Harpsichord & fortepiano

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INTERVIEW WITH THE EDITOR

By Richard Troeger

RT: Through the magazine, you have provided so many interviews with various players that I thought it time someone interviewed you yourself. So, I'll begin with a standard question. What drew you to the early keyboard instruments in the first place? Is there one to which you are particularly drawn?

MS: It was somewhat accidental. I was studying Music (and Political Science) at U.C. Berkeley and needed a chamber music credit. I heard something about a class called Collegium Musicum (run by the lutenist David Tayler) and tried the harpsichord and the fortepiano. I was mainly attracted to the amazing facility the "proper" piano gave me with Mozart. It was a Viennese copy by Regier and it solved instantly many problems that modern pianos create when presented with Classical period repertoire. I also played a lot of continuo with a folk violinist, Laura Risk, who was introduced to baroque violin at the same time. It was extremely liberating to improvise and to have music "without rules", that is until I started reading historical treatises. Of course by then I was already "converted" and I took the whole canon to heart.

RT: And to what repertoire are you especially drawn? As a player and/or listener?

MS: I like performing more than listening. Perhaps that says a lot about me! Initially I loved French 17th century baroque because my teacher, Arthur Haas excelled at it, and I still remember him making me deconstruct an unmeasured prelude by d'Anglebert, before putting it back together and playing it "as written". I also love C.P.E. Bach because he's amazing, taking music into interesting harmonic places yet coming from a baroque perspective into the classical era. I've always loved listening to Schubert lieder. For modern piano I like to listen to Debussy and to jazz (it still retains a mystery to me). And I love singing Renaissance choral music.

RT: Apart from your teachers, what were important influences on your musical development and playing?

MS: Instruments themselves. I have always been into organology because instruments teach you so much. As a budding player, I visited the Smithsonian and was lucky to be there on the right day of the week, when Ken Slowick showed us a Dulcken and a Graf. My fortepiano teacher, Charlene Brendler, encouraged me to visit the DeBellis collection in San Francisco, so I saw a Clementi. Then when at The Hague, I went on a study tour organised by my teacher Jacques Ogg. I realise you've asked about influences besides teachers, but I find the best teachers in my life have been the ones interested in the instruments themselves too!

RT: Are there any antique instruments that have made a special impression on you? If you could own one particular original instrument, which might it be?

For fortepianos two: A lovingly restored Schantz that was in the private collection of Linda Nicholson made an impression early on. Virginia Pleasants let me play on her Rosenberger when she lived in London. The next question, 'Where can I get one?' is always quashed with unique instruments. For harpsichords, the Kirckmans/Schudis I saw in UK collections (I saw two or three in the same week, but it may have been the one in Edinburgh at St Cecilia's Hall.) Yes, it had all the bells and whistles and stunning marquetry — and embodied the perfect coming together of decorative art and sound. It was also a perfect illustration of the tensions in the development of the late transitional harpsichord and showed how well it stood up to the advances made by the early piano.

RT: When playing solo recitals, what kinds of programmes do you like to assemble? E.g., all from one period, chronological, odd mixtures...?

MS: I like to work from a theme, often an historical one. Sometimes it's about a person, such as Bach, and then the recital explains the influences upon him (predecessors) and the influence he had on others (students). Another one that I found interesting was the link between England and the Low Countries — which explains why so much virginalist music is similar in style and treatment. It included the exploration of the treatment of Catholics in England through the reigns of King Edward, Queen Mary, and Queen Elisabeth I; the reasons for Catholic composers (like Bull) going to the Low Countries to avoid religious persecution; and the musical output, both sacred and secular, that was the result.

For an upcoming organ performance I am playing music related to the feast day for the death of St John the Baptist. So I am going to play an "*ut re mi fa so la*" fantasia. The link is that an 8th century cantor who had lost his voice prayed to St John the Baptist to intercede. When his voice returned he gave thanks by writing the text to the famous hymn "*ut queant laxis*". This was used by Guido d'Arezzo in the 11th century; it became the mnemonic for the "gamut" or earliest form of the musical scale. By making this link, I intend to show people the significance of the popular "*ut re mi fa so la*" theme as a vehicle for amazing musical architecture and innovation.

RT: Do you teach at present? What kind of background/range of enquiry do you find in students, generally?

MS: I teach historic keyboard instruments a little. I usually teach harpsichord or clavichord at my home. I often include one visit to the student's home to assess the student's own instruments, so I know what challenges they face, and I always teach some tuning, even if the student wants to use an "electronic box".

I have found that outside London I have more retirees as students. They are always keen to learn, but they get frustrated more easily when they find it difficult to master something. They forget that as a child they had to repeat things many, many times when learning for the first time. Adults often want their results faster. On the other hand, young students aren't the only ones who make excuses for not practicing! I do get the occasional student who is studying with someone else but needs to be "scared" in a mock-panel before an exam. Those are interesting.

My other teaching is more general early music work in schools as part of special workshops or projects. For example, during Autumn 2014 we are doing a project on the Battle of Evesham (which has its 750th anniversary in August 2015 and is as significant as the Magna Carta in limiting the rights of the English monarchy) where we will look at music for conflict as well as for peace. We'll teach some early music examples, and encourage students to compose new pieces in responses to the ideas.

RT: Do you compose original works?

MS: Not really. I do arrange things when necessary for teaching – I might harmonise or create bass lines for singing, or convert something for a group of treble singers.

RT: What led you to become editor of *Harpsichord & Fortepiano*? And may I say, as a contributor, that you're very good to work with?

MS: Surprising perhaps to many readers, I volunteered. Alison and Peter Holloway had finished editing, and there were other attempts to engage other editors. I had just submitted an article on Bull's great *In Nomine* (just a regular submission) and mentioned to Jeremy Burbidge, then owner, that I might like to be involved. At first I was asked to manage just the reviews under a different editor. I didn't much fancy this task because I had no experience with that, and then within a month or so, I was asked to take on the lot. This is why the first issue under my editorship has an article by me — but I assure you that's not the normal way these things are meant to be done. The reviews are the least of my worries now! I was interested to see what I could offer, since I'm an American, but aside from adjusting English to British spelling there's no difference to me. After all, those interested in these instruments are a pretty select bunch! Sometimes the time difference works in my favour; if a writer has a query, I answer it first thing and they have the answer when they wake up, answer me and it's 4pm my time. At other times, as you know, it can be frustrating.

RT: What has changed since you took over the magazine?

MS: I quickly realised that we couldn't restrict the magazine to its title instruments and am still gently encouraging contributors to write on the clavichord and early organ as well. Certainly the advent of modern technology is a huge help. The international community of early keyboard lovers is such a close-knit world that we, whether on forums like HPSCHD-L or other, feel we've met people we have yet to see in person.

There has been a great push to digitise. I think our core readership likes to read things on paper. Having done the majority of editing on a computer screen, I am now used to such things, but most people probably prefer paper. We currently do deliver the magazine in digital form to visually impaired learners, and I'm really pleased that this is possible.

We may find that more potential readers will expect to be able to receive the magazine in a format designed for tablets and other e-readers and hope to be prepared for that, but without forsaking those who like to sit with a hot beverage and a good magazine. After all, since we don't publish monthly, things aren't time-sensitive in the same way as other journals. One thing I learned early is that most magazines don't make their money through subscription income but through advertisement. This is a constant tension. We also are trialling online advertisement as way of better serving our specialist advertisers.

At present this is paralleling the print advertisement; no ad space is currently sold for exclusive online space. And God help me, we have created no apps!