

Harpsichord & *fortepiano*

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MAKERS' REPORTS

THE BIRTH OF A HARPSICHORD: RICHARD KINGSTON'S OPUS #333

By Caperton Andersson with Richard Kingston

Kingston's 333rd instrument (*See cover photo*) was made for Elaine Funaro, specialist in new music for harpsichord and artistic director of the Aliénor, a nonprofit organization which encourages modern compositions for harpsichord. It is a standard model that he has been making for the last 29 years, a departure from the harpsichords modelled on Parisian instruments that he made up to 1978.

Kingston says his first challenge was to free the instrument from all preconceived notions of what a harpsichord should or should not be visually. He believes that though modern harpsichord makers have the responsibility to remain honest to the design and materials of the historic instruments, they must also extend the instrument's limits to the farthest horizons that modern composers dare to take them. Opus #333 is 18th-century northern European in all aspects of its design, though the action is most certainly 18th-century French as regards octave span, key length, shape, and balance points. The total coupled weight, without pluck at the lower keys, is 35 grams and the individual keys of each manual are precision balanced.

The disposition is 2 x 8', 1 x 4', hand stops, shove coupler, with a compass of FF-g³, three-position transposition. A buff is supplied on separate battens for each 8-foot set, one conventionally operated for the hand stop in the key well, and the other from a knob at the batten on the bass end of the pin block. The pads of the back batten reach diagonally across the near batten to engage the strings close to the nut.

The transposition set-up, compass and octave span of 6 7/16 inches at the gap produce the width of 41 inches at the key well. The 105 inch case length is primarily the result of scale. The c² is 15 inches and just scaling goes from the top of the compass to the tenor range before foreshortening begins. The depth of the case is 11 inches, with a large opening between the headers and the first lower frame. The header features an additional member mortised on its anterior side and perpendicular to the header. This piece functions as a 'stiffener'

to the header. Two upper frames are glued to this piece and divide the length of the header into thirds. Thus, with gap spacers in place the line of stress from the bentside to the pin block is unified.

The 4' hitch pin rail is considered part of the case, and is installed prior to the case receiving its soundboard. The soundboard is made of spruce with tapering from 5/32 inches to 3/32 inches overall and conventional ribs of sugar pine finely feathered at each end and overlapping the spine liner. The bridges and hitch pin rails are made from Pennsylvania black walnut. The back pinning and side draft of the strings are typical, although the elevated position of the hitch pin rail is considerably less than the height of the corresponding part of the bridge. The downward force of the strings is offset by the upward thrust of the crown. The crown is affected by means of a cant on the eight-foot, bentside liner that is seven degrees at its peak.

The pin block is Appalachian white oak, three-piece laminate with a grain orientation of two opposed to one, the centerpiece being odd to the outside planks. No veneer is applied. The case is basswood, except the bentside interior frames and liners, which are yellow poplar, from the Appalachian region. The liners, header and frames, are cut to have a grain orientation of 45 degrees to the perpendicular surface, providing straight grain on all sides.

Since composers of modern pieces ask the audience to hear new sounds, Kingston believes it is fitting that the instrument be void of design elements which could evoke expectations of historical music. With this in mind, he designed the Opus #333 levers, hinges and stand to function the same as classically designed instruments, but also to stand apart visually from all other harpsichords, classic or modern. His design incorporates the repeating concept of sets of threes, along with the illusion of the freedom of movement in every direction. Blacksmith Ben Frisby of Marshall, North Carolina, created the unusual hand forged hinges that Kingston designed.

Early on, Kingston felt that the instrument itself should be considered a work of art and that the stand should cradle it, as a way to present the art. It was also important that the stand not be influenced by 17th- and 18th-century furniture. He presented his design to master furniture maker Douglas Carlisle of Mooresboro, North Carolina, who specializes in working with unusual woods and shapes. The stand/cradle was made from Pennsylvanian black walnut and is a work of art separate from the instrument it holds. Its legs curve in two planes, simultaneously angling out and curving forward, and the sides of the stretchers and crossbeam are both convex. Additionally, Carlisle created the harpsichord's matching bench. Kingston asked glass artist Alex Greenwood, from the Ashville (North Carolina) Center for Glass to create the three non-traditional glass ends of the handstops for the Kingston Opus #333.

Artist Lisa Creed of Durham, North Carolina painted the lid with an abstract representation which flows beyond its boundaries onto the case. On the left side of the lid is an icon representing the composer's score and the performer's realization with resultant emanations of sound.

The Kingston Opus #333 was debuted during a three concert series, *Back to Bach and Beyond: Redefining the Harpsichord*, presented by Aliénor in November 2009 and featured concertos by J.S. Bach for one, two and three harpsichords, played by Elaine Funaro and Beverly Biggs of Durham, North Carolina and Rebecca Pechefsky of New York. Also showcased were the sonatas for two and three harpsichords by Aliénor Competition winner Edwin McLean of Chapel Hill.

Bjarne Dahl (1930-2009), born in Hawaii, moved to Los Altos, CA, where he restored harpsichords and pianos. His widow, Marianne Dahl, is hoping to evaluate and dispose of his collection of instruments, papers and other music. To help, contact her: bjarnedahl@comcast.net.

28-31 May 2010 Clavichord course by Paul Simmonds, West Dean College. <http://www.westdean.org.uk>

23-27 June 2010 Workshop with Bart van Oort at Villa Bossi in the village of Bodio Lomnago (VA). info@bizzzi.com

7-10 August 2010
Exhibition of Early Keyboard Instrument and that keyboard competition at Bruges –you know the one. <http://www.mafestival.be>

October 2010
Michaelstein International Symposium on Musical Instruments on 13 September 2010 Shanghai; includes the CIMCIM meeting, the ICOM and CIMCIM conferences, and more.

Owen H. Jorgensen (died 7 August 2009) was best known as a leading authority on the tuning of historical temperaments; he often gave recitals with as many as seven keyboard instruments on stage each tuned differently. His principal publications are:

Tuning: containing the perfection of eighteenth-century temperament, the lost art of nineteenth-century temperament, and the science of equal temperament, complete with instructions for aural and electronic tuning. (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 1991).

Tuning the historical temperaments by ear: a manual of eighty-nine methods for tuning fifty-one scales on the harpsichord, piano, and other keyboard instruments. (Marquette: Northern Michigan University Press, 1977).

The equal-beating temperaments: a handbook for tuning harpsichords and forte-pianos, with tuning techniques and tables of fifteen historical temperaments. (Raleigh, NC: Sunbury Press, 1981).

Owen will be missed by many of us as a good friend and a disciplined scholar.

Submitted by David E. Blair