

Harpsichord & fortepiano

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INTERVIEW

With Bexley Workshops: Maintenance and Tuning Courses

Harpsichord and Fortepiano caught up with Bexley Workshops where the team of Andrew Wooderson (harpsichords) and Edmund Handy (clavichords) share a workshop.

H & F: What maintenance courses do you offer?

Bexley: We have the Basic Harpsichord Maintenance Course and the Practical Tuning Course.

H & F: Tell me about the first one, please. Who do you find attends these?

Bexley: The Basic Harpsichord Maintenance Course is aimed at owners/players. The basic premise is a player playing at home, or maybe in a rehearsal, where a note stops working. We work through all the stages to find what is wrong and then make the most common repairs - strings, plectra and dampers.

H & F: How do you know what the cause is, and how would a player know whether to leave well alone?

Bexley: There is an emphasis on diagnosing faults and deciding what can be successfully tackled and what should be left to a skilled technician. Most faults can be cured relatively easily and this usually involves replacing plectra or strings and making adjustments to dampers. We allow plenty of time for "hands on" practical experience of fitting and cutting plectra and of winding and fitting replacement strings.

H & F: Do players need to bring anything to the course?

Bexley: No. We provide all tools and materials and we have a "stringing practice jig". Voicing practice is carried out first on spare jacks and then on a real instrument. We try to allow time for a fairly wide ranging Q&A but we cannot promise to provide detailed guidance on specific problems or instruments during the course itself. The course is aimed at owners of "historical style" harpsichords

with wooden jacks, but we usually manage to spend a useful amount of time dealing with plastic jacks too. Leather plectra are outside the scope of these courses.

H & F: This sounds like something I could have used when I was first starting harpsichord. What about the tuning course?

Bexley: The Practical Tuning course is intended to teach participants to tune by ear within a day. It seemed ambitious when we first started but it does seem to work very well. The first session is a very brief summary of the relevant theory — why temperaments are necessary etc. but this is kept to a minimum and we very quickly start practical tuning. Usually this will involve up to six participants working with a minimum of three contrasting instruments in separate rooms. After mastering the tuning of octaves, unisons and other pure intervals we start dealing with beats.

H & F: Do you ever have a student who just can't hear the beats? It would be hard to get far with tuning without this.

Bexley: Rarely. Typically by mid-morning coffee most participants can identify beats and start to temper intervals. We then start some simple temperaments using very clear, simple guide sheets, almost "recipe sheets" that Edmund has prepared. Again the emphasis is practical — trust the sheet and do what it says, even if you don't quite understand why!

H & F: What temperaments do you teach first then?

Bexley: By lunchtime most participants are happily tuning Kirnberger and starting to experiment with other temperaments. By around 3.30pm most participants are exhausted but feeling rather pleased that they have tuned several different temperaments. (We concentrate on Kirnberger, Valotti and 1/4 comma meantone although other temperaments may be explored too).

H & F: So how do students feel about the theory —Syntonic and Pythagorean commas, for example?

Bexley: Actually, the avoidance of too much theory is quite deliberate —there is only so much that can be covered in one day. Most people want to be able to tune their instrument in order to enjoy playing it. They can very easily read more about the theories involved and indeed we provide a suitable bibliography in our course notes.

H & F: At more than one conservatory, students are expressly told not to tune or try to maintain the instruments. I would hope this has changed, but has it?

Bexley: To a large extent I can understand a conservatory not wanting students to tune if the conservatory already has a comprehensive tuning regime in place, especially if certain instruments are required at particular temperaments or pitches for specific teaching activities. But what I don't understand is how many students can leave a conservatory after a number of years study and still not be comfortable tuning or carrying out minor repairs for themselves. This still seems to be a commonplace amongst UK trained players, in contrast to those who have studied on the continent, where confidence in tuning and basic maintenance seems to be regarded (very rightly) as essential.

H & F: Do you have many who come wanting to tune clavichords, or is it mostly harpsichords?

Bexley: So far we have had nobody specifically attending in order to learn to tune clavichords and the courses are aimed at harpsichord players and owners. Nonetheless an aspiring clavichord tuner would probably find the tuning course very useful and Edmund, as a very experienced clavichord tuner can offer specific advice. If demand were sufficient we would certainly consider running a specific clavichord tuning course.

H & F: How do you feel about electronic tuners?

Bexley: Although emphasising tuning by ear, we are always careful to encourage those who are less confident and to relate all our practice to the use of electronic tuners too. Much of the course is equally useful in helping

people to get the best from an electronic tuning machine. Above all we try to raise people's confidence in their tuning abilities.

H & F: It is interesting, isn't it? The machine doesn't actually "tune" anything — it only tells you what the tuning is doing. I do find I trust my ear more, but of course this is after some experience of doing this. Do you find people quickly become happy to tune unisons and octaves by ear?

Bexley: Generally yes. We suggest that if someone is inclined to still rely on the electronic tuner then perhaps they should only do so to set the scale. Tuning the octaves and unisons by ear is excellent practice and helps to build confidence. It is also usually faster than relying on a machine.

H & F: This sounds fantastic. How much does it cost to take part in one of your courses and when is the next one?

Bexley: Both courses take place on single days, typically starting at around 9.30am and ending at around 5.00pm. The fully inclusive course fee (currently £135.00) includes use of tools, supply of materials and course notes, refreshments through the day and lunch, usually in a nearby restaurant. We had some on 26-27 March on Maintenance and Tuning.

H & F: Okay, I have to ask. When I first tried it took me 20 minutes just to set the "tuning scale". How long (in minutes) does it take you to tune one rank of say 4 1/2 octaves in Kirnberger?

Bexley: I'd very much prefer to avoid answering that directly for fear of future embarrassment! But typically I like to have about 45minutes to tune a three rank double, but 30 minutes is still possible. However when the pressure is on (live radio/interval tunings in hot concert halls etc) it seems to be possible to just fit the time available. This can be very stressful but it is not unknown for professional tuners to retune a whole instrument in 15 minutes or less.