Bruges 1989 International Keyboard Exhibition.

## **The Early 18th-century North German Harpsichord**

I then moved on to paint a Fleischer copy (c.1716, Hamburg) for Goble (*See Illus. 3, on the front cover*). The artist who decorated the original relied on one eye-catching figure: a large bird with wings opened wide, the body bright red and the wings in spectacular stripes of yellow, red and blue. I copied the flowing style of the flowers from the original, especially the narcissi and carnations between the bridges. This soundboard painting shows how the various items must be carefully chosen to fit in the spaces dictated by the positions of the bridges and, indeed, the shape of the instrument as a whole. As in several other cases, Kenneth helped me in this, for he has a feeling for appropriate spacing: after all, arabesques which can help with spacing are not present here. Andrea usually varnished soundboards, and I must say that my Fleischer copy in the University of Bristol Music Department looks as fresh now as on the day it was finished, seventeen years ago.

## **Continuing Orders**

To my surprise, my 'fame' as a soundboard painter spread and I did get further orders. Referring to my list of instruments; having only finished my first decoration in December 1987 and a Taskin copy in 1988, suddenly the next two years were particularly busy, as I painted the soundboard of a Anthony Gale Couchet copy in February 1989, two very large Goble Dulckens in March and September, and in between these two, a Stephen Keene Virginal of 1668 for William Mitchell. After painting a Taskin for Milan Misina, I then had a Ruckers copy and two more Fleischer soundboards for the Gobles. Fortunately, over time Kenneth had amassed thousands of photographs of early

instruments, and these were used for studying the relevant styles required. Tracings of suitable groups were then prepared, sometimes even an experimental tracing of the complete board. I was constantly making up new paint by grinding down the excellent pigments that we had bought in Germany and mixing them with Gum Arabic and a little water. Certainly I could now understand why Ann had been glad to pass some orders on to me.

## **The Later 18th-century French Style**

I have already mentioned that one of my early commissions was to paint a copy of the famous 1769 "Taskin" harpsichord in the Russell Collection, Edinburgh. The maker was David Evans, and it was for a former Bristol University music student, Peter Skuce (later to become a member of *The Dufay Collective*). The original reveals several examples of symbolism common to both harpsichords and other objects of art at this time (*see illus. 5*). Here a goldfinch perches on a dead tree stump from which small branches are just beginning to bud; one could say this represents the birth of a newly-sounding instrument from dead wood, but possibly also, in religious terms, the rising of Christ from the dead. With a tradition stemming from 14th-century paintings of the Madonna and Child with Goldfinch, we have the symbolism that, even in birth, the Christ Child was prophesying his earthly end. The goldfinch was associated in this way because of the age-old tradition that it obtained its red head at Christ's Crucifixion whilst pecking the Crown of Thorns.

The original Taskin goldfinch was such a poor example to copy that I first decided to use a hawfinch instead, but on subsequent copies I tried to copy the original bird as exactly as possible. Another typical feature found on Taskin harpsichords was the line of double scallops surrounding the whole soundboard, making it look rather like a string of toad spawn!

I also decided to place my signature on the board, but disguised within a small flower group and therefore not immediately apparent. In fact, I followed this method throughout all my work. Altogether I copied the Taskin soundboard four times, and three of these were exact copies for Milan Misina, whom I had first met at Bruges in 1989. Painting these boards in close succession was a surreal experience. No sooner had the first with its multitude of colours been completed, than it was whisked away and another, naked, substituted in its place.



Illus. 5: Copy by Mary Mobbs of the Taskin 1769: bird on dead tree with buds sprouting

Of all the original soundboards I have met, I think the most successful in every way is this often-copied “green” Taskin. Both the wreath and my copy of it are shown here ( *illus. 6 and 7*). I cannot but admire the proportion of each group of flowers (see example, *illus. 8*). Interestingly, only flowers are represented on the whole board, and each of a size to fit exactly into its space. In fact, the original painter was so clever and artistic that I even wondered if I dare sign my humble effort, but I did!

## Teaching

I was invited by the harpsichord builder, John Storrs, to teach a class in soundboard painting at his house (see *illus. 9*). During the morning Kenneth showed the class slides of originals and my paintings, while I pointed out various things to be noted; in the afternoon the students themselves tried their hands at the art, and in the evening Kenneth gave a memorable harpsichord recital. It was amazing how varied were the results of the students’ efforts. One girl showed real talent: what she produced was not in the style I was trying to teach her, but artistically I could have learned a lot from her! Surprisingly, I did not receive any pictures of my pupils’ efforts, as expected, but instead was commissioned by three of them to decorate their harpsichords.

Each had made his/her own instrument, and I certainly couldn’t have done that. Nevertheless I hope at least one of the group has subsequently tried to paint a soundboard, or has encouraged an artist friend to do so.

## Final Thoughts

In looking back on this particular period in my life, I calculate that I painted 26 soundboards and a lid in the 16 years between 1987 and 2003. Financially, I would have to admit that, for the time I expended on each, I only just about earned the statutory minimum hourly wage! But this fact is insignificant when I reflect upon the interesting and enthusiastic people whom I met while doing this work (incidentally I would be delighted to have news from any of them). I would very strongly urge any talented artists with an interest also in the history of their subject to consider this intriguing specialisation.





Illus. 6: The Taskin 1769: original wreath.



Illus. 7: Copy by Mary Mobbs of the Taskin 1769 wreath



Illus. 8: Copy by Mary Mobbs of a flower group on the Taskin 1769



Illus. 9: Soundboard painting class led by Mary Mobbs, June 1993.



- 1 Sheila Barnes, Soundboard painting in an Early Flemish Style (Zuckermann Harpsichords, 1979). This book was meant to partner harpsichord kits that were available from Zuckerman Harpsichords Inc.
- 2 Sheridan Germann, "Regional Schools of Harpsichord Decoration," *Journal of the American Musical Instrument Society* 4 (1978): 54-99.
- 3 Sheridan Germann, " 'Mrs Crawley's Couchet' reconsidered," *Early Music* 7 (1979): 473 - 481.  
  
 Sheridan Germann, "Monsieur Doublet and his confrères: The harpsichord decorators of Paris 1," *Early Music* 8 (1980): 435 - 453.  
  
 Sheridan Germann, "Monsieur Doublet and his confrères: The harpsichord decorators of Paris 2," *Early Music* 9 (1981): 192 - 212.  
  
 Sheridan Germann, "Harpsichord decoration," *Early Music* 9 (1981): 579.
- 4 Grant O'Brien, Ruckers, *A Harpsichord and Virginal Building Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 346, and Sheridan Germann, "Harpsichord decoration – a conspectus," in *The Historical Harpsichord* 4, (Hillsdale, New York: Pendragon Press, 2002).

Photos, other than illus. 6, by Kenneth Mobbs.