

# Harpsichord & fortepiano

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# OBITUARY

Ronald Haas (September 7, 1936-April 2, 2015)

written by Richard Troeger



The American maker of harpsichords and clavichords, Ron Haas, passed away April 2 of this year. Trained as an architect, Ron became fascinated by early keyboard instruments in the early 1960s.

Like many makers he began by assembling a kit instrument, and thereafter applied himself to learning the craft in detail. In visits to major collections in the U.S. and Europe he familiarized himself with a number of antique prototypes. The first results were redesigned to greater or lesser extent but he subsequently rejected these instruments (some two dozen in number) and moved much closer to literal reproductions. I believe that he never made a completely literal copy (a very rare event, in any case), but he appeared able to grasp the operative factors when he changed certain details--a claim frequently heard, but true in his case. He had a profound comprehension of how factors interrelate in a given design. His mature work achieved a freedom of tone unusual among modern reproductions of any kind.

The one-man shop produced some 72 instruments. Rather than offer a wide range of models, Ron's desire was to concentrate on musically useful originals and to refine his understanding of them. The final choice of designs included harpsichords based on three schools of construction: a five-octave interpretation of the 1697 Grimaldi; a *petit ravalement* Andreas Ruckers double (GG-d3); and a double based on the 1723 Hieronymus Hass, with three 8' choirs and 4'. Only four of the latter type were made, the last for Paul Badura-Skoda. My own caused a lute maker, following a recital, to ask me what kind of harpsichord this was: "The thing simply gushes tone!" It is a clear, ringing tone. Many people have likened that harpsichord's middle range to a singing choir. Ron was careful to draw sound from the instrument rather than force it with heavy stringing and quilling. I should remark that at a time when even acclaimed makers were still employing plywood, he used whole lumber. All work was done by Ron alone, including sometimes elaborate decoration. A slight loss of hearing caused him to give up making instruments around 1995.

I recall his making, c.1978, a harpsichord based on Vaudry. (This instrument was his sole attempt at

the 17th-century French style.) Ron did not appear altogether pleased with it, and heard at close range, the instrument indeed seemed rather subdued in both timbre and volume. The following year it was played by Gustav Leonhardt and others during a masterclass given in Hertz Hall, University of California, Berkeley. To my surprise, the sound seemed to reach out effortlessly in that large space. I well remember first experiencing my own Grimaldi-derived instrument, when I first heard it played in a large church.

(I always ask that someone play my instrument in the performance area, so I can stand back and judge its effect.) To my amazement, the large space revealed a deep, dark underside to the timbre that was only hinted at in a normal room. As with the Vaudry-based harpsichord, but to an even greater degree, I found that the instrument reaches out with unexpected breadth of timbre, as well as great fullness.

Ron came to German harpsichord models well ahead of the time when these entered the harpsichord mainstream. Similarly, he was one of the first 20th-century makers to concentrate on fretted clavichords, of which he produced some three dozen or more. These were based on three closely similar German originals of c.1700. His best unfretted clavichords were modeled after the instrument in Nürnberg attributed to J.H. Silbermann, and the 1765 Friederici in Leipzig. I had to talk him into attempting the latter, around 1989 (this required some fifteen minutes), but although characteristically modest about his work, he was pleased with the results and made several clavichords of this type.

Ron was an amiable, generous, and high-spirited man. He was glad to share his knowledge with other instrument makers, and was mentor to several. He thought nothing of cooking a lavish dinner for 50 people, which he would manage as deftly as he would turn out a batch of clavichords. He passionately loved music, was a capable cellist and keyboard player, and a devotee of opera. I am not alone in missing the light in his eye or the sound of his voice as he explained the preparation of a soundboard, or enthused about a singer or instrument he admired.