

# Harpsichord & fortepiano

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# INTERVIEW WITH MAHAN ESFAHANI

By Pamela Hickman

In November 2014 I spoke to harpsichordist Mahan Esfahani at his London home. Born in Tehran in 1984, Mahan Esfahani was given his first piano lessons by his father. He then went on to explore harpsichord and organ in his teens. In 2009, Esfahani made his Wigmore Hall solo debut, then making history with the first solo harpsichord recital ever at the London Proms of 2011.

A celebrated soloist and recitalist, Esfahani has performed much in Britain, Europe, the USA, Canada and Japan.

*PH:* Mahan Esfahani, what are your earliest musical memories?

*ME:* My earliest memories are of my father playing on our upright Petrov piano at home in Tehran. In 1970, Deutsche Grammophon put out a giant set of LPs, which my father bought. It included a lot of Beethoven works - all the symphonies but also works of Verdi. So I grew up hearing a lot of recordings of Klempener, Ferdinand Leitner (there was the great Leitner recording of *Fidelio*), Wilhelm Kempff, etc. (This seems ironic today, as I recently signed a contract to record on Deutsche Grammophon!)



*PH:* So you are from a musical family.

*ME:* Yes, certainly. On my father's side, they are all quite artistic: they played music and wrote poetry. My uncle was a painter and my mother is a painter.

*PH:* Would you like to say something of your early musical training?

*ME:* I was five or six and was always asking my father to teach me about music. He taught me some of the rudiments of piano – scales etc. I had such a strong desire to play the piano and could not get enough of it. After listening to my father's LPs, I remember once saying to him that I wanted to do "that". So he taught me to play melodies, like that of the last movement of Beethoven's Symphony No.9. When I was probably around six, my father sent me to a piano teacher for lessons. I never needed to be told to practice; in fact, the worst punishment for me was to have the piano locked! I also played the violin from the age of nine.

*PH:* So you did not go to a music school.

*ME:* No. It was all private lessons. I studied piano throughout my childhood and teen years. At school, I was the musician-clown, playing piano for all the various occasions. However, what I really very much wanted to do was composition. I was really into it when I was about 9 or 10 and all through high school I wrote a lot. Then I discarded most of what I had written, but kept a couple of movements here and there – a couple of movements for string orchestra I had written at age 14 or 15 when we were away on vacation, a few songs, a couple of pieces for piano, a small piece for piano and violin, and some other things.

*PH:* What kindled your love for the harpsichord?

*ME:* I was very interested in music history and, at some point, I read a book about an instrument called the harpsichord, found a harpsichord kit, put it together and started playing. At age 17, I went off to

Stanford University, where I studied Musicology and History. (Actually my parents were intent on my studying medicine, but I really did not want to...which was a bit awkward). In the Music Faculty there were a number of harpsichords. A student friend and I would always meet for dinner on Fridays. My lessons ended around three o'clock and he would study till six. While waiting for him, I would go to listen to the Kirkpatrick's complete Bach recordings, to a lot of Landowska, Leonhardt, Koopman and Růžičková, George Malcolm and others. And then I had some lessons. I would contact any harpsichordist coming to San Francisco and ask them for a lesson or two. Well, I was studying Musicology for four years, but, somehow, I was always at the harpsichord practicing. In the corner of the harpsichord room at the university, there was a virginal and I would also play on it. Then there were some summer courses I attended, one of which I took with Ed Parmentier in Michigan. He talked about ornamentation and that was quite interesting. I took an ornamentation table and put it up in my dorm room and studied it. Then I went to hear British composer Brian Ferneyhough; he lectured on modern music - Serialism and Stockhausen. And I met American composer Lou Harrison, who, of course, has written music for the harpsichord. So I got into modern music, but just on a theoretical basis.

*PH:* So you finished your undergraduate studies at Stanford. Where did you go from there?

*ME:* I finished my thesis and moved to Boston, where I began to take private lessons with (Australian-born) harpsichordist Peter Watchorn. And then I worked with Alan Curtis. But of all the harpsichordists I had heard on recordings, I liked Czech harpsichordist Zuzana Růžičková's playing the best. She heard some recitals I played and was very encouraging.

*PH:* How did you start performing?

*ME:* In 2006 I played a recital in Berkeley, but my first really professional recital - my European debut - was at a festival in Tuscany in 2007. I played a big all-Scarlatti program. Well, I was just 23 and chose to play all the difficult pieces! My performing career just kind of happened. You give one concert, another concert comes along and then you get called for four concerts...and on it goes until you realise you are making a living from performing. I was, however, never really a part of the "harpsichord circle".

*PH:* What does your performance diary look like at the moment?

*ME:* I play around 75 recitals a year. I'm a recitalist. That's what I do. I do not really play much chamber music. I don't play in ensembles but I have played a lot of concertos.

*PH:* Do you prepare editions?

*ME:* Only for my own use. I did, however, orchestrate Bach's "Art of Fugue" for the Proms a few years ago.

*PH:* How do you see the solo harpsichord recital stage faring at the moment?

*MS:* I would like to see the harpsichord respected as a recital instrument the way the piano and violin are! That's my goal. If your average concert-goer attends harpsichord recitals as he does piano recitals I will feel I have achieved something. Actually, there have been no problems with the mainstream public. If there has been any resistance, it has been from the harpsichord community itself, which does not accept the harpsichord as a solo instrument...especially when it comes to modern music.

*PH:* How do you relate to the Authentic Movement?

*ME:* I address it with much curiosity. I have always read sources and continue to read them in French, German and Italian. I think "authentic" is a marketing trick. I believe in authentic performance, but the whole movement has led a lot of people to teach certain mannerisms, resulting in a lot of artists doing

exactly the same thing! They seem to have a set of strict rules and anyone who thinks outside of them is shunned. I think that reading the sources points to the spirit of what this music was supposed to be. I do not want anyone to stand between me and the composer. Well, when working on contemporary music, I often have the composer sitting right next to me by the harpsichord and that is such an advantage!

*PH:* This brings me to my next question. Do you play much modern and contemporary music?

*ME:* Yes. I play a lot of modern music on the harpsichord. I think it is wonderful. I also commission works. So I play works by such composers as Poulenc – but I also play music of living composers.

*PH:* What contemporary composers have you played recently?

*ME:* Well, I recently played a piece by a young British composer called Daniel Kidane. He won the Royal Philharmonic Society's Composer Award and received a commission from the society to write a work for clarinet and piano. He is very good. I have just had a piece sent to me by a German composer called Markus Zahnhausen and am learning a few works by the Danish composer Axel Borup-Jørgensen. Then there is Sunleif Rasmussen, another Danish composer. And I have just recorded Steve Reich's "Piano Phase" and Gorecki's Harpsichord Concerto for Deutsche Grammophon, coming out in April.

*PH:* Do you see playing the harpsichord in today's concert halls a problem?

*ME:* No. Especially for recitals, it is a non-issue, in my view. Modern listeners' ears become used to the fact that the harpsichord is quieter than a piano. The decay of tone of the harpsichord comes very late and a piano is not that much louder. The piano has a big contrast of sound, which is why you hear it so clearly in a piano concerto. The harpsichord, on the other hand, integrates with the sound of an ensemble.

*PH:* When you are playing a recital, are you in your own private world of deep concentration or do you sense you are communicating with your audience?

*ME:* It depends. There are times when a recital is all about communication and there are times when I want nothing more than the audience to just watch me play and I share with them what I am doing for a couple of hours. But sometimes it is a sort of voyeuristic act; the audience is just watching me practice, in a sense. However, that is also a form of communication. And, of course, performance has got to be about communication. To some extent, I cannot resort to baby talk: I simply have to play the piece for what it is and the people will glean from it what they will, but, now and then, I will underline a point musically. One might resort to inauthentic means to point out something to the listener, and I think that is perfectly fine if the listener gets what the composer is saying.

*PH:* So how do you feel on stage?

*ME:* It is probably the only place where I am completely happy. You see, life is much more difficult off stage. On stage it is easy. You do what you want to do. There are no restrictions on stage...for me, at least. I take a lot of risks; sometimes they work, sometimes they really do not work.

*PH:* In which case, recording must be a very different ball-game.

*ME:* Of course it is. You have got to commit something to disc which can bear listening to again and again and again. That is difficult.

*PH:* Do you find yourself compromising when you record?

*ME:* Rather than say "compromise", I would prefer to say "I acknowledge that what you hear on the recording is simply the decision I made at that time", whereas in recitals, I will make different decisions

every time on some things; but there are some things that are obviously fixed – there are fixed variables, fixed posts and there are variables. In recitals, some decisions depend on what I pick up from the audience and sometimes I might just decide to try something new that day. The performer, the interpreter, if you like,) has a sort-of position of co-creator with the composer and that will change as I think of new things, discover new things or realize certain mistakes. I think there is a tacit agreement between listener and performer that there are no fixed interpretations. Unfortunately, in the age of recordings, we assume otherwise, but that is just not tenable.

*PH:* Let's go back to your composing. Have you returned to it?

*ME:* Yes. A little...for enjoyment.

*PH:* Do you do anything with oriental music?

*ME:* Yes. Am very interested in Eritrean music and have been transcribing a lot of their folk music. I also like listening to Turkish music – classical Turkish singing, Ottoman court music, actually. This is a new-found interest; I like non-western music. I am very keen on Bartok's music and have started to write some music inspired by Bartok's style but based on Eritrean music. These are still early days of my composing, but one is always looking for new material.

*PH:* What composers are you performing at the moment?

*ME:* A lot of Rameau, whose complete works I recorded for the Hyperion label.. I am also playing pieces of J.C. Bach, Friedemann Bach, Emanuel Bach, J. S. Bach... I happen to be performing the Well Tempered Clavier Book 1 tomorrow for the London Bach Society. I am also busy with a work by the modern Czech composer Viktor Kalabis and a concerto by Hugo Distler, which is really great; also a piece by Jørgensen, whom I mentioned before, and some music by modern French composer Maurice Ohana. Oh yes, and I am transcribing a Bach concerto to be played by mandolin player Avi Avital and myself!

*PH:* I wanted to ask you about your conducting.

*ME:* I tried it for a while. It is not my thing. I could be a middling conductor, but as a harpsichordist I feel I could really do something.

*PH:* What does your average day look like?

*ME:* I get up around 7 or 7:30, have tea, practice, take a walk, practice, have lunch, practice, more tea, practice, go to the gym, have dinner, then play a concert or go to a concert or play for an hour to an hour and a half before bed.

*PH:* Do you play fortepiano?

*ME:* No.

*PH:* Have you totally left the piano?

*ME:* I would love to have a piano in the house. I would play show tunes – I have a couple of books of Warner Bros. pieces, cabaret songs, Kurt Weill. I would have friends over to sing them..."

*PH:* What are your future plans?

*ME:* There are a few big commissions coming up. Then there is a big concert of modern harpsichord music. I shall be spending the next year working on (although not performing) some Scarlatti from a manuscript that has recently been discovered. I am also doing research for a book project on Landowska.

*PH:* Mahan Esfahani, many thanks for your time and for sharing so many ideas and experiences.

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