

# Harpsichord & *fortepiano*

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Musical Instrument Research Catalog  
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# INTERVIEW WITH MICHAEL JOHNSON

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By Paula Woods

*For several decades, Michael Johnson has been known as one of our leading harpsichord makers, whose instruments can be found throughout the world in concert halls, conservatoires, and in the homes of many distinguished performers. Having just celebrated his 79th birthday, he is beginning to think about retirement, and it seemed a good moment to hear his thoughts on his long career as a maker.*

**H&F:** Did you inherit an interest in music?

**MJ:** Not at all. My parents were completely unmusical really. But I was force-fed at an early age. During the war I was evacuated to live with my great-aunt in Peterborough. She and her husband enjoyed music, and as we only had schooling in the mornings, she decided I was to have piano lessons. That was my introduction to music, and as I grew up I found I really enjoyed it. I stayed with the piano, and in my teens even considered becoming a pianist. But I realised I didn't have the talent, and I'd always enjoyed crafting things, so I decided to work with pianos instead, and found myself a job with a local firm who did up pianos of rather poor quality. Luckily for me, my piano teacher knew someone with connections at John Broadwood's, and I got an apprenticeship with them – my life changed as soon as that happened. I was taught to restore pianos – I never worked with new instruments – and I learned tuning. It was a serious establishment, and there were still members of the Broadwood family there.

**H&F:** You stayed with them for a number of years?

**MJ:** Well, at 21 I had to interrupt my work in order to do my National Service. I joined the RAF, and it was then that I met my wife, whose father was an RAF man. So it was an important two years in my life, and I enjoyed it immensely. It was stimulating to be in the RAF, and I even ended up restoring a Bechstein grand for them.

After that, I went back to Broadwood's and eventually took over their West Country tuning business. It was a part of the country I'd fallen in love with. I must admit I found tuning a bit of a bore, as my main interest lay in restoration, but then I had a real stroke of luck, when the opportunity came up to have my own workshop in North Devon.

**H&F:** So at this stage you were still involved with pianos?

**MJ:** Yes – and the music. I loved the Romantic repertoire – Rachmaninov, Chopin, Schubert – that music still means a lot to me. But I was getting interested in baroque music too, and in early instruments. I was meeting quite a few of the top professional players, and was introduced to Julian Bream, for whom I restored a grand piano. When David Rubio left the workshop that Julian had built for him, he invited me to take it over. This was a complete change of career of course – I was in my early 30s, and after selling my cottage in North Devon, I realised that I could take a sabbatical and think about being a creative maker, rather than a re-creative one. I spent quite a lot of time thinking about this and drawing up plans, and decided I should get stuck into making a harpsichord. So I designed my own! After a year I had made my first double-manual harpsichord, though it was nothing like an historical one. All the same, when George Malcolm came to visit Julian Bream, he liked it, and wanted to use it for a performance.

**H&F:** What became of that harpsichord?

**MJ:** I hope it was burned years ago – it was a horrendous instrument. It had five pedals and was just a plucking piano really. But then I had another very lucky break. The late Stephen Dodgson and his wife Jane Clark were also friends of Julian, and when Jane played the instrument, she said I ought to find a real harpsichord and make a copy of it – probably the most inspiring thing anyone ever said to me. Jane really defined my career for me – it's down to her. And when Michael Thomas lent me a small Italian harpsichord by Gregori, I based my next four or five instruments on that. In retrospect it wasn't my type of instrument, and the Italian approach to harpsichord making didn't really grab me, but it was an important development for me. Through Julian I met Tom Goff, an incredibly nice man, whose instruments I admired, and who got me an invitation from Mrs Gilbert Russell to have a look at the Goermans-Taskin harpsichord – of course at that time it was thought to be by Couchet. She let me examine the instrument and measure it, and in return I looked after her Hass clavichord until both instruments went to Edinburgh. And then I was asked to make a harpsichord for Elizabeth de la Porte after the Goermans-Taskin – this was the first serious Michael Johnson harpsichord.

**H&F:** Was yours a close copy of the Goermans-Taskin?

**MJ:** Absolutely not. I have never "copied" an instrument exactly or tried to do so. All my harpsichords are "Johnsons". They're based on a fine original, but I've always allowed myself to adapt designs and put my own stamp on my work. But I then had another extraordinary break, meeting John Toll, who became a very good friend. He was generous enough to say that my harpsichords changed his whole concept of how the early keyboard repertoire should sound. I made a double-manual harpsichord for the Western Orchestral Society, of which he was at

the time the resident keyboard player. John fell for this instrument, and I then made one for him, which he felt strongly influenced him as a baroque continuo player. He would play a few notes of Louis Couperin on a new instrument and it was so sensitive in his touch that the tonal qualities were apparent straight away. For me it's all about focussing on the sound that the instrument is capable of producing, and getting the maximum communication between the plectra and the strings.

Another other huge of piece of good luck came after this. I received a call from Gustav Leonhardt, who wanted to borrow one of my instruments for a recital he was giving at the Bruges Festival. Well, I had never met him and didn't even have a harpsichord ready. I borrowed the instrument from the Western Orchestral Society, and in a little trailer towed behind the car took it over to Bruges. I can't remember much about the recital because I was so nervous – I couldn't even manage to retune it during the interval – but that performance changed my career. The end result of that evening was five years work, which helped me through the recession of the early 80s.

**H&F:** You became well known for your instruments after the Goermans-Taskin, but more recently your work has taken a new direction.

**MJ:** Yes. There was a major development in the year 2000. I decided I was going to make an instrument as close as I could – without copying – to Ruckers. This was because I had a suspicion that the second 8' string, working off the same bridge as the first, was having a dampening effect on the soundboard. So to prove this point, I made an instrument as near as I could to the tradition of Ruckers, and that had to be a 1x8', 1x4' harpsichord, with each solo choir working off its own bridge - its own part of the soundboard. I discussed this with John Toll and then built R1 – the first of my "Ruckers" series.

My work in developing the framing – the scantlings and geometry of the harpsichord – though not copying, had led to something very close to Ruckers. I felt their geometry was superior to anyone else's, and took what I considered the most important aspect of Ruckers' work: the speaking lengths and plucking points. I used the drawings of the 1638 Ruckers from Edinburgh, and then took the scaling and plucking points of the 1637 Andreas Ruckers in the Nuremberg collection. I drew that instrument as a GG-D harpsichord, so it was only "pure" in relation to the layout of the stringband and the geometry. The rest was Johnson. John liked the instrument, and used it for his last recording – the Gibbons CD which came out after his death. The 8' sound was so "free" in sound with its own bridge, and the 4', which I consider a solo stop, sounded enchanting – flute-like and clear. The 4' is so important: it disciplines the soundboard – controls it for the 8' choir to sound – and it picks up sympathetic frequencies when you play the 8'.

John then said that in order to prove my point, I should make an identical harpsichord with just 2x8'. So R2 was simply a 2x8', and I thought it a very disappointing harpsichord in comparison with the 1x8', 1x4'. Eventually I made a smaller compass instrument – a C-d<sup>3</sup>, (R7) from which I learned that as the instrument gets smaller, it gets a bit more assertive in its sound – a little punchier. It's like a small dog – say a Jack Russell – compared with a larger breed. The character of the sound changes, and becomes rounder and more diffuse in a bigger instrument. Since 2000, my development has been entirely around the use of Ruckers scaling and plucking points and their geometry. Now I'm refining aspects of the instruments such as the jack action, and I've been working on a way of eliminating all mechanical sound as the plectrum bounces back after the pluck. GG-d<sup>3</sup> seems to me the optimum compass for the harpsichord. With that, the maker is in control of every aspect of the sound – its shape

and sonority. I've also just made the 15th of a series of FF-f3 harpsichords, and while that's not my favourite compass, they seem to be popular with players who need an instrument for the later repertoire.

**H&F:** In all the time you've been here, you've only had one assistant, haven't you?

**MJ:** Yes. Continuity is the basis of all creative work. If you don't have continuity, then you have little chance of developing. I didn't particularly want to take on an assistant, but Charles pestered me, and became my apprentice when he left school. The Crafts Council helped to make that possible, and I don't think the workshop would have been as successful as it has been without Charles. He was less interested in the musical side of the harpsichord than in the cabinet-making aspect – the crafting side. So he was developed more as a cabinet maker. He has made a working clavichord, but he prefers working on the cases. It's a vital part of the process: over nearly 40 years, we have developed a system whereby he is in charge of making the case, while I focus on the design and the action. Everything I do is based on the knowledge that I have a cabinet maker in the workshop, and after about six weeks, his work and mine will come together: my soundboard and action will fit perfectly into the instrument case he has prepared.

**H&F:** And presumably having an assistant has also freed you to focus on design modifications?

**MJ:** Absolutely. And Charles enjoys the spontaneity of my approach; the way I will vary a detail from one instrument to the next. Each instrument is a separate project – I've never made several cases, or sets of jacks, or soundboards, in advance. He works with tremendous precision, and is slightly amused that I never use a micrometer on the soundboard. I've never done that – it's done by feel and by sound. That's my approach to my work. Certain measurements are



critical and have to be right – speaking lengths for example. You must not deviate, so you develop a procedure that will enable you to reproduce them time and time again. In order to do that, you establish a discipline that gives you enormous freedom to develop other aspects of the build. You set up fundamental yardsticks, and then you know that any differences in sound or function are not the result of mistakes. In all the years I've made harpsichords, one thing I can say is that I've never developed backwards! I've avoided taking the wrong turning and having to go back and correct it. Charles and I make 4 instruments a year. That gives you just 4 times in each year when you can observe how things are developing. With Charles looking after the cabinet side of things, I can focus on the action and I get enormous pleasure out of making the jacks, the keyboards, and producing my own plectra.

**H&F:** You said it was the baroque repertoire that first got you interested in harpsichords. What music do you most enjoy listening to?

**MJ:** Well, I love Bach of course. I hated it when I was young. I was very much a Chopin and Rachmaninov man. I came to Bach later in life! I feel I still have a lot to learn about music – I'm limited in what I know of Frescobaldi, but I adore Louis Couperin. That is my sound, really.

**H&F:** How many instruments do you think you've made in total?

**MJ:** Perhaps a couple of hundred? I'm really not sure. Since I've had a computer, I know precisely how things have developed from one instrument to the next. Everything is documented in detail. But although I have a lot of paperwork, I've never had a notebook in which each instrument was recorded. The current instrument is R32! Nowadays I sometimes get an instrument in for restoration that I'd forgotten I'd made. They are generally returned to the owner with new racks, jacks and strings, and are often rather different instruments.

**H&F:** Now that you're thinking about retiring, do you have any ambitions you would still like to achieve?

**MJ:** I'd like to make a really good harpsichord! I wish I were 20 years younger – if I had another 20 years work ahead of me, then I feel I might one day make a good harpsichord. At some point in the construction of every instrument I feel I could have done something better. I doubt there will be many more Johnsons made now, but I shall probably try to continue making improvements by modifying my old instruments, whenever they come back for repair. I'd like to think I could help younger makers. It's a real joy to me if someone comes to discuss any aspect of harpsichord making, and if it helps them a little, that's a great bonus. For me the major criteria that any maker should have in mind can be expressed in two words: discipline and technique. They go together, and to this day I'm always trying to develop better technique in all aspects of an instrument – experimenting with details of the design, to see what leads me in the right direction.

**H&F:** I think those players who have a Johnson instrument are very happy with what you've done so far.

**MJ:** But there's always room for improvement.



Photo by Paula Woods'