

Harpsichord & fortepiano

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INTERVIEW WITH DOUGLAS HOLICK

Graham Sadler interviewed Hollick at his home in West Willoughby, Lincolnshire.

H & F: Do you come from a musical family?

DH: Not really. My interest in music began only after I was about 10. I was taken to a Promenade concert, where Alan Harverson played organ solos by Messiaen, and I said I wanted to learn the organ. But then I had to learn piano to get a basic technique. That led to church music, since that's where the organs were, and I began singing with the Belmont parish church choir, visiting cathedrals and so on, so there were a lot of early influences from that decision to learn the organ.

H & F: So when did you actually start learning the organ?

DH: Not until I was 14.

H & F: Who were your first teachers?

DH: Initially the organist at Belmont parish church, David Harding. He was primarily a choral conductor, but he gave me a good grounding. I also went to the Royal Academy of Music organ summer schools as a teenager, which enabled me to make important contacts, notably Peter Hurford.

H & F: Were any other teachers at that time particularly influential?

DH: Two years before university, I had a wonderful piano teacher, Martin Wilson, who had been a pupil of Clifford Curzon and was really fastidious when it came to technique. He would spend a whole lesson on three bars of Beethoven.

H & F: When did you start to get interested in the “early” organ repertoire?

DH: Most of the organs I played in the early stages were small mechanical action instruments, so I tended to play Bach and early English repertoire. It was probably not until I took the organ scholarship at Hull University (by which time I was studying with Peter Hurford) that I started to think: yes, I’m really interested in this earlier stuff.

H & F: Which other organ teachers proved especially influential?

DH: After graduating from Hull, I had a Countess of Munster Trust scholarship to study with Marie-Claire Alain in Paris. She was such a brilliant teacher. She never really mentioned technique, but the fact that my technique improved hugely is a measure of what a wonderful teacher she was. Both she and Peter Hurford encouraged me to study organ and harpsichord with Leonhardt in Amsterdam in the 1970s, which I did during my postgraduate studies at Hull.

H & F: What particular aspects of technique or interpretation did you learn from Leonhardt?

DH: He had a natural but wonderful way of “bending” time – keeping an absolutely accurate metrical structure but, within that, making tiny adjustments of timing. In more vigorous dances, you would hear “sprung” rhythms in his playing, which made the music absolutely come to life. Being

able to analyze exactly what he was doing was hugely important and it's become part of my playing. He showed me how to create shadings of dynamic on both organ and harpsichord – smoke and mirrors really, as neither respond dynamically to variations of touch!

H & F: Did you find this approach initially difficult to adjust to?

DH: I think so. When I went Peter Hurford for a lesson, his reaction was, "Hmmm, I hear bits of me, bits of Alain and bits of Leonhardt. You haven't yet found yourself. But you will!"

H & F: Harpsichord was by now part of your life – where did interest in it originate?

DH: At school there was a tiny little spinet that the woodwork master had made. I used it as a continuo instrument. Then Barry Wordsworth took over the Belmont church choir, so I had a chance to try out his instruments. It was mainly at Hull, where a harpsichord was permanently available, that I began to play much more.

H & F: What induced you to make a harpsichord for the first time?

DH: I couldn't afford to buy one! In the early 1970s my great uncle left me a bit of money. I spent some of this on a kit for an Italian harpsichord (one of the French Bédard kits).

H & F: And where did it go from there?

DH: This harpsichord turned out to be a really nice instrument. When I sold it, money from the sale went into making my first instrument from scratch. That led to my being offered a workshop supported by Gough & Davy, the music retailer and piano workshop in Hull. I started making copies of early keyboards – harpsichords and clavichords. After three years, courtesy of John Chichester-Constable, I was provided workshop space near Hull.

H & F: What influenced your decision to move from there to Devon and later to the Midlands?

DH: Mainly musical considerations. I was director of music at two churches in Totnes, and also had contacts with Dartington. Later I moved to Melton Mowbray parish church in Leicestershire. But after one year I decided to concentrate on the workshop and on freelance playing.

H & F: At what stage did you move from making to restoring instruments?

DH: When I started to get into the Classical period repertory, I began thinking I should be playing this on early pianos. I'd already done basic restoration work on various square pianos, and when I moved to the Midlands, John Barnes sold me a partly restored Clementi square. I finished it and used this instrument for concerts and for my recording of French Revolution music. Square pianos are not too expensive, and that was my "way in" both to playing and to the more serious business of restoring them. I now have an 1809 Broadwood grand.

H & F: What about your career as a teacher?

DH: This began when I was a student at Hull and continued in Devon, where I had links with Dartington and the Loosemoore Centre in Buckfastleigh. Teaching really took off when I decided to stop making instruments as a commercial proposition in 1990, in order to concentrate on playing. The decision to expand my teaching activity was swayed, in particular, by one young Australian student who bought one of my instruments and asked me to give her some instruction. It was her enthusiasm

and delight that convinced me I should devote more time to teaching. David Saint, then head of organ studies at Birmingham Conservatoire, invited me to give some organ master-classes; later, as a visiting organ tutor there, I taught harpsichord and continuo for the organists, including cross-over between organ and harpsichord; eventually I began working with pianists, encouraging them to think how earlier music could be played with some historical awareness, on a modern piano. There's no reason why pianists playing a modern piano cannot be historically informed. For me this is just an absolutely natural thing: whatever repertory you are playing, try and understand it on the instruments for which it was conceived; try and understand it in the context of the social life of the time and all the other relevant historical parameters. Working across those boundaries was particularly interesting at the Conservatoire, as it is now with Cambridge University.

H & F: To what extent do you find teaching and performance a mutually beneficial process?

DH: Enormously! I love being paid to learn from my students! Any teaching should be a two-way process. I've occasionally come across teachers who merely want to produce clones of themselves. I prefer to be somebody who opens windows for the student – avenues of curiosity that they can explore and make up their own mind about.

H & F: How do you balance your recital career between organ, harpsichord and piano?

DH: I try to arrange not to do too many different things at the same time.

H & F: How does switching between instruments work out in practice?

DH: I'm quite happy to play organ and harpsichord in the same concert, as long as the organ is a mechanical action instrument. I certainly wouldn't mix the piano with the harpsichord. I have mixed organ and piano, but that's pushing the boundaries a bit, because the techniques are so different. Fingering can be a bit of a headache. I can't go directly from classical piano music to 17th-century German organ music, for example, though it's not such a problem to go the other way.

H & F: How do you go about planning a recital programme?

DH: I always try to have some historical story-line – some logical way for the listener to appreciate the music on more than just the auditory level: they can then actually hear the historical context.

H & F: How much exposure in the concert hall do you prefer before making a recording?

DH: As much as possible, especially with new repertoire. Being able to perform the music in public "settles" the repertoire down in a way that no amount of rehearsal can.

H & F: Do you prefer to record with or without a live audience?

DH: If I know a concert is being recorded, this makes me nervous, so I make more mistakes, which are obviously not acceptable on a commercial recording. If I know we can simply do it again, I feel much more relaxed – and make fewer mistakes!

H & F: Of the instruments you have made, do you have any favourites for recitals and recordings?

DH: In concerts I use my own copy of a 1711 Donzelague harpsichord, which is a very good general-purpose harpsichord (if such a thing exists), and my 1809 Broadwood grand piano. When I'm recording, I sometimes "borrow back" an instrument. For the French Revolution recording, I

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borrowed back a late 18th-century Taskin copy I'd made, and for the Buxtehude "music of the Baroque *avant garde*" recording I did the same with one of my Ruckers.

H & F: Have there been any life-changing experiences during your career?

DH: Yes, the successive scholarships I had – first at Hull (where I was the first-ever organ scholar), then the opportunity to study in Paris and the postgraduate work at Hull and, later on, the Year 2000 Churchill Fellowship. This last grew out of my interest in the organs of north Germany and was originally intended to be loosely based around Bach's early years and his connections with that region. It turned out to be much more about Buxtehude and the 17-century north German school, with visits to instrument collections and organs in Hamburg, Lübeck, Copenhagen and elsewhere. The experience revolutionized my way of thinking about this repertoire, which can be totally impenetrable on Romantic English instruments. But as soon as you play it on the correct instrument, somehow that instrument tells so many things about how you can play this music.

H & F: Have similar insights emerged from your experience as an instrument maker and restorer?

DH: The way the instruments work will teach you so much about how the music can – or, indeed, cannot – work. If you try to play a little fretted clavichord the wrong way, it will start banging and crashing and sounding horrible. That's precisely why I use instruments like that to teach my organ students a good touch. All players should have knowledge of the workings of their instrument. A violinist doesn't go to someone else to replace a string. Why should a pianist?

H & F: How wide a chronological range does your repertory on historical instruments cover?

DH: From the late sixteenth century for organ and harpsichord to the early nineteenth for piano.

H & F: Within that period do you have any particular specialisms?

DH: The north German repertory I've mentioned, obviously, which is the subject of my ongoing research: I love the music, love the instruments; then 18th-century French organ and harpsichord music; and the piano music of Haydn's London period – and that's because I've got a piano very similar to the one Haydn played in London. The music is just so well suited to this instrument, it's a joy to play.

H & F: What projects are you working on at the moment?

DH: I've been working with the harpist Eleanor Turner as the *Dussek Duo* on harp and piano repertoire of the late eighteenth/early nineteenth century. We're hoping to make a CD dedicated to this largely unknown repertoire. I'm also working with Janet Forbes, a fine young soprano and recorder player, on 18th-century music for voice or recorder, and also on English song repertoire at the time Haydn was in London. This process of unearthing of music that no one may have performed for centuries has always excited me. It has constantly been a journey of discovery – turning a corner, and yet always wondering if there is more to discover.

H & F: So you don't think you've found everything yet?

DH: Good heavens, no!