

# Harpsichord & fortepiano

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# INTERVIEW WITH MARINA MINKIN

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By Pamela Hickman

*On 6 June 2013 I spoke to harpsichordist and music educator Marina Minkin. Her CD "Harpsichord Music by Israeli Composers" received glowing reviews, including a write up in H&F.*

**H&F:** Marina, tell me about your early musical training.

**MM:** I was born in a small town in the Ukraine. At that time, it was still the Soviet Union and music education was formal and serious. I started music at age four at a pre-school centre for gifted children. From there, I took stringent entrance exams, proceeding to a music conservatory: tuition there was paid for by the state. Studying at the conservatory meant three or four hours' lessons every day after school.

Apart from my twice weekly piano lessons, we were required to study solfège, music theory, literature, and history; singing in a choir, accompaniment and chamber music were also mandatory. Deciding that music education in our small town was not going to be sufficient for me, my parents sent me at age 16 to the St. Petersburg Conservatory for extra training in piano, theory and harmony. I was planning to enter the Conservatory as an undergraduate when we emigrated to Israel.

**H&F:** Marina, are you from a family of musicians?

**MM:** Not professional musicians. My parents both sing well and love music. They were both teachers, earning modest salaries; much of the family budget went into my music education. In the Ukraine, I had a baby grand piano, which took up half the living room!

**H&F:** Let's talk about your tertiary music education.

**MM:** In 1981, I began studies at the Jerusalem Academy of Music and Dance; my piano teacher was Professor Michael Boguslavsky. At that

stage, I saw myself as a concert pianist about to embark on a performing career.

**H&F:** And where does the harpsichord come into the story?

**MM:** Actually, quite early. When I was 9 or 10 I got my hands on a vinyl recording of Ralph Kirkpatrick, in which he performed music of Couperin and Rameau. I was enchanted by it — by its powerful and magical sound — and I yearned to hear this instrument live. The early music movement was on the rise in Europe, but, unfortunately, Russia and the Ukraine were totally isolated from it.

In fact, the first chance I had was in Israel, when I was a second year undergraduate student at the Jerusalem Academy of Music and Dance. Fortunately, harpsichordist David Shemer had just returned from studies overseas, and I became his pupil. This was an exciting time; it was then that Shemer was playing a major part in establishing the early music scene in Israel.

**H&F:** So you completed your B.Mus. What then?

**MM:** Following my completion of the B.Mus. with a double major in piano and harpsichord, I was invited by the pianist Gregory Haimovsky to take graduate studies with him at New York University. There I was studying piano very seriously, performing and preparing to enter competitions. However, meanwhile, I had heard another harpsichord recording — this time of Mark Kroll. His playing was everything I wanted to hear and do on the harpsichord: it was clear and brilliant, at the same time, sensitive and personal. I saw he was head of the Early Music Department at Boston University and that

he had been a pupil of Ralph Kirkpatrick! This connection was, indeed, a sign for me. I went to Boston and played for him; he invited me to study with him, arranging for a full scholarship. I began my master's degree, for a while still commuting to New York weekly to study with Haimovsky, eventually completing my master's degree in harpsichord in Boston.

**H&F:** Would you like to talk about your doctoral studies?

**MM:** Yes. Towards the end of my master's studies in Boston, I took part in a concerto competition, performing the solo in Francis Poulenc's *"Concert champêtre"* and winning first prize. I was presented with the Dean's Scholarship there and I began doctoral studies. The doctorate itself took three years, with one extra year to finish my dissertation, on the life and works of the Italian composer Anna Bon (b.1740).

**H&F:** How did you come to choose that subject?

**MM:** I had been invited to give a lecture recital for the Department of Women's Studies at the University of Maine. There I played harpsichord works by female composers, including some by Anna Bon di Venezia. A child prodigy, her first collection of Six Chamber Sonatas for flute and continuo was published when she was only 16, her Six Sonatas for harpsichord a year later in 1757, and her Divertimenti (trio sonatas) for two flutes and continuo in 1759. I focused my research on these three collections.

**H&F:** On completing your doctorate, what did you do?

**MM:** I remained in Boston for several years, working as Mark Kroll's assistant, teaching and performing. There, I co-founded the *"Ad Libitum"* Ensemble, a period instrument group. I visit Boston once a year and hope to have a reunion concert with *"Ad Libitum"* sometime. I returned to Israel in 2004.

**H&F:** Where has your career taken you since then?

**MM:** I do a lot of performing – solo and with all kinds of ensembles, frequently with the Phoenix Early Music Ensemble (director: Myrna Herzog) and with most of the early musicians here in Israel. I am also very interested in contemporary music and perform with the Israel Contemporary Players. For two years, I taught at the Buchmann-Mehta School of Music (Tel Aviv) and also at the Israel Conservatory of Music (Tel Aviv). I now teach harpsichord, chamber music and basso continuo- both at the Tel Aviv Conservatory and at the Jezreel Valley Centre of the Arts.

In the Jezreel Valley I direct *"Lauda"*, a youth ensemble that plays early and ethnic music. Its participants are Christians, Jews and Muslims from Nazareth and the surrounding villages who play wind instruments (flute, recorder, oboe), western and eastern stringed instruments and traditional Arabic instruments such as the *oud*, *darbuka* (goblet drum) and *qanun* (middle eastern zither). The ensemble started as an early music ensemble, but then several youngsters turned up with ethnic instruments. I write arrangements for them and find myself more and more interested in oriental music. And this is my fifth year directing the Yehiam Renaissance Festival, an annual autumn event with early music concerts by local and visiting artists, street performances, workshops and guided tours.

**H&F:** Getting back to your own playing, what about recordings?

**MM:** Inspired by Mark Kroll's interest in modern harpsichord works, I have become interested in seeing what Israeli composers are writing for the instrument. The result of that is *"Harpsichord Music by Israeli Composers"* for the Albany Records label. I am now planning to record music by the Italian American composer Vittorio Rieti (1898-1994). Some of his chamber music that includes the harpsichord has not yet been recorded; such a recording is long overdue. These pieces are charming and his harpsichord writing is very effective. We have nine players

involved and have begun rehearsals.

*H&F:* Marina, how would you define your approach to the harpsichord?

**MM:** Some people who play period instruments say they were driven to do so by the beauty of the repertoire and a desire to recreate, at least in some measure, the true performance tradition of past centuries. While this is partly true for me, on a more personal level my love of the harpsichord relates to its beautiful tone colour. For me, this is the perfect instrument, capable of sensual and melodic expression. I was lucky in that both my teachers — David Shemer and Mark Kroll — worked in depth on “sound”. With Kroll, this involved a lot of work on hands as the key to achieving a flowing melodic line in the

most legato manner. In Professor Kroll's wonderful book *Playing the Harpsichord Expressively* he offers a detailed description of his teaching methods; I am a dedicated follower.

*H&F:* On what harpsichord do you play?

**MM:** I have a very nice Italian instrument after Ridolfi; the replica was made in 1970 by Thomas Wolf (USA). It was bought with the money granted to me by the St. Botolph Club Foundation, a Boston organisation supporting artists. I also own a copy of a Ruckers harpsichord made by Henk Klop (The Netherlands). My harpsichords need to be compact as I take them with me to concert venues.



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