

Harpsichord & *fortepiano*

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INTERVIEW OF MYRNA HERZOG, NEW SQUARE PIANO OWNER

By Pamela Hickman

I was fascinated to hear the story of Myrna Herzog's new acquisition – a square fortepiano. I spoke to her on 24 February 2010 to hear more about this wonderful instrument. Harpsichord player David Shemer spoke about the fortepiano from the point of view of a player. Dr. Myrna Herzog is a viol player, and founder and musical director of the Phoenix Early Music Ensemble; Harpsichordist Dr. David Shemer is founder and musical director of the Jerusalem Baroque Orchestra and speaks about the fortepiano as a performer

H&F: Myrna, where does the story begin?

MH: It started by chance. My husband – an amateur Baroque violinist – is an early instrument enthusiast. He was aware of the fact that the Phoenix Ensemble was performing Classical programmes using the harpsichord – early Haydn trios and, recently, preparing for our latest programme – “Mozart the Freemason”. He was also aware of my dream to play this repertoire on a fortepiano, a seemingly hopeless dream. Actually, I had checked out the few fortepianos available in Israel, but they were beyond our reach for a variety of reasons. At home, for lack of a better option, we had begun playing Classical repertoire on modern instruments, but we were feeling frustrated about it. Then my husband, surfing the net, discovered a fortepiano being offered for sale at a furniture auction in Bayeux, a small town in Normandy (France)...and the auction was in two days time! According to the measurements in the auction information, this instrument would fit into our elevator, our apartment and the Mazda Five. Wasting no time in getting information on the square fortepiano, we found out that it was an original instrument built in 1800 in Paris by a keyboard instrument builder called Baas and that its table had a crack in it (a normal occurrence in these delicate instruments); the crack would, however, not affect the sound. We had not actually seen the instrument and the auctioneers could not tell us anything about its playing condition.

H&F: How could you know if the instrument would be playable?

MH: There was no way we could! However, I contacted Alex Rosenblatt, an expert on early keyboard instruments, and sent him the only available photo of the fortepiano. Matching the photo with the scant information offered, we concluded that it would be the ideal instrument for playing music up to the early 1830s – Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven. The auction was 11 November: we sent in a bid by email and bought it. We were thrilled.

H&F: So it was sent to you here in Israel.

MH: Easier said than done! We were having it brought here through an Israeli transporting company but their French counterpart did not agree to make a case in which to fly the fortepiano. A French company agreed to bring it to Paris, but not in a case. I knew this would be highly risky. Fortunately, I speak very fluent French. On the net I found a carpenter in Bayeux, contacted him and sent him a sketch of the case needed with all its measurements. The carpenter would be able to check the measurements of the instrument in loco! He agreed to do the job and managed to get the case completed just before the Christmas season; he even provided us with a fumigation certificate for the wood case (necessary for bringing it into Israel). The carpenter packed the fortepiano into the case, screwed down the lid and it was sent off. It arrived in Israel on 24 December 2009.

H&F: So the square fortepiano had found a new home.

MH: Yes, and we were relieved to find that it did, indeed, fit into our elevator, the apartment and the Mazda – we want it heard in concerts all over Israel.

H&F: Would you like to tell me more about the instrument?

MH: Yes. It is a square fortepiano, of the kind people would have had in their homes. (Mendelssohn owned a similar instrument.) Fortunately, it is in very good condition. Thanks to a signature inside it, I was able to identify the person who had restored it in 1972 – fortepiano restorer Johannes Carda (who today still works at restoring early keyboard instruments). He informed me that the instrument had been part of a collection in Normandy for the last 38 years. It has 120 strings. We had to order a tuning key for it and we have had a cover made; we also came up with a special device to make for smooth transportation. It originally had four pedals – a sustaining pedal, a moderator, a lute stop and a bell. The bell was gone so Alex Rosenblatt removed that pedal, but only after photographing it carefully should we wish to reassemble it at a later stage. Alex spent much of four days on it, checking the felts and working on regulation and solving some problems caused by the natural distortion process of the wood. He needed to raise its pitch very gradually from below 392 Hertz, and the question was how the fortepiano would react to this change after so many years of being unplayed. It is now pitched at 415 Hz. The restorer said it would take the fortepiano's tuning four months to stabilize, as it would need to adjust to our dry climate after the damp climate of Normandy. Alex added two bars below it to make it safer to transport. By the way, the original legs are attached with wooden screws!

H&F: How did it perform on its first Israeli concert run – “Mozart the Freemason”?

MH: It went well. Its characteristic sound is an interesting mix, evoking its clavichord origins, but also the piano and harpsichord sound. What an interesting timbre it has – I would call it “wild” – quite a new reality, tempting the player away from a “well behaved” approach. On a fortepiano you can play *forte* in both hands, giving a clear and thrilling effect. Pianists and piano teachers were fascinated on hearing it. At our concert at the Felicia Blumental Music Center in Tel Aviv, someone in the audience said they were experiencing the pleasure of hearing music performed “in a private salon”. *Jerusalem Post* music critic Uri Epstein referred to its “exquisite, delicate sonorities”. When we use the square fortepiano for playing Haydn trios, the audience will be able to hear why Haydn wrote his cello

parts the way he did, reinforcing the left hand role of the piano, and it will sound so right!

H&F: David Shemer, you played it in the Mozart concerts. What were your impressions of the Baas fortepiano?

DS: I have spent many years playing harpsichords and have only played a few notes here and there on a fortepiano. The experience of playing it was amazing! It was like reliving history. I felt I was experiencing what a musician at around 1750-1760 would have sensed playing a new kind of instrument. It is somewhat familiar but presents a completely new set of possibilities. Playing Mozart on it makes so much sense when it comes to dynamics, articulation and lightness of touch, even if the specific instrument does not always oblige.

H&F: Myrna, what are your plans for future performances with the fortepiano?

MH: There are several. The first is a programme of Beethoven trios and his arrangements of Scottish songs (opus 108). I fell in love with those Scottish songs in my teenage years and have been dreaming of performing them ever since. They will be sung by soprano Karin Shifrin, with Alex Rosenblatt playing the fortepiano. Another programme will be of Haydn flute trios and a third will focus on the two Mozart piano quartets.

H&F: Myrna, thank you for sharing the exciting adventure of buying an historical instrument with us. How would you sum it up?

MH: The issue of historical instruments is a controversial one. The question is whether we should play on them or leave them in museums. My opinion is that they are to be heard. They are “the real thing”. If this Baas fortepiano has a soul, it is surely happy at having been brought back to life and being heard. Luck was on our side. We were fortunate it was in good condition, considering its age; and what a privilege it is to have the original instrument and not a copy! As to how we went about purchasing it, what is life without risk??