Harpsichord & fortepiano

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INTERVIEW

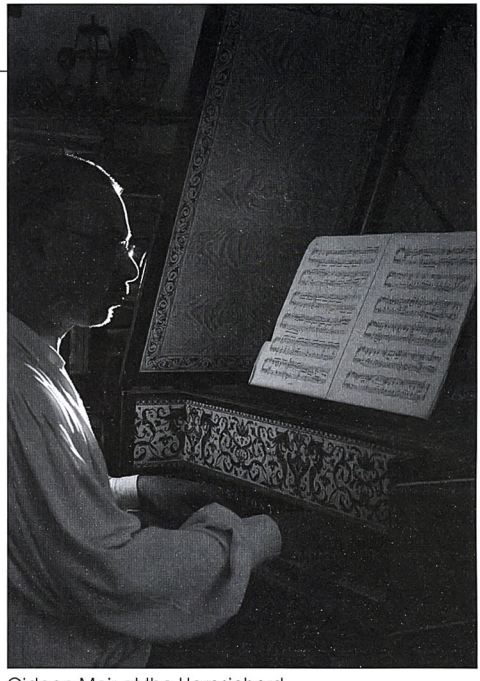
On 19 February, Pamela Hickman met harpsichordist and organist Gideon Meir in a café in the bustling city of Tel Aviv. Born in Tel Aviv in 1962, Gidi continues to reside there.

H & F: Gidi, do you come from a musical family?

GM: Most definitely. My late mother was one of the most musical people I have known. She studied music as a child but did not continue with it as an adult. My father is a cellist, having performed and taught for many years. He studied with some of the twentieth century's greatest cellists – Antonio Janigro, Pablo Casals and Diran Alexanian. Through him I feel a certain link to the "older school" and I see myself as a member of the "old school" (for better and for worse). My father is my greatest critic. In fact, I have had the privilege of both my mother and father not just being "proud parents" of an artist; if they liked my playing they said so and if they did not, I would receive detailed criticism. That is something I really appreciate.

There was always music at home – a lot of chamber music played by my father and his colleagues – and a lot of discussion about music between them. My father was also director of the Tel Aviv Conservatory for 10 years. So I interacted not only with my own piano teacher but knew many of the other local music teachers and gained a lot from that, some of them also attending my recitals. My grandmother was also a devoted music-lover. She loved music more than anything else and went to as many concerts as her busy schedule permitted, often taking her grandchildren with her. Many children receive a concert-going education from their grandparents, but if your grandmother is Golda Meir (world leader and the first woman prime minister of Israel) you are in for a special kind of experience.

As a child, I met many great musicians with her, hearing them both as performing artists and at her home. When she lived next door to us, she frequently came in to hear my father's chamber music groups or to enjoy my playing. And she bought me my first harpsichord. Golda Meir was a tremendous public speaker, speaking freely from the heart, never reading her speeches off the page.



Gideon Meir at the Harpsichord
(photo by Karen Aschner)

When I asked her how she did it, she said "I take time and quietly think about what I want to say. Then I look at those sitting there and get a feel of my audience." I do the same with my musical preparation. I often think of her when addressing my audiences freely and personally.

H & F: What are your earliest musical experiences?

GM: My mother used to say that as a small child I would stand at the piano, hardly tall enough to see above the keyboard, plunk notes and announce that I would now "play something in the manner of Debussy" or "in the manner of Scarlatti". She said my playing was true to those styles but I don't remember it.

The earliest recordings I remember hearing were Handel's "Water Music" (to which I would dance) and my acute love of Wanda Landowska's playing of Scarlatti and Bach stems from hearing recordings of hers from the age of three or four. So I already loved harpsichord music – music that did not exist anywhere near us; it was a faraway dream.

I remember, at age three, how the French pianist Gisele Kuhn, a colleague of my father's staying in our house, sat me on her knee and taught me to play *"Au clair de la lune"*. And

I have memories of my father playing the Bach solo cello suites; I love these pieces.

H & F: At what age did your music studies begin?

GM: At age four I had expressed the desire to play the harp, but what Tel Aviv family would consider giving a four-year-old harp lessons? I started learning to play the piano at the age of eight, which was a little late for me. I had wanted to start earlier, but we were in the USA for three years and I began to take lessons on our return. On television I had seen children playing the violin by the Suzuki method and was attracted to it, but my father disliked the harshness of tone and poor intonation of their playing and refused to have me taught like that. I wanted to dance ballet and was also not granted that. My father decided it would be best for me to start with the keyboard.

For ten years I studied piano with Malka Mevorach, a very great person and educator. I really loved her, and we maintained a warm friendship 'till her death five years ago. She believed in music education as an end in itself and that everybody had the right to music education. She enjoyed teaching everyone, not just the best and most talented. I spent many hours around her, not only in my own lessons. She never forced me to play pieces I did not like, nor did she make me play scales (which I loathed) or technical exercises, other than working on the technical aspects of pieces being studied. And she never ridiculed her pupils; if I wanted to make the piano sound like a harpsichord or like Landowska's Pleyel harpsichord, she never saw it as funny. I was in the habit of ornamenting Mozart's slow movements (I had learned from reading Landowska's book) to the amusement of some of the teachers of the Conservatory, who regarded it as useless.

She also helped me choose repertoire that interested me. When I played 16th-century pieces that demanded ornaments with which she was not familiar, we would together look them up in the table of ornaments. She was not a teacher who simply dictated to her students how to play. At age 12, I brought a copy of Bach's Goldberg Variations to a lesson, requesting to learn to play them. Malka did not say they were beyond me, but just that they take a long time to learn. We started with the bass line theme, analyzing it, then learning the ornaments and, eventually, I was able to play some of the movements.

H & F: Where did you take further studies?

GM: In 1980, between finishing school and doing my compulsory army service, I went to London and studied harpsichord with Maggie Cole, a wonderful player and a no less wonderful person. I was fortunate in being able to practice on the collection of incredible antique instruments at Fenton House. (I always play on antique instruments wherever and whenever possible.) There was an early music concert in London almost every day —- at the "Wigmore Hall and other venues — and they featured top artists in the emerging early music scene in London. It was there in London that I first heard the viola da gamba played, the young Emma Kirkby and Sigiswald Kuijken; this was very different to the music I had heard in concerts growing up in Tel Aviv.

In 1984, a friend informed me that the American harpsichordist Laurette Goldberg was coming to Israel from San Francisco to conduct master classes at the Jerusalem Music Centre and suggested I play for her. I prepared a Bach suite and Couperin "ordre" (suite) on my own and played them to her. She was enthusiastic about my playing and, after a couple of weeks, suggested I come to study with her in the USA. A year later, I became her assistant: that meant assisting her with the Baroque programme, doing secretarial work, running after people for rehearsals, also teaching harpsichord to pianists and playing examples in her classes.

All of this provided me with valuable experience. I worked with some incredibly gifted students. Laurette Goldberg was an interesting person. Not an old-school conventional, she would address concert audiences and she taught me to explain about music to audiences, to sing them a theme or a ballad on which a work might be based. The Bay Area was a rich haven of Baroque– and early music. Laurette was the musical director of the Philharmonia Baroque Orchestra and I attended most of its rehearsals and all of its concerts (sometimes as an usher.) I would go to Laurette's recitals, sometimes turning pages for her. In 1987, I returned to Israel.

H & F: Would you like to mention other harpsichordists who have influenced you?

GM: Yes. In San Francisco, I became friendly with harpsichordist Katherine Silver. She was a "fiery" player, who, like me, preferred the exciting personal approach to playing to "dry, historical performance practice." She always suggested

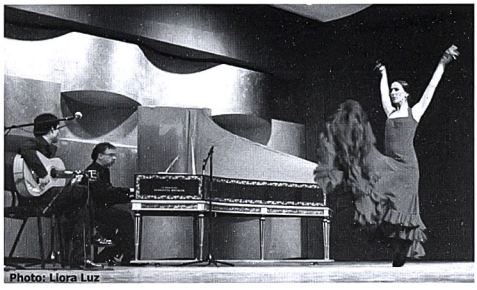


Photo: Liora Luz

I meet Lisa Crawford and hear her playing. Some years later, in 1992, I went to the Baroque Performance Institute at Oberlin, Ohio, to attend the summer programme there, but especially to meet Lisa. I first heard Lisa Crawford playing when she performed a Bach sonata for violin and harpsichord: the harpsichord was so alive, so perky...like fireworks, like sparks flying! I needed to learn how she produced those sounds. So I took some private lessons with her.

She was the first tutor I had studied with to use technical explanations in reference to sound: her approach was that you look for the sound you want to hear and you find a way of producing it, rather than just accepting the way the harpsichord sounds. She spoke of the rich possibilities of the instrument. After two weeks of chamber music coaching and lessons with her, I told her I must come and study with her! She was planning on taking a sabbatical and said we would have to be quick about it. "Wait here a moment" she said and went off to talk to the dean. She came back and asked if I could return in two months to study for an Artist's Diploma. Some people complete it in one year. Lisa let me to do it over two years, which was a great privilege. I received the Dean's Talent Award of the Oberlin College Conservatory. Oberlin was a very rich experience. And I thought it would be heaven to be in a small town, with nothing more to do than practice and play.

But things did not start too smoothly in Oberlin: during the first month I was there, I was in a car accident, broke my neck and could not play for a while. Starting to play again, I chose Handel, but could only play a few notes at a time. That year, Israeli composer Yeheskel Braun had presented me with a wonderful gift – his "Four Pieces for Keyboard" that he had written for me and I had promised him I would premiere the pieces. (After my performance of them, Yeheskel Braun dedicated the pieces to me. I love them and make a point of playing them in concert every couple of years.) But here I was recovering from my injuries!

The Artist's Diploma programme required four recitals in two years. As an Artist's Diploma student, all I had to do was play: I took harpsichord lessons and attended a studio class which required students to perform and criticize the playing of other students. Students usually played once a month; I played every week. One very useful workshop was the "continuo clinic". I was also available to play with whatever players or ensembles needed a harpsichord player and this offered me the opportunity to get plenty of experience. I also took secondary organ lessons with Mr. David Boe. He is a marvelous organist. There, I fell in love with the organ.

For years, I had wanted to return to playing the organ and now study with Arin Maisky, organist of the Immanuel Church in Jaffa. I remember hearing Arin's late father Valery Maisky playing the organ there.

H & F: Let's go back in time to the beginning of your harpsichord performing career.

GM: Yes. My first harpsichord recital was in the San Francisco Bay area in the autumn of 1985. My Israeli debut was at the Immanuel Church in Jaffa, with my teacher, friend, by then, also my colleague, Malka Mevorach present.

H & F: Why the harpsichord?

GM: I love much of the piano repertoire – in particular, music of Mozart, Haydn, Schumann, Brahms, Debussy and Ravel, but was never in love with the piano timbre. I am fascinated by that wiry, twangy harpsichord sound, of which I never tire, the subtleties that can be achieved with imagination and the endless search for physical ways of drawing different sounds from its plucked strings. It means tapping into my own personal vocabulary of imagery: associations like water, oil, sand, parchment, silver, gold, bronze, leather, paper, silk, warmth, cold, etc. The repertoire of the harpsichord has always been my out-and out favorite – Bach, Scarlatti, Rameau, Couperin, and more.

H & F: Would you like to give an outline of harpsichord concerts you have performed over the last 25 years?

GM: Yes. I must have played over 60 programmes over the last 25 years, mostly solo recitals, some focusing on a single composer, others on a theme. I have performed several single composer programmes of works of J.S. Bach, D. Scarlatti and Handel. Some

of the themes I have used in concerts are: "Music from Paris", "Music of 1733 – Bach, Handel, Scarlatti and more", "Intimate Music from the Rooms of Louis XIV", "Friends – Scarlatti and Handel", "German Music of the Seventeenth Century", "Kuhnau's Biblical Sonatas", "Homage to Landowska", "Homage to Malka Mevorach" (my piano teacher).

This included Mozart and Haydn sonatas played on the harpsichord) and "Homage to Katherine Silver". (After learning of Katherine's death, I remembered all the pieces we had played to each other and I had the need to play them and remember her through them.) I have performed three different programmes of Elizabethan virginal music (in which I sang ballads set by Bull and Farnaby and recited Shakespeare texts). Then there were programmes of duets for two harpsichords, multiple harpsichord concerti, Bach viola da gamba sonatas, Bach flute sonatas, Bach and Handel oboe sonatas, Scarlatti and Flamenco, French music on the subject of birds, and more.

H & F: You create programmes with a difference, not the run-of-the-mill recital. The last concert of yours I heard included a strong Spanish element.

GM: Yes. I love Spanish music, dance and culture. For years I have been dreaming of putting together Spanish music with Spanish dance. In fact, this idea inspired me to start learning flamenco dance myself and I have become a very devout amateur flamenco dancer. I have had the privilege of working with the best of the flamenco dancers here – with Sonia Garcia and Dana Arnon – in the Felicja Blumenthal Festival and the Guitar Festival. Putting Spanish dance together with music is painstaking work, even to find the right music. Now that I myself dance, having studied and worked with Sonia Garcia and cooperated with Dana Arnon, I know what works and what does not – what music wants to be wed with dance and what already has all it needs within it.

H & F: What do you mean by that?

GM: With Domenici Scarlatti's works, I believe some of his simpler pieces were intended as dance pieces and some, even, as sight-singing exercises. His patron, Princess Maria Barbara, who became queen of Spain, was considered a great singer and dancer in her circle. It is difficult to imagine that Scarlatti, who was so close to her as music master and in friendship, did not provide her with top class pieces to which to dance. The more elaborate sonatas have so much sound-painting of dance and movement within them that they are too dense for choreography, or in Sonia Gracia's words, *"no necesitan adornos"* ("no need of further embellishment"). Pieces that are suited to dance gain an extra dimension through choreography.

H & F: Playing with dancers must be different to playing solo.

GM: Indeed. It becomes chamber music: you have the percussion element of the footwork (*zapateado*) and, sometimes, castanets, creating rich rhythmic counterpoint. The physical movement, itself changes, becoming very rich. What I find very special about working with dancers in the Spanish programmes is that we begin by practising in my living room with the harpsichord, an intimate experience of playing and dancing, but when we bring it to the concert hall, we seem to maintain the same kind of intimate feeling of this meeting of art forms; I hope audiences get a sense of that. Working with a dancer makes me play the pieces differently.

When you play for dancers, you have to be incredibly accurate with rhythm and tempo to give the dancers the stability to allow them to be expressive, to give them the confidence to do the utmost with their bodies. You need to sense where the movement is taking you. There is a building up of tension in flamenco dance and one can not let this intensity drop! In addition, the player needs to know and understand dance gestures and the style of dance, in effect, to be a part of the choreography. Actually, I hope some day to do my own choreography of some of the pieces. When playing the same pieces alone on the harpsichord, I use much more rubato and flexibility of tempo in order to convey the shapes inherent in dance. It is certainly interesting to do both.

H & F: Do you teach harpsichord?

GM: Yes. Some of my students have done well, winning scholarships and taking studies at music academies in Israel and abroad. I am proud of them and we remain friends for life.

H & F: Would you like to talk about Baroque music in Israel nowadays?

GM: I am very pleased to see its development; there are many people in the field and

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the quality of performance is improving. I find it frustrating that there is not yet enough variety of different instruments being played and I am sorry there are not enough opportunities to teach it.

As for its performance, playing period instruments, reading from early editions or the use of historical performance practice is certainly not enough.

H & F: Do you think local audiences are developing a taste for Baroque music?

GM: I think so. In fact, I think local audiences have always liked Baroque music, but they are now beginning to understand more: they hear many performers and are now deciding what they like and what they do not like. A problem in Israel is the business aspect, making it difficult to put together a programme with more than two or three performers. As a keyboardist, I particularly like large ensemble playing. I, however, do not feel comfortable inviting people to play a concert and sharing losses!

H & F: What are your future plans?

GM: To become an organ recitalist. Also, I have been studying flamenco dancing for the last three years and have all intentions of continuing it for many years to come. Having only studied some Baroque– and Renaissance dance (with Carol Teten), I would like to study it in depth, read dance notation and to be able to draw my own conclusions as to how to dance it. And there is so much more instrumental repertoire to learn and perform.

H & F: And your personal "credo"?

GM: When I work with colleagues, I like to experiment. I think of everything in art as experimental. For example, I was happy with how I played the heavy, virile Sarabande of the Buxtehude Variations in the organ recital at the Redeemer Church. However, on my way home and on the following day I started to think about playing it entirely differently – perhaps gently, with a softer registration. What I say to colleagues or students is that, when warming up in a different hall, do not try to reproduce the tempo at which you have rehearsed – acoustics change and with them, tempi. I cannot help but agree with my father and his colleagues that the same piece will be played differently each time you play it.

I teach my students to listen to themselves. Listening to one sonority influences how you place the next, creating music that grows from one moment to the next. The written text is not an end in itself. In fact, once playing it, you do not know how it is going to end.

So, practising is never boring. My father taught me that one should practice very, very slowly but with all the music's expression. A performer should never become cynical. The tempo should suit the instrument: some harpsichord pieces should be played very fast in order to get that jangly harpsichord effect, especially French repertoire, and we often hear this music played too slowly. On the other hand, too much harpsichord music is played too fast, not allowing for the appropriate sound to develop. Rhythm should be "forged in steel" before you can allow it to fluctuate. Each phrase has a high point and a weight of gravity. So this must be manipulated. I try to avoid regular metric accents: they are too obvious and obstruct the flow of the music. The right accent at the right time makes a phrase bloom; too many accents can kill a phrase.

We can not play if we do not allow ourselves to be moved by the music we play – I sometimes shed a tear, myself. You must hear and only then play. Sound travels fast but silence must be created. (Landowska said you need to observe rests plus add a breath.)

H & F: Gidi, many thanks for your time and for sharing so much of your experience, wisdom and insight.